

Black Reading of Anti-Oedipus. Critique and Unconscious

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Abstract

This essay proposes an approach to *Anti-Oedipus*, which discusses some guidelines for a critique of the colonial racialized unconscious. To do this, I dwell on the marks of Franz Fanon's philosophy in the honored book, proposing to carry out a black reading, following the philosopher Lewis Gordon. I focus preferably on the category of Oedipus understood as the operating nucleus of familial psychoanalysis.

1. Contextual confidences

We are all little colonies and it is Oedipus that colonizes us.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

What follows is a transcription of the presentation I made in October 2022, at the Congresso Internacional *Tomar os Desejos por Realidade. 50 Anos de O Anti-Édipo*. I warn about the tone of orality that, for this reason, the text assumes at times, and about that this article replicates much of what during this year of tributes I shared in conferences and publications.

The name of this section has to do with an ambition, already risky and excessive, which is to involve the biographical dimension in essays, but also to mobilize the relational logic that constitutes us as an academic community. In addition, this name has to do with another circumstance, this time related to the need to make explicit the fact that the experiences that I share here were eventually incommensurable in relation to the theoretical and methodological materials that I had at the time. But this situation would not have been relevant, if it were not for the fact that what it was about, was a deficit that indicated a condition of epistemological submission, which in Latin America we have strongly rooted. Today they are susceptible to be articulated, of course, without guarantees, thanks to factors that I hope to make explicit. Then, let us go to the confidences.

During the nineties, the democracy that Argentina had achieved was bastardized by the fervor of the financialization process that, in our Latin American countries, had been applied in a disembodied manner. Accordingly, the idea spread that philosophical thought should inevitably aim at generating that extra value that would allow it to be at the forefront of financial market activity.

I completed my studies at an Argentinian university, under the pressure of an intellectual model in order to these contextual circumstances. The maximum disobedience regarding the terms of the academic contract was at that time to remove the time line that was imposed on us from the so-called Westernist philosophy¹. In our institutions we witnessed the battles that some professors had to face to incorporate texts, problems, categories, that deviated from this line and that still did not receive a name: was it Latin American philosophy? Or better Argentine, Brazilian, Chilean, Colombian? Was it convenient to include the word thought? Or was it better to leave the word philosophy?

In this context, I finished my undergraduate studies and began the postgraduate stage. I turned to Gilles Deleuze, because he offered me the lyrics of a certain rebellion. And in the course of my thesis on the concept of creation in the work of this philosopher, I found, in addition to support, severe criticism. I met Gayatri Spivak, an emblem of deconstruction used at the service of the Indian diaspora, with Julie Wuthnow, defender of indigenous policies; both determined to confront Deleuzian nomadism. But I also met Néstor Perlongher, Luis Orlandi, Gregorio Barembleitt, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Suely Rolnik. As I wrote there, "Looked at from today, what seems like a museum of names, is showing itself more and more clearly as a struggle between deconstruction and anthropophagy" (Pósleman 2022: 17).

But what profoundly marked this kind of turn that I describe was my encounter with Frantz Fanon, in the heat of theorizing about the unconscious, especially in chapter II of *Anti-Oedipus*. Each portrait that I have to make of the Martinican, shows new nuances that outline the impressive character he is: the author of some very powerful books that marked the independence militancy of the mid-twentieth century with fire, the psychiatrist who preceded Guattari at the *Saint Alban Clinic*, the militant of the Algerian independence struggle, the author of explosive articles in the newspaper of the Algerian National Liberation Front *El Moudjahid*. Today, I add: the author of censored books. I return to this circumstance in the next section. But firstly, I share a memory that illustrates this turn that I experience regarding Fanon. Like all Deleuze Studies Conferences, one of the last days is the official presentation of the conferences that follow. On one of those occasions was presented the meeting that would be held in London. One

¹ I use the term Westernist, instead of Western, to highlight the performative strength of philosophy that perceives itself as exclusive. In addition, I insist on its roots because it seems to me the best way to frame the majority editorial proposal that comes to us from France, Germany, England, Australia and the United States.

of the images that was shared was the immense and luxurious castle where it would take place. The memory I keep is of a Mexican colleague and I, somewhat moved by the enormous difference between the effect that these images had on us and on most of our colleagues. At that moment I ratified my desire that my presentations make it clear that the image of a castle for certain people is that of a slave ship for others.

2. The censored of the academy

The same year that marks the fiftieth anniversary of *Anti-Oedipus* also marks the seventieth anniversary of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), one of Fanon's most famous books. Although it must be recognized that *Anti-Oedipus* has not had an easy life, if compared to the fate of *Black Skin...* or other books of the Martinique writer, the tensions that he may have experienced seem derisory candid. *Black skin...* is the thesis rejected and the one that had to be readapted to pass the filter of the metropolitan academy². And, although not specifically this text, another one by Fanon, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*, published in French in 1959 and as *A Dying Colonialism*, in English in 1965, was censored in France³. In the South, in the emblematic 68, is the Portuguese version of *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in France in 1961, the one censored in Brazil (Guimarães 2008; 105).

It was to be hoped that Fanon's censorship would not shock many intellectuals in France. A clear symptom of a latent tendency in the colonial academic epistemological contract⁴: that of sparing listening to voices that destabilize the fortified buildings that erect their landscape. Lewis Gordon presents an example of this tendency, referring particularly to the relations between Sartre and Fanon. Gordon shares the presumption that Sartre's thought of an open dialectic, which broke with the rigid attitude of scientific socialism, could have been fueled by reading *Black Skin....* more than for his visit to Poland and for having seen Stalinism there. But, according to Gordon, this reference is not made expressed precisely because of the difficulty of some European authors to assume the influence of an author who goes beyond the metropolitan borders (2014: 57).

I presume that the history of those preferences and exclusions, specifically related to the work of Guattari and Deleuze is already being written. Behind this image of a compact block with which the publishing offer circulates, which contributes to increase the sale of

² I take the concept of "metropolitan" as Frantz Fanon understands it throughout his work. With this term he refers to the place and project that establishes a certain way of understanding the effects of civilizational discourses and the imperial exercise of modern colonialism.

³ In November 1959, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* was published in Paris, edited by Francois Maspero, in the Cahiers libres collection. It was translated into Spanish as *El año V de la Revolución algeriana* or *Sociología de la Revolución* (1968). This book is prohibited for threatening national security (Valdés García, F. 2017: 31).

⁴ With this expression I refer to the conditions under which a contractual configuration is expanded corresponding to academic institutions linked to Eurocentric historical contexts.

books and which crowns the theories, there is indifference that touches very sensitive points of this dominant encyclopedia. A black reading of this block, which in our case points to the so-called contemporary French philosophy in particular, has been showing us these cracks. The methodological guidelines of the approach that I propose, owe much to the thought of Lewis Gordon. Fundamentally, in a black reading, the problem of the dehumanization of the world resonates or, in other words, the urgency of reformulating the terms of criticism, but not in the abstract, or as an irrepressible destiny to which Humanity (with a capital letter) must attend with care. A black reading assumes the problem of dehumanization, or the distancing of life from the world -in Deleuze's terms-, but hand in hand with the particular experience that throbs in certain writings postponed by Westernist thought. Gordon refers specifically to the voices coming from those people who have been systematically denied being. Let us evoke the famous rude men of Tierra del Fuego and New Holland, to whom Kant denies the possession of transcendental reason, incorporating the category of sub humanity into the colonial theoretical edifice (Kant 1991: 269). That case is worth as a sample of an immense gallery with which we have been dealing with for a few decades.

For example, one of those episodes that merit this approach, directly related to the authors of the honored book, is the one that occurred in connection with Palestine. I occupy a few lines to summarize it. It is worth it. Indeed, there are testimonies about two meetings that take place at the end of the seventies in Paris. One, at CERFI (Centre d'études, de recherches et de formation Institutionnelles), where Israelis and Palestinians meet, and where Guattari has organized a colloquium on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict with his friend Halévi. Of course, in this meeting, the favor belongs to Palestine. The other, in Foucault's house, where Sartre is, as editor of *Les temps modernes* and Sartre's guest, Edward Said, who will be our rapporteur and who is, inwardly, surprised by the positions adopted. In Foucault's house, who strangely does not participate directly in the debate, a defense of the state of Israel is being drawn up (Svirsky; Ben-Arie, 2020). However, the deep meaning that these circumstances entail, or perhaps for that very reason, the history of these encounters and disagreements are not given to us as theoretical priorities.

As I anticipated in my confidences, Fanon is quoted in the middle of a key moment in the plot development of the famous anti-oedipal productive unconscious. Let us bear in mind that there are few occasions, in the sea of essays on the unconscious, in which Fanon is a reference. So, a variable is added to this investigation of what explains the lack of interest in the censorship of Fanon's text in France at the time. And it is that, if it is the unconscious that is theorized, this indifference regarding censorship is more than eloquent. It demonstrates how, paying attention to the performative dimension of a writing, is possible to blow away the fog with which the statement tries to cover up some terms of an alleged semiotic pact full of asymmetries.

What effects did Fanon's censorship have? Summarily, if I am allowed to give as evidence what results from a sweeping tour of the theoretical limits through which

Fanonian texts will circulate when they are released from the prohibition, I must say that these are absorbed by anthropology, sociology, political theory, even for film theory and for film itself, but not by psychoanalysis or philosophy. It is extremely striking that an entire gigantic archive that calls itself responsible for critical thinking par excellence, does not integrate materials of the nature of these texts I am referring. Thousands of pages written around desire, the will to power, thousands of pages written based on the suspicion directed at consciousness, at the subject, in which neither the representatives of the movement of blackness nor those of the theoreticians of coloniality, in short, no anti-colonialist voice is present⁵. Fanon had given the body to a France that first recruited him into its ranks in the First World War, and then segregated him with decoration included. He had put his body into the anti-colonialist struggles that made Algeria and Tunisia boil. Precisely that character is conspicuously absent. Obviously, this difficulty in assuming authors who deviate from the canons strongly influenced the field of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Even today, a figure like Suely Rolnik, author of such an important text as *Esferas da insurreição. Notas para uma vida não cafetinada*, confesses not having read Fanon (2018: 109). Being that she was a friend of Guattari, the protagonist of the fervent seventies, times par excellence of investigation and, I would say, of the militancy of desire, it is bizarre that she has not come across this character.

All this tells us about the difficulty involved in noticing the cranks that move what we can risk calling the theoretical unconscious. What would not imply major problems if it were not that this category, that of the unconscious, is one of the emblems precisely of the critical exercise of the theory; it is considered the tool par excellence that presumably allows dissipating the claims of a philosophy of consciousness that is established as the fundamental nucleus of the famous philosophical modernity. I think that the great Westernist illusion of having "discovered" [sic] this sphere of the unconscious goes hand in hand with another illusion, that of the alleged transgressive potential of criticism. That is why I consider it important to give ourselves some time to review the privacy of this link. I presume that a black reading should do it, if it is true that it is expected to reconsider the terms of the academic contract.

⁵ I pause for a second on this notion. While colonization is the historical process, coloniality is a category linked to it, but which refers to the analytical historical condition. The semantic scope of coloniality has not stagnated. Anibal Quijano (2007) is the one who introduces it, articulated in the notion of coloniality of power. With this term Quijano refers to a specific and historical pattern of power, which is composed from the structural association of two fundamental axes that were established between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century: a racial/ethnic classification of the population of the world and a system of material relations consistent with this classification. Walter Mignolo (2015) displaces the concept towards the philosophical universe and proposes the notions of coloniality of knowing, feeling and believing. Then it will be Nelson Maldonado Torres (2007) who works on the notion of coloniality of being.

3. Critique and unconscious

The aim is to reconsider the terms of these illusions and expose the risk they run of incurring what they intend to disable. I have chosen the figure of the boomerang to illustrate the path that the philosophical categories fundamentally linked to this program – flawed since its emergence – must follow, in regards to the asymmetric distribution of ontological status assignments. I am referring to the complicity of a sector of the academy with – I would say, its leading role in – the construction and conservation of what Rita Segato (2015) calls “colonial modernity”. An almost unbearable tension can be diagnosed in these Eurocentric philosophical categories when it comes to describing and analyzing how, extrapolated to the colonies, they must preserve their epistemological privileges and their power to adjudicate the right to being or to subjectivity, as well as to his denial. Let us note, for example, the boomerang that is for Westernist philosophy the concept of transcendental subject or that of perpetual peace, to give the closest examples. The list would be endless. But, detecting this tension, this violence exerted by the self-preservation of the epistemological privilege of these categories, requires a special operation. It is necessary to carry out crosses with other writings, which leave open the possibility of an appropriation that assumes consequences that are otherwise overlooked. As if with a brush, which in this case could be the operation of reading in black, we were rubbing the silk against the grain⁶.

It is interesting to attend to what happens when we apply these crosses to the unconscious. We know that regarding the “discovery” of this instance, the nickname of criticism corresponds to the operation consisting of facing the claims of a theory of the subject that, as I have just described, perceives itself as a subsidiary to a substantialist and universalist ontology. Until there, the deployment of the many philosophies that confronted the modern subject, appears as a gallery of colored mirrors. Philosophy had finally rebounded on a springboard that allowed it to leap into unusual lands fertile for desire, for the will to power, for the class struggle. He had left behind the reduction of the

⁶ In a recently published article, I make a counterpoint between Kant's and Foucault's answers to the question about what criticism is. What interests me in this task of investigating the articulations between criticism and the unconscious is how Kant's theorization about that natural power to use his own understanding to feed the progress that he awards to humanity, excludes the rude men of New Holland and Tierra del Fuego and that this paragraph has not attracted much attention throughout centuries of studies on the work of Kant. Regarding Foucault, I address how criticism is constituted, in the face of Kantian essentialism, in a practice of “transgression” posed as a genealogy that will not infer from the form of what we are, what it is impossible for us to be or know, as Kant, but will extract from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of not being, of not doing, or of not being governed. I am interested in noting that up to this point, Foucauldian criticism would even be susceptible to being inscribed in the field of postcolonial studies. But then, I head towards a third critique that would emerge from the intervention of the Fanonian texts. A critique that is not reduced to detecting the regimes of truth in order to challenge them, but rather points to the regimes of the skin, as I have called it, which would be the dimension postponed in that fabric, or the substratum of modernity, no longer simply hidden, but that which must be kept hidden (Pósleman 2022: 15-49).

scope of the critique to the Kantian proclamation of “using one's own understanding” (Kant 1994: 7). A claim to carry out a critique of that critique arose from among the ranks of the philosophies that would definitively mark the century, as the century of desire, or of transgressions against the regimes of truth, or as the century of deconstruction of a decrepit *logos*.

Meanwhile, a psychiatrist trained at the Sorbonne, who in his clinical work faces circumstances other than those supposed to be linked to the categories he keeps in the *made in Paris* toolbox he carries, immerses himself in a writing focused on hacking those suspicions that white philosophy presumes. In this task, he recovers the testimonies of the militants, and dedicates his study to revealing the inconsistency of the modern program. He detects the double standard of colonial violence: the black neurosis of wanting to be white, as well as the white paranoia of losing ontological privilege.

4. Colonization carried out by other means

Research on the unconscious and its articulation within the framework of anti-colonialist approaches, has been considered for some decades. In the field of anthropology it is very thick. I highlight a chapter of a book by the aforementioned Rita Segato, dedicated in particular to what she calls Black Oedipus. She analyzes the white bourgeois family structure in Brazil and highlights the total silence, also academic, around the figure of the Afro-descendant nanny, speaking of a double foreclosure of the name of the poor and black nanny (2015).

The most powerful editorial offer on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, was not far behind. There is a book of essays compiled by Simone Bignall and Paul Patton, from 2010, called *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*. In this compilation, the focus is placed on protecting Deleuzian Guattarinian thought from postcolonial criticism, such as that of Spivak or Whutnow, who, for the authors of the book, insist on inscribing it in the line of modern European, though, according to me, without sufficient evidence. This exchange deserves a separate presentation. I suggest going through the book. For his part, Patton, in his book *Deleuze and the Political*, incorporates the problem of colonialism as a topic in addition to devoting an entire chapter to it. He takes up the problem of indigenous land claims in Australia and identifies native title jurisprudence as a constitutional metamorphosis machine. But he does not touch the problem of coloniality, nor the production of Oedipus as an interior colony. In fact, he is another of those who does not take into account the incidence of Fanon (2013: 109-131).

Some essays admit the crossing between the theses of Deleuze and Guattari and those of Fanon when it comes to uncovering the operation of hyper-coding of subjectivity by the Oedipal triangle. These essays put the emphasis on two different ways in which one and the other carry out this discovery. Amber Musser (2012), for example, considers that

the affective flows that open between the unconscious and the collective are rooted in different spheres. While Fanon links these flows with the sphere of the social and historical, Deleuze and Guattari, according to their analysis, refer them to that of the sensational. I admit my closeness to Robert Young (2003), Dagmar Herzog (2016) and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc (2015), because I agree that the way in which Deleuze and Guattari approach the transversal condition of desire is recurrently underestimated. It is precisely at the crossroads with Fanonian thought, as the named authors, and with whom I agree show, what nourishes the commitment to the hypothesis of the constitutivity of colonialism and racialization as the factors that explains the transversal condition between those spheres.

Deleuze and Guattari resort to Bergson and his "discreet revolution" (1998: 102)⁷, to expose the risks of extrapolating approaches that assume the relationships between the microcosm and the macrocosm as two isolated spheres – one of which would be inscribed in the other and would be expressed in it –, to the dimensions of the familiar and the social. This discreet revolution would indicate the opening of these two wholes, the micro and the macro, which would entail crucial consequences regarding the relationships between the living and the world. They write that,

If the living thing resembles the world, it is, on the contrary, to the extent that it opens onto the opening of the world; If it is a whole, it is to the extent that the whole, that of the world as well as that of the living, is always being made, produced or progressing, inscribing itself in an irreducible and non-closed temporal dimension (Deleuze; Guattari, 1998: 102).

And it is when it comes to replicating this Bergsonian revolution in an anti-oedipal way in the field of relations between the family and the social that they resort to the analysis of clinical files contributed by Fanon. They express their astonishment in this famous phrase that I reproduce in full:

It is curious that it was necessary to wait for the dreams of the colonized to realize that, at the vertices of the pseudo-triangle, the mother danced with the missionary, the father got butt-fucked by the tax collectors, the self got hit by a white. It is precisely this coupling of the parental figures with agents of another nature, their embrace as fighters, that prevents the triangle from closing again, standing on its own and claiming to express or represent this other nature of the agents posed in the unconscious itself. (Ibid.: 102)

Fanon's accusation exposes the fact that the Oedipal structure does not come to a close, as the testimonies to which he resorts show, and therefore that its terms remain linked to

⁷ All the quotes from *Anti-Oedipus* correspond to one of the Spanish editions and the translation has been made by the author of the essay.

the agents of oppressive social reproduction. Deleuze and Guattari explain how colonization produces and processes the unconscious through the dissociation between the sphere of reproduction and that of production. And they present a magnificent explanation. They write:

(the analysis) becomes, in part, under the effect of colonization. The colonizer says: your father is your father and nothing more than this, or the maternal grandfather, don't go taking them for bosses [...] you can make yourself triangular in your corner and place your house between those of the paternals and those of the maternal [...] your family is your family and nothing else, social reproduction no longer passes through it, even if your family is needed to provide a material that will be subjected to the new regime of production [...] So yes, an Oedipal framework is outlined for dispossessed savages: Oedipus of shantytowns (Ibid.: 175).

This is one of the analytical thresholds that we find in *The Anti-Oedipus*. The Fanonian reading contributes to the detection of an invisible factor in the theories about the oedipal triangle. Familiarism and its application to the social sphere shows the double standard of colonialist violence. I return once more to the Fanonian accusation of the trend that instills whitewashing values. But now, having analyzed the double tactic of applying the familial scheme to the social, and at the same time hiding this operation in order to exercise a submission that is directly inscribed in the subjectivities. It is this violence, ultimately, that constitutes the true content of the unconscious. Then, in addition, it makes the consistency of the Europeanization process itself to which we referred. It is in this sense that Deleuze and Guattari write "Oedipus is always the colonization carried out by other means, it is the internal colony and we will see that, even among us, Europeans, it is our intimate colonial formation" (1998: 177).

5. And meanwhile... *The Anti-Oedipus*.

We no longer just suspect. *Anti-Oedipus* undresses this intimate colonial formation configured through the reduction of the polyvocal real in favor of the application of the familial scheme to all social relations. The operating core of this application is the unconscious. For this reason, what matters, according to what we expect from an anti-oedipal critique, is to note that this biunivocality is put in check in this work, not only by admitting the separation between the two spheres, as can be pointed out by antipsychiatry, which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, would insist on hypostatize the family (1998: 330), but from the detection of coloniality as a condition. And I risk making a comparison between what the authors call oedipalization as colonization carried out by other means and the condition of coloniality.

The criticism understood in terms of the Freudian-Lacanian suspicion must be rectified. If Fanon warns of the impossibility that it implies for Algerians to deal in the clinic with the application of this colonial unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari, for their part, appropriate this thesis to put in tension the very metropolitan clinical and theoretical context. Something that evokes in a certain sense the appeal that Sartre makes in the prologue to *The Condemned...*, which he directs to the "Europeans" (Sartre 1965: 5-19). But, more than that, more than an appeal to pay attention to a bell of history that is ringing a mirror that shows a not very pleasant image, in the case of Deleuze and Guattari, it is a question of directly showing the complicity of philosophy and the psychoanalysis with the modern project and its constitutive segregative violence, in the very performativity of a theoretical unconscious that does nothing more than safeguard its privileges.

In the end, I would like to make explicit that I accept the insistence on the accusatory and, at times, vehement tone of the text. Including the biographical record in an academic text is a prohibition that I have been understanding, for some time, as a mark of coloniality and patriarchy in the academy. In the case of *Antiedipus*, I dare to say that this license that I give myself is the true tribute. It is also, modestly, a tribute to those who fight for the emancipation of desire.

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