

## ***Desiring Machines and the Sex of Plants***<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This paper connects the concept of desiring machines, as it appears in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, to the sex of plants, which Deleuze had already used on *Proust and Signs*, to relate his philosophy to Guattari's concept of transversality. In this context, this text argues with Preciado's understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's molar homosexuality, stating that this concept points toward trans and countersexuality, more than to the bipolarity between hetero and homosexuality.

The pragmatic revolution promoted by *The Anti-Oedipus*, at once a conceptual and ethical-political one, has as its most important feature the conception of desire as production. If psychoanalysis already attributed a certain productivity to the unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari's contribution consists of underlining the real and purely affirmative character of such production, breaking the links of desire with phantasmic or imaginary production - in a word, with representation - and with the negativity of an original lack. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari:

If desire produces, it produces the real. If desire is producer, it can only be so in reality, and of reality. Desire is that set of passive syntheses that frames partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production. The real follows from this, it is the result of the passive syntheses of desire as self-production of the unconscious. Nothing is lacking in desire, it does not lack its object. It is the subject, above all, that is lacking in desire, or it is desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is only a subject fixed by repression. Desire and its object constitute one and the same thing: the machine, as machine of machine. Desire is a machine, the object of desire is also a connected machine, so that the product is extracted from the producing and something is detached from the producing by passing to the product and giving a rest to the nomadic and wandering subject. The objective being of desire is the Real in itself (Deleuze; Guattari, 2010: 83).

The operative syntheses of desire are said to be passive because they do not depend on the articulating consciousness of a thinking self, but are individuating and individuated

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotations were translated by me from the Brazilian version of the books.

instances without the form of the self. And if desire is not intrinsically linked to a fixed, sedentary subject, which is only produced as a residue in a repressed functioning of the desiring machines, one can suppose that the individuation produced in the desiring process is not confined to the binarism of what Preciado, from a Foucaultian inspiration, will call the sex-gender system.

The concept of desiring machine contemplates two requirements: that of affirming the productive character of desire and that of refusing "the anthropomorphic representation of sex" (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 388). Through an alliance between Spinoza and Marx, the authors consider production as generating the whole real and, at the same time, as being both desiring and social. This formulation not only intends to mark a simultaneity, but also a horizontality or absence of hierarchy. There is not one mode of production more important than another, or first in relation to another.

It seems to me that the non-human sexuality of desiring machines, with their n sexes, instead of only two, can be understood with reference to the sex of plants. To deal with the connective synthesis of production in its legitimate use, Deleuze and Guattari refer to Proust, a thinker who returns incessantly in their writings as a duo, or signed by only one of them. Deleuze quotes an article by Guattari in *Proust and Signs* to introduce the concept of transversality; Guattari, in turn, makes incursions into Proust's work both in *The Machinic Unconscious* and in *Chaosmosis*. In *The Anti-Oedipus*, this common ally is evoked to make visible the construction of a narrative and narrator body without organs, which puts into play a sexuality based on the "radical innocence of flowers" (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 95). The flowers are configured as intensive images of a hermaphroditism that, more than a modality of homosexuality, constitutes a transsexuality moved by a transversal vector. I note in passing that our authors recurrently mobilize literary texts as cases of desiring production, a production that is not limited to the imaginary or symbolic, and is taken as real production and production of real.

Returning to the plants, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari:

The plant theme, the innocence of flowers, brings us yet another message and another code: each one is bisexual, each one has both sexes, but compartmentalized, incommunicating: the man is only the one in which the masculine part dominates statistically, and the woman, the one in which the feminine part dominates statistically. And so, at the level of elementary combinations, at least two men and two women must intervene to constitute the multiplicity in which transversal communications, connections of partial objects and fluxes are established: the masculine part of a man can communicate with the feminine part of a woman, but also with the masculine part of a woman, or with the feminine part of another man, or with the masculine part of another man, etc. (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 97)

Deleuze already underlined this transversalizing homosexuality in the second part of *Proust and Signs*, added in the second edition of the book, in 1970, later, therefore, to the

first contacts with Guattari and his writings. The two sexes are present in the same individual, but without communicating, in the manner of the boxes or closed vessels that characterize so many dimensions of Proust's work and give name to one of the chapters of the second part of *Proust and Signs*. For Deleuze, it is in this separation "that the vegetable theme acquires its full meaning, by opposition to a great Living Logos: hermaphroditism is not the property of an animal totality now lost, but the actual separation of the two sexes in the same plant: 'the male organ is separated by a partition from the female organ'" (Deleuze 1996: 163) .

The emphasis on the vegetal theme makes it possible to understand the apparent contradictions surrounding homosexuality in the *Recherche*, showing that there are two series or levels of sexuality at play in the text: one global and specific, the other, local and non-specific. These terms will appear again in *The Anti-Oedipus*, referring not only to the Proustian narrative, but to distinctive workings of the desiring machines. Moreover, the plant expresses how a living totality distinct from the animal organism, which Deleuze considers logocentric, can function.

The logos is a great Animal whose parts gather into a whole and are unified under a principle or a guiding idea; but the *pathos* is a vegetable made of separate parts, which only communicate indirectly in a part set apart, to infinity, although no totalization, no unification can bring together this world whose ultimate pieces lack nothing. (Deleuze 1996: 210)

This fragmentation is called schizoid by Deleuze and constitutes the lesson of Baron de Charlus about the "world of sex". At the same time, this fragmentation refers to the Proustian style, built by transversality among elements, in principle, not in communication, since, for Deleuze, "the vegetable model in Proust replaced that of the animal totality, both for art and for sexuality" (Deleuze 1996: 139). The absence of communication does not amount to the impossibility of connections, since an agent with no relation of similarity establishes "aberrant relations between closed vessels; wasp that makes flowers communicate, and that loses its proper animal value, to be in relation to them only a composite piece apart, a nonsensical element in a plant reproduction apparatus." (Deleuze 1996: 211)

This world of vegetal-inspired sex constitutes transsexuality because sexual relations connect sexes that do not identify with a gender eventually assumed in identity registration and also because these relations depend on the circulation or transport performed by a disparate element. Deleuze insists on the trans character of a dimension of Proustian reality, coupling life and work in the same movement:

if one understands the meaning of this transsexuality as the last level of Proustian theory, and its relation to the practice of separations, not only does the vegetal metaphor become clearer, but it becomes indeed grotesque to wonder about the degree of 'transposition' that Proust had to operate, as it is supposed, to transform an Albert into

Albertine; even more grotesque to present as a revelation the discovery that Proust must have had some amorous relations with women. (Deleuze 1996: 166)

The passage through Proust, in *The Anti-Oedipus*, gives occasion to the elaboration of a formula that synthesizes the conception of non-identitarian, in becoming sexualities: "we are heterosexual statistically or molarly, but homosexual personally, whether we know it or not, and finally, transsexual elementally, molecularly" (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 97).

This formula, which seems to me to have so much affinity with the conceptual, and vital, environment of Preciadian contrassexuality, is read by Preciado in a somewhat critical way in an appendix to the *Contrassexual Manifesto* entitled: "From philosophy as a superior mode of giving ass: Deleuze and the 'molecular homosexuality'". If, initially, the formula gives rise to an investigation that searches for the physical operations that would correspond to the logical concepts of *The Anti-Oedipus*, according to a principle placed in the book itself by Deleuze and Guattari, it closes with an inversion of the problem, stating that the question to be answered is that of the reasons that would have prevented Deleuze and Guattari from coming out of the closet as heterosexuals in the 1970s (Preciado 2014: 193).

Preciado's interpretation of the formulation that states "we are homosexuals personally" suffers from an excess of literalness that seems to me far from benevolent. What immediately strikes me is that the first person plural employed there by Deleuze and Guattari is not meant to designate just the two of them, but all of us. And even when quoting the whole formula, Preciado writes all the time about a molecular homosexuality, without mentioning molecular transsexuality at any point, which seems to be precisely the figure that comes closest to counter-sexuality. Nevertheless, his interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's position regarding homosexuality as "a superior form of knowledge" seems interesting to me.

From the Deleuzian presentation of the Proustian character of the Baron of Charlus, Preciado states that what interests Deleuze in this enigmatic emitter of signs is its power to dissolve "all the contradictions of Western metaphysics" (Preciado 2014: 189). From this point of view, molecular homosexuality is seen as an activity of fecundation, paradoxically sterile, capable, however, of connecting thinkers engendering the history of philosophy. In this way, Preciado links the conception of sexuality in *The Anti-Oedipus*, including the Proustian aspects found in the text, to the celebrated Deleuzian presentation of the history of philosophy as enrapture and immaculate conception. These expressions, incidentally, have fallen into the taste of many Deleuze and Guattari scholars, at least in Brazil, and I have often witnessed evocations of this formulation, as if it were still capable of shocking anyone. For my part, I prefer to return to the idea of exercises in the history of philosophy as portrait art, an effort to master the colors and techniques of other thinkers and make them our own. Perhaps the most successful image bothers me because I understand it molarly, in which case the history of philosophy would be seen as connections only between men.

Returning to *The Anti-Oedipus*, the concept of desire elaborated there is inserted in the field inaugurated by psychoanalysis, insofar as it maintains the relation between desire and the unconscious. However, the unconscious drawn in the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* does not refer the affective intensities to images or representations. Such remission or rebinding may occur - as, in fact, it does in capitalist societies where the nuclear family and individualism predominate - but the circumscription of the production of desire to the limits defined by the phantom of castration and to oedipal narratives, however frequent it may be, is not the only mode of functioning of the production of desire, nor even the one that is most proper to it.

Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the standardization of desire production, its submission to a model or ideal, is not limited to the refusal of Oedipal borders, but to the assumption of an unique model for sexuality<sup>2</sup>. In the wake of Marx, the authors advocate for a non-human sexuality. The authors understand this sexuality that escapes the framework of the human not in terms of an animal sexuality, but a machinic one, which is constituted as a mode of production, among other possible modes. This non-human sexuality has nothing to do with the device of sexuality, as conceptualized by Foucault, or with the sexotechnique, as defined by Preciado. The fact is that sexuality, in *The Anti-Oedipus*, comprises what the authors call two faces: it can designate, on the one hand, the anthropomorphic representation of sex (pole of human sex), that is, the submission of the machines of desire to the social and organic machines; on the other hand, the machinic sexuality as the desiring production itself that escapes representations and totalizations (pole of non-human sex). For Deleuze and Guattari,

sexuality is strictly the same thing as the desiring machines as present and active in the social machines, in their field, their formation, their functioning. Non-human sex is the desiring machines, the molecular machinic elements, their agency and their syntheses, without which there would be neither human sex specified in the large sets, nor human sexuality capable of investing these sets (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 388).

In other terms, non-human sexuality encompasses the set of desiring productivity, all the possibilities of connection between desiring machines, of circulation of intensities as degrees of multiple and distinct affections. It is not a relationship between individuals, subjects or objects, of different genders or of the same gender, but an individuating force, producer of individuations that only crystallize into identity positions through disciplinary and control devices, variable according to the social formations in play. In this sense, the minimal elements that enter into the composition of desiring machines are called partial objects, a concept borrowed from Melanie Klein. However, the partiality of these objects, their unstable character, not identical to themselves, not totalizable under an identity, is not thought of in *The Anti-Oedipus* as a stage to be overcome in favor of the unification or totalization of an integral object that would constitute the ideal object of

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<sup>2</sup> In this part, I resume some elements from the paper we published with Letícia Decarli (Vieira da Silva; Decarli 2022).

desire in a psychic functioning that is considered healthy. They are more partial things, parts of machines, than objects, and can be constantly connected and disconnected to a plurality of distinct machines. These minimal, molecular elements, however, connect directly to a social field, to the open whole of production. For the authors,

Sexuality is no longer considered as a specific energy that unites persons derived from the large sets, but as the molecular energy that connects partial molecules-objects (libido), that organizes inclusive disjunctions on the giant molecule of the body without organs (numen) and distributes states according to domains of presence or zones of intensity (voluptas). It is because the desiring machines are exactly this: the microphysics of the unconscious, the elements of the microinconscious. But as such, they never exist independently of the historical molar sets, of the macroscopic social formations that they statistically constitute. It is in this sense that there is only desire and the social (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 242-3).

The desiring machines, with their molecular functioning, continue to produce within the social machines, according to a regime of their own. If the unconscious assumes a certain figure within a given social formation, a figure that shapes the production of desire, co-opting it, this does not mean that the possibilities of desire are limited to this figure, or complex of figures. The enclosure of desire within the family and the position of the paternal and maternal figures as role models for the desiring investment are verifiable occurrences in capitalist social formations. This particular configuration of sociability and the production of desire, however, does not eliminate the vectors of deterritorialization of desire, to use the vocabulary of *One Thousand Plateaus*. The channeling of the desirous flow to constitute a libidinal investment in persons, entities endowed with identity, does not prevent the subterranean course of non-identitarian individuations, of affective intensities not shapeable according to the form of an entity endowed with personal identity, including the definition of gender. Deleuze and Guattari write:

Beneath the conscious investments of economic, political, religious, etc. formations, there are unconscious sexual investments, micro-investments that bear witness to the way in which desire is present in a social field and the way in which it associates this field with itself as the statistically determined domain that is attached to it. The desiring machines function in the social machines, as if they maintained their own regime in the molar whole that they form, on the other hand, on the level of large numbers. A symbol, a fetish, are manifestations of a desiring machine. In no way is sexuality a molar determination representable in a family set, but it is rather the molecular underdetermination that functions in the social and, secondarily, family sets, which trace the field of presence and production of desire: a whole non-Oedipal unconscious, which will only produce Oedipus as one of its secondary statistical formations ("complexes"), as the result of a history that puts into play the becoming

of the social machines and their regime in comparison with that of the desiring machines (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 243).

Both what Deleuze and Guattari call machinic sexuality, in *The Anti-Oedipus*, and what Preciado names *potentia gaudendi* in his *Testo Junkie*, that is, "the (present or virtual) potency of (total) arousal of a body" (Preciado 2018: 44), despite their conceptual differences, are connection-producing forces and power-enhancing affects that are never entirely moldable by categories determinable from bi-univocal contrapositions, such as man/woman, natural/artificial or machinic, or even, in Preciado's terms, prosthetic, human/animal, and so on. The standardization devices of desire, subjectivity, sociability, however effective, do not prevent the subsistence of flows that escape modelization. Although the authors criticize psychoanalysis for acting as one of these devices, what seems to me is that, on this point, psychoanalytic theories - and, to a large extent, the various clinical approaches - merely follow the dominant tone of the social formations in which they arise and develop. Not only "Freudism is traversed by this strange idea that, after all, there is only one sex, the masculine" (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 388), but such an assumption presides over subjectivations, the multiple interactions between subjects, such as affective relationships, work relationships, and so on. The frustration about a theory of the unconscious and a clinic of desire that does not act to free them from binarisms and submission to any and all models is understandable, and echoed in Preciado's recent speech at the Journey of the School of the Freudian Cause in Paris. However, psychoanalysis, or "Freudism," as the authors say, is not the founder of the welding of desire to an original lack - an operation present in Western thought at least since Platonism, nor by the position of man as a model in the sex-gender system. Let us emphasize that, as Deleuze and Guattari show, there is no male privilege when it comes to the splitting of desire by lack. The female identity is defined by a lack in relation to the male model, but men do not reach the model either, being equally marked by castration. To the extent that, from a molecular point of view, the unconscious is populated by, and produces, pre-individual singularities - which are called, in *The Anti-Oedipus*, partial objects, its productivity is entirely affirmative and is not intended to fill any lack. The production of desiring machines, in molecular regime, allows us to experiment individuations that go beyond the dualisms of sexotechnics and cross n non-human sexes, or n modalities of desiring machines.

The anthropomorphic molar representation culminates in what underlies it, the ideology of lack. On the contrary, the molecular unconscious ignores castration, because nothing is lacking in the partial objects that, as such, form free multiplicities; because the multiple cuts do not stop producing flows, instead of repressing them in one and the same cut capable of stopping them; because the syntheses constitute local and non-specific connections, inclusive disjunctions, nomadic conjunctions: a microscopic transsexuality everywhere, which makes woman contain as many men as man, and man, women, capable of entering, with each other, with each other, into relations of desire production that

subvert the statistical order of the sexes. To make love is not to make just one, or two, but a hundred thousand. This is what the desiring machines or the non-human sex are: not one, not even two, but  $n$  sexes (Deleuze; Guattari 2010: 389-90).

In this way, contrary to the conceptual divergence that the terminological difference between counter-sexuality and machinic sexuality suggests, we can observe that both are constituted as an effort to construct new sexual platforms that break with the sexual difference or anthropomorphic representation of sex. Insofar as counter-sexuality is an effort to denaturalize what we understand as sexuality or sex, we can also see that Deleuze and Guattari strive to place social and desiring production on the same plane, so that sexuality is not an individual or natural field, but coextensive with the social - one and the same economy. Faced with non-human sex or *potentia gaudendi*, the challenge is then to experiment with liberating forms of desire and a kind of proliferation of practices and forms of life against the devices of sexual difference. "Revolution (...) is always a becoming-trans: mobilizing an existing state of things to another that only desire knows" (Preciado 2019: 213).

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