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The Cannibal's Antidote for Resentment: Diffracting *Ressentiment* through Decolonial Thought

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Abstract

This essay is split into two thought experiments. The first will be to diffract *ressentiment* through the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Édouard Glissant. I will create a bridge with decolonial thought by interpreting Anzaldúa's concept of the *nopal de castilla* and *mestiza* consciousness through the interpretive lens of *ressentiment* to show the affinity that exists between the work of Anzaldúa and Nietzsche. I then look at *ressentiment* through some of the concepts Glissant offers in the *Poetics of Relation*. I argue that *ressentiment* resists the creolization of identity and culture, and that Glissant's demand for the right to opacity for all signals the overcoming of *ressentiment*. The second experiment diffracts *ressentiment* through Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics*, beginning with an analysis of the most relevant points of that text for our discussion, then putting our diffracted *ressentiment* in conversation with the Brazilian anthropologist's post-structural interpretation of Amerindian perspectivism.

Keywords

Latin American Philosophy – *ressentiment* – decolonial theory – poststructuralism

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These people have deluded themselves for so long that they really don't think I'm human... And this means that they have become, in themselves, moral monsters.

JAMES BALDWIN



1 First Experiment: Diffracting *Ressentiment* through Anzaldúa and Glissant

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

WILLIAM BLAKE, "A Poison Tree"

1.1 Ressentiment

Thinking first about *ressentiment*, our intention is not to provide a textbook definition of this concept straight out of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Rather, while this is where our discussion of *ressentiment* begins, I will supplement and broaden (one might even say enrich) its horizons with the work of Gilles Deleuze, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Édouard Glissant. We will be calling on Deleuze's interpretation of *ressentiment* in *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, Anzaldúa's discussion of the *nopal de castilla* and *mestiza* consciousness in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and the concepts of creolization and opacity in Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.

Nietzsche introduces *ressentiment* in the first essay of the *Genealogy*, saying:

[t]he slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality says no from the onset to what is "outside," what is "different," what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed.¹

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36.

According to this formulation, *ressentiment* arises whenever a power struggle between dominant and oppressed groups comes to a head from the point of view of the latter, resulting in the formation of slave morality as an act of subversion. Nietzsche refers to the ancient Greek nobility's distinctions of "good and bad" to describe the characteristics of master morality. Master morality is characterized by great health, strength of character, aristocratic valuations, and remorseless self-affirmation – a Yes to life – meaning that self-worth comes from within, rather than from a judgment based on external values. The strong do not resent or hate the weak but, rather, think of them "with a kind of pity, consideration, and forbearance, so that finally all the words referring to the common man have remained as expressions signifying 'unhappy,' 'pitiable.'"² In other words, the strength of master morality rests in its affirmative character – the weak are simply an after-thought. It does not begin from a feeling of lack or inferiority but, rather, is characterized by an exuberant affirmation of its power.

On the other hand, slave morality arises when *ressentiment* becomes creative, meaning that the force of resentment pitting the weak against the strong, a feeling of impotence and shame in the face of overwhelming and oppressive power, is expressed as the creation of a purportedly objective value system, whereby those characteristics that distinguished the weak from the strong (such as humility, impotence, poverty) become virtues, while those features that characterize the strong (such as power, pride, wealth) are judged to be *evil*. Notice that while master morality thinks in terms of "good and bad," slave morality thinks in terms of "good and evil." This is a crucial difference because, as Deleuze notes, whereas master morality begins with an affirmation of itself as good, slave morality begins with the formula "You are evil, therefore I am good."³ According to Nietzsche, "[t]he 'well-born' *felt* themselves to be the 'happy;' they did not have to establish their happiness artificially by comparing themselves to their enemies, or to persuade themselves, nay, *deceive* themselves, that they were happy (as all men of *ressentiment* are in the habit of doing.)"⁴ Thus, slave morality, being incapable of affirming itself due to an inferiority complex experienced as hatred towards an external enemy, must find a way to assert (and to believe in its own assertion!) that the strong are pernicious and therefore culpable for their strength, so that what once caused the weak to feel inferior may now be interpreted as evil and blameworthy. This

2 *Genealogy of Morals*, 37.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 119.

4 *Genealogy*, 38.

precludes the weak from needing to overcome their condition through action by anaesthetizing feelings of shame with an intoxication of vengeance. In other words, the “goodness” of slave morality is grounded in its inability to establish an identity independent of its antagonism to the strong. As Nietzsche puts it:

every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a *guilty* agent who is susceptible to suffering – in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects ... for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, *anaesthesia* – the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind. This alone, I surmise, constitutes the actual physiological cause of *ressentiment*, vengefulness, and the like: a desire to *deaden pain by means of affects*.⁵

In other words, the “goodness” of slave morality is grounded in this inability to establish an identity independent of its antagonism with the strong, and it is the intoxication of this antagonism that fuels slave morality.

Before moving forward with our analysis, we should address a question that may have come across the mind of the reader at this point: what value does a discussion of Nietzschean *ressentiment* have for a piece on decolonial thought? In fact, should we not reproach Nietzsche for claiming that anti-democratic, elitist, and egotistic virtues are more worthy of moral praise than communal sentiments of charity, equality, and community? What's worse, is not Nietzsche's logic an affirmation of the logic of, say, capital? which requires the exploitation of the lower classes, constituting the “many,” by the few that have power over the means of production: the strong dominating the weak to ensure the perpetual increase in power of the few over the many?

Such interpretations of Nietzsche exist, but they are not advanced in this essay. Deleuze points out what he called some major misunderstandings which threaten Nietzsche's philosophy of the will, illustrated in his concept of “will to power.” One such misunderstanding is interpreting power as an object of representation. Interpretations of the will to power that portray it as a kind of Hobbesian vainglorious desire to dominate others, such as the interpretations mentioned in the previous paragraph, portray power as the “object of a representation, of a *recognition* which materially presupposes a comparison of consciousnesses.”⁶ Nietzsche anticipated these misunderstandings and wondered, rather, *who* is it that interprets power as the will for recognition, to

⁵ *Genealogy of Morals*, 127.

⁶ *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 80.

be represented as superior over others?⁷ In the third essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche tells us that this is the slave's interpretation of power: "At least to *represent* justice, love, wisdom, superiority – that is the ambition of the 'lowest,' the sick."⁸ This idea seems to resonate with an enlightening quote from James Baldwin: "[h]ow can one, however, dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power?"⁹ Those who are consumed by *ressentiment* dream of partaking of the symbols of power, but their condition is defined precisely by the inability to embody that power in themselves. The genius of *ressentiment* lies in its ability to sequester power: the positive social valence of "goodness," associated with the powerful few, is transferred to the humble "virtues" that distinguish the slave from the master (i.e., the "evil one"). The actor of *ressentiment* wants nothing more than to shroud themselves with the stolen prestige of the object of the actor's resentment; to exercise power over another as *the* means of enhancing one's own power. Deleuze explains that when we think of power as an object of representation, "[w]hat we present to ourselves as the master is the idea of him formed by the slave, the idea formed by the slave when he imagines himself in the master's place."¹⁰ These are interpretations of power grounded in *ressentiment*, and they reveal that the mania for being represented "is the mania that is common to all slaves, the only relation between themselves that they can conceive of."¹¹ We must conclude from this that, in the end, the master reveals themselves to not be a master at all, insofar as they also dream in the symbols that *represent* power. This begs the question: what is the master's interpretation of power that Nietzsche is pointing to? To answer this question, we will invite Anzaldúa and Glissant to join the conversation with Nietzsche and Deleuze.

1.2 *Diffraction Ressentiment through La Mestiza*

Looking now to the work of Anzaldúa, I would like to argue that she provides a poetic conceptualization of *ressentiment* as *la mestiza's* natural defense mechanism in *Borderlands/La Frontera* in the form of the *nopal de castilla*, and that Anzaldúa's discussion of this phenomenon sheds a light on the relationship between *ressentiment* and violence. We should note however that my intention is *not* to say that Anzaldúa was *actually* talking about *ressentiment* and did not know it, as if it were some sort of obscure transcendental concept. Rather,

7 Ibid.

8 *Genealogy of Morals*, 123.

9 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 88.

10 *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 81.

11 Ibid.

both Nietzsche and Anzaldúa seem to be describing a similar dynamic of cultural forces with the interpretive tools they had available to them. The merit of this analysis, then, should hopefully consist in compiling a variety of interpretations that will afford us a richer understanding of a play of forces whose form or style repeats itself, albeit always under different contexts with different cultures. In this sense, there seems to be an affinity¹² between Nietzsche and Anzaldúa.

In the fourth chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa compares the *nopal de castilla*, also known as the “prickly pear” that cultivates needles to protect itself, to the vulnerability of a threatened self. I argue that the following description by Anzaldúa of the *nopal de castilla* provides a great amount of insight into the phenomenon of *ressentiment*:

[t]here are many defense strategies that the self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy and I have used all of them. I have split from and disowned those parts of myself that others rejected. I have used rage to drive others away and to insulate myself against exposure. I have reciprocated with contempt for those who have roused shame in me. I have internalized rage and contempt, one part of the self (the accusatory, persecutory, judgmental) using defense strategies against another part of the self (the object of contempt). As a person, I, as a people, we Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that something is “wrong” with us, something fundamentally “wrong.”¹³

Here we have a description that is very similar to the description given above, specifically when she mentions the contempt that the ashamed self harbors and directs against its object, the Other. The sense of inferiority felt in the face of the Other generates shame and contempt. The ashamed self then projects contempt onto an-Other part of the self, the perceived source of the threat.

12 Viveiros de Castro describes Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the notion of affinity as conceived by the indigenous of South America as “the point of articulation between opposed terms” (*Cannibal Metaphysics*, 46). See also the following article comparing perspectivism in the work of Nietzsche, Anzaldúa, and María Lugones: “Relational Perspectivism in Anzaldúa and Lugones Contra Nietzsche,” by Rebecca Longtin. Although we do not subscribe to Longtin's interpretation of Nietzsche, Longtin provides a very interesting discussion of how the works of these two decolonial feminist authors can have a fruitful conversation with Nietzsche's ideas, while also emphasizing the more explicitly ethical and feminist consequences of relational perspectivism that we don't find in his corpus.

13 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 45.

Furthermore, Anzaldúa makes a crucial connection when she ties the *nopal de castilla* to Chicano identity. This seems to show an even greater affinity between Anzaldúa and Nietzsche, considering that Nietzsche saw *ressentiment* as a hallmark of European culture that nevertheless has remained mostly outside of the self-reflexive awareness of the culture itself. Diffracting *ressentiment* through the *nopal de castilla* seems to indicate the workings of the former in the sense of inferiority felt by the colonized psyche, as shown, for example, in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*. Immediately following the previously cited passage, Anzaldúa goes on to describe how the self then turns to addiction as a safe haven, which it uses as a touchstone in trying times, keeping one from facing the source of their psychological distress head on. Thus, much like in Nietzsche's formulation of *ressentiment*, the ashamed self exists through a series of reactions, cultivating needles in response to the source of its psychological distress, and forming an addiction to affects to deaden pain.

We also see the dynamics of the *nopal de castilla* at work in the seventh and final chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera* in her discussion of *la mestiza*, which she defines as "the product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to the other."¹⁴ She reminds us that we all perceive the version of reality communicated to us by our culture, which affords *la mestiza* a unique third point of view whenever her (at least) two cultures clash. Conversely, those who were never exposed to a different version of reality or culture will inevitably only apprehend an-other culture from one point of view, or at the very least struggle to understand or accept an-other culture's perspective without frequent exposure to it. However, this does not necessarily mean that *la mestiza's* cultures coexist peacefully within her. She describes how "within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attacks commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture;"¹⁵ the many parts of ourselves cultivate needles to ward off outside threats. Indeed, Anzaldúa goes on to say that

[s]ubconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterstance. But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the

14 *Borderlands*, 78.

15 *Ibid.*

criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence ... All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against.¹⁶

There is a lot to unpack here. First, the initial reaction of blocking a perceived attack on ourselves with a counter stance seems to follow the formula for *resentiment*. Furthermore, what is particularly interesting is what Anzaldúa can teach us here about the relationship of *ressentiment* to violence. The immediate reaction of the counter stance is to take the fight to the other side of the river and challenge the hostile conventions of the other. I am not saying, and neither is Anzaldúa, that it is reprehensible to defy the established order. One should indeed put a foot on the other side – but only one. To put both feet on the other side and leave them there is an attempt to conquer territory for my culture at the expense of the other; to deny the perspective of the other and put mine in its place: *this is a formula for violence*, which makes clear that *ressentiment* isn't simply a psychological state, but a fundamental orientation one takes towards the world. What Anzaldúa is describing is a reactivity that remains at the mercy of external forces, which is why she thought that, although reaction is a necessary step towards liberation, "it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we still have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two moral combatants healed so that we are on both shores at once."¹⁷ What is also implied here is that thinking in terms of strict dualisms is a symptom of violence. Indeed, Anzaldúa thought that the end of dualistic thought could lead to the end of violence.¹⁸ This means that

16 Ibid.

17 *Borderlands*, 78.

18 "The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (*Borderlands*, 80). For Nietzsche, the process described here by Anzaldúa reveals the meaning of knowing. Cf. aphorism 333 "What knowing means" in *The Gay Science*: before knowledge is possible, different interpretive forces must present their one-sided view of the phenomenon, "and occasionally out of it a mean, an appeasement, a concession to [all sides], a kind of justice and contract; for in virtue of justice and a contract all these impulses can assert and maintain themselves in existence and each can finally feel it is in the right vis-à-vis all the others. Since only the ultimate reconciliation scenes and final accounts of this long process rise to consciousness, we suppose that *intelligere* must be something conciliatory, just, and good, something essentially opposed to the instincts when in fact it is only a behavior of the drives towards one another." That the greatest part

ressentiment is not inherently bad, as it is a step towards liberation or becoming *active*, a term used by Nietzsche and Deleuze to describe master morality, as well as by Anzaldúa to describe liberation.¹⁹ Nietzsche himself says, albeit in a harsher tone, about *ressentiment* that “[h]uman history would be altogether too stupid a thing without the spirit that the impotent have introduced into it”²⁰ – we must never approach Nietzsche with black and white judgments. This is a particularly relevant thought for decolonial scholarship because decolonial thought itself is defined against colonialism. This seems to imply that decolonial thought begins in *ressentiment*. But, as Anzaldúa shows, it does not have to remain there.

This is *not* a wholesale criticism of decolonial theory, but an observation that *ressentiment* is a kind of colonial export *par excellence* because, as we’ll see in our interpretation of Glissant and as Nietzsche never tires of pointing out in his work, western thought is steeped in *ressentiment*. There is really no other choice in the beginning of a struggle for liberation but to make oneself known through the symbols of power, to offer an-other perspective to the oppressor on terms they recognize. But true liberation is knowing how to speak the language of power and exposing it to an-other perspective(s), allowing those other perspectives to deform *and* be deformed by the language of power; a mutual diffraction that creates a new perspective; a product that is greater than the sum of its parts; a foot on both shores.

1.3 *Creolizing Ressentiment*

Glissant would call this process a “creolization.” Glissant defines creolization against *métissage*, meaning the synthesis of two differences. Creolization, however, “seems to be an endless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable. Creolization diffracts, whereas certain forms of *métissage* can concentrate one more time.”²¹ *Métissage*, by proceeding in terms of synthesis, remains within dualistic thought because it views differences as perspectives that contradict one another, needing to be reconciled according to a principle of identity that would constitute the common ground of unity for the overcoming of these contradictions through *métissage*. Thus, synthesis always leads to another dualism, as every synthesis eventually becomes the

of the mind’s activity proceeds unconsciously is another affinity between Anzaldúa and Nietzsche.

19 *Borderlands*, 79.

20 *Genealogy of Morals*, 33.

21 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 34.

other half of a dualism whenever it encounters an-other contradictory perspective. Creolization, on the other hand, always creates something new; an unprecedented difference resulting from the diffraction of other differences. That creolization proceeds by an affirmation of differences as differences in kind, as Deleuze would say, rather than differences in degree (the idea that all differences can be referred to a universal standard of measurement) is the sign of a thinking that has overcome *ressentiment*, in that the legitimacy of the perspective of the other is not judged by the standards of my own difference, and, therefore, covered over by the Same. This implies the understanding that difference does not imply the superiority or inferiority of one culture or another, only a difference in culture – the perspective of the Other lacks nothing. It is in this sense that we also interpret *ressentiment* as an “epistemological obstacle,” to describe how *ressentiment* limits our capacity to develop a *mestiza* consciousness, therefore limiting our capacity to think the world from an-other perspective because of the actor of *ressentiment*'s insistence on remaining within the confines of a single perspective. There is a well-known Nietzschean adage that says health's perspective on illness is different from illness' perspective on health; the road is not the same both ways, meaning that there is a fundamental asymmetry in the relation of two perspectives. *Ressentiment*, however, attempts to impose a symmetrical perspectival relation by constructing a mirror at each end of the road.

For Glissant, to think of difference just in terms of difference of degree is characteristic of western thought, which is based on the “requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments;”²² we interpret the “ideal” scale mentioned by Glissant as being the objective system of values developed by slave morality once *ressentiment* becomes creative. On the other hand, Glissant opposes the concept of “opacity” to the western demand for transparency of the other. Opacity describes the irreducible singularity, or difference in kind, of every perspective. More than just describing it, Glissant demands the *right* to opacity for everyone:

[a]gree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these

22 *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures ... Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality.²³

Glissant follows a similar pattern of thought to the one being outlined here, focusing on the dynamics of perspectival forces rather than on unearthing an oxymoronic perspective in-itself. To affirm everyone's right to opacity and overcome the idea of the one "true" perspective – namely, identity in the model of what he calls the "totalitarian root" – is to let go of the blinding narcissism of *ressentiment*.

There are two seemingly separate moments in the affirmation of opacity which really amount to a single affirmation. One cannot affirm the singular difference of the other without simultaneously affirming their own opacity. Opacity is like a coin with two sides: the affirmation of the singular difference of the other is the flipside of the affirmation of my own opacity. This only seems paradoxical if we continue to think of identity, as Glissant notes above, in terms of the components of the fabric rather than the texture of the weave. We must think of identity relationally, as a dynamic weave of interacting perspectives or forces, meaning that there is no transcendental subject freely calling the shots "behind" every perspective. Rather, every component is what it is by virtue of the different threads that meander through it. This is identity in the model of the rhizome: "[t]he notion of the rhizome maintains ... the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root [the principle of transparency]. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."²⁴ Thus, overcoming *ressentiment*, becoming active, is an aspiration to affirm the opacity of others and oneself, such that my identity is extended through the Other but never reducible to it, and that the Other's identity is extended through me (the Other of the Other) while being fundamentally irreducible to my perspective; it is the capacity of the *mestiza* to overcome the epistemological obstacle created by *ressentiment* and to hold conflicting perspectives without the threat of their mutual destruction. This sense of becoming active echoes Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal return, which he interprets not as the eternal return of the Same, as is common, but as a return of what differs: "[i]t is thus in the nature of affirmation

23 Ibid.

24 *Poetics of Relation*, 11. Glissant borrows the concept of the rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari.

to return or of difference to reproduce itself. Return is the being of becoming, the unity of multiplicity, the necessity of change: the being of difference as such or the eternal return."²⁵ We agree that to stamp the seal of being on becoming is the highest affirmation, an antidote to *ressentiment*. This, too, is a clamor for opacity: the victory of the creative power of affirmation over the rancorous "No" of *ressentiment*. Having developed an understanding of *ressentiment*, we will now diffract it yet again, but this time through the description of Amerindian perspectivism in *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

2 Second Experiment: *Cannibal Metaphysics* as Diffractive Apparatus for a Creolized *Ressentiment*

When everything is human, the human is an entirely different thing.

EDUARDO VIVEIROS DE CASTRO

2.1 *Analysis of Cannibal Metaphysics*

Before we diffract *ressentiment* through this work, we must first provide the reader with a brief analysis, which will then serve as the diffractive apparatus through which we will read *ressentiment*. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro wants no less than to comprise "the ideal of anthropology as a permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought, and a proposal for another means besides philosophy for the creation of concepts."²⁶ In the first chapter of his book, "*Anti-Narcissus*," his aim is to "illustrate the thesis that every non-trivial anthropological theory is a *version* of an indigenous practice of knowledge, all such theories being situatable in strict structural continuity with the intellectual pragmatics of the collectives that have historically occupied the position of object in the discipline's gaze."²⁷ If the ideas Viveiros de Castro puts forth sound similar to the ideas discussed in this paper, that is because they are. In particular, there is one significant point of affinity between this essay and *Cannibal Metaphysics*: a significant influence from the work of Deleuze. In fact, the most present influences on *Cannibal Metaphysics*, besides Amerindian culture, are Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and the work of Lévi-Strauss. Viveiros de Castro calls on some of the ideas of these thinkers to argue that the concepts anthropologists create have always already been

²⁵ Nietzsche & Philosophy, 189.

²⁶ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 47–48.

²⁷ Ibid., 42.

diffracted through the culture in question, and are thus an expression of a relation of perspectives, rather than a one sided interpretation of an objective phenomenon. His thesis asks that we think of identity rhizomatically, because, as Viveiros de Castro shows, the Other remains covered over by the Same as long as the anthropologist conceives of herself as a passive observer, reflecting (instead of diffracting)²⁸ the inner-workings of a culture from an objective perspective.

One of Viveiros de Castro's most important moves in developing a post-structural anthropology is his shift from European anthropology's traditional interpretive lens of "multiculturalism" to the concept of "multinaturalism," inspired by his study of Amazonian tribes in Brazil. Multiculturalism presupposes the idea of many cultures (points of view) that open up on to the same objective reality. This further presupposes a nature/culture dualism, where nature is the universal and culture the particular. Thus, from this point of view, anthropology's task is largely an epistemological one, i.e., to develop a map of how different cultures subjectively know the world. Multiculturalism and structuralism go together. The structural anthropologist brings with themselves a given system of significations in their symbiotic toolkit when they go to work. The presupposed objectivity of nature logically leads to the conclusion that it is possible to discover laws of culture that govern seemingly contingent and incompatible perspectives. Thus, multiculturalism unifies different perspectives under the banner of Culture.

Viveiros de Castro opposes multinaturalism to multiculturalism. Amerindian multinaturalism presupposes the opposite of the European worldview: it is "mind" or "culture" that is the universal, "nature" or "body" the particular (I added quotations to the dichotomous terms to indicate that, as we attempt to enter thought through the Amazonian perspective, we must be careful not to make the multiculturalist equivalence of our semiotic categories with those of other cultures). In this case, perspective is not in the mind, but in the body. Since awareness is the universal, we might ask, then, awareness of what? Perspectivism does not presuppose that a perspective is a perspective *on* something (the question itself presupposes a multiculturalist frame of reference), as if all perspectives opened onto the same nature. Rather, there are

28 Donna Haraway, "Modest Witness: Feminist diffractions in science studies," in *The Disunity of Science: Boundaries, Contexts, and Power*, eds. Peter Galison and David J. Stump (1996). Haraway's modest witness represents the ideal figure of modern science, who simply reflects reality as it is and has the authority to decide what is fact and what is not. Haraway argues that the modest witness is a myth, and that we must acknowledge that, rather than reflecting reality, we are always diffracting it.

only perspectives; "reality" is the ceaseless flux of the differential interaction of perspectives, such that there is no transcendental object or world-in-itself to be referred to across different bodies and cultures; perspective is embodied as an opaque psycho-physical totality. Thus, since one's experience of reality is contingent on how one's body affects and is affected by other bodies, there is no homogenous reality to use as a transcendental reference for the representation of different bodies and cultures. Hence, Viveiros de Castro wants to develop an "[a]nthropology as comparative ontography."²⁹ This means that the task of Viveiros de Castro's post-structural anthropology is not to compare subjective perspectives on a transcendental nature. Rather, it is already implied in the name of a multinaturalist anthropology that it gets rid of the assumption of a single nature, undertaking instead the task of exploring the multiple natures that exist; not the epistemological task of pursuing the *logos* of human culture, but an attempt to enter thought through the opaque embodied ontologies of other bodies.³⁰

We can no longer take the unicity of nature and the multiplicity of cultures for granted, so anthropology must enter thought through the ontology of the Other, no longer seeing the Same in the Other. This is why Viveiros de Castro refers to the chapter in question as *Anti-Narcissus*, after the Greek myth of Narcissus, who spent his entire life staring at his reflection in the water (as well as after Deleuze and Guattari's book *Anti-Oedipus*, from which the author draws much of his inspiration). Now, it becomes clearer what Viveiros de Castro might mean when he talks about the "permanent decolonization of thought."³¹ It would entail entering thought from a whole other

29 *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 43.

30 More on the difference between multinaturalism versus multiculturalism: "Cultural relativism, which is a multiculturalism, presumes a diversity of partial, subjective representations bearing on an external nature, unitary and whole, that itself is indifferent to representation. Amerindians propose the inverse: on the one hand, a purely pronominal representative unit – the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as "activated" or "agencied" by a point of view – and, on the other, a real or objective radical diversity. Perspectivism is a multinaturalism, since a perspective is not a representation. A perspective is not a representation because representations are properties of mind, whereas a point of view is in the body. The capacity to occupy a point of view is doubtlessly a power of the soul, and nonhumans are subjects to the extent to which they have (or are) a mind; but the difference between points of view and a point of view is nothing but a difference – is not in the soul. The latter, being formally identical across all species, perceive the same thing everywhere. The difference, then, must lie in the specificity of the body." *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 72.

31 *Ibid.*, 48.

perspective; to put the perspective of other cultures on the same level as our own; a flat, rhizomatic image of thought; every anthropological concept the result of a disjunctive synthesis of anthropology-becoming-Amazonian and the Amazonian-becoming-anthropology; taking the ideas of the Other as concepts in their own right and attempting to develop them within that culture's conceptual plane of immanence.

The unicity of culture presumes something like a universal soul that is shared by all actors. He reminds us that “[p]erspectivism presumes an epistemology that remains constant, and variable ontologies,”³² making the enlightening point that perspectivism already assumes a multinaturalist approach. Furthermore, he tells us that indigenous American ethnography is

replete with references to a cosmopolitical theory describing a universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents, human or otherwise—gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artifacts as well-equipped with the same general ensemble of perceptive, appetitive, and cognitive dispositions: with the same kind of soul.³³

From this point of view, one does not need to be a human being to be a person. In fact, since all subjects are endowed with the same soul, that means that every subject, from its point of view, considers itself “human” (i.e., grants itself personhood) due to the unicity of the epistemological categories of universal awareness. Viveiros de Castro discusses the perspectives of other animals to explain the universality of epistemological categories: “[a]nimals rely on the same ‘categories’ and ‘values’ as humans: their worlds revolve around hunting, fishing, food, fermented beverages, cross-cousins, war, initiation rites, shamans, chiefs, spirits.”³⁴ For example, what we consider to be blood is beer for the jaguar, a puddle of mud for us is a ritual ground for tapirs. This is because, although there is a unicity of soul, our physiology determines our relationships to other bodies in our environment. It is by virtue of the jaguar's physiology that the universal epistemological category of “beer” is interpreted by the jaguar as being what we call blood, the jaguar's “understanding” of beer/blood being similar to how we interpret intoxicating beverages. As Viveiros de Castro notes, this isn't so much because different beings see the same things differently – this is the formula for multiculturalism. Although this is true, this

32 Ibid., 74.

33 Ibid., 56.

34 Ibid., 71.

is simply a consequence of the more fundamental fact that *different beings see different bodies in the same way* due to the unicity of the epistemological categories of awareness and the multiplicity of natures – the formula for multinaturalism.³⁵ The person capable of communicating with other agents is the shaman who, by altering his psychological state, attempts to take the embodied point of view of animals, spirits, and other entities in order to conduct diplomacy and come back from his journey with an interpretation of these other perspectives. In a sense, the Amerindian shaman has been employing this method of post-structural anthropology for many centuries – the multinaturalist ontographer *par excellence*.

Now, before re-introducing *ressentiment* into the conversation, let's talk about the namesake of the book's title: cannibalism. Viveiros de Castro remarks that "one of the fundamental aspects of perspectivist inversions concerns the relative, relational status of predator and prey ... there is scarcely an existent that could not be defined in terms of its relative position on a scale of predatory power."³⁶ The flip side of the flexibility and generosity that allows the Amerindian to grant humanity to more-than-human beings is also their readiness to deny the humanity of other human collectives; kinship only occurs where the deliberate cessation of predatory relations is achieved, since the predator-prey relationship is the basic mode of relation. This means that where diplomatic relations don't exist between two groups, a predator-prey relation exists.

Viveiros de Castro utilizes this idea of the metaphysics of predation to argue against interpretations of Tupinambán cannibalism as human sacrifices. He says that it is not that the victim of sacrifice is an offering to supernatural entities. Rather, using the logic of multinaturalism, de Castro proposes that

[t]he "thing" eaten, then, could not be a "thing" [or sacrificial gift] if it were at the same time – and this is essential – a body. This body, nevertheless, was a sign with a purely positional value. What was eaten was the enemy's relation to those who consumed him; in other words, *his condition as enemy*. In other words, what was assimilated from the victim was the signs of his alterity, the aim being to reach his alterity as point of view on the Self. Cannibalism and the peculiar form of war with which it is bound up involve a paradoxical movement of reciprocal self-determination through the point of view of the enemy.³⁷

35 Ibid., 71–72.

36 Ibid., 57.

37 Ibid., 142–143.

Remember that a body from the Amerindian point of view is the particular and does not partake of the universal. Using the same epistemological categories within the purview of western thought, we could think of this heuristically as assimilating someone's perspective of us into our own. But to what end are these activities performed? Referring to the work of Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros de Castro argues that within Amerindian sociality, "the social body is integrally constituted through the capture of symbolic resources – names and souls, persons and trophies, words and memories – from the exterior."³⁸ Furthermore, "[b]y taking for its principle this movement of the incorporation of the enemy's attributes, the Amerindian socius had to 'define' itself with these same attributes."³⁹ Basically, Amerindian society self-actualizes from outside itself. The logic seems to be that, in the absence of a self-identical transcendental subject, Amerindian society can only come to know, and therefore become "itself," by incorporating other perspectives of itself. Thus, anthropology for the Amerindians is anthropophagy – taking life by eating the point of view of the enemy.⁴⁰

(In a sense, this essay could be seen as a kind of conceptual anthropophagy, where *ressentiment*, by incorporating other perspectives on itself, comes to know itself through images of itself that only the Other can give it. This is also what I mean by diffraction: seeing how *ressentiment* interferes with itself in its differential encounters with decolonial thought.)

2.2 *The Cannibal Metaphysics of Ressentiment*

So, what is the unique perspective that *Cannibal Metaphysics* offers on *ressentiment*? First, having dialogued with Glissant, it is no surprise that Viveiros de Castro felt the need to use perspectivism as his method of analysis in order to move past the old western habit of seeing the Same in the Other. The inability to set a foot on the other bank, nay, to miss it completely and deny its existence would indicate that *ressentiment* had been lurking in anthropology for quite some time (this seems to provide evidence for Nietzsche's bold claim that European sciences were founded in *ressentiment*).⁴¹

Second, in both our discussions of *ressentiment* and *Cannibal Metaphysics* we encountered a denial of the humanity of the other, with the very large caveat that in Amerindian culture there is always the possibility of the humanity of the other being recognized, pending diplomatic relations and the cessation of

38 Ibid., 144.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 143.

41 *Genealogy of Morals*, 146. Nietzsche believed science was the noblest and most recent form of the ascetic ideal.

the predator-prey relationship through the establishment of kinship. In the case of the history of western thought, however, recognition of the humanity of the indigenous people of the Americas is an ongoing battle that goes all the way back to the Valladolid debate between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginès de Sepúlveda. Remembering that *ressentiment* is not simply a passing psychological state but a fundamental orientation one takes towards the world, does *Cannibal Metaphysics* help us understand something predatory about *ressentiment*? By predatory we do not mean to invoke the idea of a morally evil act. Rather, we are thinking of *ressentiment* as the result of an encounter of perspectives/forces. From this point of view, *ressentiment* might be predatory in the way we mentioned above, in that, for the actor of *ressentiment*, negation of the other is the basis for the increase of one's power – one's self-affirmation draws its power from the negation of the other. Negation on the part of *ressentiment* as described by Nietzsche seems to be almost the opposite of the negation involved in the cannibalistic Amerindian ritual. Whereas western thought's negation of the other has been a means of replacing the perspective of the other with its own, the Amerindian rituals indicate that the negation of the humanity of the other and the subsequent consumption of the latter's body is at the same time an affirmation of the dependence of the sacrificers' identity on the legitimate perspective of the other; one's increase in power, one's self-actualization, is tied to the affirmation of another perspective. This is not to say that we would be better off as cannibals, only to point to the differences between *ressentiment* and Amerindian perspectivism's negation of the humanity of the other.

Although our discussion thus far has implied that *ressentiment* can be predatory without necessarily being expressed as physically predatory behavior, the latter is a natural next step. In a speech titled "The Free and the Brave," James Baldwin calls our attention to the plethora of epic cowboy/indian movies that have been made in America. He wonders how this could be, considering that this invokes a history of genocide committed by the United States. Isn't this something that is best not to talk about in public? To sweep under the rug of history? Is this not too shameful, and therefore too offensive, for the public eye? Actually, it is precisely for the sake of repressing awareness of the United States' shameful treatment of indigenous people that these epic myths have been necessary. As Baldwin puts it, "I suppose that all those Cowboy/Indian stories are designed to reassure that no crime has been committed. We have made a legend out of a massacre."⁴² Baldwin thought that at the heart of the

42 James Baldwin, "The Free and the Brave," Transcript of speech delivered at the Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles (May, 10, 1963), <https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-28-gz9o863j5g>.

matter of racism is the persistent denial of history by means of myths to reassure the guilty minds of Americans. These myths rely on depicting the superior humanity of white people at the expense of dehumanizing black and indigenous people, while diminishing their historical plight – sounds like the narcotic for shame that Nietzsche was talking about. Whenever a glimpse of the humanity of a black or indigenous person threatens to unravel this “fantastic system of evasion, denials, and justifications,”⁴³ there is the option of affirming their humanity or negating it with renewed fervor to save what Baldwin called one’s sense of reality or moral sense. This is where the threat of physical violence arises, because if reality does not match one’s idea of it, then for that idea to maintain its power, it eventually might need to violently impose itself on reality. This is an act inspired by a *ressentiment* towards life, as it demands that life answer to our concept of it, rather than the other way around. Thus, if one day everyone shared the same perspective, if everywhere one looked one saw confirmed their distorted image of the sub-humanity of indigenous and black people, and everywhere one saw these sub-humans treated as second class citizens, then what reason would there be for feeling guilty about racism! Similar to our discussion above on Anzaldúa, then, from this point of view, in addition to being predatory in thought by denying the humanity of the other, *ressentiment* is also a precursor for physically predatory behavior – expressed here as racial violence – which occurs when one attempts to force life to answer to one’s expectations of it.

Lastly, Viveiros de Castro’s discussion of the unicity of epistemological categories could be useful for understanding the dynamics of *ressentiment*. It would be silly to describe *ressentiment* from a multicultural point of view since, as we have established above, the tenets of multiculturalism can be traced back to a thinking that is held back by *ressentiment*. In line with the train of thought pursued by the experiment at hand, we should seek to understand *ressentiment* from a multinaturalist point of view, meaning that we should seek the (univocal) epistemological categories that, enacted differentially by different bodies, determine how perspectives engage and interpret each other in their mutually embodied equivocation. This is very similar to how Nietzsche describes the will to power, although I do not believe that he would have been keen on the idea that there is a single set of epistemological categories set in stone for all perspectives across time, as if these epistemological categories themselves were not subject to change. However, he did grant that every perspective wills its own will to power, that it wants to assert itself over other

43 “The Free and the Brave.”

perspectives. This could proceed creatively through the affirmation of difference or destructively through the negation of difference. This is not the same as science's endeavor to discover the laws of a single nature. Rather, we should seek to understand the multiplicity of natures as a function of the differentiation of interacting perspectives. Perhaps, then, bringing in the notion of the unicity of epistemology can enrich our understanding of will to power. Could we then interpret *ressentiment* as the result of an equivocation of epistemological categories between two perspectives? In this sense, the epistemological category of "power" describing the drive to self-actualization and the affirmation of one's difference is embodied one way in the body of the master and in yet another in the body of the slave, one way in the Amerindian and another in the European. Through slave morality this epistemological category is embodied as the creative interpretation of the master as evil, which moralizes that which, from another perspective, is associated with nobility and good health. Perhaps, then, whenever *ressentiment* first appeared, there was the creation of a new epistemological category: the morality of good and evil.