When cultural complexes meet artivism

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Abstract

Based on the theory of complexes formulated by Jung, this work aims to establish a dialogue between post-Jungian studies on Cultural Complexes and decolonial theories, utilizing artivism as an intersection point for this dialogue. Artivism is understood as any artistic production that carries at its core the resistance and subversion of any narratives or norms that collaborate or promote the oppression of an individual and/or group. This article aims to bring analytical psychology to the arena of contemporary debates in an attempt to broaden the discussion between individual-group-society, which can greatly contribute to the development of Brazilian analytical psychology.

Keywords
analytical psychology, cultural complex, colonial complex, artivism.

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Introduction

The Cultural Complexes theory is based on the theory of complexes formulated by Carl Gustav Jung, so to understand both of them I will bring some key concepts below. Jung has as one of his thought fundamentals the idea that the unconscious has different levels or layers. He did opt to call these layers the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. Regarding its characteristics, Jung wrote that:

A more or less superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal. I call it the personal unconscious. But this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature that is present in every one of us (JUNG, 1980, p. 20, par. 3).

According to Jung “‘archetype’ is in itself irrepresentable, but has effects which make visualizations of it possible, namely, the archetypal images and ideas” (JUNG, 1975, p. 199, par. 417).

As archetypes in their pure state are non-representable content for the consciousness, they access our personal unconsciousness under the form of complexes.

The Complexes may act consciously as a “lens” where the individual has his perception distorted by the complex’s content, which turns out to be positive or negative for the person. This distortion blurs the conscious and may provoke struggling (or facilitate) the subject’s adaptation process. It interferes with decision-making and in interpersonal relationships, the complexes act almost like other personalities; for this reason, one may say that a person is taken by the complex itself, not the opposite (JACOBI, 2007).

As Jung comments, when a complex is not treated on the subject’s conscious, remaining unconscious, they “[...] lose nothing of their original affectivity, though their outward manifestations can change almost endlessly” (JUNG, 1976, p. 92, par. 122). It means that, besides they’re being quite insistent and creative, the complexes can and should be brought to the light of consciousness for the subject to realize how these complexes affect his life, and once they did realize it, confront them with the elaboration and integration purpose.

The cultural complexes

Along his writings, mainly in volume 10 of The Collected Works, Jung gives us some clues about the correlations of unconsciousness with culture, without however addressing a proper concept that applies directly to it. The idea of Cultural Unconscious was formulated for the first time after Jung’s death, by the Jungian analyst Joseph Henderson, which along his lifetime trajectory wrote about correlations between the individual, the psyche, and culture, coming across the ideas of cultural unconscious, cultural archetypes and cultural attitudes (SILVA, SERBENA, 2021). Henderson (1990) formally defined the culture unconscious as:

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The cultural unconscious, in the sense I use it, is an area of historical memory that lies between the collective unconscious and the manifest pattern of culture has some kind of identity arising from the archetypes of the collective unconscious, which assists in the formation of myth and ritual and also promotes the process of development in individuals (p. 103).

Henderson's major contribution was spotting the cultural unconscious among the cultural unconscious and the personal and collective unconscious, to the extent that, those collective contents necessarily have to pass through a cultural mash before inhabiting the personal unconscious. The authors Thomas Singer and Samuel Kimbles (2004) further developed the idea of Cultural Unconscious, starting from Jung's Complexes theory, not intending to discover the causes of grupal conflicts, but mainly to amplify analytical theory on its own, due to its remaining flaws. Based on their predecessor's principles, Thomas Singer (2018) argues:

 [...] a cultural complex is defined as an autonomous, largely unconscious, emotionally charged aggregate of memories, affects, ideas, images, and behaviors that tend to cluster around an archetypal core and are shared by individuals within a group. Cultural complexes are active both in the psyche of the group as a whole and in the individual at what we can think of as the group level of the individual’s psyche (p. 73).

Singer (2018, p. 73-74, emphasis on original) proceeds with his definition, naming a few cultural complexes’ typical characteristics: they are autonomous and repetitive; collect experiences and memories that validate their own point of view; the thoughts of cultural complexes tend to be simplistic; have strong effects or emotions by which one can recognize their presence and, ultimately, “Not all cultural complexes are destructive; not all cultural complexes are ego-dystonic to the cultural identity of a group or individual. Indeed, some cultural complexes can form the core of a healthy cultural identity”. Singer e Kimbles (2004) consider that the cultural complexes start to integrate our psyche when we get in touch with collective life and public structures surrounding us, for instance, the community we belong to, schools, the media around us etc.

The author draws attention to the fact that cultural complexes are not collective identities or national ones. Despite these ideas being intertwined, it would be dangerous and even simplistic to analyze individual and group identities through the lens of cultural complexes. What could be argued is that cultural complexes “May contribute to a better sense of cultural identity and belonging to a group, which is essential for a well-being state of feeling” (SINGER, 2022, p. 114, free translation).

Some Jungian thinkers are exploring the realm of cultural complexes theory and are dedicated to writing about some cultural complexes that jeopardize not one culture alone, but the entire globe as a whole. Some of these complexes were named: racial complex (BREWSTER, 2020), racism cultural complex (CARIBÉ, 2018), and heteropatriarchal complex (PESSOA, 2021).

That’s an attempt to bring theory into the contemporary debate, contributing with a psychological perspective. In the Brazilian scenario, the Jungian analyst Walter Boechat (2018), starting from the ideas developed by Leonardo Boff (2016), named the fourth greater cultural complexes of the Brazilian nation that would be: colonialism, slavery, indigenous genocide, and corruption. Further on, I will dig into the colonial complex and thereafter, work on its relationship with artivism.

**Colonialism cultural complex**

The sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2005) analyses the colonization of America, especially
Latin America, as a universal racial classification process in the name of capitalism, and also as ethnocentric colonialism; He argues that the invention of concepts such as modernity and rationality are experiences and products exclusively European – therefore colonial from the outset – what is called Eurocentrism. Thinking about Europe as the center of subjectivity, culture, knowledge and its reproduction do create a narrative that other nations and cultures didn’t have the intellectual capacity for self-development as a civilization, thus, requiring European enlightenment. Those became the basis for the consolidation of colonial power structures. Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2020) still argues that for colonial power to sustain itself it is necessary to annihilate subjectivity (being) as well as the knowledge of colonized nations, turning its religion, cosmogony, culture, language, symbols - in short, turns its humanity - primitive, inferior, inhuman. Then replacing its culture, language, and Science for the colonizer’s modernity, for this reason, Nelson Maldonado claims that “not only are lands and resources taken, but minds are also dominated by thought forms that promote colonization and self-colonization” (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2020, p. 41, free translation).

Subsequently, other authors developed the decolonial theory and started to forge concepts such as gender coloniality, created by María Lugones (2014; 2020) claiming that the modern/colonial gender system doesn’t exist without the coloniality of power, that is to say, the colonialization process also imported a number "ideal-formal" rules and values. Some of them are: (i) the idea of anatomically correct biology (man/penis and woman/vagina); (ii) the hierarchization and adequate sexual behavior among genders – as women being inferior to men. Than, the bourgeoisie family-core model (father, mother, children) as being the only acceptable family configuration. Viviane Vergueiro (2015) still complements this thought by referring to a ciscoloniality that comes up with cisgender2, cisnormativity3, and cissexism4, even more ranking human beings, labeling them as acceptable, unacceptable, or inhuman.

From the lessons of Viviane Vergueiro and María Lugones, it becomes evident that those who occupy the human-subject locus are the European-men/cisgender-white-heterosexuals and those placed in the object-non-human spot where the people racialized as non-white, above all, women. Krenak (2019, p.37) calls this process of “selective human club”, in which those who don’t fit in the patterns imposed by this club “insist on declining to join this dance of civilization, technology, and planetary control. And as their dance is a strange one, it has to be stopped, and the dancers eradicated through epidemics, poverty, starvation, and violence”.

The idea of colonialism’s cultural complex is similar to Grada Kilomba’s (2010) ideas developed in her book Plantation Memories. In her new book, the author expatiates racism treating it as a psychic trauma, following the concept formulated by Freud, which generates a bunch of suffering for the black population, directly impacting those communities’ quality of life. Despite Kilomba’s psychoanalytical background, she quotes the collective unconscious when she argues that:

We could say that in the white conceptual world, it is as if the collective unconscious of Black people is pre-programmed for alienation, disappointment and psychic

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2 The Cisgender, fundamentally, may be perceived as the typical gender identity, therefore, a neutral one. The term “cisgender” is a concept that encompasses people who do not identify with the gender determined at birth, in other words, the non-transgender people (VERGUEIRO, 2015, p. 192, free translation).

3 We may assume that cisnormativity is a series of sociocultural and institutional forces that take the cisgender phenomena as a “natural” discourse (VERGUEIRO, 2015, p. 68, free translation).

4 Comparable to the idea of sexism, cissexism can be defined as a series of discriminatory practices which stabiles a hierarchy between cis and transgender people, being the cisgender people on top and transgender at the bottom.
trauma since the images of Blackness we are confronted with are neither realistic nor gratifying (KILOMBA, 2010, p. 19).

Despite being distinct psychological theories, Jung had a profound bond with psychoanalysis, which had a great contribution to his work. This very example that Kilomba brings would be an equivalent of a complex cultural action on the individual psyche, which changes the subject’s perspective, framing it on its unconscious narrative. Therefore, the colonialism cultural complex would be like a trauma implanted within the soul of the colonized, a collective experience of exploitation, domination, expropriation, extermination, death’s trivialization, torture, and rape (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2020).

The notion of trauma thought through a Jungian perspective would be, according to Kalsched (2013), any experience that causes unbearable or intolerable pain or anxiety, which threatens the human personality or the personal spirit. This trauma prevents the subject from having a satisfactory and creative psychic development, activating what he called the “archetypal self-care system of the psyche”; the psyche is willing to do anything to protect this fragile Self that cannot fulfill itself socially, including killing himself (suicide). The mechanisms that the individual psyche produces to deal with this trauma can be negative/self-destructive or positive/transformation. Experiences such as racism and Transphobia fit this description of trauma perfectly, as we will see later.

The way these complexes act on the individual psyche of non-white people’s descendants turns out pretty evident when we analyze the mental health overview in Brasil. The non-white population and LGBTQIA+ Community, due to racism and structural cis/straight-normativity turn out to be the ones who are most likely to develop psychiatric disorders, accordingly to the research work of Ghorayeb (2007); Cardoso e Ferro (2012); Smolen e Araújo (2017) and Oliveira and Vedana (2020). Not surprisingly though, those same populations are the ones at greater risk of committing suicide, as shown by the research conducted by Brazilian Healthcare Ministry (BRASIL, 2018) and by the Brazilian LGBTI+ Death and Violence Observatory (ANTRA et al., 2022).

The book Enfrentamento dos Efeitos do Racismo, Cissexismo e Transfobia na Saúde Mental (Facing the effects of Racism, Cissexism, and Transphobia on Mental Health) organized by Neon Cunha (2021) and co-workers explores pretty well these consequences. That is the reason why psychoanalysts Parise e Scandiucci (2021, p. 144, free translation) reiterate “[...] we ought to decolonize Brazilian psyche. Only then we can elaborate our founding trauma”.

Based on these considerations, lays a question. Before the European invasion, Abya Yalá already has on its people diversity and their own cultural complexes that organized collective life. So, what happened to the contents of those cultural complexes that inhabited the cultural unconscious after the pre-colonial invasion context? What about the cultural complexes brought by slaved people? From a Jungian perspective, it is assumed that these contents have been relegated to the shadow.

When someone studies a complex’s behavior and discusses its autonomy, it is true to say that a complex does not stop existing, it just “discharged”. Thus, the psychic energy once available for a complex may be redistributed for another one. And the more psychic energy a complex has, the more it gets close to consciousness (JUNG, 1975).

When studying the behavior of a complex, while discussing its autonomy, it’s common to say that a complex doesn’t stop existing, it just

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5 Porto-Gonçalves (2009, p. 26, free translation) defines “Abya Yalá, in the language of the Kuna people, it means Ripe Earth, Alive Earth or Flowering Earth, and its synonymous with America. [...] Little by little, in the different meetings of the indigenous people’s movement, the name America has been replaced by Abya Yalá, thus indicating not only another name but also the presence of another subjective speech, hitherto silent and subordinated in political terms: the native people”.

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is “unloaded”, and the psyche energy which was available for a complex may be redistributed to another one. The complexes may present four distinct behaviors: “[...] total unconsciousness of its existence, identification, projection, or confrontation. But only confrontation can help the ego to come to grips with the complex and lead to its resolution” (JACOBI, 2007, p. 17-18); and, according to Boechat (2018, p. 82, free translation) “The first step in order to confront a complex, as for individuals as for the culture, is to acknowledge its very existence”.

Parise e Scandiucci (2021, p. 145, free translation) referring to pathologies generated by the colonial complex suggest that the Brazilian soul urges to be “re-imagined” and to achieve that we ought to “restore and update a plurality that already existed even before the portuguese invasi or’s arrival”. Boechat (2018, free translation), in an attempt of formulating a response for healing those pathologies, give us some clues on how it can be done:

What could we do to transform those harsh cultural complexes deeply rooted in our self-image as a nation? The major answer for this process is the same given in individual psychotherapy: Memory, in confrontation with severe cultural problems, we ought to remember, not repress, forget and throw away in the past ditch (p. 83-84).

The cultural complexes meet the artivisms

As we previously commented, the complexes express themselves through symbols. And these psychic images are not immune to cultural and personal complexes we carry with ourselves, they speak through them, tell us stories, and bring some of our psyches. Jung (1976, p. 124 par 180) refers to the idea of the symbol as “[...] an indefinite expression of many meanings, pointing to something not easily defined and therefore not fully known”. To become a symbol, an image needs an observer’s consciousness to

\[8\] The term decolonization may be understood as: “Politically, the term describes the achievement of autonomy by those who have been colonized and therefore involves the realization of both independence and self-determination” (KILOMBA, 2010, p.138).

\[7\] A widely known quotation of Conceição Evaristo, nationally acclaimed and widespread author, well-known for advocating both for civil rights and black women’s rights organizations.
create a bond with this image, on a trade involving it in meaning (RODRIGUES, 2019).

The symbolic language can capture, like a magnet, those who observe it, being able to instigate the movement of psychic aspects, thus, avoiding psyche stagnation (JACOBI, 2007).

These images from the unconscious (personal, cultural, and collective) are projected in “the real world” via visual arts in the form of symbols. Those symbols are defined as an image or scene with a visible meaning, but underneath the visible, it carries an occult and deeper meaning (JACOBI, 2007).

The artist, by appropriating natural and/or artificial materials and entangling them with their creativity, can create new subjectivities, perceptions, and meanings, as well as create other possibilities and other worlds capable of dialoguing with the spectators (ROLNIK, 2003). In her book Images of Unconsciousness the psychiatrist Nise da Silveira (2015) tells us:

The psychic process develops its dynamism through the creation of symbolic images. “the symbol is the psychological mechanism that transforms energy” [JUNG O.C. 8]. Thus, the objectification\(^8\) of symbolic images in drawing or painting may promote energy transfers from one level to another psychic level. The image is not something static. It is alive, active, and even possesses curative efficiency (p. 135, free translation).

Nise da Silveira (1905-1999) was a Brazilian psychiatrist who developed her train of thought and research fundamentals inside Pedro II Psychiatric Ward, located on Rio de Janeiro. Nise was responsible for the creation of Painting Atelier, in 1946, and she had set as the main goal creating a therapeutic alternative for violent “treatments” forced upon mentally disordered patients. The significant improvement observed in the patients, who willingly frequented the Painting Atelier led Nise da Silveira to start her research work.

Gustavo Barcellos (2006) in his paper South and the Soul discusses a bit how these cultural complexes manifest themselves and update in the arts, for this purpose, the author uses the artistic expression of colonial/tropical baroque as an example of artistic manifestation that confronts the colonial complex, to the extent that it refuses to accept this artistical expression as a finished work; regarding that, besides the baroque was a style imported from Portugal, when it arrives in Brazil it is transformed, encompassing several other cultural references, until it becomes a whole different and unique style, distancing itself from the original baroque, which has its own idiosyncrasies that differentiate and defines it.

So how this confrontation with artivism would occur? This artistic and political movement does not work with subtleties and turns the conflict between the cultural complexes wide open? The first step would be to define what artivism is, which Raposo (2015, p. 05, free translation) did when he argues that:

It appeals to connections, as classical as they are prolix and polemical, between art and politics, and stimulates the potential destinations of art as an act of resistance and subversion [...] Its aesthetic and symbolic nature amplifies, sensitizes, reflects, and interrogates themes and situations in a given historical and social context, aiming at change or resistance. Artivism is thus consolidated as a cause and social claim and simultaneously as an artistic rupture - namely, by the proposition of alternative scenarios, landscapes, and ecologies of fruition, participation, and artistic creation.

Briefly, artivism is an artistic production that carries in its core the resistance and subversion

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\(^8\) By objectivities the authors refer to the process of giving shape to a certain image, transforming it into creation, a tangible and observable work of art.
of any narratives or standards that promote or even cooperate with individuals or groups’ oppression. In general, artistic production refers to social themes and emerging politics.

It is interesting to note here that Jung himself, in his text *On the relation of Analytical Psychology to poetry* (1922) refers to the social value that art has and the role of the artist in the face of the inadequacy of his time:

That is the secret of great art and its effect on us. The creative process, so far as we can follow it at all, consists of the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and elaborating and shaping of this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate for the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. The artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers (JUNG, 1971, p. 77, par. 130).

By analyzing the Brazilian activism scene, Leandro Colling (2019, p. 29) observes what it seems to be a major mobilization around themes involving sexual and gender dissents. This topic is intimately intertwined with the decolonial fundamentals aforementioned. In this activism scene, the author remarks on what seems to be a “happiness of trespassing” but trespassing what exactly?

Throughout the text, Colling observes that the activism scene values the hybrid gender sexual identities, opposing the idea of the attached identity of male/penis/heterosexual and woman/vagina/heterosexual. He also observes that the predominance of multiple artistic languages and collectives — not centralized on a person alone —, several times, provokes the spectator to participate and intervene in the work of art. The activism scene makes chorus against any kind of prejudice and bodies and identities normalization, which on this subject, it is very similar to decolonical ideas.

Colling (2019) links these two references and even quotes some authors who analyze artistic production through the decolonization idea. Apparently, by producing images that deconstruct the notion of fixed identity and breaking with a series of norms invented by culture, this artistic scene collides directly with the very basis of the colonial complex, promoting discharge, so to speak, and circulation of psychic energy to other images and complexes that subvert the coloniality image.

In another paper called *Failure, queer utopia or resistance? Reading keys for thinking about the arts of sexual and gender dissidents in Brazil*, Colling (2021, p. 15, free translation) observes that “many individuals and groups forming the current activist sex and gender dissents scene in Brazil refuse to accept the death drive, they refuse to take part on failure or unhappiness. In this scene, disobeying (OLIVEIRA, 2017), sometimes with joy, is much more appropriate than failure”.

Would it be an archetypical defense of the spirit of “dissent groups”? Maybe it is a creative and positive defense (or self-defense?) that encompasses unawakened cultural complexes and refuses to operate in the colonial terms that produce images of death and unhappiness? Or would it be a rescue/inflation of pre-intrusion colonial cultural complexes?

This artistic movement seems to confront the narratives that sustain the very basis of the colo-
nial complex, doing so through positive and joyful images and scenes that represent non-white and LGBTQIA+ people with dignity, creativity, strength and freedom.

Final considerations

If we assume art as a kind of therapy, or Art therapy itself, and realize it has the power to transform people through image and promote, as Nise da Silveira once said, a self-healing process, what could these images achieve, even slowly, on behalf of collective entities? By questioning it is referrrer to human subjectivity, which is not immune to the constant visual bombing we receive. Even when those images are transmitted through traditional media, or even through social media, stamped on Billboards and walls along the city.

Impregnated with a narrative that, as seen, permeates the cultural complexes, the images conveyed by the hegemonic media teach us, among many things, that: the happy family is the one pictured in the advertisements (white, heterosexual, and with offspring); that Indians in Brazil only exist in isolated lands somewhere in the Amazon; that agro is pop and that it is okay to destroy our planet; and that black men and women only occupy the subordinate places in society because they didn’t try hard enough.

Regardless of the effort, we had on public policies and pressure from social movements in the last few decades, there is still fragility in the political conquests in favor of the masses and diversity.

It is indisputable that a change at the structural level is necessary. However, for this to occur, a subjective change is also necessary. And artivism proves to be a powerful ally to achieve it. Art has the power to reach unimaginable places, and it doesn’t silence itself when faced with censorship; on the contrary, the more art is censored, the more transgressive it will become. And the current government seems to have realized this power, since it was responsible for trying to censor several artistic manifestations, especially those linked to LGBTQIA+ themes.

Utterly, I finish this article with a very relevant quote from visual artist Elidayana Alexandrino (2022, online, free translation): “We have to understand images as world creators and possible realities. We need a new visual culture based on love, in the political sense of action and transformation!”.

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* Cure in the analytic vocabulary means transformation.
Resumo

Os complexos culturais e os artivismos

A partir da teoria dos complexos formulada por Jung, este trabalho se propõe a fazer uma interlocução entre os estudos pós-junguianos sobre Complexos Culturais e as teorias decoloniais, utilizando como ponto de intersecção para esse diálogo os artivismos. Entende-se por artivismos toda produção artística que carrega em seu âmago a resistência e a subversão de quaisquer narrativas ou normas que colaborem ou promovam a opressão de um indivíduo e/ou grupo. Esse artigo tem o intuito de trazer a psicologia analítica para a arena dos debates contemporâneos na tentativa de ampliar a discussão entre indivíduo-grupo-sociedade, que podem contribuir para o desenvolvimento da psicologia analítica brasileira.

Palavras-chave: psicologia analítica, complexo cultural, complexo colonial, artivismo.

Resumen

Los complejos culturales y los artivismos

A partir de la teoría de los complejos formulada por Jung, este trabajo propone establecer un diálogo entre los estudios pos-junguianos sobre los Complejos Culturales y las teorías decoloniales, utilizando el artivismo como punto de intersección de dicho diálogo. Se entiende por artivismo toda producción artística que lleve en su núcleo la resistencia y subversión de cualesquier narrativas o normas que coadyuven o promuevan la opresión de un individuo y/o grupo. Este artículo tiene como objetivo traer la psicología analítica a la arena de los debates contemporáneos en un intento de ampliar la discusión entre individuo-grupo-sociedad, que puede contribuir en gran medida al desarrollo de la psicología analítica brasileña.

Palabras clave: psicología analítica, complejo cultural, complejo colonial, artivismo.
References


