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## The Disaster of Colonial Narcissism

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## The Disaster of Colonial Narcissism

Narcissus's self-knowledge is an accession to a clarity that is so clear that it will not lead to relation. (Spivak, 1993, p. 32)

In her 1991 article “An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus,” Claire Nouvet notes that Maurice Blanchot includes a brief discussion of the Narcissus myth in *The Writing of the Disaster*. This inclusion, she says, “implicitly gives rise to a question of capital importance for our purposes: what is ‘disastrous’ in Narcissus’s story?” (1991, p. 117). On one level, the answer to this question—which is of “capital importance” not just for Nouvet’s but also for my own purposes in this essay on colonial narcissism—seems fairly obvious: narcissism, as the psychopathology which takes its name from “Narcissus’s story,” has such a singularly bad reputation in the popular imagination that it is not difficult to fathom why someone would frame it as a “disastrous” condition. In fact, in as much as Narcissus is commonly attributed with arrogance, grandiosity, aloofness, intense self-absorption, as well as a ruthless lack of empathy for and indifference towards others, he is easily identified as a walking disaster best avoided. However, while Narcissus’s disastrous impact on others is well documented, and much lamented, what is perhaps less commonly noted—at least outside the context of clinical psychoanalysis—is the utter disaster of Narcissus’s own existence. This lesser-known disaster is perhaps worth a closer look, for it certainly plays a significant part in Ovid’s original conception, where Narcissus is severely punished for his cold indifference and impervious air of superiority: meeting the fate predicted for him by Tiresias, Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection and dies upon thus coming to “know himself.” In fact, becoming bound to a love that can never be consummated, Ovid’s Narcissus turns into what Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Echo,” evocatively calls “an icon of mortiferous self-knowledge” (1993, p. 22): encountering his own beauti-

ful reflection and becoming transfixed by it, Narcissus dies a tragically isolated figure. Honing in on this latter disaster—a disaster, we might say, of stymied relationality and painfully lonely existence—Spivak implicitly refocuses our attention, pulling it away from Narcissus’s arrogance and grandiosity and drawing it instead towards his failure, particularly his failure in relationality. Enchanted by an “other” who is nothing but his own reflection, Narcissus is incapable of relating to a real other; as Spivak writes, “Narcissus’s self-knowledge is an accession to a clarity that is so clear that it will not lead to relation” (1993, p. 32).

“[W]hat is ‘disastrous’ in Narcissus’s story” (Nouvet, 1991, p. 117), at least on this reading, is thus that Narcissus is painfully impaired in his ability to relate to others. Analyzing the narcissistic condition from a clinical perspective, relational psychoanalyst Phillip Bromberg names the problem associated with this impairment succinctly when he says that narcissism “is a quality of unrelatedness which represents the failure in development of a spontaneous, stable, taken-for-granted self experience” (1986, p. 439). Further, he notes that the repercussions of this failure are profound:

The individual tends not to feel himself at the center of his own life. He is prevented from full investment in living because he is developmentally stuck between “the mirror and the mask”—a reflected appraisal of himself, or a disguised search for one, through which the self finds or seeks affirmation of its own significance. Living becomes a process of controlling the environment and other people from behind a mask. (1986, pp. 439–440)

In other words, in this “disastrous” perversion of relationality, Narcissus gets trapped in a fixed and limiting role just as much as his echoing counterpart does: while Echo is being cast in the unenviable supporting role of a passively reflecting other who must provide Narcissus with the longed-for self-consolidation, the main act, Narcissus, becomes stuck in masked and hollowed-out versions of himself that prevent genuine relationality and leave him “mortiferously” alone in his longings for connection.

Intriguingly, Spivak notes that what drew her attention to the Narcissus myth is the frequent “racist misuse” of the myth, where the presumed immaturity of non-European cultures is seen as preventing them from reaching the developmental stage of the Oedipal process (and hence the formation of a superego), leaving them “stuck in varieties of narcissism and its vicissitudes” (1993, p. 17). She is therefore “interested in the psychoanalytic Narcissus,” she says, “because, in a kind of ‘colonial’ reconstellation of the matter of ‘Greece,’ he is made to stand at the door of the free discourse of Oedipus” (1993, p. 18). Taking inspiration from Spivak’s idea of a “‘colonial’ reconstellation”—but adopting a post-Freudian understanding of narcissism and extending my discussion in a different direction—I want to consider, in this essay, whether another kind of transposition of the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus into a colonial context is imaginable, one where it is not the non-European who is “stuck in varieties of narcissism and its vicissitudes,” but the European himself. In other words, this is a transposition that presents the colonial relation specifically in terms of a narcissistic dynamic—with the colonizer stepping into the role of Narcissus and the colonized adopting the role of Echo. Such a transposition, where Narcissus re-emerges as grandiose and aggressive conqueror, makes immediate psychological sense; in fact, Diane Simmons makes precisely this association between narcissistic and imperial relationships when she opens her 2007 study *The Narcissism of Empire* (which remains one of the few extended studies of colonial narcissism to date) with the following statement:

The modern portrait of narcissism—a grandiose sense of superiority alternating with feelings of loss, rage and revenge—gives us a model for thinking about imperial relationships. Subject peoples could be of immense psychic use to their conquerors, as they could be compelled in a variety of ways to reflect back to the imperialist a grandiose self-image. (2007, p. 1)

The extreme closeness of the match between imperial and narcissistic modes of relating further impresses itself upon us

if we consider Daniel Shaw's recent relational reframing of the concept in *Traumatic Narcissism* (2014). Narcissism, in Shaw's psychoanalytic account, finds expression in "the tendency to seek power and control through negation of the other" (2014, p. 6). He suggests:

What is most characteristic of the traumatizing narcissist as I am defining him is his compelling need to suppress subjectivity in the other, so that the narcissist's subjectivity is always the exclusively important and only valid focus in any dyad or group. He creates fixed complementarity in his relationships, with himself in the dominant position, as subject, and the other as his object to use. (2014, pp. 12–13)

One does not need to go very far, I think, to recognize in this "disastrous" scenario an all-too-familiar version of colonialism's Manichaean self/other relationship, where the other's otherness features as a subjectivity that is subjugated and held captive in a violent relational regime put into place, and enforced, by the dominant imperial self. As Edward Said put it so compellingly in *Orientalism*: "because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action"—an act of imprisonment that brought enormous psychological benefits to the European Orientalist: "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (1995, p. 3). What we witness play out in colonial contexts is therefore easily recognized as a version of this "compelling need to suppress subjectivity in the other" that, for Shaw, marks the "traumatizing narcissist" (2014, p. 12).

It is in this context that the "disaster" of Narcissus's own existence becomes of greater interest. In fact, Spivak's attribution of a "mortiferous" form of anti-relationality to Narcissus—and, by extension, to the "narcissistic" colonizer—proves to be inspired here, for it provokes an analysis of the "disaster" of colonial narcissism that potentially stretches beyond the usual and predictable perpetrator/victim dichotomy inherent in conventional accounts of narcissistic complementarity. To be

sure, Spivak's essay does not itself deliver such an analysis: her own specific concern lies with "Echo"—particularly with the ways in which "Echo" refutes her assigned role—while "Narcissus" and his relational problems are (appropriately enough) of only secondary interest for her. My own sense is, however, that we need to give these problems due attention if we want to untangle the toxic relational knots that tie Narcissus to his "others." In other words, if we take Spivak's rendition of Ovid seriously and acknowledge that Narcissus himself might be trapped in a deadly non-relationship, what we ought to realize is that Narcissus does not just inflict pain on others but also suffers his own fair share of it. As a result, the familiar picture of colonial relations—the reductive but comfortable "bad colonizer/good colonized" dichotomy—suddenly starts to look a lot murkier. In other words, if Narcissus is just as much (albeit certainly differently so) a victim of his "mortiferous" condition as is Echo, the "disaster" of colonial narcissism is not only far more comprehensive than we might at first assume but, importantly, also presents quite different challenges for an effective intervention.

In alerting us to Narcissus's "disaster" of non-relation, Spivak therefore goes beyond simply offering us a perhaps unexpected response to Nouvet's question of "what is 'disastrous' in Narcissus's story" (1991, p. 117). What ultimately makes her response so provocative for a postcolonial reconsideration not just of colonialism but, more specifically, of colonialism as a form of narcissism, is that she invites us to reconsider the familiar picture of narcissistic grandiosity—a picture into which the European colonizer is, as we saw, readily interpellated—as a picture of painful failure: a failure, specifically, of relationality. Given this "disastrous" state of affairs, a closer analysis of what may lead to such a spectacular failure in relationality is clearly vital—and it is to this task that my article is dedicated. My suspicion here is that we cannot come to terms with the "mortiferous" narcissistic tangle until we understand what drives it—what drives, that is to say, Narcissus's "compelling need to suppress subjectivity in the other." My own sense of what might be behind this need is informed by Shaw's insight that what motivates the "tendency to seek power and control through

negation of the other” is the narcissist’s “fear of otherness” (2014, p. 6). More specifically, I believe that what the narcissist fears in fearing otherness is the potentially traumatic impact of the other. In other words, the argument I seek to develop here is that the narcissistic condition circles around a disavowed traumatic core, and that to be able to make an effective post-colonial intervention and tackle our colonial legacies in a way that would allow us to radically reconfigure the complementary dynamic at work in the post/colonial relationship, we not only need to address the social, historical and economic legacies of the colonial encounter that have been, and continue to be, the principal focus of postcolonial studies, but also its psychic inheritances—specifically as they relate to this traumatic core.

What I am therefore urging for here is a reengagement with psychoanalysis—particularly relational psychoanalysis in its contemporary and historical formations—*vis-à-vis* the colonial encounter. For what is curious here, I think, is that, while most post-Freudian theories of narcissism, including the otherwise opposing ones of Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut, agree that the developmental background of narcissism is generally one of “disastrous” emotional deprivation and abandonment, this developmental view of narcissism is finding little airtime in disciplines beyond clinical psychoanalysis, including postcolonial studies. In other words, what tends to still dominate the popular view is some version or other of Freud’s original conception of narcissism as libidinal investment in the ego—“His Majesty the Baby” (1957, p. 91), as he famously calls it in “On Narcissism”—without a fuller understanding that what frequently lurks in the developmental background of this grandiose “Majesty” is a history of deprivation and relational trauma. This article therefore emerges out of a sense of disciplinary conversations being woefully out of sync: bluntly, if clinical analyses of narcissism emphasize narcissism’s “disastrous” origins in traumatic relationality, why is so little of this discourse filtering through into broader conversations about narcissism beyond the clinic? Without being able to offer any satisfactory answers to this question—which could at best be speculative—I want to take my impulse here from the thought that it might be possible to establish a more attuned and productive conversation between

the two fields. In particular, I would like to see whether the key clinical assumption regarding narcissism (that narcissism is intricately entangled with traumatic relationality) can be mobilized for a field such as postcolonial studies—a field which may recognize (at least to a point) the narcissistic dimensions of the colonial encounter, but, to date, has shied away from looking more fully into the aetiology of the narcissistic psyche, such as it has been opened up by post-Freudian clinical conversations.

### “crisis of nonrelation”

Let me move into this discussion by acknowledging that the reading I am developing here of the colonial situation as marked, specifically, by a narcissistic “quality of unrelatedness” is a little unorthodox in postcolonial scholarship, a field that has long had a troubled relationship to psychoanalysis,<sup>1</sup> and that rarely looks beyond Freud and Lacan for inspiration.<sup>2</sup> The earliest intellectual seeds for such a reading can perhaps be found in Frantz Fanon’s influential study *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). As a practicing psychiatrist, Fanon had first-hand experience of the psychological damage colonialism was inflicting upon the colonized, leading him to frame *Black Skin, White Masks* as “a clinical study” (2008, p. 5). More specifically, he turns to psychoanalysis in his “effort to understand the black-white relation,” proceeding to diagnose this relation as a form of “dual narcissism” (2008, p. 3). To be sure, Fanon was no psychoanalyst and he does not develop a fuller analysis of this “dual narcissism” in the text, suggesting that he may have meant little more than colonialism’s violent Manichaeisms, which will become a much more overt target for him in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Importantly, however, for the context of this discussion, the “narcissism” of which Fanon speaks seems to have little in common with Freud’s “libidinal cathexis of the ego” (1957, p. 75), thereby offering us an early prompt to look beyond Freud in our analysis of colonial narcissism. And indeed, Fanon, whose relationship with psychoanalysis was nothing if not ambivalent, proclaims at one point that “the discoveries of Freud are of no use to us here” (2008, p.

77),<sup>3</sup> thereby inviting us to consider the concept of colonial narcissism in non-Freudian terms, terms, specifically, that can accommodate a sense of the “real” and “actual” alongside the realm of unconscious fantasy.

Without mentioning narcissism, Leela Gandhi’s discussion, in *Affective Communities* (2006), of what she calls colonialism’s “crisis of nonrelation” (p. 184) perhaps offers the most overt precursor to my discussion here. Gandhi argues that what some of the utopian socialists she discusses in the book “aimed to expose” was the “antirelational basis of imperialism” (2006, p. 185). Engaging directly with colonialism’s violent relational economy, Gandhi draws on Giorgio Agamben (who, in turn, draws on Hannah Arendt), to argue that the power/knowledge configurations at work in imperialist regimes are predicated upon a “crisis of nonrelation”: a Manichean organization of the encounter between colonizer and colonized that is fed by colonial fantasy and its “craving for the hygiene of oppositionality” (2006, p. 4). Further, it is against the background of such a “crisis” that her own investment in what she variously calls a “politics of friendship” (2006, p. 9), an “immature politics” (2006, p. 177), an “evental politics” (2006, p. 183), or a “politics of relationality” (2006, p. 188) takes shape.

For Gandhi, the utopian mentality that interests her in *Affective Communities* is marked by the kind of relationality that is under display in friendship, which she defines, borrowing from a range of thinkers including Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, as “the co-belonging of nonidentical singularities” (2006, p. 26). Such a friendship, for her, is not based on Aristotelian *homophilia* (where the friend is defined in terms of self-consolidating similitude), but rather on Epicurean *philoxenia*: a “love for guests, strangers, and foreigners” that, she says, introduces “the disruptive category of risk into the otherwise determined Epicurean espousal of the ethical benefits of cultivated *ataraxia*, or invulnerability, and *autarkia*, or self-sufficiency” (2006, p. 29). Incorporating openness to this “disruptive category of risk,” the utopian mentality, for her, pursues a “genuine” or “affective” cosmopolitanism that is quite unlike its better-known Kantian counterpart:

[. . .] a utopian mentality shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism: always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe. In Kant's canonical rendition—readily absorbed within the coercive universalizing logic of former and current colonialisms—cosmopolitanism, we might recall, was privileged as the stable political zone of “perpetual peace,” a prescriptive “being-in-common” bearing promise of immunity to the psychic contagion of cultural difference. In its affective mutation, however [. . .], cosmopolitanism may well be the means to puncture those fantasies of security and invulnerability to which our political imagination remains hostage. It might, for instance, teach us that risk sometimes brings with it a profound affirmation of relationality and collectivity. (2006, pp. 31–32)

What this means is that, in Gandhi's vision, the toxic “quality of unrelatedness” that, as I suggested earlier, deforms the psychic structures of both parties in the colonial encounter can be undone through an embrace of risk. As she argues, the “ethical agency of the host-friend relies precisely on her capacity to leave herself open [. . .] to the risk of radical insufficiency” (2006, p. 31). Significantly, this “risk of radical insufficiency” has the capacity to interrupt what she calls “the eternal recurrence [. . .] of solipsism” (2006, p. 31): a solipsism that lies at the heart of narcissism and whose “eternal recurrence” connects the Greek myth to its contemporary colonial and postcolonial instantiations.

What interests me in Gandhi's project is two things. The first is her eloquent defense of a “politics of relationality” (2006, p. 188): a defense close to my own heart. As part of this defense, she recasts the assumption of colonial relationships as uniformly violent by drawing attention to the numerous “affective communities” which stood counter to, and troubled, the usual battles lines of Empire. Proposing an “immature politics” (2006, p. 177) as an alternative to any politics derived from a maturely “enlightened” Kantian subject, Gandhi recasts Kant's definition of Enlightenment as man's emergence from

self-imposed immaturity, calling this process of maturation “the exit from immaturity into the asylum of adult rationality.” What is problematic about this adult rationality, for her, is that “Kant’s influential conception of adulthood, informed by the imperatives of his wider ethical philosophy, is elaborated once again as a fantasy of autonomous subjectivity: the picture of a unitary and sovereign Self armored affectively against the defenselessness of human existence” (2006, p. 180). Citing Martha Nussbaum Gandhi emphasizes that what an “immature politics” does, significantly, is drop this affective armory:

By contrast, the “immature” escapee from the prison house of enlightenment rationality remains a creature of contingency, mired, as Martha Nussbaum has written in another context, “in the ‘barnacles’ and ‘seaweed’ of passion,” ever “messy, needy, uncontrolled, rooted in the dirt and standing helplessly in the rain. (2006, p. 181)

An “immature politics” is therefore a politics of affective vulnerability and exposure: exposure, first and foremost, to the other in an encounter of primordial relationality. Such affective exposure to the other within the realm of the political, she concludes, disrupts the functioning of the political and makes the “unexpected ‘gesture’ of friendship,” signifying a “breach [. . .] in the fabric of imperial inhospitality” (2006, p. 189).

As much as I like the idea she puts forward here (and I like it a lot), I am puzzled—and this is the second point of interest to me in her account—by her failure to reflect more deeply, which is say psychoanalytically, on what it is that might *get in the way* of such a politics.<sup>4</sup> What is it that informs, and feeds, “the antirelational basis of imperialism” (Gandhi, 2006, p. 185) that compels endless Western pursuits of ideals of freedom and autonomy, with these ideals cast, specifically, in terms of invulnerability, impermeability, immunity, etc.? In other words, if we are dealing with “the eternal recurrence [. . .] of solipsism” (2006, p. 31), as she says, should we then not also be drawn to an analysis of what it is that leads to this particular recurrence, or, as we might also name it, repetition compulsion? Repetition compulsion, as we know, is commonly

a response to unresolved trauma—which raises the question as to whether what we are dealing with in the colonial situation is not so much a confidently self-founding subject but, conversely, a traumatized subject desperately covering up its traumatic wounds with defensive ideals of self-sufficiency. Ideals, that is to say, which indirectly betray their origin in relational trauma.

### **“both traumatic and traumatizing”**

Guided by psychoanalytic insights into the conjunction between narcissism and trauma, I want to begin to advance our understanding of the factors that might be contributing to colonialism’s “crisis of nonrelation” by taking my cue from an often-overlooked detail in the original Narcissus myth so as to shine the light on yet another—deeper—level of disaster in Narcissus’s story than those we have already encountered. What I have in mind here is the fact that Narcissus’s very inception has a “disastrous,” or more specifically *traumatic*, origin, for Narcissus is a child born of rape. Reminding us of this rape, Victoria Coulson, in a recent rereading of the myth, notes the traumatic pathology at the heart of Narcissus’s story, where a mother’s traumatic experience in turn engenders a relational trauma for her son:

Far from the “narcissist” that he has been made out to be, Narcissus demonstrates a total inexperience in relation to mirrors: he has no concept of the capacity of objects to register his presence in front of them, and what this suggests is that Liriope has never been able to meet her son with a receptive and creative look. (2013, p. 818)

The assumptions feeding into this argument derive from D. W. Winnicott’s contention that such a “receptive and creative look” is the original “mirror” for the child: “In individual emotional development,” he says, “*the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face*” (2005, p. 149, emphasis in original). As a kind of proto-mirror, the mother’s face, under good-enough conditions, will reflect back what the baby presents to it: his or her pleasure,

hunger, anger, distress etc.—or, as Winnicott puts it more categorically, “what the baby sees is himself or herself” (2005, p. 151). Problems arise if the mother, for reason of her own (which may include, as in Narcissus’s case, maternal trauma), is unable to function as such a proto-mirror, and instead reflects her own, not the baby’s, moods and needs back to the baby. In these situations, the baby is left without a mirror: “They look and they do not see themselves,” and, as Winnicott warns, “there are consequences” (2005, p. 151). Not only—and this is of course Coulson’s point regarding Narcissus—will a “baby so treated [. . .] grow up puzzled about mirrors and what the mirror has to offer” (Winnicott, 2005, p. 152), but they will also grow up with a profound disturbance in their capacity to relate to others. Reducing others to the mirroring function that was once absent and that is still being sought, they cannot relate to, and make use of, a “real” other. Further, if the mother’s attuned mirroring presence, in Winnicott’s conception, reflects, and thereby creates, the self as *in relation* to the (m)other, the absence of such a presence means that the infantile self experiences itself as unrelated: as unbearably—traumatically—alone. As I will discuss in greater detail below, the baby will then attempt to compensate for this traumatic aloneness through grandiosely enlarging its fragile sense of self. Engaging in defensively solipsistic self-relation, the baby enacts precisely the breakdown of the capacity to relate to another that Spivak observes in Narcissus.

What stands at the heart of Narcissus’s story, on this reading, is the kind of double trauma that Jill Salberg describes so well in “The Texture of Traumatic Attachment,” where a traumatized mother is incapable of being a full relational presence for her child and thereby triggers the kind of traumatic aloneness that Narcissus will subsequently seek to defend himself against—and involuntarily re-enact in his various failures of relationality. What emerges here, in other words, is that what is ultimately “disastrous” in Narcissus’s story is that it is a story of disavowed—and transgenerationally transmitted—trauma. While she does not mention trauma, Simmons draws on the influential theory of narcissism developed by Heinz Kohut to make a similar claim:

[. . .] narcissism is not, as is often assumed, a condition of self-satisfaction or self-admiration; it is, rather, a condition of deprivation, producing a personality desperate to find others who will nourish it, constantly dreading an attack that will puncture grandiosity. Such personalities need constant self-display and dominance over others to ward off persistent feelings of vulnerability and worthlessness. (2007, p. 6)

What is important to recognize here is that it is the traumatic “condition of deprivation” that *produces* the better-known face of narcissism; grandiose narcissism, that is to say, functions as a defense against an unbearable experience of vulnerability and deprivation.

While Simmons lays some important groundwork here, my sense is that the trauma at the heart of Narcissus’s story—at the heart of narcissism—is not often-enough acknowledged, let alone analyzed, outside clinical contexts. As a result of this widespread non-attention to the trauma at the heart of narcissism, this traumatic core remains largely disavowed—and that, of course, means it is all the more potent in its “disastrous” consequences. Further, in light of the pernicious persistence of colonial structures,<sup>5</sup> it seems to me that Stephen Frosh’s recent suggestion that “the time of narcissism, if it ever existed in a pure form, has run its course” (2016, p. 4) is perhaps a little premature. Receiving little airtime outside the somewhat rarefied realm of the clinic, narcissism’s traumatic core remains largely obscured—thereby contributing to the relentless perpetuation of narcissism’s presenting symptom: its “crisis of nonrelation” (Gandhi, 2006, p. 184). In other words, what this widespread disavowal of relational trauma may help explain is the particular persistence or “stickiness” often associated with narcissistic relational dynamics; whether it is in interpersonal contexts or in larger political configurations, such “stickiness” suggests that we may have missed something crucial in our analysis. Thus, when Ziauddin Sardar, for example, notes the historical continuities between old and new narcissistic colonialisms—“The old European empires have been replaced by a new Empire, a hyperpower that wants to rule and mould the world in its own

image” (2008, p. xix)—we need to ask what it is that leads to this relentless perpetuation of Empire. In other words, it is precisely because colonialism “lives on” in our neocolonial present—in an apparent act of repetition compulsion that ought to alert us to the absent presence of trauma—that, I believe, a closer analysis of colonial narcissism’s traumatic core is called for.

What such an analysis requires of us, most immediately, and perhaps surprisingly or uncomfortably, is a reframing of colonial narcissism. Such a reframing would recognize that the colonizer’s grandiose sense of self-importance and anti-relational self-sufficiency is, in fact, the symptom of disavowed vulnerability and, I would add, relational trauma. In other words, what it requires of us is the somewhat troubling thought that it might not just be the colonized (Echo) who can rightfully lay claim to the experience of colonial trauma, but that the traumatizing colonizer (Narcissus) may live in the wake of trauma as well: his own disavowed relational trauma.

It is here that psychoanalysis, particularly in its more relational orientations (both contemporary and historical), can offer vital resources to help us understand the specifics of this trauma. In fact, characterizing narcissism as “the result of cumulative developmental trauma to the capacity for intersubjective relatedness,” Shaw emphasizes that “narcissism can be understood as both traumatic and traumatizing” (2014, p. 3), thereby alerting us to the possibility that the two experiences of colonial trauma may be linked. Narcissus, that is to say, may be both traumatized and, in turn, traumatizing. Emerging from the colonial experience with his own relational scars, the traumatized colonizer traumatizes the colonized via various acts of physical and epistemic violence that are the grandiose manifestation of his own rather desperate efforts to ward off the ever-present threat of re-traumatization—efforts that are ultimately driven by fear, or what Gandhi so much more elegantly calls the “fantasies of security and invulnerability to which our political imagination remains hostage” (2006, p. 32). Helping us understand what drives these fears and fantasies, psychoanalysis, I believe, can open the door to a radical rethinking of the relational dynamics at work in the colonial relationship, thereby enabling us to tackle its troubling legacy in the contemporary world.

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**“traumatized societies par excellence”**

Within the broader spectrum of colonial subjectivities, it is perhaps the settler colonial condition that is most directly afflicted with narcissism’s double trauma. In fact, it is because “settler collectives,” according to Lorenzo Veracini, “are traumatized societies par excellence” (2008, p. 364) that I will focus on the settler context in my ensuing remarks—remarks which, if we follow Simmons or Gandhi, may well have application more broadly in postcolonial contexts.<sup>6</sup> What makes the settler colonial condition a particularly compelling case of colonial narcissism is that the constitutive kind of doubleness that, as we saw, characterizes “traumatic and traumatizing” narcissism also lies at the heart of what Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson (2000) call the very “axiom” of the settler colonial condition. Belittled as mere “colonials” by those who remained in the imperial metropole, settlers were acutely aware of their (geographical and emotional) distance from the mother country and their ensuing status as second-class citizens of Empire. Simultaneously, however, they acted on behalf of, and as an extension of, imperial power. This split and ambivalent position, Johnston and Lawson suggest, means that “the settler is both colonized and colonizing” (2000, p. 363). However, while it takes little imagination to see the ways in which settlers, in their role of colonizer, might have a “traumatizing” effect on the indigenous populations they displace, violate, and exploit, it is perhaps a little harder to see why their own situation, as “colonized,” should also be considered “traumatic,” or, indeed, why their trauma should be associated with narcissism.

Albeit perhaps perplexing—if not outright inflammatory—the suggestion that the postcolonial settler subject is a subject of somewhat precarious psychic health is not actually all that new in the field of settler colonial studies. In fact, a wide range of diagnostic labels have already been mobilized in an effort to classify what Jo Smith, with regard to the New Zealand context, has termed the “settler colonial disorder” (2011, p. 112). For her, this “disorder” finds expression in the well-documented psycho-social symptoms of settler unease and self-obsession, making it “[s]omewhat akin,” she argues, “to an

obsessive-compulsive disorder” (2011, p. 112). Describing the same phenomenon, but drawing a different diagnostic label from the psychoanalytic toolbox, Ghassan Hage, by contrast, names Australia’s settler anxiety a “paranoid nationalism” in the title of his 2003 book *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, while Stephen Turner, focusing on New Zealand in his influential essay “Settlement as Forgetting,” refers to “the melancholy condition of the settler” (1999, p. 23). Further, it is not as if the possibility of trauma has gone entirely unnoticed among this flurry of diagnostic labels either. Thus Veracini, writing from a Freudian perspective, suggests that settler trauma finds expression in “stubborn and lingering anxieties over settler legitimacy and belonging” (2008, p. 364), an assessment with which Cherie Lacey, in her Lacanian analysis of New Zealand settler films, agrees. Lacey clearly distinguishes the kind of trauma that Māori (as indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand) have experienced from the trauma undergone by Pākehā (as their settler counterparts), arguing that “colonisation may be said to manifest in different traumatic symptoms for the Māori and the Pākehā”:

For Māori, as colonised, trauma likely consists of the loss of land, language, identity, self-determination, as well as oppression by the Government, the media and other institutions [. . .]. However, I would like to suggest that Pākehā also experience a kind of trauma, one that is more insidious, occulted, and unspoken. This settler trauma is inscribed as colonisation itself, and presents the settler subject, and the settler narrative, with an *impossible origin*. Descended from colonisers, but unable and unwilling to maintain this genealogical link (due to our ongoing presence in the country), this origin takes the form of an enigma, a lack, an empty place, and an unrepresentable origin. (2010, p. 12, emphasis in original)

Although writing from different theoretical persuasions, both Veracini and Lacey therefore propose that the persistent settler anxiety over belonging is ultimately the product of guilt: the result of a need to dissociate from the “perpetrator trauma”

(Veracini, 2008, p. 364) that the genealogical link with the violence of the original colonizers entails.

The closest precursor to my own reading, which stresses the specifically *relational* nature of colonial trauma, may be Turner's discussion in "Settlement as Forgetting." Like Veracini and Lacey, Turner also argues that "[s]ettlement is traumatic" (1999, p. 22), but locates the source of the trauma in what he calls "the loss entailed in settlement" (1999, p. 23): a disavowed and unmourned loss of "Mother England," which for him leads to the aforementioned "melancholy condition of the settler." The "roots of a troubled cultural psyche" (1999, p. 23) in New Zealand, he argues, lie in the country's unresolved relationship with the mother country. As "a child of Empire," New Zealand "has not properly severed its ties" (1999, p. 23) from England, and therefore remains ambivalently attached to its "mother."

Turner's use of filial language here is significant. Such language is congenial to the kind of conversation over colonial narcissism that I seek to advance in this essay: a narcissism that, as previously noted, I regard as intimately entangled with the relational trauma unfolding between an insufficiently attuned mother, who is emotionally (and/or physically) absent, and a dependent child in vital need of that mother's mirroring presence. Further, what is being mobilized in Turner's filial language is the familiar and highly productive trope of kinship that was so frequently invoked in conversations around Empire during the nineteenth century, and that offers suggestive evidence that what a "child of Empire" would likely have experienced at the hands of an unreliably available colonial "mother" is relational trauma. For what a close analysis of the operation of this filial trope reveals is the utterly conflicted—indeed traumatic—relationship between "Mother England" and her distant "children of Empire," where, as Terra Walston Joseph argues,<sup>7</sup> "the idea of a 'Greater Britain' held out the possibility of integration but the reality was not so inclusive" (2011, p. 20). What Walston Joseph highlights here is the intensely ambivalent stance the colonial mother country adopted towards her far-flung children: on the one hand considering them a narcissistic extension of both the British body politic and British values, and, on the other hand, abnegating responsibility towards them

by, for example, withdrawing troops from the colonies and leaving them to adopt their own military protection. “Settler experience,” Walston Joseph therefore notes, “was constituted by the simultaneity of being British and *not* British” (2011, p. 19, emphasis in original)—an ambivalent doubleness that is echoed in the “traumatic *and* traumatizing” and “colonized *and* colonizing” conjunctions noted earlier. As a result of this tension-filled doubleness, “Settler subjectivities were defined by a transcultural experience of in-betweenness, by the sense of belonging to Great Britain and, yet, of being excluded from it as well” (Walston Joseph, 2011, p. 19).

This latter sense of exclusion and rejection was nurtured particularly by the liberal rhetoric, prevalent at the time, which suggested the colonies were a burden upon the mother country and should be discarded—a threat that led, as James Froude observes, to an acute sense of abandonment:

They have felt as a child would feel who was trying to do his best, and was conscious that he was no discredit to the family, yet was told by his father that the family had no wish to keep him, and that the sooner he took himself off the better. (1886, p. 89)

Writing of his first visit to Australia in 1871, Anthony Trollope notes—with more than a little indignation—that the Australians’ response to such a felt sense of abandonment was one of retaliatory “accusation,” an accusation, moreover, which invoked Britain’s beloved kinship metaphor only to flip it on its head and use it against its “mother”: “I have heard on all sides accusations of the littleness of England,—and worse than littleness, of the weakness and infanticide of which England is guilty, in her desire to repudiate and put away from her her own children” (1873, p. 358). To the Australians’ minds, says Trollope, England’s desire for separation from her colonial children revealed Mother England to have “the heart of a step-mother rather than of a parent” (1873, p. 359). In other words, the popular metaphor of familial relations here got inverted: it no longer symbolized the warm bonds and connections of a Greater Britain, but instead spoke of cold-hearted disinterest, alienation, and abandonment.

Further, and importantly, Walston Joseph reminds us that, in the case of settler colonies, familial relations go beyond the purely metaphoric:

[W]hen it applies to settler colonies, [the] familial metaphor ceases to be entirely metaphor and enters the realm of synecdoche. Thus, “mother” and “child” do not merely act as vehicles for the tenors “Britain” and “colony,” but also refer to a contiguous genealogical relation. (2011, p. 41)

This is the very “contiguous genealogical relation” that, as we saw in Lacey’s account of colonial trauma, proved so troubling for the settler psyche. In fact, given this direct genealogical contiguity, which signals that the mother/child trope was more than just an evocative metaphor, it is not difficult to imagine that the troubled and troubling relationship to the colonial “mother” should have a devastating effect on the settler “child”—so devastating, in fact, that the word “trauma” perhaps no longer seems quite so misplaced. Further, whether it is Lacey’s and Veracini’s “perpetrator trauma” or Turner’s “abandonment trauma”—what is particularly pernicious with regard to settler colonial trauma in both contexts is that there is a marked “resistance against acknowledging trauma” (Veracini, 2008, p. 373). This resistance expresses itself in a defensive forgetting or disavowal—which may help explain why this trauma is all-but invisible, both within the affected contexts themselves and to the external scholarly postcolonial eye, which may be willing to see the trauma of the colonized but struggles to open its eyes to the occluded trauma of the colonizer. Problematically, of course, a trauma that is forgotten, disavowed or occluded is difficult to address and work through—which means that it remains all the more potent in the haunting repetition compulsions it engenders. Veracini therefore rightly concludes, “Something else is needed” (2008, p. 374).

What is needed, I believe, is a closer analysis of the kind of trauma we are dealing with here. Such an analysis remains underdeveloped not only because the conversation between trauma studies and the broader field of postcolonial studies has

barely begun, but also because, as we have seen, settler colonies themselves have been reluctant to acknowledge trauma—both in themselves and in the people they colonized.<sup>8</sup> My aim here is therefore to consider the traumatic dimensions of settler coloniality so that its toxic legacy—a legacy I believe to be entangled with the narcissistic defense response that manifests in a “crisis of nonrelation”—can be addressed. The concept of narcissism can, I believe, help us make sense of both kinds of settler trauma identified by Turner and Lacey/Veracini: the abandonment trauma suffered by a “child of empire” ambivalently attached to an unreliably available “Mother England” and the “perpetrator trauma” suffered by that “child” in response to its own compensatory, violent acting out. Read as such, the settler—and, arguably, the colonizer more generally—is both the victim and perpetrator of trauma. In fact, reminding ourselves here of Shaw’s suggestion that “narcissism can be understood as both traumatic and traumatizing” (2014, p. 3), we perhaps begin to see that the two traumas are, in fact, part and parcel of each other: part and parcel, that is, of a narcissistic defense and its concerns over the precarious security of the core self.

### **“a break in life’s continuity”**

To understand the traumatic dynamics that are at work here a little better, we need to begin by reconsidering the kind of trauma theory we are drawing on for, as Stef Craps notes in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, “Cultural trauma theory continues to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event” (2012, p. 31). Craps adds that this model, which underpins the influential trauma theories of the likes of Cathy Caruth and Dominic LaCapra, does not lend itself particularly well to understanding the “traumatic impact of racism and other forms of ongoing oppression” (2012, p. 31). What this means is that cultural trauma theory already has enough problems recognizing the situation of the colonized as traumatic; registering the colonizers’ “crisis of nonrelation” as traumatic within an event-based model of trauma is therefore

near-impossible. This crisis remains “unreadable” as trauma because it is not the product of a single shattering event, but instead of a more insidious *relational* trauma. Narcissism, as we have seen, does not defend against a traumatic event but against a traumatic relationship; it is, as Shaw noted, the “result of cumulative developmental trauma to the capacity for inter-subjective relatedness” (2014, p. 3). To analyse the dynamics of colonial narcissism we therefore need to go back to psychoanalytic theory and identify the specifically *relational* theories of trauma that we might be able to mobilize for the cultural realm, for the “traditional event-based model of trauma” that dominates cultural theory cannot easily make sense of a trauma that is relational in origin.

It was Masud Khan—a frequent editorial collaborator of Winnicott’s, as well as (astonishingly) his analysand—who offered us the first significant theorisation of a more specifically relational trauma in “The Concept of Cumulative Trauma” (1963). In fact, Khan’s important essay provides a significant alternative to the dominant event-based model of trauma: one that, I suggest, lends itself more readily to the analysis of the kind of colonial trauma that finds expression in a disavowal of relationality. However, before delving more deeply into the clinical literature, let me offer a word of caution regarding the use of psychoanalysis outside the clinical contexts in which the theories originate. I am aware, of course, that cultures are not individual psyches and therefore cannot be analyzed in the same way, the most obvious obstacle being that one of the key methodologies of the clinic—the interpretation of free association—is not available in the cultural realm. Nonetheless, I want to argue, with Stephen Frosh, that psychoanalytic ideas may serve as “suggestive aids to comprehension” of “non-clinical phenomena” (2010, p. 4). In fact, something I hope to achieve in this article is to bring to the attention of cultural critics some of the analytical resources available within the clinical field: resources that may help us make sense of—and move beyond—the anti-relationality of Spivak’s Narcissus. I do not, therefore, intend to put a culture, or a cultural dynamic, on the metaphorical couch, but instead aim to draw on clinical accounts of the kind relational trauma that underpins narcissism

to help us come to terms with the phenomenon of cultural, or, more specifically, colonial, narcissism. Reading Khan's (and Winnicott's) work in the context of settler colonial trauma is productive, I believe, precisely because it locates the source of trauma in the early relationship of dependency between mother and child—in other words, in the very relationship that has proven to be profoundly troubled in the case of settler nations. Moreover, while this is clearly not an actual mother/child relationship in the way that Winnicott and Khan assume in their work in the clinic, the fact that the filial language is more than just a metaphor in the settler colonies perhaps gives us license to explore the resources of the clinic outside its direct realm of application—even if just in an exploratory kind of way, as “suggestive aids to comprehension” (Frosh, 2010, p. 4), or to see if it will get us somewhere.

What makes Khan's essay suggestive in this context is that he revisits the trauma terminology Freud had introduced in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), an essay which remains a staple in event-based trauma theories. In this influential essay, Freud famously likens the psyche to a single-celled organism surrounded by a “protective shield against stimuli” (1920/1955, p. 27) and proposes that trauma occurs when this “shield” between inside (ego) and outside (world) is breached:

We describe as “traumatic” any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. (1955, p. 29).

Utilizing this terminology of the “protective shield,” but ingeniously rereading Freud's metaphor through Winnicott, particularly Winnicott's emphasis on the role of the mother<sup>9</sup> as a “holding environment” for the infant, Khan aims “to discuss the function of the mother in her role as a protective shield” (1963, p. 290)—already, I think, the colonial resonances are there, for Britain of course functioned as the colonies' protector in military and other matters. Importantly, in making the mother

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the “protective shield,” Khan relocates the protective psychic “crust” (Freud, 1955, p. 26)—which, for Freud, was an integral part of the individual ego—in another person. In her role as “protective shield,” the mother ideally provides a hospitable environment “for the anaclitic needs of the infant” (1963, p. 290); a disturbance in that interaction, however, prepares the ground for what he calls cumulative trauma:

My argument is that cumulative trauma is the result of the breaches in the mother’s role as a protective shield over the whole course of the child’s development, from infancy to adolescence—that is to say, in all those areas of experience where the child continues to need the mother as an auxiliary ego to support his immature and unstable ego functions. (1963, p. 290)

He adds that it is “important to distinguish this ego dependency of the child on the mother from his cathexis of her as an object” (1963, p. 290), which is to say that, during this developmental stage of ego-dependency, the mother is not experienced as an object in her own right, but instead as what Kohut will later call a “self-object,” that is, an object that is not separate but is “experienced as part of the self” (2009, p. xiv). It is at this point of utter ego dependency on the caregiver as a self-object, or an “auxiliary ego” in Khan’s language, that trauma can occur.

More commonly referred to as developmental or relational trauma in the contemporary clinical literature, cumulative trauma differs significantly from the kind of trauma that is associated with a distinct catastrophic event; Khan therefore emphasizes that “the use of the word trauma in the concept of cumulative trauma should not mislead us into considering such breaches in the mother’s role as protective shield as traumatic at the time or in the context in which they happen” (1963, p. 291). This is important to recognize in the colonial context, for it stops us searching for specific catastrophic events that could justifiably have traumatized the colonizer, and in the absence of which the possibility of traumatization is easily dismissed. What Khan proposes instead is that these often quite minor breaches “achieve the value of trauma only cumulatively and

in retrospect” (1963, p. 291). Cumulative trauma is characterized by what Winnicott calls the “maladaptation to the infant’s anaclitic needs” (cited in 1963, p. 291): in other words, if the infant’s need of the caregiver as a vital ego support goes repeatedly unmet, the fragile ego is left exposed and vulnerable to disintegration. What happens in the case of maladaptation in a state of ego-dependence is that the early integrity the infant experiences—what Winnicott calls its “*continuity of being*” (1984, p. 245, emphasis in original)—can rupture and lead to the kind of traumatized state that is characteristic of cumulative developmental trauma. Reflecting on the infant’s experience of being separated from its mother, Winnicott writes:

In  $x+y$  minutes the baby has not become altered. But in  $x+y+z$  minutes the baby has become *traumatized* [. . .]. Trauma implies that the baby has experienced a break in life’s continuity, so that primitive defences now become organized to defend against a repetition of “unthinkable anxiety” or a return of the acute confusional state that belongs to disintegration of nascent ego structure. (2005, p. 131 emphasis in original)

What we get here is a fine balancing act between trauma and primitive defense against trauma. Further, defense organization at this early stage of development indicates a rupture at the most fundamental level of ego integration: the ego’s very existence, its very continuity of being, is at stake. It is because, as Winnicott says, the “underlying agony is unthinkable” (1989, p. 90) that a defense organization to prevent the breakdown of the ego—such as narcissism—is vital.

Christo Joannidis reminds us, however, that such defense organization is hardly perfect and that the thus-traumatized person remains haunted by a fear of reliving the trauma. “Winnicott,” he says, “refers to this conscious feeling of foreboding as fear of breakdown/fear of madness” (2013, p. 56)—it is the kind of fear, we might say, that leads to Gandhi’s “fantasies of security and invulnerability” (2006, p. 32). The important point to note—and here Winnicott offers us his own version of the Freudian notion of traumatic belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*)—is

that defenses are created retrospectively: against a breakdown that has already happened but that has not been consciously experienced because the necessary maturity and ego integration for such an experience had not yet been established. The “experience” therefore remains unconscious—which in this context “means that the ego integration is not able to encompass something” (Winnicott, 1989, pp. 90–91). Because in crucial ways “the patient was not there” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 92) when it happened, the unconscious experience “cannot get into the past tense” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 91), and is instead projected into the future as “*fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced*” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 90, emphasis in original). “Fear of breakdown” therefore signals a fear that the primitive defense organization might fail and re-expose the patient to “the unthinkable state of affairs that underlies the defence organisation” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 88).

What makes situations of dependency particularly problematic, and further fuels the “fear of breakdown,” is that these are situations that cannot easily be defended against: “The ego organises defences against breakdown of the ego-organisation, and it is ego-organisation that is threatened. But the ego cannot organise against environmental failure in so far as dependence is a living fact” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 88). Left utterly vulnerable, a dependent ego is precariously exposed to the threat of annihilation. This leaves only one option: a disavowal of vulnerability, fortification of defence organisation, and retreat from relationality into narcissistic self-sufficiency. Or, as Adam Phillips puts it, “If the environmental failure is severe—beyond the infant’s comprehension—then he will, in despair, develop a militant fantasy of self-sufficiency” (2007, p. 95).

### **“a false identificatory oneness is manipulated”**

What Phillips’s statement alerts us to is the second dimension of traumatic withdrawal from relationality: namely its “militant”—that is, violent and violating—impact on the other. It is here that we re-connect with the more familiar face of narcissism: narcissism not in its traumatic but *traumatizing* dimension.

The thought I want to put forward here is that what Phillips calls “a militant fantasy of self-sufficiency” (2007, p. 95) might well be fed by an unconscious “fear of breakdown.” In other words, what is being feared here might be the transferenceal anticipation of re-traumatization at the hands of an other whose very independence serves as an unconscious reminder of that earlier independent (m)other who traumatically failed to meet vital ego needs. An other who must therefore be controlled and turned into a dependent other, an other, that is to say, who cannot bring any nasty surprises—much in the way that an echo is dependent on the primacy of the speaking self and therefore cannot “speak back.” What comes into view here, I believe, is the curious double-logic at work in the narcissistic defense, where a retreat from relationality into fantasized “solipsism” or “autonomy” is—paradoxically—paired with what Turner termed a “failed separation” (1999, p. 23) from the other. In other words, the self is simultaneously walled off into monadic isolation and too closely, too intimately, entangled with the other. It is precisely this double-logic, I suggest, that underpins Spivak’s relationally compromised Narcissus, making it mandatory that we now look at the other side of the narcissistic equation: the side that cannot tolerate the other’s separateness and therefore cathects the other narcissistically.

To shed light on this strange double-logic that is part of the narcissist condition, let me return to Khan’s essay, which identifies exactly such an inability to tolerate separateness in response to the experience of traumatization. Thus Khan emphasizes that what gets established in situations of cumulative trauma—where the “failures of the mother in her role as protective shield are significantly frequent and lead to impingement on the infant’s psyche-soma, impingements which he has no means of eliminating”—is “a nucleus of pathogenic reaction” (1963, p. 298). This “pathogenic reaction” results in a warped self/other relationship in which “the disillusionment that belongs to maturational separating off from mother is sidetracked and a false identificatory oneness is manipulated” (1963, p. 298). In other words, one of the effects of this derailed development of a coherent and separate ego function is the inability to consider the (m)other as separate from the self. In a “precocious

narcissistic cathexis of the mother” (1963, p. 298), the infant becomes overly preoccupied with the mother—but significantly not with the mother in her separateness (as would be the case in “true object cathexis” (Khan, 1963, p. 299), but with the mother purely in her function as ego-support or self-object. It is a distinction that Winnicott will later call the difference between “object relating” and “object use,” suggesting that what lies “in between [. . .] is the most difficulty thing,” perhaps, in human development; or the most irksome of all the early failures that come for mending” (2005, p. 120). He explains:

This thing that there is in between relating and use is the subject’s placing of the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control; that is, the subject’s perception of the object as an external phenomenon, not as a projective entity, in fact recognition of it as an entity in its own right. (2005, p. 120)

What is at stake here is vital, for what this transitional experience facilitates, if all goes well, is that both self and other become “real”—which is to say separate—entities: entities which can then engage in *genuine* relationality.

The pathological alternative to such genuine relationality—which is clearly of greater relevance to us here—develops out of the precarious state of dependency on the mother as “protective shield.” If this “protective shield” is not effective in protecting the emerging ego from disruptive impingements, ego-integration cannot occur and the child develops a “false self,” in Winnicott’s terminology. Devoid of “true ego-integration,” and settled with “premature defensive organization and functioning” (Khan, 1963, p. 296), this “false self” is a hollowed-out self that has lost its own center of gravity. It begins life not centered in itself but rather in reaction to a powerful other who is vitally needed, but who comes to be feared—and ultimately hated—for the pain they involuntarily (one hopes) inflict when crucial needs go repeatedly, traumatically, unmet. The result, of course, is that the other—this other and every subsequent other—needs to be controlled, in the sense that their separate existence has to be denied and an “identificatory oneness” be

manipulated. The other, that is to say, must remain within the sphere of fantasized “omnipotent control” and be narcissistically cathected as a self-object—a “mirror” or “echo” for the self. As a result of this cathexis, the other’s separate and independent subjectivity is usurped and imprisoned. (1995, p. 3)

**“freeing me from the narcissism of my own little existence”**

Coming back to my earlier question as to what might lead to the “compelling need to suppress subjectivity in the other” that Shaw identifies in the traumatizing narcissist, we can now see that it is precisely because the other has the power to traumatize that they need to be controlled, subjugated, and denied an independent existence. The “core of narcissism,” Neville Symington thus rightly notes, “is a hatred of the relational” (1993, p. 18): the relational is hated, fundamentally, because it can inflict “unthinkable” wounds. And as a result of this “hatred,” Narcissus becomes caught in a solipsistic universe and cannot interact with the exterior in any way other than through transference projections: every new relational counterpart becomes yet another version of the old frustrating object that could not be controlled, and that was powerful enough to traumatize. It is precisely because what is feared is that the pain of this trauma—a pain so “unthinkable” that it needs to be dissociated and kept from conscious awareness—would put the all-too-fragile narcissistic ego integration at risk of disintegration that the other must be controlled at all costs. Operating from behind the “mask” of a “false self,” Narcissus thus defuses the projected threat of the other by turning them into a “mirror”: a process that not only violates—colonizes—the other by reducing them to a reflection, or echo, for the self, but that also, as we have seen, imprisons the self in “crippling solipsism” (Gandhi, 2006, p. 23).

The former problem appropriates the alterity of the other and reduces them to a utilizable object for the self; it is a problem to which, within the context of postcolonial studies, Said’s *Orientalism* drew attention in 1978 and which has since become a well-established cornerstone of postcolonial analysis.

What is less established in postcolonial scholarship is the second problem: a problem that, as I am suggesting here, also results from a narcissistic relational dynamic. This latter problem is, as we saw, foreshadowed in the myth: Narcissus dies when he comes to “know himself,” when he sees himself reflected in the pool. Unlike the self-knowledge that a child develops through interaction with attuned caregivers (or that a patient might develop through interaction with an attuned analyst), Narcissus’s self-knowledge is “mortiferous” precisely because it does not go through otherness. In other words, death results when self-understanding is not mediated by another—precisely because the “transformative capability” (Howell, 2003, p. 57) that this other person brings is lacking, thereby imprisoning Narcissus in sterile self-reflection. Ken Wright usefully elaborates on the significance of this vital “transformative capability” in a discussion of Winnicott’s true self/false self distinction:

In the myth of Narcissus [. . .] what I think ultimately destroyed Narcissus was not the *unreachableness* of his image in the pool. *It was the lack of that transforming quality which arises out of a passage through the Other.* Mirror images are always like this—they mock because of their sameness—if I move, the image moves too. *But nothing is added.* There is nothing in the image which says: “I recognize you and respond to you.” Only a slavish identity with myself which tells me I am alone. My question to the Other, my reaching out to the Other, has failed and received the unthinkable answer. (1996, p. 81, emphases in original)

The “unthinkable answer” here is that Narcissus finds himself alone, with no other who could respond to him and affirm his reality. What this means, ultimately, is that, in the transposition of the myth into a colonial context that I have unfolded here, both parties become trapped in a toxically anti-relational relationship.

Significantly, as we will now be able to see more clearly, this anti-relationality, which chases fantasies of invulnerability and self-sufficiency, is profoundly animated by fear. Thus Nouvet, for example, notes:

Pride [. . .] describes the peculiar predicament of a subject who can neither experience desire nor respond to desire because he undertakes to constitute himself as absolutely impervious to the other. This desire of impenetrability proceeds from fear. As the dialogue with Echo indeed demonstrates, Narcissus fears and shuns the approach of the other as a violent dispossession, a radical impoverishment, the scattering of an all-too fragile unity. (Nouvet, 1991, p. 113)

Perhaps, in light of my earlier discussion of relational trauma, we are now in a better position to understand why Narcissus should fear the other—and that ultimately means fear his own vulnerability—for what he fears is exactly the kind “dispossession,” “impoverishment” or “scattering” that the other may bring. It is for this reason that he invests in the project “of remaining uncontaminated by an otherness,” a project Nouvet describes “a delusion” (1991, p. 113). Importantly, Nouvet also reminds us that, “[a]lthough delusory, this belief in selfhood produces deadly effects” (1991, p. 113)—and it is of course precisely because of these “deadly effects” that alternatives to Narcissus’s self-entombment need to be found.

The question then becomes, of course, what is to be done? The pernicious problem with narcissism—which Freud famously considered to be untreatable—is that the very relationality that could liberate Narcissus from his sterile self-reflection is being defended against. What this means for the “crisis of nonrelation” of which Gandhi speaks *vis-à-vis* the colonial context is that, for now, things are fairly stuck—and it is not lost on me that, as I am finishing this article, in the wake of his unthinkable election to become the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Donald Trump is doing his best to paint “the other” in the most monstrous colours imaginable: promising to build walls and issuing travel bans, and thereby further fuelling the familiar flames of fear and clinging to those “fantasies of security and invulnerability to which,” as Gandhi says, “our political imagination remains hostage” (2006, p. 32). And it is indeed not easy to imagine what it would take to persuade Narcissus that “the risk of radical insufficiency” (Gandhi, 2006, p. 31)

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may sometimes bring greater benefit than “security”: that the other, transferentially experienced as a threat of momentous proportions, may ultimately be benign, or may even bring valuable gifts.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, in this instance, the other may bring the gift of liberation from suffocating self-enclosure.

Ultimately, what might be required to transform the “crisis of nonrelation” which continues to hold our neo-colonial imagination in its grip is the kind of thing that might happen in an analysis: the slow unravelling of defenses against trauma and growing toleration of the risk of bearing the unbearable. A breakdown, of sorts, so that the feared unconscious experience of the past can be consciously experienced, and subsequently “get into the past tense” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 91). Certainly that is what Winnicott imagines in “Fear of Breakdown,” when he suggests that a simple remembering and working through—à la Freud—is not possible in cases where a viable ego function cannot be assumed at the time of “breakdown.” Thus he writes:

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the possibility that the breakdown has already happened, near the beginning of the individual’s life. The patient needs to “remember” this but it is not possible to remember something that has not yet happened, and this thing of the past has not happened yet because the patient was not there for it to happen to. The only way to “remember” in this case is for the patient to experience this past thing for the first time in the present, that is to say, in the transference. This past and future thing then becomes a matter of the here and now, and becomes experienced by the patient for the first time. This is the equivalent of remembering, and the outcome is the equivalent of the lifting of the repression that occurs in the analysis of the psycho-neurotic patient (classic Freudian analysis). (1989, p. 92)

For the past to be able to move “into the past tense,” and henceforth no longer infect the future with its fearful projections, a return to, and re-experiencing of, the very vulnerability from which the narcissistic defense was supposed to shield the

fragile ego may therefore be necessary. What is needed, that is to say, is another kind of defense of vulnerability: not the defense *against* vulnerability but the defense of a certain kind of power of vulnerability:<sup>11</sup> a power to re-experience, and ultimately lay to rest, some of the frightful ghosts from the past, so that non-violent modes of relationality may slowly emerge from the ruins of a “mortiferous” anti-relationality.

But while this kind of toleration might be safely facilitated in a successful analysis, the tools and methods of the clinic are of course not available outside the clinical setting. It is for this reason that I want to gesture, in closing, towards the potential fruitfulness of bringing the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to this discussion—which may do for cultural and/or philosophical narcissism what a good analyst might do for a narcissistic patient. In following this thought, I am drawn back to Levinas’s early text *On Escape* (1935), which may well be read as a text which programmatically establishes his philosophy as the desire for transcendence, for “getting out of being by a new path” (2003, p. 73), as he puts it. In the context of this discussion, such a desire for transcendence could perhaps be described as the desire to avert the fate predicted for Narcissus by Tiresias: if Narcissus dies because he becomes transfixed by, enchained to, and entrapped in, his own reflection, then only an escape from such “enchainment” can set him free. “Escape,” says Levinas, “aspires to break the chains of the I to the self [*du moi à soi*]”:

In the identity of the I [*moi*], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterable binding of chains, the fact that the I [*moi*] is oneself [*soi-même*]*. (2003, p. 55, emphasis in original)

What is ultimately at stake in the Levinasian project—from as early as *On Escape*—is hence a pursuit of freedom; however, it is a form of freedom that looks quite unlike the traditional—narcissistic—conception of freedom as “a fantasy of autonomous subjectivity” (Gandhi, 2006, p. 180) we are familiar with in the Western tradition. In fact, the Leviansian project could well

be described as an effort to redefine freedom: dissociating it from narcissistic pursuits and reframing it as an encounter with otherness that liberates the self from enchainment to itself.<sup>12</sup>

My suggestion here is that the Levinasian oeuvre—which, as Simon Critchley has emphasized,<sup>13</sup> itself circles around themes of trauma—may productively be read as an attempt to break free from the entrapment in self-absorption that is Narcissus's pathological legacy—a legacy which Levinas, in the words of Fred Alford, considers “a trap, the prison that turns my being into a deadness that closes off the world” (2002, p. 121). Building on Alford's suggestion that the “Western idea of freedom is a defense against narcissistic humiliation” (2002, p. 121), I want to propose that the liberation from such pathological narcissism in turn gives rise to a new understanding of freedom: a freedom that is not, as in the case of Narcissus, “mortiferous,” but rather generative of ethical life. As Alford, channelling Levinas, argues:

Not to do what I want, but to put my very being into question, and so open myself to the encounter with the other, as though the other were a wedge inserted into my ego, freeing me from the narcissism of my own little existence. For Levinas, that is the true meaning of freedom, the investiture of freedom he calls it, as though I were a knight sent on a sacred quest to serve the other (T&I, pp. 302–4). In taking up this calling, I become free. (2002, p. 126)

And what becoming free here means is an escape from the invisible chains that tie the I to itself—just as they hold Narcissus transfixed at the pool. Escape, that is to say, means accepting the difficult task of tolerating the kind of vulnerability that would allow for the “wedge” of the other to be inserted into the ego. That this may be painful—even retraumatizing—is clear; however, the “mortiferous” alternative seems too bleak to contemplate. Perhaps, for Narcissus to be able to risk this kind of vulnerability, regardless of the pain that may be involved, he needs to come to realise that his fear of the other is ultimately the fear of a trauma that has already happened. Indeed, if we

can convince Narcissus that the toleration, instead of disavowal, of his vulnerability can enable him to re-experience something that was once “unthinkable,” but that may now be bearable as conscious experience, “the original experience of primitive agony” might finally be able to “get into the past tense” (Winnicott, 1989, p. 91). Freed from the traumatic past’s hold on the present, Narcissus may then retrieve his vital capacity for relationality and thereby break with the present’s “crisis of nonrelation” so as to enable a future that is more than simply an unconscious repetition of the past.

### Notes

1. For a good overview, see, for example, Greedharry (2008).
2. For prominent examples, see Hook (2012) and Khanna (2003).
3. In the context of a discussion over Octave Mannoni’s analysis of a series of seven Malagasy dreams, Fanon proclaims that “the discoveries of Freud are of no use to us here” (2008, p. 77). His contention is that the dreams’ content is all-too-conscious and not derived from some “archetype of the Senegalese can represent for the Malagasy” (p. 77), in the way Mannoni proposes, but instead from their roots in actual, and therefore conscious, military battle. As he puts it rather pointedly further on: “The rifle of the Senegalese soldier is not a penis but a genuine rifle, model Lebel 1916” (p. 79).
4. I appreciate that this is not Gandhi’s project in *Affective Communities* and that her interest instead lies in the “politics of transgression and small gestures” that managed to cross and challenge a dominant imperial nonrelationality. However, the very fact that nonrelationality remained the dominant imperial trait perhaps deserves greater attention than she gives it.
5. Ziauddin Sardar, for example, notes that, “Direct colonial rule may have disappeared; but colonialism, in its many disguises as cultural, economic, political and knowledge-based oppression, lives on” (2008, p. xix).
6. Crucially, these remarks will of course also put my attempt to reinvigorate post-colonial conversation about narcissism via an engagement with clinical insights to the test: for if we are unable to identify any kind of trauma on the part of the colonizing narcissist, then it is ultimately inconsequential, for this discussion, that clinical conversations attribute narcissism to relational trauma.
7. I owe this reference to Josie Carter.
8. In the New Zealand context, for example, Tariana Turia, who at the time was a Labour MP, addressed the New Zealand Psychological Society Conference in August 2000 to speak of the “trauma of colonisation.” Her suggestion that Māori may be suffering from what she called “Post Colonial Traumatic Stress Disorder” caused a public outcry and earned her a formal rebuke from then-Prime Minister Helen Clark.
9. For clarity, I maintain Khan’s and Winnicott’s terminology here; however, “the mother” should be understood more broadly as “the primary caregiver.”
10. Judith Butler makes precisely this point in *Precarious Life*, where she proposes that our vulnerability is deeply entangled with “our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another” and therefore must be defended: “To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way” (Butler, 2004, p. 30).

11. I have developed this idea more fully in Drichel (2013).
12. In an important subsection of his 1957 essay "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," entitled "Narcissism, or the Primacy of the Same," Levinas explicitly aligns the conventional Western understanding of freedom with the solipsistic self-absorption of Narcissus: "Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus" (1987, p. 49).
13. Cf. Critchley (1999). For a development of this thought, see also my discussion in Drichel (2017).

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