

Thinking Thought Otherwise: **Cannibal Metaphysics and The Resistance to ideal Form** **21-22 May 2015.**

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's notion of *Cannibal Metaphysics* and the use of indigenous alter-anthropologies that offer the possibility to *think thought otherwise* than the dominant frameworks of Western modernity. It traces the use of cannibalism across thinking *and* making, exploring the work of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica and his imaginative spatial and material practices that establish relational ecologies between humans and nonhumans. Ecology is foregrounded as a necessary *precondition* for thought's possibility. The concept of 'Nature' is contested as a foundational concept to enable modes of imaginative worlding to emerge that significantly challenge Western intellectual frameworks, depriving them of their universality and therefore transforming knowledge. "Cannibal alterity" is mapped as a political act of transgression where values are devoured in order to subvert their meanings, unsettle their cultural dominance and oppressive force, to transform their negative and destructive power into new creative and productive forms.

Keywords: Ecology, Materiality, Cannibalism, Decolonialism, Ethics.

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L'écologie, tâche de la pensée / ecology, the task of thinking

(Deguy, 2012:31)

As social, political and economic frameworks globally shift towards an increased focus on living *with* and adapting *to* climate change rather than its prevention, as a species we are now embarking on a collective form of experimentation to learn anew how to be in a shared world. This means acknowledging our entanglements with and attachments to chains of actors and situations that affect us and who we, in turn, affect. Central to this experiment is the need to develop imaginative spatial and material relations that challenge existing models of thought and practice, that contribute to enriched ontologies of *worlding* where ecology (the relationship between an individual and its milieu) becomes not only the "task of thinking", to quote the poet Michel Déguéy, but a necessary precondition for thought's possibility.

Within the context of *Transvaluation* therefore this paper will foreground the notion of thinking ecologically (Morton, 2009) as the foundation of any approach to knowledge formation, and will turn specifically to the work of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica whose artworks offer productive sites for the generation of experimental spatial and material relations. A number of Oiticica's installations and, what I will refer to as, his object-events, involve the spectator as an active participant in their production of meaning and form as well as engaging with a range of materials and entities (animate and inanimate) as active agents in their composition and assemblage. Oiticica can be seen to adopt subversive techniques of juxtaposition, placing different 'things' alongside one another in a series of provocative sensual and material gestures that alert us, as spectators, to the precarious materiality of our surrounding environments. As an artist engaged in research through theory and practice, these notions of composition and assemblage surface repeatedly as important heuristic devices across making and thinking within my own work.

The second strand of this discussion will focus on the work of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro who, alongside Oiticica, was influenced by the earlier writings of the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade from the 1920s and his *Manifesto Antropófago (Cannibalist Manifesto)* in particular. I will trace the appeal to cannibalism/anthropophagy as a radical politics of dissent with the potential to offer a relational and ecological ontology that embraces notions of collective composition and the *exchange* of meaning. Viveiros de Castro argues against Western models of *Poiesis* challenging notions of the creation/production of knowledge which imply actions "upon and against the world", he instead considers the idea of knowledge as "transformation/transfer" which "belongs to the paradigm of exchange." Within this model there is no absolute beginning or originary act of thought, "every act is a response" with exchange offering "a "moment" of production (it "realizes" value) and the means of reproduction. In the transformation paradigm exchange is the condition for production since, without the proper social relations with non-humans, no production is possible" (Viveiros de Castro in Franke, 2010:237-238).

Oiticica's installation *Tropicália*, first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in 1967 then reinstalled two years later in London as part of an exhibition at The Whitechapel Art Gallery, offers an example of this exchange of meaning in the interrelationships of animate and inanimate materials, human participants, technological tools and spatial-architectural framings. Before addressing the work itself however, I would like to briefly contextualise my response to this installation and to attend to my use of the term 'nature' in relation to my reading of *Tropicália* as an example of ecological thought.

There has been a significant (and well documented) turn towards issues of materialism and ecology in recent philosophical discourse with an emphasis on the need to break down the ontological distinctions that have been drawn between nature and culture and the human and nonhuman for example. This is seen as a necessary precondition for thought to be able to generate new political and speculative environments where the idea of any political constitution or composition might open up to include nonhuman ‘actors’ and their relations with both humans and other nonhuman actors. Bruno Latour’s works in particular offer a significant challenge to the continued use of the term ‘nature’ as an ontologically stable category. Latour emphatically states that “*political ecology has nothing to do with nature*” (2004, 5), and that “under the pretext of protecting nature, the ecology movements have also retained the conception of nature that makes their political struggle hopeless” (2004, 19). Latour’s primary thesis in his book *Politics of Nature* (2004) is that nature as an independent concept collapses, as nature cannot be separated from its social and cultural representation through the sciences:

As soon as we add dinosaurs to their palaeontologists, to particles their accelerators, to ecosystems their monitoring instruments, to energy systems their standards and the hypothesis on the basis of which calculations are made, to the ozone holes their meteorologists and their chemists, we have already ceased entirely to speak of nature; instead, we are speaking for what is produced, constructed, decided, defined, in a learned city whose ecology is almost as complex as that of the world it is coming to know. (2004, 35).

It is this false conflation of scientific *representation* with nature, this process of instrumentation that brings about the confusion and perpetuates the idea that ‘Nature’ is an independent and monolithic realm that is somehow free of the social, historical and cultural world, yet acts always as the universal backdrop against which the cultural is measured. Latour’s critique of the nature/culture split at the origins of the modern is famously to argue that “we have never been modern” as the title of his 1991 book provocatively suggests. This originating dualist metaphysical model has arguably shaped our current knowledge cultures in the West and elevated notions of objectivity and sensual detachment to fetishistic heights, endlessly reproducing and proliferating across a number of other binary oppositions including the human/non-human, subject/object, mind/matter, primitive/civilized, rational/sensual, fact/value, etc. Any discussion about the future of knowledge generation and research must therefore address the issue of ‘Nature’ at its root, which is why I am framing this discussion as a question of thinking ecologically.

Nature, in its modern Western representation, is idealized and it is this picture that is frequently called upon in environmental politics which habitually presents a ‘holistic’ view of the environment that aims to persuade us of our ethical obligations to ‘preserve’ or ‘conserve’ the natural world as *it* exists (or might exist) independently from us. What we need to move towards, in Latour’s terms, is a *non-modern* reimagining of our world. We need to embrace Viveiros de Castro’s call for “the putting into variation of our imagination” (2014:41), to imagine a “multinatural” world where nature is pluralized, where, “against the great dividers ... small multiplicities proliferate” (2014:45). This shift towards a multinatural thinking is born out of Viveiros de Castro’s anthropological fieldwork within Amazonia and is one part of his research into Amerindian cosmologies that is also supported by notions of “interspecific perspectivism” and “cannibal alterity” (2014:50). Together, these three concepts work to produce an indigenous alter-anthropology that moves anthropological thought and practice away from thinking *about* to thinking-*with*, towards a co-production of meaning that initiates “a permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought” (2014: 48). Within this alter-anthropology modes of imaginative worlding emerge that significantly challenge Western intellectual frameworks, depriving them of their universality and therefore transforming thinking as a whole.

In a further move to decolonize thought and to challenge the use of ‘nature’ as a foundational category the critic Timothy Morton in his works *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2009) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010) outlines how nature is “an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it” (2009:22). Yet thinking, including ecological thinking, has set “nature” up as, what Morton refers to as a “reified thing in the distance” (2010:3). It is here, in this reification via the *aesthetic* representation of nature, that Morton turns his attention, and this is what distinguishes his writings from Latour’s who is more concerned with scientific representation. Morton’s focus in these texts is less concerned with visual art than with literature (although he does refer to this as “environmental art”), particularly Romantic literature of the late 18th and 19th Centuries. Morton describes what he calls the “poetics of ambience” that emerged with the texts from this historical period and their emphasis on an idealised space of external nature represented as “transcendental.” Morton argues that this type of thinking about nature has continued to permeate ecological thinking up to the present and that this clouds our ability to move beyond “the constant elegy for a lost unalienated state, the resort to the aesthetic dimension (experiential/perceptual) rather than ethical-political praxis” (2009:23). Morton does however, offer some hope for rescuing the aesthetic and continuing to imbue it with political agency through his appeal to a notion of “dark ecology” which is introduced at the end of *Ecology Without Nature* and expanded upon in *The Ecological Thought*. Dark ecology is likened by

Morton to *film noir* where the protagonist is implicated in the very crime he sets out to investigate from an apparently neutral perspective. The moral of the story being that, “there is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements” (2010:17). Instead, we have to immerse ourselves in the very ‘problem’ or crime, as the reality is – as many recent commentators of climate change are now warning - that we are no longer *waiting* for the ecological catastrophe to happen, it is in the process of happening or, as Morton states, it “*has already occurred*”(2010:17). Dark ecology is therefore a “perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form” (2010:195), it must work instead to reframe our notion of the ecological itself through a sense of openness to radical otherness, to that which cannot be easily assimilated.

It is here with Morton’s references to “digesting the object” and the processes of assimilation that a connection might be found with Oiticica’s work from the 1960s and Viveiros de Castro’s writings. Oiticica described the experience of entering *Tropicália* for example, as giving him “the powerful sensation of being devoured” and described the work as “the most anthropophagic work in Brazilian art” (Oiticica, 1968, cited in Basuldo, 2005:240). This notion of devouring and anthropophagy (or cannibalism) is taken from the writings of Oswald de Andrade from the 1920s and his use of anthropophagy as a metaphor for the emergence of a new form of Brazilian cultural identity. Andrade’s avowedly anti-colonial *Manifesto Antropófago (Cannibalist Manifesto)* published in 1928 opens with the statement “Cannibalism alone unites us.” For Andrade, the process of assimilating anthropophagically enabled a selective process whereby elements of the dominant European culture in Brazil could be absorbed alongside Indian and Black cultural references, in this way ‘foreign’ cultural influences could be internalized, then redeployed creatively in a manner that reflected the complexity of Brazilian culture as a culture of transnationality and hybridity. In one of the most infamous lines from the Manifesto “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question” Andrade plays on the line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with a reference to the Amerindian Tupinambá tribes and the practice of cannibalism as a way of occupying the enemy’s point of view. In this instance it is a text from the universalising Western cultural canon that is digested and regurgitated as a blend of indigenous and European cultural references. This process of devouring or cannibalising the stereotype is not, however, simply about ‘consuming’ foreign cultural elements but is rather about assimilation as a political act of transgression where values are taken in in order to subvert their meanings, unsettle their cultural dominance and oppressive force, in short, to transform their negative and destructive power into new creative and productive forms. Throughout the Manifesto, Andrade cites a mix of European cultural and political thinkers and plays on Enlightenment notions of the “noble” savage at the root of modern Western thought. His response is the deliberate provocation of the savage

presented as “bad”, as a “devourer of whites” (De Campos, 1986: 44). In Viveiros de Castro’s work this “cannibal proposition” is explored in more depth as an exchange of perspective, position or point of view, rather than the ingestion of an essence or material substance. The practice of cannibalism is about the transformation of self through engendering the relationship with the other, “predatory relations are fully and immediately social relations... the self is the gift of the other” (2010:240).

Oiticica can be seen to borrow from these practices of transvaluation in his work in a continuation of the questioning and negotiation of Brazilian identity and its relationship to European and North American cultural forms, as well as in his use of materials and their relationship to the social, cultural and political context of the work’s production and presentation. *Tropicália*, was a multi-sensory environmental installation conceived by Oiticica to draw the viewer/participant into its architectural spaces and to journey through its labyrinth-like passageways with a view to experiencing a heightened sense perception and physical/emotional awareness. *Tropicália* consists of two separate *Penetrables*, *PN2, Purity is a Myth* and *PN3, Imagetical*. The artwork’s materials include painted wooden panels, printed fabric with ‘tropical’ floral patterns or fabric in plain orange and blue cotton, and black and white stripes, sand, gravel, living tropical plants, live parrots, sachets scented with patchouli and sandalwood, carpet, plastic fabric strips, a black and white television and text in the form of poems and writing on the wall. The visitor enters the first *penetrable* to read the words “Purity is a Myth” hand written at the top of the facing wall, they then progress through to the second *penetrable* which leads them through a series of, what Oiticica refers to as, “tactile-sensorial experiences” (2013 [1968]:228) via several progressively narrowing alleys which gradually become darker until they reach the end where a television set is placed on the ground permanently broadcasting images. In describing *Tropicália*, Oiticica (quoted in Brett, 2007: 32) wrote that:

Most importantly, one had the feeling of treading upon the earth. This is a sensation I had felt previously, walking through the hills or the *favela*, and even the trajectory of entering, leaving and winding through *Tropicália’s* corridors is strongly reminiscent of walks through the Hill... What I want is to offer a global meaning that suggests a new behaviour, an ethical-social one that gives individuals a new sense of things. In this sense, the environment is intentionally anti-technological, perhaps even non-modern. I want to make man return to earth... The problems of myth (which is characteristically collective) and of modern man’s absorption with the avalanche of information and images in our world are both present in them [the two penetrables].

This passage helps to contextualise *Tropicália* from a number of different perspectives. The first is its situated context in terms of the references that Oiticica makes to the physical and human geographies that inspired its making; the second is the reference to technology as image domination and information overload, a strangely prescient observation from its pre Internet position in the late 1960s; the third is the reference to the earth and tactile materiality as primary signifiers of a physical and sensual engagement with the environment; and the fourth is the reference to the collective experience of myth. Viveiros de Castro explores the importance of myth in the ethnography of indigenous America and the abundance of references to cosmologies filled with a range of actors human and nonhuman from people and animals to plants, spirits, meteorological events, objects and artifacts. Within these assemblages the various actors involved have forms of agency that allow for the “ontological potentiality” of personhood (2014: 58). This is a matter of context and perspective rather than the definition of an essence that belongs singularly to the human as a species. In Amerindian cosmologies the common condition shared by humans and animals is not animality, as Western thought has long established, but humanity and this profound disturbance in the order of things displaces any claim to universalizing knowledge; “when everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing” (2014: 63). The subject is no longer defined in relation to an object, anthropocentrism is displaced in a paradoxical movement through anthropomorphism as all manner of things take on the qualities of personhood and are endowed with souls.

Oiticica, an artist from an educated middle-class family, famously spent a significant part of his artistic life in the working-class neighbourhoods of the Brazilian *favelas* (the slums or shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro, now more positively referred to as *comunidades* or communities), most notably in the area of Mangueira Hill where he learnt the art of samba dancing and became involved in the collective forms of making associated with dance and the carnival. Whilst I can only touch on this aspect of the artist’s life here, for the purposes of this discussion it is important to note the profound transformation that these experiences had on Oiticica’s work and the transition of his practice from a form of abstract neo-constructivism to a more immersive, sensorial and participatory engagement with materials and with the spectator. These ideas initially found form in a series of works preceding and contemporaneous with the creation of *Tropicália*, the *Bolides* (painted, interactive boxes with mixed materials, 1963-69) and the *Parangolés* (painted and fabric capes, banners and tents made to be worn/danced in or occupied, 1964-79). These experiments with colour and form began to address the role of the spectator and to transform them into a *participant* in the work by encouraging interaction and involvement with the objects in the case of the *Bolides*, where drawers could be opened and closed for example,

and, in the case of the *Parangolés*, to radically transform the artwork itself through the necessary participation of the spectator who must wear the work and bring it to life through their movements. With the *Parangolés* in particular Oiticica was to embark on an ethical-environmental project that sought to integrate art into everyday life. This practice has to be understood in the social and political context of the time as Brazil was in the stranglehold of an oppressive and violent military dictatorship that reduced the possibilities for oppositionary politics and for open individual and creative cultural expression. The *Parangolés* in Oiticica's words were "the definitive formulation of environmental anti-art", they were "against everything that is oppressive, socially and individually – all the fixed and decadent forms of government, or reigning social structures" (2013 [1966]:171). Through encouraging the participator to move, dance and express themselves in layers of textiles, materials and colour, Oiticica wanted to produce an immersive sensory experience that might enable what he phrased as, "the retaking of confidence by the individual in his or her intuitions and most precious aspirations" (2013 [1966]:171). Fundamentally the *Parangolés* were an expression of freedom, freedom of movement and of individual and collective forms of creativity and spontaneity. They can also be seen to represent a rethinking of materiality in their appropriation of everyday modest materials from the streets and surroundings of the *favelas* in a process that replicates the contingent nature of the architecture and precarious conditions of life lived under oppressive social and environmental forces. The translation and transvaluation of these materials through performative action also contributes to their affective role in the relationship between human and non-human actors.

With *Tropicália* these ideas begin to find a more extensive expression with the creation of an environment that combined the visual with the tactile whilst also referencing the sense of smell (via the scented sachets) and sound (via the squawks of the parrots and the sound of the television). The installation mimics the experience of walking through the *favela* of Mangueira Hill with its cultural mix of inhabitants and its temporary architectures composed of different everyday materials. Collapsing the distinctions between art and life Oiticica found a creative connection to the world *through* the materials themselves. He wrote that "anti-art is the true, definitive link between creativity and the collectivity – there is, as it were, an exploration of something unknown: 'things' are found, which are seen everyday but which one never thought to look for. It is the search for oneself in the 'thing' - a kind of communion with the environment" (2013 [1966]:173). In this context *that* environment is representative of a denial of fixed identities, of completion, of "ideal" forms (to refer back to Morton). It is rather, an open-ended and fluid process of negotiation and construction between human actors and non-human 'things', a materiality in flux, constantly subject to change, renewal, transformation and transvaluation. It

is unclear whether the installation is being assembled, about to fall apart or is already a ruin, whether it is inhabited or abandoned. Its labyrinthine passages and relationship between inside and outside space offer a sense of movement through the work that is not predetermined or linear. The poetics of the things themselves offer a sensual space beyond the visual that Oiticica referred to as the *suprasensorial*. This appeal to a heightened and extreme sensuality reimagines the world through sensuous correspondences and recognizes the importance of non-linguistic, embodied forms of communication in the production of meaning whilst recognizing their power to disrupt and destabilize organized forms of rationality and logic.

Oiticica's ideas on the *suprasensorial* can also be seen to capture something of the language of the early European explorers with their vivid descriptions of the landscapes of South America upon first encountering them. The nineteenth century explorer and naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt, for example, whose prolific writings and visualizations had a profound effect on subsequent engagements with the tropical world, represented South America above all as a place of superabundant nature that was wild, uncultivated, breathtakingly beautiful, full of lush vegetation and intensely colourful. Humboldt repeatedly refers to the "intensity" of experience of life in the tropics in comparison with that of the temperate zone (Stepan, 2001). This image of Brazil as a land of tropical abundance as represented through European eyes persists and it is this popular cultural stereotype that Oiticica 'devours' in his interactive sensory installations from this period. What the concept of cannibalism also highlights however, is a 'darker' picture of the tropical that subtends the rich, fertile and highly sensuous stereotype. In many accounts of the Imperial encounters with the tropical from the 18th and 19th centuries for example, there is a clear narrative of tension and contradiction; the *suprasensorial* image of the tropics was regularly countered with a picture that emerged of the tropics as a place of disease, death and degeneration. Images of primitiveness, violence and destruction, of tropical diseases, extreme weather conditions from unbearable heat to destructive storms, and of the damaging effects of the climate on the moral character of the inhabitants who were frequently depicted as lazy, indolent, and morally corrupt, lacking the necessary character to advance technologically.

This picture is part discovery of a 'new' world, part *representation* of that world by the 'alien' European cultures and part *creation* of that world by the Europeans through the establishment of a place of cruelty, oppression, slavery, imported diseases and ravaged landscapes. What such disparate and contradictory responses to the tropics reflect is the difficulty in trying to 'fix' any single position or representation on such diverse landscapes and the cultures that exist within them. Oiticica's work can be seen to embrace these ambiguous references and the legacies of colonialism in its combination of everyday/raw materials that reference the earth, and in his

appropriation and devouring of cultural forms from the colonial and the popular to the folkloric and the technological. “Purity is a myth” can be read as a comment on Brazilian cultural identity but perhaps also, in the context of this discussion, it can be read as a statement about ‘Nature’ as the universalizing backdrop for the production of knowledge and the emergence of Culture. In Viveiros de Castro’s recent work on cannibal metaphysics, as we have seen, he seeks to challenge the nature/culture dichotomy through his discussion of Amerindian perspectivism and the effect that indigenous alter-anthropologies have on Western forms of knowledge production. This results in an approach to anthropology as a “permanent exercise in the decolonization of thought” (2014: 48) that asks us to “incriminate” ourselves in the “task of thinking thought otherwise” (2014: 43).

Within this framework Viveiros de Castro enters into a long discussion of the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and in particular addresses Lévi-Strauss’s late work on myth. He cites a conversation that Lévi-Strauss had with Didier Èribon in which he defined myth as “the story of the time before men and animals became distinct”, going on to argue that, far from describing an unambiguous movement from Nature to Culture, Lévi-Strauss instead maps a “labyrinth of twisting, ambiguous pathways, transversal trails, tight alleys, obscure impasses, and even rivers that flow in both directions at once” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014:212-213). Mirroring Oiticica’s labyrinthine passageways in *Tropicália* and his object-events that collapse the distinctions between the artwork, material assemblages and spectator/participant, this conception of mythic (perspectivist) thought can be seen to propose difference as a question of disequilibrium and deformation (the refusal of ideal form) rather than opposition, which requires fixed positions from which to establish the notion of identity and difference in the first place. In *Tropicália*, ‘natural’ materials merge with artificial ones, living plants and birds are displaced from their usual environments and temporarily dwell in the gallery space, plants are reproduced through pattern and print, and colour is dispersed and displaced throughout the temporary structures that guide the spectator through their sensorial passageways. “Purity” (of culture or of nature) is not conceived as something that has been lost but rather, as something that was a myth to begin with. Oiticica’s cultural devouring and his *suprasensorial* tactics displace ‘Nature’ whilst embracing multiple natures across the human and nonhuman divide. Read alongside Viveiros de Castro’s recent work and set within the broader project to think ecologically as outlined by writers as diverse as Morton and Deguy, this approach can be seen to open a space for thinking beyond the rigid structures of Western metaphysics and the “vicious dichotomies” of the Enlightenment (Viveiros de Castro, 2014:49). This space for thought emerges out of imaginative spatial-material practices that foreground the precariousness of our shared ecologies in a continual process of exchange and transformation. The experience of *worlding* therefore, becomes one of composition

and *recomposition* across and between species, materials and environment that provoke us to continually *think thought otherwise*.

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