Thinking Thought Otherwise:
Cannibal Metaphysics and The Resistance to ideal Form
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Abstract
As social, political and economic frameworks globally shift towards an increased focus on adaptation to climate change (rather than 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 where ecology (the relationship between an individual and its milieu) becomes a necessary precondition for thought’s possibility and any future formation of knowledge.

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. The concept of ‘Nature’ is contested as a foundational concept to enable modes of imaginative worlding to emerge that challenge Western intellectual frameworks, depriving them of their universality and transforming knowledge. “Cannibal alterity” is mapped as a political act of transgression where values are devoured to subvert their meanings, unsettle their cultural dominance and oppressive force, to transform their negative and destructive power into new creative and productive forms.

Timothy Morton introduces the concept of “dark ecology” to challenge the use of the term ‘nature’ as an ontologically stable referent. Dark ecology addresses the enduring reification of nature in the realm of the aesthetic and offers a “perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form” (2009, 195). Morton’s reference to ‘digesting’ the object offers a conceptual link to Oswald de Andrade’s writings from the 1920s on cannibalism that influenced a later generation of artists including Oiticica, whose 1967 installation Tropicália created a “suprasensorial” environment that he described as “the most anthropophagic work in Brazilian art,” offering “the powerful sensation of being devoured” (2005, 240). The ‘environments’ and possibilities for action created through Oiticica’s experimental spatial and material practices represent a denial of fixed identities, ideological certainties or “ideal” forms. They offer an open-ended and fluid process of negotiation and construction between human and non-human actors and the worlds they co-habit.

Cannibalism has emerged with renewed conceptual force in the work of Viveiros de Castro and his commitment to anthropology as an exercise in the “permanent decolonization of thought” (2014, 40). Encounters with alternative perspectival and multinatural Amerindian cosmologies disrupt and transform Western notions of truth, subjectivity and value in a process of worlding that moves beyond
the anthropocentric. This opens a space for “the putting into variation of our imagination” (2014, 41) and enables the emergence of relational ecological ontologies that offer the possibility of “thinking thought otherwise” (2014, 43).

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

**Key references**