The Future of Cultural Anthropology:

A Review of *Cannibal Metaphysics*

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Abstract

Cannibal Metaphysics, by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, raises incontrovertibly the question of what cultural anthropology is—and what it should be. De Castro places his combative cultural politics at the center of the theory he builds; his declared cultural enemies are Western modernity and science—more broadly, any "mononaturalist" episteme which posits a shared, objectively knowable world. In opposition to these, he advances a theory of "perspectivism" and "multinaturalism" which is allegedly founded in part on Amerindian "cosmophilosophy." It bears repeating, however, that the structural necessity of regional ontologies as an inevitable outgrowth of the indeterminate trajectories of human collectivities removed from each other at various degrees of distance does not preclude at all an anthropology whose purpose is to build a universal human understanding of culture and social life. This review was written because the alternative, which has been gaining extraordinary appeal within the discipline, is a-trajective—it leads to listing,

without compass, in a morass of virtual exchanges, without building anything that can be conferred and refined as knowledge over time.

Keywords: Post-structuralism, ontological turn, perspectivism, multinaturalism, metaphysics

Introduction

We need to talk about cultural anthropology. Certainly, the field has passed through long periods of self-reflexivity over the past several decades—a reflexivity of which many are understandably tired. Perhaps such engagement even has a *narcissistic* flavor to it—something which Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in giving his recent work *Cannibal Metaphysics* the alternative title *Anti-Narcissus*, ostensibly wishes to reject. Nevertheless, reading the book raises incontrovertibly the question of what cultural anthropology is—and what it should be. This is not a minor issue. It is central to the future of the field, because it determines the very standards on the basis of which evaluation and critique of work may be offered and knowledge advanced—or not.

It is well-known that in 2010, the American Anthropological Association removed the word “science” from its Long-Range Plan in order to accommodate the growing number of practitioners of anthropology who do not consider themselves scientists:

Until now, the association's long-range plan was "to advance anthropology as the science that studies humankind in all its aspects."

The executive board revised this last month to say, "The purposes of the association shall be to advance public understanding of humankind in all its aspects" (Wade 2010).

In May of 2011, the Executive Board of the AAA responded to the resulting controversy, in which the AAA faced backlash for allegedly disavowing its scientific mission, by amending the Long-Range Plan again. The new Preamble begins with the following paragraph:

The strength of Anthropology lies in its distinctive position at the nexus of the sciences and humanities, its global perspective, its attention to the past and the present, and its commitment to both research and practice. The purpose of the Association shall be to advance scholarly understanding of humankind in all its aspects, and to make that knowledge available to a broader public as appropriate. This includes, but is not limited to the classic research areas of U.S. anthropology—archaeological, biological, ethnological, and linguistic anthropology—drawing from and building upon knowledge from biological and physical sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences. It also includes newer groupings and different constellations that bring together many anthropologists sharing vibrant research

and practicing domains of activity. The Association promotes the professional interests of anthropologists, including the dissemination of anthropological knowledge among scholars and the broader public and supports the application of scientific and humanistic anthropological knowledge to improve the world in which we live (AAA Executive Board 2011).

Despite this attempt to unite the disparate camps within the field, strongly divided opinions remain about the nature and purpose of anthropology—particularly cultural anthropology. A summary of the two main divergent positions offered by cultural anthropologist Krystal D’Costa shortly after the initial Plan change continues to hold and is worth quoting at length:

The suggested changes shift anthropology from a scientific endeavor to a public forum where the primary goal appears to be advocacy and cultural preservation. I don’t necessarily object to advancing “public understanding of human kind in all its aspects,” but I am at a loss as to how anthropologists are meant to go about identifying and advancing public understanding because this move reduces us to storytellers.

Some have embraced what they perceive as a “science-free” mission statement that abandons “a distinctly Western framework for explaining the world around us.” PhD candidate Douglas Carl argues

that science has long overlooked the value of indigenous knowledge, and that this recent statement by the Association works to restore the “equally complex (and equally valid) indigenous counterpart to Western science.” There is some truth to this statement: Indigenous knowledge is a wonderfully rich and complex resource that is often not given the importance it deserves. For example, Cori Hayden's *When Nature Goes Public: The Making and Unmaking of Bioprospecting in Mexico* makes clear that the knowledge of local villagers about the medicinal values of plants is often overlooked. These people are not free to own their knowledge—that falls to the lab coats. But the two groups could really benefit from a partnership. One should not be abolished in place of the other. Indigenous knowledge is wonderful, but for it to have a broader impact it needs to be understood and applied objectively, otherwise it represents a very specific and isolated way of looking at the world. And for science to be effective, it needs to understand and account for the nuances of indigenous knowledge. If the anthropologist is to be a successful advocate, this is where he or she comes in: a champion of neither, but a mediator of sorts who can help both parties navigate change with minimal conflict.

I want to stress however that I do not think the primary point of anthropology is advocacy. I am a social scientist. Like all scientists, I

hope that my work will increase understanding that may contribute to positive change. To do so I must draw upon a vast store of knowledge. Without the partnership of colleagues in psychology, biology, chemistry, math, physics, economics, and other departments, I lose the ability to see the whole picture. All that are left are the anecdotes. Advocacy grows out of my understanding. It is not a requirement for the discipline. But as I read and reread the proposed changes, I feel that there are two roads being offered for anthropologists: activist or record keeper—but not scientist.

One response to D'Costa, particularly after the Executive Board's revision of the Plan, could be that the AAA is not seeking to make advocacy and cultural preservation *primary* over science—rather, it simply includes them *alongside* science as other goals worthy of the discipline. The problem with this view, however, is that once advocacy and cultural preservation become presupposed aims of the field along with science, *the scientific purpose of the field is compromised*. This is not because advocacy and science are always at odds but because the necessity and desirability of advocacy in any given context is by no means self-evident. It may very well be salutary in many instances for scientists to also be advocates for some policy or social practice. However, in the realm of culture politics, the presupposition that “cultures” *as such* are inherently worthy of preservation is an unfounded and essentialist claim. Cultures have transformed radically countless times over the course of human evolution, and they will continue do so. To valorize

any given state of things—no matter how noble the intentions from which one begins—is a value judgment, not a scientific proposition. And although, in the context of anthropology, cultural preservation is usually invoked as one of the idioms of a broad leftist political orientation, there is no doubt that such an anthropological commitment can be and has been used as a tool of the reactionary right, including fascist regimes. In other words, the criteria by which to determine *what* precisely defines any given “culture” as well as *which* cultures are advocated for and which are not depend entirely on the political orientation of the researcher, and are thus essentially not scientific.

This does not trouble many cultural anthropologists, who openly consider themselves more cultural warriors than scientists of culture. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro declares his combative cultural politics to be central to the theory he builds in *Cannibal Metaphysics*. His named cultural enemies are Western modernity and science—more broadly, any “mononaturalist” episteme which posits a shared, objectively knowable world. In opposition to these enemies, he advances a theory of “perspectivism” and “multinaturalism” which is allegedly founded in part on Amerindian “cosmophilosophy.” In the following review, I aim to show why this political commitment profoundly distorts his interpretive frame, rendering him unable to accurately recognize and describe major aspects of both the Amerindian societies he has studied in the field as well as his own native society, the European academy. In the end, his project of bringing indigenous theory “into” anthropological theory ends up doing a disservice both to the indigenous communities he invokes and to cultural anthropology.

While its focus is de Castro's book, this review understands *Cannibal Metaphysics* to be an example of a broader trend within cultural anthropology in which attempts to "take seriously indigenous theory" result in a language of insider storytelling and shame that replaces the work of science with the initiatory regime of a mystery cult. If anthropology is to seriously contribute to a more just political order, it will not be through a valorization of "the native" and a demonization of science or "Western modernity," but through a self-honest functioning from actually-obtaining cultural and epistemic conditions to include ever-broader circles of humanity in the creation and benefits of scientific progress, which includes progress in the understanding of human culture. Most fundamentally, there can be no return and no "preservation;" there is only what we choose to do together under imperfect—often deeply flawed—conditions as we move into a trajectory yet undefined future.

Conceptual Debt and Ontological Self-Determination

Cannibal Metaphysics is a book about debt. Viveiros de Castro opens it with a question: "What do anthropologists owe, conceptually, to the people they study" (39)? De Castro does not build a case for *why* anthropologists owe a debt to the people they study; he simply posits it, in a manner reminiscent of theological doctrines of Original Sin. Then he answers his question with the thesis that "the originality of anthropology . . . reside[s] . . . in this always-equivocal but often fecund alliance between the conceptions and practices that arise from the worlds of the so-called 'subject' and 'object' of anthropology" (40)—that is, the world of the (always

already “Western” because of her academic institutional provenance) anthropologist and the world of the “natives” under study. Displaying a missionary zeal reminiscent of the colonial ancestors of his discipline whom he decries, he declares that “Anthropology is ready to fully assume its new mission of being the theory/practice of the permanent decolonization of thought” (40).

Yet one must ask, decolonization from where? De Castro’s answer seems to be that *faithful* ethnographic engagement in any society leads to a kind of epistemological merger, whereby categories native to both anthropologist and object of study are transformed into entirely new ones. But is this, in fact, the case? And if so, is it decolonization? And decolonization for whom? Perhaps mainly for de Castro himself—and the location of this transformation, the anthropologist, goes entirely unscrutinized in his telling. Instead, the cannibal metaphysics he proposes functions as a transparent rendering of Amazonian native categories of experience.

This line of reasoning—that there is “conceptual debt” and that it must be repaid by incorporating “native” ways of making sense of the world into anthropological theory—emerges from de Castro’s critique of a certain strain of postcolonial anthropology which, in his reading, posits that anthropological work can only ever be a solipsistic endeavor. He writes, “By always seeking the Same in the Other, by thinking that under the mask of the other it is always just ‘us’ contemplating ourselves, we end up complacently accepting a shortcut and an interest only in what is ‘of interest to us’—ourselves” (41). It is for this reason that “*Cannibal Metaphysics* is therefore a beginner’s guide to another book, entitled *Anti-Narcissus*” (39). De Castro’s project aspires to shatter what he considers to be the

narcissistic illusions of anthropology—whether colonial or postcolonial—by proposing an epistemological merger between academic and native ways of knowing.

But to what end? What work, in other words, does this epistemological merger do? De Castro answers that it is central to the “effort to force an anthropological theory of the conceptual imagination, one attuned to the creativity and reflexivity of every collective, human or otherwise” (43), a project he calls “an anthropological concept of the concept” (42). This is not only a descriptive project, however, but a prescriptive one:

In sum, a new anthropology of the concept capable of counter-effectuating a new concept of anthropology, after which the descriptions of the conditions of the ontological self-determination of the collectives studied will absolutely prevail over the reduction of human (as well as nonhuman) thought to a *dispositif* of recognition: classification, predication, judgment, and representation.... Anthropology as comparative ontography (Holbraad 2003:39-77)—*that* is the true point of view of immanence (43).

It is the commitment to the “ontological self-determination” of the objects of anthropological study which situates de Castro’s project firmly within what has been called the “ontological turn.” The ontological turn describes the movement by some anthropologists away from the postmodern and poststructuralist critiques of

anthropology as a representational practice, which included critiques of presuppositions about anthropologists themselves as unified authorial (and authoritative) subjects, and toward an overriding concern with the structures of relating that constitute the categories which define and order experience. Postmodern and poststructuralist critiques were, of course, motivated by a deep political commitment to establishing greater parity in a field (in both senses of the term) constituted by a problematically hierarchical disjunction between knower and known. The ontological turn shares this concern, but takes postmodernists and poststructuralists to task for functioning from a universal notion of world which allegedly presumes a scientific capacity for mediative translation (albeit through a glass, darkly). Annemarie Mol has thus defined the ontological turn as “Not a politics of who (who gets to speak; act; etc.) but a politics of what (what is the reality that takes shape and that various people come to live with?)” (Mol 2014). For the ontological turn, then, what is at stake is reality itself. However, as Mol does not mention here, the what is always a what *for a who*—and that who very much determines, for anthropological ontologists, which realities are to be privileged and which are to be subverted. For these reasons, metaphysics is a central preoccupation of scholars writing in this vein.

De Castro’s argument in *Cannibal Metaphysics* is inspired in part by Martin Holbraad (cited in the quote above), a prominent theorist within the emerging tradition of the ontological turn. A crystallization of Holbraad’s thinking which mirrors de Castro’s own emerges in the 2007 Routledge edited volume *Thinking through Things*, edited by Holbraad as well as Amiria Henare and Sari Wastell. In

their Introduction, the authors take (Western) social science to task as follows:

“Cross-cultural translation must be mediated by some point of comparison—an element that can be posited, if not as supra-cultural, then at least as a point of cultural convergence. Enter ‘the world,’ as itchy as a phantom limb following metaphysical amputation” (11-12). The editors argue that the notion of a shared world doesn’t force us to come to terms with ontological presuppositions that create very different experiential worlds from the ones we natively inhabit. They propose a methodology in which the anthropologist uses his or her terms in an ontologically “under-determined” way, allowing them to be revised by the ethnographic encounter itself: “If we are to take others seriously, instead of reducing their articulations to mere ‘cultural perspectives’ or ‘beliefs’ (i.e. ‘worldviews’), we can conceive them as enunciations of different ‘worlds’ or ‘natures’, without having to concede that this is just shorthand for ‘worldviews’” (10).

According to Henare et al., it is concepts which offer the gateways to different ontologies. By refashioning our native concepts to encompass other realities, we can gain entry into those realities:

Concepts can bring about things because concepts and things just are one and the same . . . things . . . *are concepts* as much as they appear to us as ‘material’ or ‘physical’ entities . . . so this is a method of ‘back to the things themselves,’ as the phenomenologists had it, but only with the caveat that this is not because the ‘life-world’ or our ‘experience’ of things has priority over a ‘theoretical attitude’ (Husserl 1970), but

precisely because our experience of things, if you will, *can be conceptual* (13).

Leaving aside the question of “priority” in Husserl (which the authors have mischaracterized here), what they are indicating in this passage is the importance of taking as object of study the subjective mediation of reality (“things”) which has been the central concern of phenomenology. However, Henare et al. mire themselves in a seemingly unresolvable quagmire by in effect positing that things are whatever people say (or think) they are. They write, “No ontological distinction between ‘discourse’ and ‘reality’ pertains in the first place. In other words, concepts can bring about things because concepts and things just are one and the same (one and the same ‘thing’, we could say—using the term heuristically)” (*ibid.*). In this way, what seems on the surface to be a rejection of representational or linguistic approaches to anthropology in fact reveals itself as a radicalization and entrenchment of them. The signifier is no longer arbitrary, empty, or parochial, but reified as metaphysical scaffolding which the anthropologist is suddenly in no position to call into question when in the realm of non-Western natives, lest he commit the political and moral betrayal of ingratitude—disavowal of the *conceptual* debt he owes to his objects of study.

De Castro would likely disagree with this characterization. He writes,

A perspective is not a representation because representations are properties of mind, whereas a *point of view is in the body*. . . . What we

are calling “body,” then, is not the specific physiology or characteristic anatomy of something but an ensemble of ways or modes of being that constitutes a *habitus*, ethos, or ethogram. Lying between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms is a middle, axial plane that is the body qua bundle of affects and capacities, and that is at the origin of perspectivism. Far from being the spiritual essentialism of relativism, perspectivism is a corporeal mannerism (71–72; italics in original).

Yet this posited bifurcation between mind and body is nowhere substantiated. Although scientifically feasible, De Castro’s account doesn’t give any examples of a mind that exists, or even could exist, outside of a body whose *habitus* is formed in the context of ongoing mental and bodily implication in a lifeworld. In short, any understanding of relativism which proceeds from the presupposition that it is purely representational, on the one hand, or that it arises from a mind which is not always already implicated in embodied experience, on the other, is a faulty understanding of relativism. World is always experienced as relative by human beings precisely because it is never experienced from more than one position—the originator of experience is the subject—for now, located in a body. Neglect of an account of the subject is why the ontological turn has had such trouble distinguishing between concept and reality—and why, as a result, it has vacillated between splitting and equating body and concept, idea and world.

But it is not only body and concept which “split” in the thought of the ontological turn; in the Manichean worldview underpinning much of this movement, Western metaphysics looms as the enemy to be combated. This metaphysics is allegedly guilty not only of Eurocentrism but of anthropocentrism. De Castro refers to a “Great Divide, the same gesture of exclusion that made the human species the biological analogue of the anthropological West, confusing all the other species and peoples in a common, privative alterity” (44). Then, arguing that descriptions of difference are always inevitably narcissistic exercises in hierarchical solipsism, he continues: “asking what distinguishes us from the others—and it makes little difference who ‘they’ are, since what really matters in that case is only ‘us’—is already a response” (*ibid.*) He later proclaims: “Every Great Divider is a mononaturalist” (63). Finally, invoking an uncited Heidegger who stands in for Western metaphysics as such, he writes,

The burden of man is to be the universal animal, he for whom there exists a universe, while nonhumans, as we know (but how in the devil do we know it?), are just ‘poor in world’ . . . As for non-Occidental humans, something quietly leads us to suspect that where the world is concerned, they end up reduced to its smallest part. We and we alone, the Europeans, would be the realized humans, or, if you prefer, the grandiosely unrealized: the millionaires, accumulators, and configurers of worlds. Western metaphysics is truly the *fons et origio* of every colonialism (*ibid.*).

Thus having identified and decried the enemy, De Castro is poised to delve into the project itself: rescuing anthropology from “mere death by asphyxia” (48) via the antidote of Amerindian perspectivism. To determine the success of this endeavor, let us first recount what it means.

Perspectivism and Multinaturalism

De Castro defines the kind of thought that allegedly characterizes Amerindian cultures as follows:

As various ethnographers have noted (unfortunately too often only in passing), virtually all peoples of the New World share a conception of the world as composed of a multiplicity of points of view. Every existent is a center of intentionality apprehending other existents according to their respective characteristics and powers (55).

This, then, is “Amerindian perspectivism.” On the basis of “perspectivism” emerges “multinaturalism”:

The new order of this other conceptual map led us to suggest that the term “multinaturalism” could be used to designate one of the most distinctive traits of Amerindian thought, which emerges upon its juxtaposition with modern, multiculturalist cosmologies: where the

latter rest on the mutual implication between the unicity of nature and the multiplicity of cultures—the first being guaranteed by the objective universality of bodies and substance, and the second engendered by the subjective particularity of minds and signifiers . . .—the Amerindian conception presupposes, on the contrary, a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies. “Culture” or subject as the form of the universal, and “nature” or object as the particular (56).

For de Castro, perspectivism suggests a fertile approach to world in which consciousness, rather than materiality (or “virtuality” as opposed to “extension,” to invoke the Deleuzian terms he employs throughout his analysis), emerges as the foundational ground of reality. It is for this reason that the “epistemological debt” toward Amerindian societies that he proposes is not only a form of atonement but, allegedly, an advance in understanding how human beings make meaning in the world. Importantly, de Castro notes that taking consciousness as primary upends the binary of relativism and universalism within which so many Western philosophical debates appear mired:

The presuppositions and consequences of this idea are nevertheless irreducible to the current concept of relativism that they would, at first glance, seem to evoke. They are in fact, instead arranged on a plane orthogonal to the opposition between relativism and universalism. Such resistance on the part of Amerindian

perspectivism to the terms of our epistemological debates casts suspicion on the transposability of the ontological partitions nourishing them (55).

Despite these seemingly promising attributes, however, a theoretical reliance on perspectivism and multinaturalism by a social scientist gives rise to numerous fatal problems. The first place these problems become evident is in de Castro's introduction to perspectivism via a narrative recounted by that other notable anthropologist of the Amazon, Claude Lévi-Strauss:

In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards sent out investigating commissions to ascertain whether or not the natives had a soul, the latter were engaged in a drowning of white prisoners in order to verify, through prolonged watching, whether or not their corpses were subject to putrefaction (quote p. 50).

This story, combined with de Castro's own fieldwork, led him to his foundational insight about Western and Amerindian cosmologies: while for Europeans, nature and body were assumed to be universal categories and soul was something parochial and specific, for Amerindians, soul was the universal category, while the nature of bodies was presumed to be highly variable.

Yet these are reductive characterizations of both cosmologies. For one thing, in many cultures de Castro would likely consider “Western,” the relationship between body and soul cannot be reduced to this hierarchical binary. Belief in the undecomposing nature of the bodies of saints, for instance, has been historically widespread among European Christians of both Roman Catholic and Orthodox persuasions. Conversely, as de Castro himself notes, the Taino Indians from Lévi-Strauss’s story had greeted visiting Europeans as divinities—their expectation that this should have had some implications for their bodily nature can thus easily be understood even by many “Western” natives. Moreover, finding themselves in the position of holding putative divinities as captive prisoners must have represented a jarring cognitive dissonance for these peoples—giving rise to a felt imperative to determine *what*, exactly, these Europeans were.

What the story from the Greater Antilles does indicate is that the relationship between alleged divinity (or the realm of “souls”) and materiality is experienced as deeply ambiguous by peoples across the world, and whatever settled notions are held about such a relationship are thrown into profound contestation under conditions of ongoing encounter with difference. In response, people whose worlds are being called into question often test their underlying assumptions using methods that aim at truthful understanding of the phenomena in question, whether juridical or scientific (and the former have often historically midwived the latter). In this way, world is reconstituted for the peoples in question through more or less rigorous engagement with procedural truth, though the procedures in question may be quite different. Thus it is correct to describe the Taino and the Spanish—as well

as University-trained anthropologists—as beginning from different worlds, seeking to make sense of each other’s bodies, minds, and worlds by placing their local presuppositions in dialogue with empirical testing procedures in which results have not been determined in advance. The extent to which these results reciprocally reshape the worlds from which the experimenting subjects have begun varies, but nevertheless engenders profound and lasting change. Once an assumption has been fundamentally called into question, there can be no unproblematic return to its self-evidence—despite occasionally vociferous insistences to the contrary. *All* experience contributes to the subjective sedimentation from which world is constituted.

Another problem with de Castro’s account is that it stops at the moment of encounter, freezing and reifying the worlds in question (European and “New”), which he then juxtaposes in a “split” Manichean description of both. On the one hand, Western modernity is characterized exclusively by “objectivism,” in which “To know is . . . to desubjectify, to render explicit the part of the subject present in the object in order to reduce it to an ideal minimum . . . Our [the West’s] epistemological game, then, is objectification; what has not been objectified simply remains abstract or unreal” (60). On the other, he characterizes Amerindian thought (of which shamanism is the apotheosis) as having little interest in the objective: “Amerindian shamanism is guided by the inverse ideal: to know is to ‘personify,’ to take the point of view of what should be known or, rather, *the one* whom should be known” (*ibid.*).

While de Castro obliquely recognizes that shamanic subjectivization has parallels in the Western phenomenological tradition (61), he dismisses the phenomenological inflection of this process as “*modern*”—and therefore presumably fatally inadequate to account for the ways Amerindians think. Yet this dismissal is too fast and convenient. If there is, in fact, an instance of Western modern thought which privileges subjectivity, why is it irrelevant to the people under study in *Cannibal Metaphysics*? And how would the complexity introduced by the existence of such a tradition into the “Western” “objectivist” epistemology decried by de Castro alter his argument?

Finally, it is one thing to claim that Amerindian metaphysics proceeds according to a logic that is dominated by personification in relational context; it is quite another to imply that objectivity appears to be of little significance to Amerindian peoples. De Castro characterizes the purpose of shamanism as follows: “the good shamanic interpretation succeeds in seeing each event as being, in truth, an *action*, an expression of intentional states or predicates of an agent” (61; italics in original). This is essentially no different from Evans-Pritchard’s observations about Azande witchcraft nearly a century ago, in which he demonstrated that what is salient to the Azande is not *that* an event has occurred, but that it occurred *to that particular person at that particular moment* (Evans-Pritchard 1937). In both contexts, shamanic divination is an attempt to establish the (social) truth: who did what to whom and why. A shaman who was revealed to have simply fabricated a story, especially if that story was calculated to result in some social advantage for himself or for a confederate, would likely be in a great deal of trouble—or at the

very least, entrench already-existing social divisions and potentially result in the activation of rival shamans. That divinatory truth is held to be objective (at least aspirationally) is evident in the public nature of many divinatory rituals, particularly when they involve an issue of justice in the community (Evans-Pritchard 1937, Lewis 1979). The presence of witnesses is a social insurance against manufacture, slight of hand, and post-hoc misrepresentation—*even in social contexts in which shamanic slights-of-hand are widely known* (Lévi-Strauss 1967). In fact, the truth is so important to indigenous peoples that the responsibility of carrying it is often displaced from living humans onto some external agency for which the shaman is expected to make himself a vessel (whether that is a god, spirit, animal, or something else)—and his work may be subject to corroboration by other shamans. All of this testifies to the social salience of objective truth. Without a robust sense of objectivity, human social life could not cohere.

Although de Castro concedes (in a perhaps unintentionally patronizing fashion) that “the Indians are perfectly capable of adopting ‘physical’ and ‘functional’ attitudes” (61), *he doesn’t seem to recognize in them any interest in truth*. This is the problem at the root of his misinterpretation of both the story from the Greater Antilles, cited above, as well as of knowledge practices within the cultural formations he essentializes as “Western” and “Amerindian.” Indeed, the inability to recognize when other people are solving for truth because the methods they use to arrive at truth are so different from our own appears endemic to anthropology. This is, in part, a legacy of the rejection of James George Frazer’s periodization of magic and religion as “prescientific” truth discourses which have now been essentially

superseded (Frazer 2009 [1890]). For de Castro, wading into the matter of truth would likely have brought him far too close to a project he would characterize as imperialist universalism—precisely the opposite of what he sets out to do. Indeed, he writes that anthropology *cannot be concerned with truth*:

But those problems that are truly anthropological are posed neither in the psychological terms of belief nor the logical terms of truth; alien thought should be taken neither for an opinion, which is the only possible object of belief or disbelief, nor as a group of propositions, the equivalent for judgments about truth. We are quite familiar with the damage anthropology does by conceiving indigenous people's relation to their discourse in terms of belief—culture becomes, in that event, a species of theological dogmatism—and by treating it as an opinion or a body of propositions, which makes it the object of an epistemic teratology obsessed with error, madness, illusion, and ideology (194–195).

Yet this, I contend, is disingenuous. De Castro came to the Amazon as an anthropologist seeking to truthfully describe the functioning of human subjectivity (at the very least, “concepts”) within a particular society, in a context very foreign from the one to which he himself was native, *for the express purpose of building a universal human understanding of culture and social life*. While he defines anthropology not as a science but as “experimental metaphysics or field

geophilosophy” (92), he nevertheless *is in* that field as a theoretician with the financial and positional backing of global academic institutions interested in what his project may contribute to social science writ large. He himself seems to momentarily become aware of the stakes involved in these material conditions and the project presupposed by them when he writes,

The analogy drawn here between indigenous concepts and the objects of the natural sciences is not only possible, but even necessary: we should be capable of producing a scientific description of indigenous practices as though they were objects in the world, or, even better, so that they could be objects of the world (191).

In this excerpt, objectivity and (shared) world both suddenly—strikingly—make an unironic appearance. Which leads us to the crux of the issue: *the Amerindians de Castro studies are not implicated in the same way as he is, nor is the motivation behind their metaphysics the same as his*. Although de Castro bestows upon their metaphysics (or “cosmophilosophy”) the honorific of “theory” in an attempt to magnanimously posit, by fiat, that the native is an interlocutor on his terms, this does not change the fact that the Amerindians are not structurally obligated to give an account for their metaphysics to outsider others on terms that can be folded into a theoretical scaffolding that is broader than the metaphysics itself. In short, *Amerindian thought does not aspire to a scientific account of human culture or subjectivity*—which, I contend, must be the purpose for the anthropologist’s

presence in the field if his work is to amount to anything more than speculative observation at best or disingenuous frivolity at worst.

Without the ability to be honest about what he himself was doing in the field, de Castro's account of what was going on there cannot hold. His inability to recognize when and how the Amerindians seek after truth becomes a blindness to situations in which they, like people in all societies, may practice untruth or a lack of concern for truth: he evinces what seems to be a kind of naïve credulity with regard to Amerindian metaphysics, presenting it as a seamless, coherent whole in which inconsistencies, deceptions, self-interest and contestation appear absent or irrelevant. The possibility that informants could be lying to him or to each other or making things up, or in short presenting positionally-interested or deeply individually meaningful stories about the cosmos, seems never to occur to him. In short, while politics is the foundation and distillation of de Castro's own thinking—and the thinking of much of the humanistic and social scientific academy which constitutes his own "native" tribe—*there is no Amerindian politics in his account*. As such, the theoretical exchange occurring between him and his informants does not occur with the symmetry that his positing of an equivalence implies. The Amerindian "theorist" never comes to understand the discourse of de Castro's native world on its own terms, never has her own world thrown into sharp question as a result, and does not evolve her thinking over time. Neither does she become an authority on de Castro's cultural forms, nor a political subject. She does not even appear.

But not only do the Amerindians not change in de Castro's account—neither do their concepts. There is no description of what happens to Amerindian concepts or the stories that contain them when the things themselves—in that pesky shared world—refuse to conform to the logics within which they are locally embedded. As a result, the stories, rather than being understood as malleable cultural materials employed organically by people over time, are presented as static, immune to being punctured or disrupted—other than by the ill will of menacing Western colonial forces. The only place the concepts come alive is within the theoretical world of the Western academy, where they are objects with which theorists play in order to get to the next interesting idea.

De Castro seems to realize that this focus on concepts while neglecting the people who give rise to them could present numerous problems. To that end he writes,

This book began with the declaration that anthropological theories are in strict continuity with the intellectual pragmatics of the collectives such theories take as their object. The experiment proposed here thus begins by affirming the equivalence, in principle, of anthropological and indigenous discourse, with the same going for their “reciprocal presupposition” of each other, which accede as such to existence only by entering into relation with knowledge. Anthropological concepts actualize this relation, which is why they are entirely relational—but more in their expression than in their

content. They are not, per the cognitivist dream, veridical reflections of indigenous culture; nor are they illusory projections of the culture of the anthropologist, as per the constructionist nightmare. What these concepts reflect is a certain relation of intelligibility between two cultures, and what they project is two cultures as their specific presuppositions. In this, they are doubly uprooting: they are like vectors that always point toward the other side, transcontextual interfaces whose function is to represent, in the diplomatic sense of the term, the Other at the core of the Same . . . here as much as there (189–190).

Yet here he seems to fall into both the “narcissistic” trap of self-referentiality that he had vowed to overcome at the beginning of the book as well as a disavowal of any material impact that the production of knowledge about and as a result of Amerindians could have. Thus, *Anti-Narcissus* is not only, in a final analysis, a book about structural and poststructural anthropology, but one that disavows any relationship with actually obtaining world in favor of the endless play of never-to-be-actualized ideas:

Keeping the values of the Other implicit does not mean celebrating whatever transcendent mystery it supposedly keeps enclosed in itself. It consists in refusing to actualize the possibilities expressed by indigenous thought, making a decision to maintain them, infinitely, as

possibles—neither derealizing them as fantasies of the other nor fantasizing that they are actual for us. The anthropological experiment, in that event, depends on the formal internalization of those specific and artificial conditions Deleuze spoke of: the moment the world of the other is no longer thought to exist outside its expression, it transforms into an eternal condition, which is to say one internal to the anthropological relation, which *realizes* the possible *qua virtual*. If there is something that *de jure* belongs to anthropology, it is not the task of explaining the world of the other but that of multiplying our world “populating it with all these expresseds that do not exist outside their expressions.” For we cannot think *like* Indians; at most, we can think *with* them. And on this point, (to attempt, but of course just for a moment, to think “like them”), it should be said that if there is a clear message in Amerindian perspectivism, it is that one should never try to actualize the world that is expressed in the gaze of the other (196; italics in original).

Yet there is no “thinking with Indians” in *Cannibal Metaphysics*—as I have said above. Thus, the “anthropology of the concept” seems to become anthropology without the *anthropos*—unless that *anthropos* is one of the theorists writing in the structuralist and poststructuralist tradition: Deleuze, Guattari, Wagner, Strathern, Lévi-Strauss. Which is fine—but this is a quite different project from the grandiose declarations made throughout the book. Amerindian thought is not made equivalent

to anthropological theory; rather, some of its concepts become provocative objects with which anthropologists may think.

Multiplicity and Becoming

Re-centering the book's thesis on the structuralist and poststructuralist lineage would have been more intellectually honest, but here another problem arises: de Castro has de-emphasized lineage for allegedly reflecting a "hierarchical," "tree-like" theoretical frame which must now be fundamentally rethought on the basis of the "lateral" structure of affinity represented best by the Deleuzian rhizome (109–111). After declaring that "certain parts of the classic theory [of filiation] can be recycled," he explains that

It is . . . a matter of imagining the possible contours of a rhizomatic conception of kinship capable of extracting all the consequences of the premise that "persons have relations integral to them" (Strathern 1992b: 101). If the theory of filiation groups had for its archetype the ideas of substance and identity (the group as metaphysical individual) and the theory of marriage alliance's was opposition and integration (society as dialectical totality), the perspective offered here draws some elements for a theory of kinship qua difference and multiplicity from Deleuze and Guattari—of relation as disjunctive inclusion (124).

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "multiplicity" (of which the rhizome is an image) becomes a master concept for de Castro, who believes it (again) allows him to reject the narcissistic trap of self-referentiality as well as the allegedly limiting "Euclidean" concepts of "unity" and "essence" (with their corresponding notions of units and aggregates, individuals and collectives):

A multiplicity is different from an essence. The dimensions composing it are neither constitutive properties nor criteria for classificatory inclusion. A chief component of the concept of multiplicity is, on the contrary, the notion of individuation as non-taxonomical differentiation; the process of the actualization of a virtual different from the realization of the possible through limitation and refractory to the typological categories of similitude, opposition, analogy, and identity. Multiplicity is the mode of existence of pure intensive difference—"irreducible inequality that forms the condition of the world (Deleuze 1994: 222) (109).

De Castro continues, "Wagner's fractal person, Strathern's partial connections, Callon and Latour's socio-technical networks are some well-known anthropological examples of flat multiplicities" (111). But this line of thinking seems to presume that hierarchies and multiplicities are somehow at odds—that the anthropologist may talk about one or the other, but not both. Of course this is untrue—networks and "partial connections" are imbued with all sorts of hierarchical relations. Neither is

the problem of the unicity of any given multiplicity satisfactorily addressed—that is, the conditions that allow us to talk about any given multiplicity as *a* multiplicity in the first place. De Castro writes,

To compare multiplicities—which are systems of comparisons in and by themselves—is to determine their characteristic mode of divergence, their internal and external difference; here, comparative analysis amounts to separative synthesis. Where multiplicities are concerned, there are not relations that vary but variations that relate: differences that differ (114).

Any phenomenon can be described as a series of “variations that relate” it to a broader category of which it is a part—in fact, it is the very process of imaginative variation that Edmund Husserl delineated as the method by which the *eidos* of a thing may be determined. De Castro’s account thus does not meaningfully separate a multiplicity from a unity, despite avowals to the contrary. Neither does his contention that unities are oppressive or theoretically limiting hold under any kind of rigorous scrutiny. Rhizomes, for example, can be described in Euclidian terms. In fact, de Castro’s inability to rigorously think through the concept of essence or *eidos* leads to all sorts of reifications, as in the cases of “Western” and “Amerindian” metaphysics noted above.

Moreover, the idea that a rhizome—which in many cases is merely an inverse (that is, underground) image of a tree—is somehow essentially non-hierarchical is

nowhere substantiated. But for de Castro, this is a theological project. He cites Deleuze: “We believe only in totalities that are lateral” (111, footnote 67). What is this “belief” that has been smuggled in here after all the disavowals of it as an analytical category? The answer is that belief becomes a necessary condition for excluding the problems that empirical hierarchies and change over time pose to the “anthropology of concepts” envisioned by de Castro as a kind of timeless virtual world in which an idealized series of infinite lateral differences can be preserved *ad infinitum*: “Intensive difference, difference of perspective, difference of differences” (115).

Indeed, for de Castro, the structure of difference itself seems to be all that remains of structuralism in the final analysis:

A structuralism without structures? At least a structuralism animated by another notion of structure much closer to a rhizome than the kind of structure *A Thousand Plateaus* opposes to it—a notion, in truth, that had always been present in Lévi-Strauss’ work. Or perhaps we should say that there are two different ways Lévi-Strauss employs the concept of structure: as a principle, on the one hand, of transcendental unification or formal law of invariance, and as an operator of divergence and modulator of continuous variation (of the variation of variation), on the other. In other words, structure both as a closed grammatical combinatory and as an open differential multiplicity (206).

This theoretical frame seems to strand the Indian in a place of radical alterity, which can never be overcome through anything like mutual rapprochement, but only “transformed” into the concepts of the anthropologist:

The disturbing final message of [Lévi-Strauss'] *The Story of Lynx* is that the other of the others is also Other: that there is space for a ‘we’ only if it is already determined by alterity. And if there is a more general conclusion to be drawn, it is that anthropology has access to no other possible position except a ‘coplaneness’ of principles with savage thought, a plane of immanence that it would hold in common with its object. In defining the *Mythologiques* as the myth of mythology and anthropological knowledge as a transformation of indigenous praxis, Lévi-Strauss’ anthropology projects a philosophy to come: *Anti-Narcissus* (216).

Indeed, the problem of qualitative change is displaced by de Castro under the rubrics of mythic transformation, translation, and the Deleuzian term “becoming.” In mythic transformation, de Castro sees an alogical, non-classificatory process that always preserves the structure of difference which he considers essential to any multiplicity: “I was aiming, well beyond sacrificial metonymies, for an ‘other’ of classificatory reason, or, more precisely, a noncombinatory or alogical interpretation of the central notion of structuralism—transformation” (83).

Translation becomes a special instance of this—a transformation of one expression into another without, supposedly, any mediating idiom: “If myth is translation, this is because *it is above all not representation*; for a translation is not a representation but a *transformation* (205; italics in original). And then, finally, “becoming:”

If serial resemblances are imaginary and structural correlations symbolic, becomings are real. Neither metaphor nor metamorphosis, a becoming is a movement that deterritorializes the two terms of the relation it creates, by extracting them from the relations defining them in order to link them via a new “partial connection.” In this sense, the verb to become designates neither a predicative operation nor a transitive action: being implicated in a becoming-jaguar is not the same thing as becoming a jaguar. The “totemic” jaguar, whereby a man is “sacrificially” transformed, is imaginary, but the transformation itself is real. It is the becoming itself that is feline; in a becoming-jaguar, the “jaguar” is an immanent aspect of the action and not its transcendent object, for becoming is an intransitive verb. From the moment a human becomes jaguar, the jaguar is no longer there (which is why we appealed to the formula “human/jaguar” above to designate the specific disjunctive multiplicity of becoming) (160–161).

This “becoming,” this “transformation,” is “the other side of the mirror of production: the inverse of identity. An identity ‘with the opponent.’ Or opposite, to recall the Tupinamba word for enemy” (162). It is a form of alliance that is “anti-filiative” (166), and because major writers in the structuralist tradition have theorized filiative alliance as a form of exchange, it is therefore non-exchangeist as well (*ibid.*) These characteristics grant this newly-theorized form of alliance “certain savage and obscure powers—as if it had been contaminated by the other, ‘demonic alliance’” (166). In sum, becoming is, for de Castro, a non-procreative alliance with an other who is always already an enemy and (structural) opposite. It is a specific form of affiliation in which an “other” is made internal to the self *in order to constitute that self*.

This is, of course, the precise thesis de Castro began the book claiming to have overcome: that the anthropologist’s interest in Others is only ever an interest in himself. Nevertheless, his field data seem to lead him back to it, in that it appears to characterize the relationships Amerindian tribes have with their own Others, who are usually enemies. This is the titular “cannibal metaphysics”: “if it is always necessary to imagine an enemy—[but is it? – N.S.] to construct the other as such—the objective is to *really* eat it . . . in order to construct the Self as other” (149; italics in original). Cannibalistic societies, per structuralist tradition, construct themselves by ingesting their enemies. (Would such a standard render de Castro and his colleagues epistemological cannibals?)

Yet these transformations—which are really becomings-self by becoming-other—seem to leave the structures of difference in place. In that sense, de Castro

aptly characterizes becoming as “that instantaneous movement-in-place” (211).

The conditions of the lifeworld appear never to change, and no change in self that is not other-appropriation appears possible. Yet this becoming is valorized as, purportedly, a great theoretical and pragmatic opening. The book ends on the necessity of continuously becoming-other:

The problem, in the last analysis, is that of constructing a non-contractualist, nondialectic concept of exchange that would make it neither a rational interest nor an *a priori* synthesis of the gift—not an unconscious teleology, work of meaning, inclusive *fitness*, desire of the desire of the other, conflict, or contract, but rather a becoming-other. Alliance is the becoming-other proper to kinship (218; italics in original).

This new understanding of kinship extends indefinitely, fractally, into a future seemingly without any logics of trajectory: “Exchange, then, as the infinite circulation of perspectives—exchange of exchange, metamorphosis of metamorphosis, perspective on perspective: again, becoming” (218–219). An endless, atemporal drift, the exchange of energy and identity in a “virtual” conceptual realm, is what we are left with at the end of *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

Conclusion

De Castro's project magnifies the encounter between "the West" and "the New World" into a metaphysics of irreconcilable epistemes which must be heroically spliced by the politically-savvy anthropologist. There is no account, however, for the overlaps and points of convergence that characterize the encounters between these peoples over time as intersubjective—that is, available to multiple subjects and exceeding any regime of conceptual control (Duranti 2010). In short, there is no account for what the Taino and the Spanish were *doing* in the Greater Antilles: seeking a truthful understanding about *what* the other is, using methods derived from their habitual subjective practices of categorization but also functioning from the awareness, conscious or not, of their having been relativized. This encounter and resulting relativization is only possible if there is a world that is shared, however parochially it is encountered.

Having rejected world as a mediating category, however, de Castro attempts to hold together the West and Amerindian society through the idiom of moral and political "conceptual debt." In this he attempts operationalize the perspectivist logic he has described, in which a relation of (colonial) predation is transformed into a relation of (epistemological) kinship. However, this unilateral "kin-making" on de Castro's part is a violent act in which the Amerindian is not present. "Now for the native's turn!" he emphatically declares (88), but nowhere in the book does a "native" in fact appear or speak. Along these lines, even the definition of the theological structure of debt lacks a single Amerindian perspective: no explanation is given for why the debt must be epistemological rather than, for instance, material, or how Amazonians themselves might envision the debt—if even they understand

their relationship with Europeans, Euro-Americans, and scientists in terms of debt at all.

In short, this purportedly radical “decolonization of thought” is in fact an ideology of mummified and expertly ministered difference, articulated from a prestigious position within the European academy, in which any notion of commons, including a potentially shared project of scientific knowledge production, has been sacrificed on the altar of fascination with theoretical intricacies intrinsic to the poststructuralist anthroposophical tradition. Because anthropology, as well as science, are for de Castro, simply different metaphysics on the same “plane” as Amerindian mythology,ⁱ he creates false equivalencies between what he is doing and what his interlocutors in the field are doing, and as a result misrecognizes the searches for truth, the political positioning and deceptions, and the change over time that characterize life for both Western and Amerindian peoples.

Ultimately, therefore, de Castro’s project is insolvent: the “epistemological debt” he claims he is beginning to pay in *Cannibal Metaphysics* is never actually paid because doing so is impossible. De Castro would never seriously make the claim that jaguars are human because their souls (to whose intentions he has mystical noetic access) consider themselves human, or posit essential differences *in body* between one group of human beings and another because he relates differently to each. Neither can his account of either “Amerindian” or “Western” metaphysics be called properly “perspectivist”—there are no “blood is beer for jaguars” equivalencies (other than the false equivalency, as described above, of the Amerindian mythologist with the anthropologist), only mutually annihilating essentialisms.

By contrast, a scientific account of exchange, production, and kinship in the Amerindian context has merit as data for a more detailed understanding of structures of human relatedness with other humans as well as with the nonhuman environment. De Castro adopts the institutional trappings of such an approach, but then evades its implications out of a misguided fear of science as epistemic practice. In one fleeting moment, however, he recognizes the possibility that an anthropological science based on a shared, objective world could be broadly beneficial, but he does not think through its implications other than possibly as a remedy for anthropological insecurity vis-à-vis the “hard sciences” (190). It bears repeating, however, that the structural necessity of regional ontologies as an inevitable outgrowth of the indeterminate trajectories of human collectivities removed from each other at various degrees of distance does not preclude at all an anthropology whose purpose is to build a universal human understanding of culture and social life. This review was written because the alternative, which has been gaining extraordinary appeal within the discipline, is a-trajective—it leads to listing, without compass, in a morass of virtual exchanges, without building anything that can be conferred and refined as knowledge over time.

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ⁱ "Moreover, there are certain internal, nonphilosophical reasons that provided me the impetus to speak of the concept. The first stems from my decision to put indigenous ideas on the same plane as anthropological ideas" (189).