

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## **In the Gilded Realm of Ideas**

**Review by George Mentore**

*Cannibal Metaphysics*

by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Univocal Publishing, 2014

We live in the normative realm of ideas. For those who have mastered the specialized craft of gilding ordinary thoughts, the luster of the regime thinly empowers. It perhaps even additionally offers some form of pleasure from the aesthetics of the high status it confers. But to those for whom its vermeil or ormolu provides no promise of power or granted joy, such mastered ideas either do not exist or they press down hard with constrictive tyranny. In our gilded realm of the anthropological, *Cannibal Metaphysics* exemplifies the glittering mastery of modernist thought. But, if I might be permitted to add, it also presents to those who live, in the now, beneath the gold-leafed forests of indigenous Amazonia, yet another example of a completely unrecognizable dominion of thought.

I have long been gratified by the contributions of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro to our small parish of Amazonian scholarship. His intellectual successes beyond our select community have truly brought us great joy. Yet because they initially hail from our own municipality of specialists, his works tend to be read by us with a somewhat different appreciation. Informed by our shared ethnographic experiences, we read with far more preemptive suppositions. We have traveled the same Lévi-Straussian pathways from Boas and Durkheim. We have depended upon the legacy of the spilt between self and other which calls into play the moral base of society and its dominate principle of exchange. And we too, in our own interpretations of Amerindian socialities, have similarly encountered the ubiquity of the predatory feline. Hence many of us have not been surprised by the content of *Cannibal Metaphysics*, not because it repeats earlier works in a more expansive rendering, but rather because it familiarly advocates the disputed primacy of at least one side of Amerindian thought long considered

foundational to an understanding of indigenous sociality. In this work, affinity as predation stands triumphant over all metaphors of uterine conviviality. Nonetheless, the clear success of the theory of Amerindian perspectivism has been its broad appeal to the wider non-Amazonian anthropological community.

Of course *Cannibal Metaphysics* contains many other worthy ideas and intriguing interrogations beyond that of indigenous perspectivism, each deserving of equal mention. In so brief a commentary as mine, it would be impossible to do them any justice. The depth and breathe of the scholarship simply defeats any frail attempt at review. I would, however, like to draw your attention to one obvious consistent theme which I consider to be the principle explanation for the broader appeal of the work. Throughout the entire argument there is an overall – and for us trained intellectuals – satisfying privileging of thought itself: a lavished gilding of ideas into concepts.

A rigor of rationalist thought moves elegantly throughout *Cannibal Metaphysics*. It deploys its own intellectual operators as it describes those of Amerindian thought. It uses its own algorithms of thinking to break the intellectual codes of the other. The rigor of procedure depends completely upon binary units, the use of relationality, the process of comparison, and the feature of transformation. The added ingenuity to this familiar (and thus unthreatening thoroughness of) thought appears to be the creative use of inversion whenever the predictability of thinking leads one in a particular direction. This strategy of inversion can only logically function and be seemingly innovative within the confines of our legacy of dualistic thinking. The binary forces we modernists invent for ourselves serve not only to make the world meaningful, but also to provide us with our sense of superiority within it. Our ontological existence appears predicated upon the warring oppositions we create for ourselves and, it seems, carryover to indigenous alterity through our comparisons. There is no negative judgment here on my part to these skillful moves. Indeed they exhibit the artistry of the Euro-American deployment of modernist thinking. For as *Cannibal Metaphysics* constantly reminds us, we too have culture. In this regard, one could argue, we scholars make claim not so much to the pomposity of being divine, but quite simply to being human as well.

But, of course, there are all kinds of humans, even in our modern rationalist domain. There are those who have to fit into the objectified categories prescribed for them, and there are those who conjure up the categories for others to fit into. There are those whose thoughts manifest in the magnificent products shaping our current world and, as such, function as recognizable achievements of empowerment, even as pleasing aesthetics furthering ideas about self superiority. Yet there are those who must learn to live under the tyranny of these others' materialized thoughts, in other words, within an alien aesthetic. In all such epistemological effects – so reminiscent of the modern power of

governmentality which not only reflects the sensibilities of the elite, but also the positive exercise of power by subordinates – the tradition of anthropology follows suit.

In the training and practice of our specialist thoughts and the epistemological foundations we have inherited, we are as much the handmaidens of political power as any other agents and institutions of the modern state. Like other forms of Euro-American modernity, anthropology appears to be just as equally driven by desires for a world where unpredictable contingencies must be anticipated and where our knowledge serves to protect us, if not from the anxieties of being exposed to the unknown or unknowable, then at least from the presumed chaos that will descend upon us if our ordered intellectual procedures do not triumph.

The individual humans for whom anthropological thought continues to construct social categories have little if any access to its scholarly regimes. The algorithms of thinking we invent for them and into which we place them (even when sympathetically compared to our own and given the new status of a “reverse anthropology”), remain to them a foreign land. With perspectivism (as with Structuralism and all the other theories we have invented for ourselves, even in the act of problematizing thought as an experiment of the *Anti-Narcissus*), the effort to reach Amerindian worlds by way of their thoughts remains an attempt to discover an absence we alone perceive: to presence, if you like, presumed hidden worlds.

This very attempt to deploy the metaphors of discovery seems to be but yet another anxious move of a discipline seeking to protect the vulnerable subjectivities of its own practitioners. Knowing as it does that it has no way to traverse the interval between self and other but by that of thought itself, anthropology shields its practicing subjectivities both from the impossibility of ever obtaining the means to being the reality of the lives lived by those it seeks to represent, as well as from any of the consequences of exposure to those lives.

The very questions such thinking raises for itself and for which it seeks to address secrete within the folds of its own thought. Its binary procedures encode then decode that which it encrypted in the first place merely to claim discovery of the answers produced by its very own definitive questions. Provocatively, one question stands out most prominently in *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

Beguiled by its own luster, *Cannibal Metaphysics* addresses many questions crafted by us and for us, already knowing beforehand the possible range of answers available. Poignant, therefore, that it should interrogate the one issue most haunting academic anthropology in current times – the very fact of its own relevance. But through the intellectual move of an inversion, it places the burden of response not upon western rational knowledge but on Amerindian epistemology.

The same question *Cannibal Metaphysics* raises about Amerindian epistemology it does also of anthropology: how to take indigenous thought seriously. Yet despite the best of intentions, this privileged glittering of thought that is about thought, has the unfortunate effect of subordinating indigenous thinking to its own. However unintentionally, in the gilded realm of ideas, the master thinker reigns supreme. It is, nonetheless, a virtual sovereignty. It is after all mostly about thinking about thought and not about lived experiences. Clearly it is not indigenous thought which we should be seeking to take seriously but rather that which makes the indigenous obviously human. The manifest humanity of indigenous others has less to do with how and what they think and more to do with how and what they experience. Even without having to betray its treasured rationalist legacies and its warlike metaphors of opposition, conflict, and conquest, an anthropology that opens its thinking to the embodied lived realities of others still can and should regain its very own relevance.

*George Mentore* teaches anthropology at the University of Virginia. He has published variously on topics ranging from aesthetics, abandonment, compassion, madness, silence, and shamanic breath. He specializes in the ethnography of indigenous Amazonia and is currently working on theories of Amerindian subjectivity, empathy, and the anthropology of cruelty.



© 2015 George Mentore