Re-opening the field and epistemic justice: An anthropophagic framing of Robert Cooper

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abstract

In this essay, we conduct an anthropophagic framing of Robert Cooper’s insights on social systems in order to illuminate issues of epistemic justice within the realm of Organization and Management Studies (OMS). By delving into Cooper’s previously unpublished works, first published in this issue of *ephemera*, namely ‘Notes on organizational kitsch’ and ‘On closed and open systems’, we read his work through a decolonial lens that aims at promoting epistemological justice. Anthropophagy, a conceptual practice rooted in Brazilian thought, embraces irreverent and radical hybridization as a means of deconstructing Western dominance in various fields (including academia). While Cooper’s insights touch upon the notion of closed social systems or what he terms ‘totalitarian kitsch’, which tend to perpetuate the status quo in academic disciplines, an anthropophagic reinterpretation prompts critical questioning of how these ideas intersect with promoting epistemic justice. First, through the lens of anthropophagy, OMS becomes an open system where the concept of Otherness assumes a pivotal role, both structurally and ethically. Second, the process of reclaiming the position and role of the Other involves dismantling restrictive Western cultural elements grounded in ‘fictional’ or ‘authoritative’ foundations (kitsch) that underpin closed systems. Lastly, the ongoing practice of ‘anthropophagy’ involving concepts, value systems, and cultural elements, regardless of their geographical origins or other privilege markers, becomes a necessary step in maintaining openness and an anti foundational spirit. In conclusion, this reading of Cooper illuminates pathways toward the creation of non oppressive knowledge systems that nurture fresh ideas capable of addressing unprecedented and persistent challenges in novel and unforeseen ways.
Introduction

Much of the relevance crisis experienced by Organization and Management Studies (OMS) today may be explained by the fact that it has become a sort of closed knowledge system that produces ‘more of the same’ or ‘self fulfilling prophecies’ (Aguinis et al., 2014; Empson, 2020; Hoffman, 2016; Marti and Gond, 2018; Nicolai, 2004). Such a process is fueled by epistemic injustice, as it is based on the systematic and the continuous exclusion of diverse forms of knowledge (Jammulamadaka et al., 2021; Mignolo, 2009, 2017; Quijano, 2000; Santos, 2014, 2019).

The concept of epistemic injustice posits that Western dominance has consistently marginalized different forms of knowledge and wisdom, with a particular focus on its impact on the Global South (Mignolo, 2017; Santos, 2014). This means that neglecting to acknowledge the diverse ways in which people around the world attribute meaning to their lives constitutes a form of epistemic injustice that impoverishes our understandings (Jammulamadaka et al., 2021; Santos, 2019). Epistemic justice advocates for restoration of global epistemological diversity, alternative frameworks for coexistence and solidarity, that challenge the prevailing ethos of individualism, exploitative and profit driven logics (Santos, 2014, 2019).

Furthermore, epistemic justice aligns with the understanding that knowledge and the creation of theories play a crucial role in shaping social reality (Felin and Foss, 2009; Silva et al., 2020) and in influencing managerial practices (Goshal, 2005; Noronha et al., 2022). This poses a significant issue, as it reveals a deficiency within the field of OMS in its ability to effectively engage with and adapt to new ideas and perspectives, thereby limiting our capacity to comprehend and address the unprecedented and pressing challenges in our world – particularly those that disproportionately impact marginalized and voiceless communities.

In OMS, the concept of anthropophagy has been addressed as a ‘Brazilian’ contribution to the postcolonial debate that often problematizes epistemic injustice (Islam, 2012; Wanderley and Bauer, 2020; Wood Jr. and Caldas, 1998). Anthropophagy, a cultural metaphor used in Brazil from the early twentieth century, serves as an analogy that highlights a crucial moment of
modern history: the encounter of the Modern European subject and Otherness. This analogy reframes the birth of the Modern European subject during the era of colonization. It illustrates how, at the very instant when the Other was employed to define this Modern Subject, it experienced an abrupt rupture, and in some cases, it was consumed (eaten) by the Other (de Andrade, 1978; Rolnik, 2021).

In this paper, our objective is to delve deeper into and expand upon this discussion from a decolonial (Brazilian) perspective. We aim to demonstrate how anthropophagy can be a way of understanding Robert Cooper’s poststructuralism in examining epistemic injustice and fostering alternatives. We term Cooper’s works as poststructuralist, even though some prefer to characterize his ideas as ‘poststructuralist inspired’ (Spoelstra, 2005: 106).

While it’s worth noting that Cooper himself never explicitly used the term ‘epistemic justice’ or mentioned postcolonial or decolonial perspectives, we will engage with his thoughts from this perspective. Our departure point will be the key insights presented in his unpublished works, ‘Notes on organizational kitsch’ (1986/2023a) and ‘On closed and open systems’ (1986/2023b), first published in this issue of *ephemera*. These works illuminate the author’s concerns regarding the establishment of ‘open’ knowledge making systems and his poststructural perspective on language and Otherness within the context of organizations.

We argue that some of Cooper’s insights align with the decolonial aspiration for epistemic justice. This alignment is evident in his engagement with ways that these systems shape knowledge and the often perverse ‘totalitarian kitsch’ that can result (Cooper, 1986/2023a). The notion of ‘kitsch’ has been approached within organization studies after Cooper (Kostera, 1997; Linstead, 2002). Although it was first used as a degrading construct referring to the production of ‘low’ or ‘popular’ cultural products (Kostera, 1997), it can be incorporated in the analysis of knowledge production systems because, according to Cooper, these have become a constrained process designed to produce ‘consumption goods’, or ‘comforting packages that give the illusion of providing neat, authoritative answers to questions of social understanding’ (2001: 322). We propose that a decolonial ‘anthrophagizing’ of these insights is a radical approach to Otherness and thus a way to debunk kitsch and its
pervasive effects in knowledge making systems, especially its unfitness to produce novelty and to embrace marginalized perspectives.

His piece on ‘On closed and open systems’ (Cooper, 1986/2023b) reinforces this point when he clarifies that closed systems are only capable of posing problems to which there are already implied answers. It explains, therefore, why so much of what we have been producing/reproducing within OMS can be characterized of ‘more of the same’ (Empson, 2020; Marti and Gond, 2018; Nicolai, 2004). Cooper always embraced and sought to understand boundaries and boundlessness (2001a). In conceiving this dimension as being beyond human grasp, he recognized its structuring function in our social worlds. He also signaled that attempts to label or occupy this space are therefore authoritarian acts or a deceiving pretense of knowledge within knowledge making systems. We think that combining Cooper’s insights and Brazilian anthropophagy shows us that ‘kitsch’ theories are unfit for human consumption, and how the ‘ethics’ implied by the alliance between the ‘nomad’ and the ‘cannibal’ not only challenges but dissolves kitsch, thus clearing ground for epistemic justice in OMS.

This paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we’ll review the ideas contained in ‘On closed and Open Systems’ (1986/2023b) that help shed light on important aspects of his poststructuralist perspective on organizations and social systems in general. We’ll then move on to analyze how ‘closed systems’, especially academic ones, may be considered a type of ‘kitsch’. In the third section, we’ll present the concept of anthropophagy, contextualize it within the decolonial approach, highlight its uniqueness within that framework and, summarize what approximates this concept from key ideas found in Cooper’s work. Finally, we’ll explore how an alliance between his insights and anthropophagy may help us open grounds for new ideas and knowledges within OMS.

**Open and closed systems: Cooper’s ontological and epistemological approach**

In this piece, investigating the concept of open and closed systems within the context of organizations, it becomes evident that Cooper is applying this same
rationale to profoundly challenge the ontological and epistemological assumptions that form the foundation of our comprehension of organizations and our own identities (Cooper 1986/2023b). For instance, within this paper, the author elucidates the interplay between ‘process’ and novelty on one hand, and ‘structure’ and conservatism on the other, operating at both ontological and later existential as well as epistemological levels.

At an epistemological level, the author addresses ‘Systems Theory’s’ incapacity to adequately capture the processual nature of organizations: ‘Systems Theory, as presently conceived, has, therefore, an inbuilt structural bias’ (Cooper, 1976: 1001). In a later work, Cooper proposes a way out of this structural bias imposed by ‘Systems Theory’: “System” thus loses its position of centrality in the theoretical analysis and becomes an adjunct to “boundary” and “difference” which are then seen as the true problematics of social action’ (Cooper, 1986c: 304).

It becomes clear that Cooper sees in ‘boundaries’ and ‘differences’ the key to understanding social reality. As he sees Otherness as being the structuring force behind all forms, he recognizes its primacy in the organization of the social world – the tangible and the immediate do not share this power (Cooper, 2016: 72). But how does one come to terms with or makes sense of this metalogical absence that organizes reality? In the context of Cooper’s work, the term ‘metalogical’ signifies a dimension beyond the conventional realms of logic and formal reasoning. It points to the recognition of an underlying order or structure that transcends traditional logical frameworks. This metalogical perspective challenges us to consider inherent complexity and invites us to explore uncharted territories of thought and existence that may not neatly fit into established epistemological paradigms.

Cooper’s emphasis on ‘boundaries’ and ‘differences’ as central to his approach can be seen as an attempt to grapple with this metalogical absence and understand the intricate, often non linear, nature of the forces that shape our understanding of the world. He poses the need to exercise an existential choice if we are to grasp the processual nature of organizations: ‘The existential choice for man lies in understanding himself and his institutions in terms of instrumental/expressive systems and in deciding which of these should characterize his social forms’ (2016: 1001). At this ontological level, it
is important to recognize that the ‘Other is a structure – not simply another person or thing – that characterizes social organization’ (Cooper, 2016: 67).

In other works, the author also approaches this ontological shift, taking readers to the borders of organization and social systems. He states that it is the only way one can grasp the phenomenon of how an organization is formed: at the boundary that separates what an organization is (form) from what an organization isn’t (yet): as difference differs and defers, it is postponed in time and, thus, never complete, finished, like social systems in general (Cooper, 1987: 398; Cooper, 1986/2023b: 40).

As ontology, the Other is that which includes disjunction and conjunction. It is like the rim of glass, which while separating inside from outside at the same time brings them together, or the edge of a coin, which separates as well as joins the obverse and the reverse. (Cooper, 2016: 58-59)

Given this ontological positioning, he also explains that the distinction between closed and open systems is a ‘convenient fiction’, as systems only exist in interaction between form (given, static, predictable systems) and what negates form (becoming, uncertainty, novelty) (Cooper, 1986/2023b: 41). The ‘convenient fiction’ of closed systems is our first cue towards understanding such systems as a form of ‘kitsch’, which we will explore in depth later.

Other authors have attempted to clarify this point and have added layers of complexity to the issue of grasping the Other and its structuring function, or the pure difference that shapes all forms and triggers imbalance and movement (change). For example, Berardi (2010) offers an insightful provocation surrounding this issue:

Difference, therefore, is not the non being of something, or what is opposed to the thing, negating it from the outside. Difference rather is in the heart of the thing, it is the same dynamic that permits definition and change. Definition and change, finally, are the same; if you want to define something you must tell me how it changes. And the thing does not change through opposition to something else, but through the intimate imbalance that causes everything to move. (Berardi, 2010: 65)

However, it might be that the binary approach stated in Cooper’s (1986/2023b) piece could lead us to a trap: the trap of understanding negativity in its vulgar or overly simplistic conception. This simplistic view
would lead us to the following conclusion: whatever force negates a phenomenon defines it. Hence, disorganization defines organization, non being defines being, and so on. This is probably the greatest danger faced by those who invoke and try to grasp ‘pure difference’ in a rigorous manner, as Cooper did. By rigorous manner we mean consistently approaching it without reducing this instance to ‘pure chaos’ that must be abolished because of its dissolutive/destructive power – which would be another simplistic view of difference. Cooper was far from adopting either of these simplistic views – although one who performs ‘kitsch reading’ (as suggested by Linstead, 2002: 661) could argue otherwise.

The two simplistic views need further clarification. The first view, which asserts that negation wholly defines a phenomenon, represents an extreme reductionism that fails to appreciate the intricate interplay and coexistence of contrasting elements within a concept or system. It overlooks the dialectical nature of reality, where opposing forces often complement and give meaning to each other. This simplistic view disregards the nuanced, multifaceted nature of existence. The second simplistic view, the reduction of ‘pure difference’ to ‘pure chaos’ to be eliminated, oversimplifies the complex role of difference in the construction of meaning and identity. It fails to recognize that difference, even when disruptive, can be a source of creativity and novelty, driving change in systems and ideas. This perspective risks suppressing the potential inherent in divergence and uniqueness.

In essence, the danger we must be keen to avoid when reading Cooper lays in the reduction of profound philosophical concepts to simplistic binaries that ignore the richness and complexity of the world and its intricate interplay of forces. His work aimed to transcend such reductive thinking and explore the deeper, often paradoxical, dimensions of existence and difference.

Challenging ‘kitsch’ in knowledge making systems such as OMS itself emerges as a difficult but crucial task. As Cooper clarified in his other unpublished piece, ‘kitsch’ theories are a common phenomenon in our field. We think that he offered us valuable insights into how such theories, like closed systems, become attractive: it is because they offer a ‘simple’, ‘ready for consumption’, ‘calming’ and ‘soothing’ anthropomorphic mirror. We’ll explore these insights in the next section.
Debunking kitsch in OMS: Clearing the ground for epistemic justice

Aside from Cooper, others have attempted to clarify the notion of ‘kitsch’ in OMS (Kostera, 1997; Linstead, 2002). It has been defined as a cultural artifact that contains a perverse attractiveness that raises a key philosophical aspect of modernity (Linstead, 2002). Its perversity lays on the artifact’s appeal which is rooted in its ability to entice and captivate, despite its harmfulness and unsettling implications. This ability can be explained because, due to its anthropomorphic ‘soothing and calming’ core (shaped by unity and simplicity), it becomes an object of narcissistic adoration (Cooper, 1986/2023a: 64-65).

The trickiest facet of kitsch for academics and for academic work (such as this one) is that our attempts to clarify and simplify an argument, making it more accessible to a broader audience and avoiding the label of being a ‘cryptic’ writer, can inadvertently lead us towards producing a piece of kitsch. It is a fine line to tread, as the risk of oversimplification looms. However, we are indeed fortunate to have had contributions from an author like Robert Cooper in our field. Surprisingly, despite his ability to convey complex ideas in a digestible manner and his commitment to clarity, Cooper never garnered widespread acceptance in mainstream Organization and Management Studies (OMS).

The lack of mainstream acceptance of Cooper’s work may be attributed to several factors. First, his unconventional ideas and his inclination to challenge established paradigms may have been unsettling to the conservative nature of mainstream OMS. In a field that often favors conformity to established theories and methods, a thinker like Cooper, who questions the status quo, may encounter resistance.

Second, the interdisciplinary and philosophical nature of his work may have made it challenging for mainstream OMS to categorize and integrate his ideas into their existing frameworks. OMS has traditionally leaned towards empirical research and practical applications, which may have limited the recognition of Cooper’s more abstract and philosophical contributions.
Lastly, the complexity and depth of Cooper’s thinking may have been seen as a barrier to accessibility for a wider academic audience. While he strived for lucidity, his work still demanded a level of engagement and intellectual effort that could deter those accustomed to more straightforward or formulaic ‘kitsch’ approaches aimed at fast and easy consumption.

Building upon the theme of confronting kitsch and the pursuit of epistemic justice, the approximation between Cooper and decolonial thought highlights the some differences in their approaches. While both challenge kitsch, decolonial thought goes beyond intellectual critique. It not only exposes kitsch as a deceptive construct, but also a violent and oppressive one, thus advocating for its obliteration due to the extensive damage it has inflicted upon a diverse array of knowledge forms and ways of existence. In this regard, the decolonial perspective displays a robust assertiveness, which emphasizes the imperative to dismantle not only kitsch but also deeply entrenched oppressive systems and structures that are present in knowledge making systems. This assertive and action oriented impulse is a striking contrast to Cooper’s more contemplative and nuanced approach. The following section will delve into this distinction, shedding light on the distinctive character of decolonial thought in the context of confronting kitsch and striving for justice.

Another observation we must make before moving forward is that a decolonial approach isn’t immune to the risk of becoming kitsch itself, that is: founded on a fictional non European Anthropomorphism, which would be equally authoritative and equally a possible ‘object of narcissistic adoration’ (Cooper 1986/2023a: 65). But how do we avoid such traps? As Linstead (2002) asked, is any human endeavor destined to or highly susceptible to becoming itself kitsch? We provide an answer to this initial provocation by bringing in the concept of anthropophagy.

**Decoloniality and anthropophagy**

[… I am stealthily entering into contact with a new reality for me that still lacks corresponding thoughts, and even more so, any word to signify it; it’s a sensation behind thought. (Lispector, 1998: 44, our translation)
The postcolonial/decolonial literature encompasses a broad and diverse set of concerns, as well as different experiences of colonialism (deriving from both colonized and colonizers’ ends) (Bhambra, 2014; Moraña et al., 2008; Quijano, 2008). For the purpose of this article, we’ll approach the Modernity/Coloniality (MC) argument contained in decolonial theory (see Harding, 2016; Mignolo, 2007 for more detailed descriptions) also referred to as the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) Research Program (Escobar, 2007). This argument has Walter Mignolo, Artur Escobar and Boaventura Santos as some of its main proponents. It consists of a radical critique of modernity and its sciences as being Eurocentric and undemocratic (Mignolo, 2008, 2009, 2017; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Santos, 2014, 2019). In the context of OMS, this discussion becomes more relevant, since it has been argued that the production and dissemination of management knowledge has been, historically, an essentially colonial venture (Alcadipani, 2017; Seremani and Clegg, 2015).

For the purpose of this paper, because Cooper is aligned with a poststructuralist account of organizations, we must first state that we do not agree with the assumption that ‘postmodernism and poststructuralism as epistemological projects are caught within the Western canon reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a coloniality of power/knowledge’ (Grosfoguel, 2007: 212). Firstly, postmodernist and poststructuralist ‘epistemological projects’ are not cohesive enough to allow this generalization. Secondly, this assumption assumes a ‘purity’ of perspectives by those who were colonized, meaning that thinkers in former colonies and the population in general have not been influenced by nor have appropriated elements of the colonizer’s perspectives.

In other words, simply because postmodernism/poststructuralism have geographically originated in Europe and have been coined by European intellectuals it does not follow that they are reinforcing Western colonialism. Likewise, we dispute that ‘epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies’ (Grosfoguel, 2007: 212) necessarily produce and/or reinforce a decolonization of knowledge. Quite the opposite, we have examples of notorious ‘critical’, ‘anti colonialist’, ‘subalternized’
scholars who have reinforced Western colonialist categories in their works (Cavalcanti and Alcadipani, 2016).

Following an ‘anthropophagic ethics’, which we will delve into in more detail shortly, it is advisable not to judge any value system or epistemological project as an all encompassing, all or nothing package. Especially, geographical origins should not be the primary basis for acceptance or rejection. Instead, these systems should be approached as collections of fragments that are inherently hybrid in nature and should be assessed accordingly (Rolnik, 2021). Think of a value system or an epistemological project as a mosaic of various cultural, social, and geographical influences. Just as a mosaic is composed of individual, intricately crafted tiles, these systems are formed from diverse elements, each with its unique history and significance. It’s not about accepting or rejecting the entire mosaic based solely on its geographic origin; rather, it’s about appreciating the beauty and complexity of each tile and how they come together to create a larger, more comprehensive picture.

The term ‘anthropophagy’ essentially signifies the act of consuming and assimilating these fragments, much like a mosaic artist carefully selects and integrates each tile to craft a meaningful and beautiful work of art. By understanding this concept, readers will be better equipped to comprehend the argument regarding the evaluation of value systems and epistemological projects as intricate, hybrid collections of fragments. This perspective underscores the richness and diversity that can emerge when we engage with these systems on a fragmentary level rather than making sweeping judgments based on their place of origin.

Therefore, accepting this anthropophagic formula or ‘ethics’ is key to connect decolonialism with poststructuralist perspectives such as Cooper’s. Nonetheless, we must warn readers that this notion originates in the colonial context of Brazil and perhaps cannot be generalized to other colonial experiences (Castro, 2021; Rolnik, 2021). The Brazilian experience is shaped by the impossibility of preserving binary separations between colonizer/colonized, or even oppressed/oppressor. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that it has been pointed by some as being ‘the only philosophical concept originally articulated in Brazil’ (Garcia, 2020: 124).
The ‘Anthropophagic Movement’ gained prominence during the 1920’s, driven by the modernist vanguard of São Paulo. This movement was characterized by the practice of cultural cannibalism, known as ‘antropofagia’, where Brazilian artists rejected the dominant artistic movements of the time and sought to create a new world picture (Jones, 2013). The movement was a reaction to the catastrophic experience of World War I and a denouncement of the bourgeoisie’s responsibility for its horrors (Klengel, 2020). It was also influenced by the socio geographical dynamics of the periphery, as the periferia played a central role in the artistic expressions of the ‘marginal’ (Pardue, 2010). The Anthropophagic Movement challenged traditional notions of center and margin, transforming the artistic landscape of São Paulo (Jones, 2013). This movement was part of a broader trend of urban occupation movements in São Paulo, which aimed to reclaim and rein habit vacant buildings in the central area of the city (Stevens, 2019). Overall, the Anthropophagic Movement was a significant cultural and artistic movement that emerged during the 1920s in São Paulo, driven by the modernist vanguard and influenced by socio political and geographical factors.

Since then, it assumed a prominent space in our cultural imaginary. It adopted and promoted the ‘ethics’ of how indigenous populations related to the Other and transferred it to our society as a whole. This ‘formula’ was applied especially in cultural productions: you either devour or abandon the Other. The choice depends on an evaluation of how much that Other will increase our own power. If that Other debilitates or does not contribute to this empowerment, it should be kept away and avoided: ‘[…] this is an irreverent response to the need not only to confront the imposed presence of colonizing cultures, but also to affirm the process of hybridization’ (Rolnik, 2021: 19). In his ‘Manifesto Antropofágico’ Oswaldo de Andrade gives us an extraordinary example of this ‘irreverence’ in face of colonizers:

Against all importers of canned conscience, the palpable existence of life. And the pre logical mindset that Mr. Levy Bruhl should study. We want the Caraíba Revolution. Bigger than the French revolution. The unification of all effective revolts towards the man [...] without us, Europe would not even have its meager declaration of human rights [...] but it was not crusaders who came. They were fugitives from a civilization that we are eating, because we are strong and vengeful like the tortoise. (de Andrade, 1978: 13-14)
The term ‘Caraíba’, which initially had a somewhat ‘magical’ aura amongst the Tupi peoples of the Amazon basin and was often used to refer to ‘prophets’, became associated with the European colonizers in Brazil. However, as historical accounts reveal, the indigenous people’s initial encounters with the ‘Caraíba’ brought about results that were quite the opposite of the promises held in that magical perception. This observation underscores the stark contrast between the expectations created by the term ‘Caraíba’ and the harsh realities of European colonization (Castro, 2011). The ‘Caraíba Revolution’ refers, therefore, to Oswaldo de Andrades utopic vision of how this encounter with Otherness should take place.

In a sense, anthropophagy ‘eats’ the European Man (as an unwanted and debilitating cultural fragment, as figuratively speaking) thus radically subverting and mocking modern anthropomorphism. With this being said, epistemic anthropophagy implies a more radical critique than the hybrid epistemology suggested by Bhabha (Abreu-Pederzini and Suárez-Barraza, 2020; Frenkel and Shenhav, 2006; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2008). This subversive humour or mockery resonates with the ‘postmodern laugh’ or the ‘philosophical laugh’ at the modern subject (Foucault, 2007: 473) or the ‘irony’ that makes ‘kitsch’ powerless (Kostera, 1997).

Therefore, anthropophagy is a wonderful analogy which shows that, as soon as Modernity, and thus the Modern Subject appeared, in the midst of its encounter with the Other (within the historical moment of colonization), in that exact split of a second when the Other was used to define it, it immediately shattered and, sometimes literally, was devoured. Alternatively, the Modern subject was obliviously swallowed by the very Other it produced in order to exist, a slow ongoing revenge carried out behind his ‘back, or in the moment when he blinks’ (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002: 1).

In other words, the Modern subject was but an impossible moral/anthropological/philosophical dream and idealization (a typical Caraíbas’ deception) that, in order to persist and impose itself in time and history, became a political nightmare, a ‘kitsch’, an authoritarian delusion that produced exploitation, crimes and atrocities around the colonized world and today in transformed and subtle forms, such as cognitive imperialism (Alcadipani, 2017; Alcadipani and Bertero, 2014; Barros and Alcadipani, 2022;
Cooke and Alcadipani, 2015; Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Wanderley and Barros, 2020; Yousfi, 2021). However, since this idealization is nothing but a cheap 'kitsch' trick, a 'strong' and 'vengeful' tortoise can catch up with it.

Although postmodernists/postructuralists didn’t use ‘anthropophagy’ to describe or to make analogies in relation to the shattering of the Modern Subject, the ‘disappearance of man’ was at the center of their concerns (Deleuze, 2006a; Foucault, 2007). In addition, anthropophagy signals the need to construct new ways to understand the making of the human subject as a process of constant interferences, where one cannot be separated from the other: what we eat becomes part of who we are. The mediators of the process, of course, are not physical arenas where we would subjugate each other or the plates we could serve the occasional loser on. Rather, the arena is symbolic, and language is the mediator of the struggles through which one becomes who she is, thus, an Other – assuming Deleuze’s notorious use of Rimbaud’s formula: ‘I is an Other’ (Deleuze, 2013).

One example of the importance and the power of language and also the alterity it implies is found in Brazilian decolonial indigenous perspectives such as Hanna Limulja’s ethnography of the Yanomami’s dreams. The author explains the state of ‘aka porepë’: it is a process of becoming an Other by speaking or attempting to speak a language that isn’t your own (Limulja, 2022: 79).

In summary, the decolonial approach outlined here and the work of Robert Cooper have a shared epistemological agenda that is interrelated in three ways. His quest for ‘scientific pluralism’ (Harding, 2016) advocates for freedom of thought and imagination in ways similar to how Cooper advocated for constructing OMS as an ‘open field’ (Cooper, 1976) and his constant defense of academic pluralism in opposition to establishing closed and isolated academic fields – a tendency in modern universities (Cooper, 2001b). Cooper’s questioning of authority (including ‘Kitsch’), and his attempts to foster ‘new sensibilities’ free from oppressive taken for granted assumptions (Willmott, 2014). His efforts to produce an epistemology focused on understanding alterity, the functioning of boundaries (or the ‘logics of division’, ‘inclusion and exclusion’, see Munro, 1998) and the mediating role of language/information in these processes (Cooper, 1987).
In the following section we will focus on exploring in more depth the idea of a questioning of authority in order to propose an anthropophagic reading of Cooper’s insights. We’ll show how his poststructuralist perspective may be framed with an anthropophagic lens and, thus, help us better understand the process of ‘Opening our Field’ to Otherness as a way to empower academics from multiple backgrounds to produce various modes of knowledges and, therefore, better enable our field to produce novelty and new ways of addressing persistent and novel problems surrounding organizations and organizing.

**Do not eat! Kitsch theory (unfit for consumption): From self reference to self interference**

The essence of difference is self interference. (Cooper, 1987: 395)

We showed that, even though ‘kitsch’ is perversely attractive and powerful, it is also fragile. When questioned, or faced with expressions of humanity, such as irony, inquiry, and amazement, it becomes powerless (Kostera, 1997). ‘Kitsch’ theories within OMS are only capable of producing and embracing more of the same, or ‘the obvious, the familiar and dear [...] Kitsch fails to surprise, it avoids amazement, it abhors the singular, domesticating our perception and emotion’ (Kostera, 1997: 2). Therefore, the irreverence and ambiguity of anthropophagy becomes a powerful tool to dismantle them. When applied to knowledge making systems such OMS, it becomes especially potent when combined with Cooper’s insights. In this section we’ll explore this combination.

Cooper’s quest to explore and propose an alternative epistemology to understand organizations and ourselves is seen throughout his works. He used strong words to signal the dangers of traditional Western epistemologies founded on the separation of knower and known (for which we can cite Plato) and on categorical modes of thinking that privilege form and hierarchy while erasing or suppressing uncertainties, change and differences. He uses strong assertions such as ‘our curse is that we are slaves to an epistemology that separates knower and known’ (Cooper, 1976: 1010), that thinking through individual categories are rooted in a ‘divide and rule’ logic and that ‘we have not yet properly understood the human cost tolled by the systems we have
built to assuage our fears of uncertainty and the void. Nor the thick grip they have on us in consequence’ as he aims for a ‘repossession of ourselves’ (Cooper, 1976: 1015-6).

In addition, self reference is an essential mechanism of closed knowledge making systems, and some have already highlighted that OMS relies heavily on self reference (Cunliffe, 2022; Nicolai, 2004), which has also been termed a ‘boxed in’ research system that is taken for granted as ‘natural, rational and good’ in OMS (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014)

The design of a self referential, closed knowledge making system can also be better understood by resorting to the notion of ‘repetition’ that Cooper presents in ‘Notes on organizational kitsch’. He borrows this concept from psychoanalysis referring to the repetitive state which reveals the crucial void or emptiness in the heart of human experience. He also explains that language and communication work through repetition, where she who sends a message receives it back in an inverted form, and she who poses a question includes in it its reply (Cooper, 1986/2023a).

This is the anthropomorphic process of constructing an authoritative origin, which is not necessarily Eurocentric but rather a generic form of anthropomorphism. However, Cooper also acknowledges that this process should be debunked as ‘kitsch’. Indeed, if organization studies is constructed as a closed system based on a fictitious and authoritative foundation, it closely resembles Cooper’s (1986/2023a: 59) definition of ‘totalitarian kitsch’. This form of kitsch is characterized by a single political movement, often Eurocentric, which seeks to dominate power and suppress diversity by exploiting human weaknesses for comfort and certainty. Such a ‘closed system’ aimed at feeding a particular ‘consumer market’ can only produce ‘more of the same’. It is a kind of formula that reproduces pre moulded ideas aimed for mass consumption, and being subject to formula means that it erases differences as much as it avoids novelty.

In an applied social science such as ours, this issue becomes more problematic. Besides becoming more and more irrelevant, ‘kitsch’ theories are still directly moulding and affecting the way humans behave and relate to each other. Although he never used the term ‘kitsch’ Ghoshal (2005) provided
a remarkable reading of this dynamics. As he argued in his celebrated piece, contemporary management theories often have overly simplistic and negative assumptions about people and institutions, leading to a denial of the role of human choices and intentions and to a direct influence on promoting practices in organizations that reinforce these negative assumptions (Ghoshal, 2005).

In this context, it is crucial to recognize that Cooper’s ontological perspective offers a critical lens through which we can reevaluate the impact of oversimplified and negative management theories on human behavior and organizational practices. For instance, Cooper shares with Deleuze ontological assumptions that help clarify his poststructuralist positioning (Linstead and Thanem, 2007). In a similar critique, Deleuze’s notion of Being challenges the traditional Western ontological view by asserting that it is intrinsically different from itself, possessing unique qualities that make it fundamentally distinct (Deleuze, 2006b). This concept diverges from the ‘representational’ thinking that has governed Western metaphysics and that has been long supported by social theory by subscribing to ‘identitary logic’, which acknowledges difference in social being only to dispel it (Bogard, 1998: 54).

However, it’s important to note that Cooper used multiple references and concepts throughout his works that are not normally associated with a poststructuralist perspective. Not coincidentally, Cooper seems to enact the spirit of ‘English intellectuals’ of whom Deleuze was so fond. He suggested that the English are nomads who treat the plane of immanence as a mobile or moving ground, a field of radical experience, a world of archipelagos where they content themselves with planting their tents, from island to island and across the sea. They do not have concepts like the French or Germans; rather, they acquire them by inhabiting and planting their tents, by forming habits

in the trinity of Founding Constructing Inhabiting, the French construct, the Germans found, and the English inhabit. They only need a tent. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2007: 136-7)

In recognizing Cooper’s utilization of a diverse array of references and concepts that extend beyond the confines of a strict poststructuralist perspective and his radical advocation for ‘openness’, it becomes evident that
his intellectual journey bears a resemblance to the spirit of the ‘English intellectuals’ admired by Deleuze. These English intellectuals engage widely, akin to a field of radical experience or a world of archipelagos. Cooper’s work resonates with this spirit of inhabiting, where ideas are not imposed but become a part of his intellectual landscape. In many ways, Cooper’s nomadic spirit is reflected in his intellectual journey, and it’s this spirit that has allowed him to traverse diverse territories of thought with agility and openness. We also think there is a ‘pirate’ aspect to such thinking – a perspective that comes into play after everything is prepared and occupies spaces without making concessions. This intellectual approach should be commended for its nomadic essence, adaptability, and dynamism. Thus, the thinking of an author like Cooper isn’t preoccupied with establishing a fixed foundation or claiming grounds; instead, it’s focused on traversing and exploring the intellectual landscape.

At this juncture, it’s important to avoid simplifying Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the history of philosophy (with the Germans founding, the French building, and the English inhabiting) into a mere reflection of national character (as noted by Cardoso, 2006). Their anecdote carries a deeper meaning when a ‘nomad pirate’ encounters a ‘cannibal’ (an anthropophage). In this rare event we see a ‘double capture’ unfolding which underscores the reaffirmation of their distinctiveness and divergence. The ‘nomad pirate’ selectively incorporates foreign concepts into their own intellectual terrain without substantial compromise, embracing them when they enhance their own thought. Conversely, the ‘cannibal’ fearlessly assimilates concepts from potentially oppressive sources and refuses to ‘consume’ those deemed undesirable, as they would undermine his or her vitality. This alliance gives rise to a fresh perspective on the concept of becoming, characterized by pure action and uninterrupted flow, unburdened by self reference. Self reference often leads to exclusion, imitation, or assimilation, while this ‘double capture’ represents a unique fusion of non parallel evolutions, signifying a distinct form of self interference (as expounded by Deleuze and Parnet, 2002).

In the realm of Organization and Management Studies, this concept of ‘double capture’ can be exemplified in the context of knowledge production. Imagine a traditional, established approach that tends to prioritize a specific methodology for studying organizational behavior. It may have a tendency to
exclude or overlook alternative perspectives or methods that could enrich the field. Now, consider a scholar with a ‘nomad pirate’ mindset who is open to engaging with various methodologies, even those from different disciplines, without being bound by the conventional norms of the field. They embrace these alternative ideas when they enhance their understanding of organizational dynamics and the creation of knowledge. This mindset represents one side of the ‘double capture’ dynamic, where the scholar selectively adopts foreign concepts to strengthen their intellectual journey.

On the other hand, think of another scholar who embodies the ‘cannibal’ or anthropophagic spirit. They assimilate ideas and methodologies from potentially oppressive academic paradigms, critically examining them, and only ‘consuming’ those aspects that contribute positively to their work. This approach allows them to challenge and reformulate existing paradigms and methodologies in a way that preserves their vitality, and to discard and dismiss that which is indigestible or simply not appetising.

The synergy between these two approaches results in a richer, more diverse landscape of knowledge making in OMS. It goes beyond mere imitation or assimilation and, instead, fosters a dynamic intellectual environment where divergent perspectives coexist and enhance the dynamism of the field. This ‘double capture’ encourages a non linear, self interfering, and inclusive development, giving a fresh meaning to ‘openness’.

However, the perception acquired through this alliance isn’t a ‘conscious perception’ and it can only be acquired from the perspective of a body (not a fully constituted individual). It occurs in a pre human realm, with bodily effects (thus not a mere abstract alliance). The alliance needs bodies because it occurs in a pre individual realm and implies a bodily differentiation in sensing, seeing and perceiving reality, finally freed from the individuality of the modern, self referential, subject. Cooper seems to support this point when he asserts that

organs thus make sense out of a primal condition of pre sense which in itself can never be known except as an invisible reserve for the ceaseless production of the products of human organization. Human organs must make human sense out of the pre human invisibility of pre sense. (2007: 1548)
In contemplating the ‘pre conscious’ nature of this ‘double capture’, we step into a mysterious and uncharted territory. The ‘nomad pirate’ encounter is akin to an enigmatic journey into the unknown. It echoes the sentiments of Clarice Lispector’s quote: ‘só poderia haver um encontro de seus mistérios se um se entregasse ao outro: a entrega de dois mundos incognoscíveis feita com a confiança com que se entregariam duas compreensões.’ (Lispector, 1969: 78) Translated into English, it conveys the idea that an encounter of their mysteries can only occur if one surrenders to the other – two worlds, both unknowable to one another, embracing each other with the trust that only two parts that understand each other would. This perspective suggests that within the synergy of these different approaches lies a profound and enigmatic journey into the vast landscape of human knowledge and understanding, where the possibilities for discovery and transformation are endless.

While the allure of surrendering to the apparent simplicity of ‘kitsch’ may seem tempting or comforting when confronted with an uncharted landscape, the connection between Cooper’s writings and Brazilian anthropophagy imparts a shared wisdom. It reminds us that opting for the ‘easy’ way out is not a viable solution. This alliance demands, above all, a resolute commitment to the cause of epistemic justice. It requires an attitude that not only welcomes intellectual challenges but also opens spaces for the unexpected, amazement, humor, and a willingness to embrace interreference. In this pursuit, we navigate the enigmatic realm of knowledge, where the intricate interplay of ideas and approaches continues to shape our understanding of the world and our place within it.

As, once again, Clarice Lispector, the Ukrainian/Brazilian novelist, writes in her notorious piece ‘Mineirinho’:

No, it’s not the sublime, nor the things that were given to me in order to make me sleep in peace, those which mix the words of forgiveness, vague charity, [for] us who take refuge in the abstract. What I want is much rougher and more difficult: I want the terrain. (Lispector, 1979: 103, our translation)
Concluding remarks

In this essay we showed that, in a clear opposition to the tendency of Western
to individualize and categorize and also to isolate what is ‘different’ as
irrational or as non existent, Cooper always embraced and sought to
understand boundaries and boundlessness, ‘the endless circulation of pure
relationship’ (Cooper, 2001a: 17). Even though he conceived this dimension
as being beyond human grasp, he attempted to make sense of it by recognizing
its structuring function in our social worlds. He also signaled that attempts to
label or occupy this space are therefore authoritarian acts or a deceiving
pretense of knowledge within knowledge making systems.

Therefore, we clarified that theories, seen as products of a constrained and
problematic knowledge making system aimed at fast and comforting
consumption that erases difference, novelty and complexities may be
addressed as a type of ‘kitsch’. Finally, we explored how the alliance between
Cooper’s insights and Brazilian anthropophagy show us that ‘kitsch’ theories
are unfit for human consumption, and how the ‘ethics’ implied by the alliance
between the ‘nomad’ and the ‘cannibal’ not only challenges but dissolves
kitsch, thus clearing ground for epistemic justice in OMS as it is reshaped as
an open knowledge making system based on self interference.

Finally, considering that on this essay we are proposing a radical project of
thinking difference, perhaps, we can ask ourselves about how a white
Western, heterosexual cisgender man like Bob Cooper could be useful to
support this radical project? It is worth stating that our argument in favor of
disrupting the hegemonic (and, of course, heteronormative) order in the
production of knowledge within Organization and Management Studies
(MOS) is not about relegating the intellectual contributions of heterosexual,
European, male individuals to obscurity. It does not involve reversing the
dynamics of domination and oppression between privileged and subalternized
groups. Instead, it advocates for knowledge production that ensures the same
access and conditions granted to hegemonic categories are also extended to
subalternized groups. Herein lies what we advocate for in this essay as
epistemic justice in MOS, reshaped as an open knowledge making system
based on an anthropophagic self interference.
The radical thought project we champion in this essay uses insights found in Cooper’s works to expand the possibilities for subaltern groups to produce knowledge with global engagement. It offers a means to provide more equitable conditions for all to engage in dialogue, regardless of one’s social markers of privilege within the field of OMS. Proposing such a project is feasible when we engage in the anthropophagy of Bob Cooper and the markers of privilege he represents (see Cavalcanti and Parker, 2023 this issue), without discarding his valuable intellectual contributions.

In a symbolic act of anthropophagic consumption, this essay invites us to consume Cooper’s insights, digesting it, fragmenting its meanings, and hybridizing it with new knowledge, contexts, and experiences. Ultimately, it calls for a collective process of self regurgitation, of a new ‘self’, of a new possibility to transcend simplistic dualisms, as we embark on a radical thought movement that advances in knowledge production by hybridizing wisdom and assessing our (non)privileges. This process compels us to reopen the field of OMS, inspired by Cooper’s works, and to achieve epistemic justice through a collective anthropophagic movement.

Engaging in movements of this nature might bring us closer to what Clarice Lispector conveyed in her renowned work ‘Água Viva’: ‘I am transfiguring reality – what is eluding me? Why don’t I reach out and seize it? It’s because I have only dreamt of the world, but have never really seen it.’ As this essay suggests alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking, we conclude with anthropophagy of Lispector.

Everything comes to an end, but what I write to you endures. This is good, very good. The best is yet to be written. The best is between the lines. (Lispector, 1998: 60, 1988: 86, our translation)

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