

Anthropophagy traces in a cultural commons platform

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Oswald de Andrade begins his *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928) with a clear statement about Brazilian cultures: “Only anthropophagy unites us.” Anthropophagy means for him the practice of hybridizing foreign cultures with local cultures to counter colonialism. After the manifesto, it became a key to understand how Brazilian cultures developed from conflict and hybridity (Canclini, 1995; Jáuregui, 2012). The latest great revival of anthropophagy corresponds to the digital culture movement, which managed to prioritize Free Software and Creative Commons in the Ministry of Culture (2006) and to secure digital rights in the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet (2014). Cultura Viva, a program created by the Ministry of Culture, organized a distributed network of cultural points that gathered activists, producers, and curators to keep alive the popular cultural heritage (Turino, 2013). Since 2012, this program suffered from political backlashes, which culminated with the extinction of the Ministry of Culture in 2019.

Since the backlashes began, cultural points started experimenting with organizing without the state. A handful of them tried hybridizing solidarity economy with cultural production, yet they lacked an appropriate infrastructure for that. When they arrived at Corais Platform (corais.org) in 2012, initially created to cultivate a design commons in Brazil (van Amstel & Gonzatto, 2016), they thought this had everything they needed: a suite of integrated Free Software online collaborative tools. Together with its community manager (the author), the cultural producers designed many improvements to the platform, including a new tool for managing social currency. As a result, the platform shifted from cultivating a design commons to infrastructuring cultural commons (Marttila & Botero, 2017).

As of today, Corais Platform hosts more than 800 projects, most of them inactive. An infrastructure trace ethnography (Geiger & Ribes, 2011; Pelanda, 2019; Star, 1999) being conducted in the platform database reveals evidence of anthropophagy in members’ interaction. Each project has to choose a participation model that affects its transparency and permeability. Public projects have all conversations, documents, and media visible by anyone on the web — including search crawlers, while private projects are visible only by logged-in subscribed members. The platform encourages the public option in the hopes of encouraging project-to-project horizontal learning (Engeström, 2003), however, it does not apply any restriction to the private. Currently, public projects are the majority (706), divided into open for anyone (284), moderated membership (243), and closed (179). Private and closed amounts to only 180 projects.

Public projects must also choose a Creative Commons license, which applies to all the information shared by the project. Attribution only is the most popular choice (558), followed by share-alike with the same license (74), non-commercial use and share-alike (45), non-commercial use (14), non-commercial share-alike no derivatives (12), and no derivatives (3). The visibility and license choices reveal a pattern of contributing to the cultural commons without caring about the protection against exploitation. This may be explained by the non-rivalry nature of the resources (Hess & Ostrom, 2007), however, the ethnographic method adopted seeks for explanations in the construction of a main narrative (Star, 1999), in this case, anthropophagy.

Anthropophagy is described as a form of radical alterity (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 2012; Szaniecki, 2019), as caring more for the Other than for the Self: “I’m only concerned with what is not mine”, stated Andrade in his manifesto (1928). Following this statement, the frequency of possessive pronouns such as “mine” in discourse can be considered a negative trace of radical alterity. A search conducted in Corais public projects, nevertheless, reveals positive traces of radical alterity: “yours” (3682), “ours” (2018), and “his/her” (728) have many more hits than “mine”(1548). This predominance of the “yours” and “ours” pronouns suggests that anthropophagy happens more often in direct member-to-member interaction rather than through an indirect third person interaction. There is also a considerable number of hits for an undefined “someone” (394).

The preliminary findings of this ethnographic study add a new dimension to the literature on designing commons and commoning design: the intersubjective relations that are designed by sharing and taking resources from the commons. As the data suggests, whenever a member shares a resource in Corais Platform, that Self is imagining a proximate Other that can benefit from it, for example, a project member that can pick up a conversation that was left behind. However, in the case of digital cultural commons, non-rivalry makes it possible for unimaginable Others to take what is shared.

The prevalent choice for publicness and less restrictive licenses in Corais projects might seem contradictory once Others might not care about the project or even recognize it is part of a cultural commons. However, the anthropophagy narrative may explain this pattern through its crafted longing for the Other. Anthropophagy does not mean "yours, devoured, become mine", but "mine, yours, devoured, become Other" (Azevedo 2018). This means the cultural producers in the platform are not only appropriating the work of Others, but they are also infrastructuring Others to appropriate their own work in the future, effectively designing that intersubjective relation. This reciprocity can be traced back to the vengeance principle of pre-colonial Tupinamba people (Eduardo Vivieros De Castro, 1992). Tupinamba ate captured enemies with respect, hoping to incorporate their strength into the tribe. However, they did so knowing that their progeny might come later to claim vengeance and eat the eaters. This created an endless link, pushing for common history-making among the tribes.

Anthropophagy in Corais Platform presents, thus, a challenging narrative to designing commons and commoning design: the irrationality of intersubjective relations, the lack of clear boundaries, the acceptance of conflict, the horizontal learning, and the principle of reciprocity, all contributing to a lively cultural commons in a platform that was not initially designed for that.

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