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052162908X - Cannibalism and the Colonial World

Edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen

Excerpt

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Introduction: the cannibal scene

Peter Hulme

Weapons hung against the walls – long spears, strangely shaped knives, a couple of narrow shields. In the center of the room was a cooking pot, and at the far end a litter of dry grasses covered by woven mats which evidently served the owners as beds and bedding. Several human skulls lay upon the floor. (Burroughs 1990: 84)

The story of *Tarzan of the Apes* begins in 1888. Tarzan – the orphaned son of Lord Greystoke and his young wife – has been raised among apes and actually kills the first human being he sees, the African Kulonga, in revenge for Kulonga's killing of Tarzan's 'mother', the ape Kala. After the killing, Tarzan examines Kulonga's body carefully, admiring the tattooing on the forehead and the sharp filed teeth. He investigates and appropriates the feathered head-dress, 'and then he prepared to get down to business', because he was hungry and what Edgar Rice Burroughs calls 'jungle ethics' allowed him to eat the meat of the kill: Kulonga seemed just another of the 'countless wild things of the jungle who preyed upon one another to satisfy the cravings of hunger'. However, 'of a sudden, a strange doubt stayed [Tarzan's] hand'. From the children's books he had found in his dead parents' hut, Tarzan had learned that he was a man; and Kulonga – he recognised – was a man too. This produced a dilemma: did men eat men? Tarzan didn't know, but the doubt wells up inside him and a 'qualm of nausea' prevents him from tasting Kulonga's flesh: '[H]ereditary instinct, ages old, usurped the functions of his untaught mind and saved him from transgressing a world-wide law of whose existence he was ignorant' (79–80).

Just what Burroughs means by 'hereditary instinct' remains

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temporarily unclear, although the obvious reading would seem to be that Tarzan 'realises' on an instinctual level that, as a human being rather than an animal, he is subject to a law that forbids cannibalism. However, in the next chapter he enters the African village, emptied by the uproar following the discovery of Kulonga's body, and slips through the door of a low thatched building, where he observes the scene described at the top of this page.

This scene is archetypal in a number of ways, and its variants provide one of the threads to this introduction. Like its ultimate precursor – Dr Chanca's 1493 description of a Carib village on Guadeloupe – and like many of its analogues, Burroughs' scene is bereft of actual cannibals: the primal scene of 'cannibalism' as 'witnessed' by Westerners is of its aftermath rather than its performance. At the centre of the scene is the large cooking pot, essential utensil for cannibal illustrations; and surrounding it is the 'evidence' of cannibalism: the discarded human bones.

But the scene also serves to answer the question about the nature of Tarzan's 'strange doubt'. Although the Africans are 'of his own kind' (89), they are clearly not held back by any hereditary instinct from their cannibalistic inclinations. Tarzan's difference is in part racial – he is a white man – and in part a matter of breeding. This is clarified later when he has Jane in his power for the first time and is unsure whether to take her by force since that is the order of the jungle which is all he knows, but which he again vaguely suspects is inappropriate to the human world. He gives her his parents' locket and, when she kisses it, he presses his lips to it where hers had rested:

It was a stately and gallant little compliment performed with the grace and dignity of utter unconsciousness of self. It was the hall-mark of his aristocratic birth, the natural outcropping of many generations of fine breeding, an hereditary instinct of graciousness which a lifetime of uncouth and savage training and environment could not eradicate. (189)

The repetition of the phrase 'hereditary instinct' brings together cannibalism and rape as the twin aspects of a savage voracity which Tarzan manages to avoid. Not because he is human, but because he is a gentleman. Cannibalism is inseparable from considerations of difference and distinction, here highlighted precisely because, since that difference is in no sense perceptible, therefore it must be innate.

There will be other cannibal scenes in this Introduction, but

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Tarzan's offers itself as an archetype: there is no more typical scene in the writing about cannibalism in whatever genre than that in which a witness stumbles across the remains of a cannibal feast. The repetition of that scene can be read in a number of ways, from confirmation that cannibals are cannibals, wherever you find them, to evidence of a deep-rooted cultural obsession in need of analysis. Tarzan's scene also incorporates a good number of the topics that this book will engage through its analyses of the discourse of cannibalism: race, class, genealogy, species, gender, imperialism.

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For many years histories and analyses of cannibalism were written from firmly within the European or Western tradition, which saw itself as fully civilised. For this tradition, cannibalism was a feature of life in many non-European parts of the world: pre-Columbian America, the Pacific, Africa. If cannibalism featured prominently in accounts of those parts of the world, it was because it was so prominent a practice that accounts could not ignore it. It forced itself upon our attention, and we merely registered our horror and buckled down ever more robustly to the civilising mission. According to this history, cannibalism marked the world beyond European knowledge and was, by the second half of the twentieth century, found only in isolated communities in places like New Guinea and the Amazon, though it elsewhere might remain below the surface, ready to reappear when civilisational influence showed signs of waning.

Like many imperial verities, this story has been comprehensively reversed in recent years. The full counter-narrative is sometimes proposed: cannibalism is merely a product of the European imagination, it was never practised anywhere, it was a calumny imposed by European colonisers to justify their outrages, it had its origins in the disturbed European psyche, it is a tool of Empire. Like many counter-narratives, this version is in danger of oversimplifying almost as much as the once hegemonic story it seeks to overturn. But, as with other counter-narratives, it is actually proposed and defended in this form much less frequently than sometimes supposed, especially by those who seek to expose its presumed oversimplifications while defending some version of the earlier story.

On this vexed question of the reality of cannibalism as a social

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practice, the views of the contributors to this book can probably be classified as occupying different points on the sceptical part of the spectrum, and as therefore closer to the counter-narrative than to its original. But two points should be emphasised. Firstly, even for the sceptics, cannibalism does exist: it exists as a term within colonial discourse to describe the ferocious devouring of human flesh supposedly practised by some savages. That existence, within discourse, is no less historical whether or not the term cannibalism describes an attested or extant social custom. And second, what marks the concerns of this book and its contributors is the recognition that the really interesting questions about cannibalism begin rather than end with the statement of scepticism, however modulated. For us, the overriding questions remain, why were Europeans so desirous of finding confirmation of their suspicions of cannibalism? and why does cannibalism feature so insistently as a contemporary trope in different forms of writing? The chapters in this book offer a variety of approaches to these questions.

So, for the most part, the 'reality' or otherwise of cannibalistic practices is a question sidestepped rather than directly confronted by our emphasis on the discourse of cannibalism. After all, the starting point for this book is that the imperial narrative about cannibalism has no way of explaining why our fascination for the subject seems to grow in inverse proportion to the amount of cannibalism which that narrative assumes to be (or to have been) practised in the world. Even the most fervent believer in cannibal rites would have to acknowledge that cannibalism is now primarily a linguistic phenomenon, a trope of exceptional power. So, despite the variety of disciplinary backgrounds represented in this book, we approach cannibalism first as cultural critics rather than as anthropologists, historians, or literary analysts. There are no fine distinctions offered here between, say, survival cannibalism, ritual cannibalism, and mortuary cannibalism. An argument does exist – perhaps too purist to gain much acceptance – that anthropophagy should remain as the general term, reserving 'cannibalism' for the ideology that constitutes itself around an obsession with anthropophagy. However, such sophisticated distinctions have been eschewed here, as for the most part has the holding up of the term in sceptical inverted commas. The whole endeavour of this book has been to interrogate the term cannibalism and the phenomenon it purports to describe. Cannibalism is in question throughout; and some of the witnesses called belong to the rich metaphorical hinter-

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land in which the term flourishes: appetite, consumption, body politic, kinship, incorporation, communion.

The general direction travelled by *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* is, then, from elsewhere to here, from the sense that cannibalism is practised over the seas and beyond the hills to the inkling that we need to look within to understand why the cannibal scene means so much to us. That looking within can take many forms: from the psychoanalytical gaze to attention to the vocabulary of cannibalism within our cultural practices, from the analysis of cannibals and vampires in popular culture and film to the self-reflective analysis of imperialism as itself a form of cannibalism.

That movement has a geographical correlate: from two of the classical Pacific sites of cannibalism, New Guinea and Fiji, through the equally classical American sites, Brazil and the Caribbean, eventually arriving back at what is 'home' to the majority of the book's contributors, the cultural 'centres' of Western Europe and North America. But the journey is far from being that simple. To arrive home is to realise – as Marina Warner's chapter shows – that cannibals have been with us for a long time, crucial figures of myth and fairytale; and to remember that supposed cannibals have been brought back to Europe ever since the end of the fifteenth century, as part of the slave trade which Columbus established (Sued Badillo 1992). However, if – as many of the chapters here suggest – cannibalism needs to be understood as a topic within the dialogue between Europe and its others, and therefore within the context of the colonial world, then our symbolic starting point must be the historically resonant appearance of the Tupinambá who disembarked at Rouen in November 1562, where they conversed with the young French king, Charles IX, and with Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne's conversation with the Tupinambá, and the reflections it produced in his essay 'Des cannibales', reverberate through all subsequent cultural debates about cannibalism – and are a frequent reference point in this book.¹

Montaigne's famous essay brings America back to Europe: a conjunction which has recently been recognised as crucial not just for the development of European colonialism but for that of capitalist modernity itself (a point which we have recovered rather than arrived at fresh, since it was a commonplace for Adam Smith and Karl Marx). The modern Cartesian subject of that capitalist modernity depends for its sense of self as independent entity on an image

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of a clearly differentiated 'other' who destroys boundaries, the kind of 'other' so powerfully figured in the cannibals who threaten Robinson Crusoe: modernity enters the world's stage attached to its cannibal shadow. One of our contributors quotes Stallybrass and White's formulation:

The bourgeois subject continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as 'low' – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust ... But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. (below, p. 223)

Disgust, but also desire; loathing, but also fascination. Montaigne's cannibal scene is a dialogue, albeit fraught by the difficulty of bad interpretation; a dialogue which offers itself as a model for much of the work of this volume.² To concentrate on the notion of dialogue is to insist on two emphases, not always present in discussions of cannibalism: on the agency of those described as cannibals – difficult to access but necessary to posit; and on the relationship between describer and described, between Europe and its others. The figure of the cannibal is a classic example of the way in which that otherness is dependent on a prior sense of kinship denied, rather than on mere difference. At least from Peter Martyr onwards, cannibals have been compared with their describers, comparisons which tend to undermine the strong sense of difference carried by the surface argument. Brazilian cannibalism was immediately drawn into the religious controversies of sixteenth-century Europe, with papist theophagy denounced as by far the worse practice of the two (see Lestringant 1982). Jean de Léry – Montaigne's most important source, and one of the key European witnesses of Tupinambá cannibalism – makes the same point about the European usurers who eat everyone alive, especially widows, orphans, and other poor people (Léry 1990: 132). For Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* the thrill was in the thought of his kinship – however remote – with the cannibals of the Congo (Conrad 1967: 244).

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Another way of describing the trajectory of this book would be through reference to the work of the authors of its opening and closing chapters, William Arens and Maggie Kilgour respectively, taking us from the historical scepticism of Arens's influential 1979

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polemic, *The Man-Eating Myth*, which marks the beginning of the contemporary debate about cannibalism, through to the broader literary and cultural concerns of Kilgour's *From Communion to Cannibalism* (1990), a book which took on cannibalism as a metaphor, reading it in conjunction with its associates, incorporation and communion.

The nature of Arens's argument has been so often misrepresented, especially by its association with Holocaust denial (which I come to below), that it's worth reiterating his fundamental project: 'First, to assess critically the instances of and documentation for cannibalism, and second, by examining this material and the theoretical explanations offered, to arrive at some broader understanding of the nature and function of anthropology over the past century'. The actual question as to whether or not people eat each other is taken as 'interesting but moot'; and less interesting than the fact that the idea that they do so is commonly accepted without adequate documentation (1979b: 9). Arens considers several of the well-known historical cases, reports his efforts to track down eyewitnesses, and looks in detail at the most famous contemporary case of cannibalism, as supposed transmitter of the disease of kuru among the Fore of New Guinea, a thesis that won a Nobel Prize for its proponent – and which Arens returns to in the first chapter of the present volume (and cf. Arens 1990). Arens's conclusions are actually directed less at the evidence for cannibalism – about whose customary practice he remains sceptical – than at the relationship between cannibalism and anthropology. The pattern of that relationship ('comfortable and supportive' (1979b: 162)) seems highly suspicious to Arens:

Once having made the proper excuses for the benighted natives' former moral transgressions, the anthropological field-worker is also able to report ... that contact with Western civilization has immediately resulted in the demise of this custom which our culture views with such fascination and horror. Fortunately, but strangely enough, this is often the only trait which has been abandoned by the indigenes with such ease. Other customs which the agents of Western morality also fail to appreciate, but which have actually been encountered, somehow manage to remain a vital part of the culture, in spite of determined attempts by others to stamp them out. (168)

For Arens the association between cannibalism and Western imperialism is impossible to ignore: cannibalism was supposedly the trait that characterised those parts of the world into which the torch of civilisation had not yet shone. That such areas of darkness were by

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definition unobserved by the torch-bearers did not dent their confident description of the practices that flourished there. Yet to shine the torch of civilisation into these dark spots immediately caused the practice to wither. Such patterns are enough for the suspicious cultural analyst to turn the spotlight back onto the way in which cannibalism contains and transmits 'significant cultural messages for those who maintain it' (Arens 1979b: 182).³

The good humour and mild tone in which Arens conducts his investigations present a remarkable contrast to the outrage his book provoked, with wild charges of 'slur' and 'scandal' thrown around, along with liberal doses of adjectives such as 'dangerous', 'mischievous', and 'offensive'. *The Man-Eating Myth* clearly touched a raw nerve and drew any number of 'refutations', most of which missed the point.⁴ Here, for the first time, in 'Rethinking Anthropophagy', Arens responds to some of his critics, reassesses the nature of the debate nearly two decades on, and brings the story of the vexed relationship between kuru and cannibalism up to date, a story newly topical given that Creutzfeld-Jacob's Disease is a variant of kuru. In particular, Arens demonstrates how the impression of Fore cannibalism is conveyed through self-referentiality and inference in citation and photography.

Kilgour's book, though less controversial, has been an equally important influence, offering as it does what is little short of a full re-reading of the Western literary tradition through the trope of cannibalism, paying substantial attention to major authors such as Homer, Ovid, Augustine, Dante, Rabelais, Jonson, Milton, Coleridge, and Melville.⁵ This canonical literary tradition features in the present book, though often in supplementary or shadowy ways: the stories of Hesiod and Ovid retold in the fifteenth or nineteenth centuries; the Prospero-Caliban relationship from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* echoed in a Guyanese novel of the 1950s. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the one indispensable canonical reference point. But it is often other, perhaps less well-known genres, that come to prominence here: nineteenth-century ethnographic adventure stories treading the narrow line between fiction and travel-writing; sailors' yarns, sometimes transcribed into would-be best-sellers, sometimes acting as the explicit model for the literary patterns of Melville and Conrad; cinematic examples from the black humour of *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* and *Cronos* to the tacky images of *Dawn of the Dead*; the hallucinatory world of late colonial and postcolonial fiction in the Caribbean; the provocative and witty texts of Brazilian *modernismo*;

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the psychological macabre of children's stories; the dark American gothic, fictional and real, of Thomas Harris and Jeffrey Dahmer. Through it all emerges the figure of the cannibal: ferocious, innocent, threatening, playful, Rabelaisian, Hobbesian, postmodern, postcolonial, paranoid, rational: Hannibal Lecter sums up that overdetermined figure for the 1990s, and it's therefore appropriate that this book ends with Maggie Kilgour's careful and perceptive analysis of the modern cannibal at the centre of *The Silence of the Lambs*.

In Kilgour's book, Freud features as constant commentator on cannibal concerns, and he is inevitably a key figure on the cannibal scene, as Hannibal Lecter, analyst, himself suggests. Postcolonial counter-narratives will seek support from the language of psychoanalysis to argue that the figure of the cannibal is a projection of European fantasies, a screen for colonial violence (see Bucher 1979). However, psychoanalysis – at least in its classical Freudian model – offers only ambivalent support for this view. After all, Freud had his own cannibal narrative, as fully developmental as – and very much of a piece with – imperial stories; and that cannibal narrative is part of a universal story of psychic development, not one which is interested in distinctions between the colonisers and the colonised. That narrative has its own cannibal scene, too, visualised as the beginning moment of all human culture:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually . . . Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind's earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things – of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (Freud 1983: 141–2; cf. Kilgour, below, pp. 244–5)

More precisely, the Freudian narrative offers a powerful encoding of the 'development of the self' in what Kilgour (in this volume) calls his quest-romance of sexual development, in which the individual recapitulates the development of the species. During this development the oral or cannibal 'stage', in which the infant has no sense of its separation from the world, is left behind – yet never

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completely sloughed off, since what Freud calls the 'final structure' of the self often contains 'vestiges of earlier fixations' (quoted below, p. 244). Regression is feared as pathological, yet erotic desire is a notoriously 'consuming passion' which threatens to dissolve the boundary between ego and object in a way that has often led poets to use cannibalistic imagery to describe the actions of lovers. This allows cannibalism to appear as a form of nostalgia, offering a restoration of social wholeness, which may account for some of the relatively benign assessments of the phenomenon during the early modern period, most notoriously Montaigne's, and which Kilgour suggests may explain our current fascination with the topic: 'a sign of our culture's refusal to let go of the idea of the natural, the wild, the savage, at the very time in which it is disappearing in the external world' (below, p. 247). Less an idealisation of the cannibal, then, than an attack on our own rapacious egos. The man-eating myth is still with us – but as a story about ourselves.

3

Why cannibalism fascinates us at the end of the second millennium is a difficult question that several of the later chapters of this book address, in cultural analyses that draw on the language of ideology and psychoanalysis. Why cannibalism interests scholars of cultural process is easier to answer: few topics seem to concentrate so effectively so many key cultural issues, especially those that cluster around the questions of relativism and scepticism that have played such a large part in the 'culture wars' of recent years. In some ways cannibalism might seem an unlikely topic to generate much heat: after all its contemporary political resonance is rather small and its range of potential application distinctly limited. Nevertheless, beyond our perennial fascination with the topic, two related issues have put it in the forefront of current debates: the comparison made between those sceptical of cannibal stories and those who deny the Holocaust; and the whole question of Western attitudes towards and understanding of non-Western cultures. The first issue can be introduced and disposed of; the second simply introduced.

Defenders of traditional cannibal stories have raised the stakes by repeatedly associating Arens's revisionism with the denial of the Holocaust. The initial linkage goes back to an exchange in the *New York Review of Books* even before *The Man-Eating Myth* was pub-