

A 'horrid way of feeding': Pervasive, aggressive, repulsive cannibalism

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Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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Abstract

Cannibalism both fascinates and repels. The concept of the cannibal has changed and evolved, from the semi- or in-human anthropophagi of Classical texts to the 'savage' cannibals of colonial times, whose alleged aberrations served as a justification for invasion, conversion and extermination, to the contemporary cannibal driven often by psychosexual drives. Cannibal texts typically present the act as pervasive, aggressive and repulsive. If these parameters are admitted, alleged cannibals immediately fall outside normative European humanist morality. This paper examines cannibalism as a major delineator of the civilised human. Cannibals offer social scientists a handy milestone to confirm the constant improvement and progress of humanity. The idea that colonised peoples were not savage, degenerate cannibals threatens the concept of the 'Great Chain of Being', which was assumed to show an inexorable progress from plants to animals to humans, and upward toward the divine, led by enlightened Western civilisation. But cannibal mythology, factual or imaginary, offers an opportunity to re-evaluate the assumptions of human supremacism and see ourselves as edible, natural beings.

Keywords: cannibalism; anthropology; savage; civilisation; colonialism; psychosexual

I thought that, in order to bring Friday off from his horrid way of feeding, and from the relish of a cannibal's stomach, I ought to let him taste other flesh... (Defoe, 2001).

Introduction

Cannibals, like royalty, monsters and criminals, have evolved and morphed into new forms, each one reflecting the fears of its time. Each form was, in its time, believed to be pervasive (widespread), aggressive (exceptionally dangerous) and repulsive (unacceptable by standard social norms). Yet the variety of forms of cannibalism and the motivations for the acts make it difficult to define conclusively, even where it can be proven. Who are these cannibals, and how can we identify them?

Cannibals are routinely defined as 'monsters' which, according to the seventh century scholar Isidore of Seville, makes them monstrations (monere) or warnings (monare) of divine will (**quoted in White, 1991, p. 1**). Monsters warn us about the things we fear most, which are very often the phenomena we do not understand. The cannibal is the abject outsider – the one who does not respect the boundaries between inside and outside, between what we control and what is wild, unruly, natural. As humans have expanded their knowledge and control over the planet, what has become of the cannibal? The alien is proven myth, the 'savage' is tamed and colonised, the human/animal border is lost, and only we ourselves are left to threaten our flesh and lives.

Sigmund Freud tried to elucidate the origin of the taboos on cannibalism and incest by speculating on a cultural turning point, which, he thought, might have occurred at a time when a 'Darwinian primal horde' (**1998: 108**) of human progenitors were, like many other primates, dominated by an alpha male. This patriarch refused to share power or access to the females and drove out the younger males. Frustrated and angry, they conspired to kill the father and of course, as 'cannibalistic savages', they then ate him (**Freud, 1998: 122**). Their subsequent revulsion, or perhaps anxiety that the same fate could befall them, led them to create taboos on parricide, incest and cannibalism, which are subconsciously expressed in the Oedipus complex. These inhuman cannibals, in their remorse for their 'criminal act', developed as a result 'social organisation, moral restrictions and religion' (**Ibid**); in other words, civilisation, which thereby established the hard boundary between their animal nature and their human destiny, nature and civilisation.

The earliest reports of cannibalism in Western texts spoke of the perils of the lands outside of the 'civilised' polis, where inhuman or semi-human hybrid creatures on the outer edges of the known world preyed on anyone who ventured into their forbidding lands (**Avramescu, 2009: 10**). Classical

writers including Pliny and Herodotus recounted stories of cannibals (anthropophagi) engaging in ritual feasting. Greek mythology 'envisioned rings of progressively more primitive social development surrounding a Mediterranean hearth; in the furthest ring, at the banks of Ocean, social primitivism becomes absolute' (Romm, 1992: 47). These 'primitive' peoples were likely to be man-eaters, and were usually considered guilty until proven innocent. The quintessential cannibal of Classical mythology was the Cyclops, Polyphemos, from a race of giant 'fierce, uncivilised people' who proved their irrationality by not planting or ploughing or engaging with their neighbours (Homer, 1946, Book IX: 142).

Cannibals were often depicted as dog-headed men. Myths of dog-men, often eating human flesh, are found in cultures all over the world, and represent a threshold between the Wolfman, a human who has rejected social norms, and civilised humanity; the dog-man is human in social behaviour, even if recognisably of a different race (White, 1991: 16). The stories of Alexander speak of dog-headed warriors; in one case Alexander attempts to capture a specimen by luring him with a naked woman, but the creature instead takes the woman away and eats her (Price, 2003: 4). St Christopher, patron saint of travellers, was said to be a black giant from a cynocephalic (dog-headed) race that ate human flesh and communicated only by barking. He was granted the power to speak Greek by an angel and brought down to human size and shape by the Christ child, and his skin became white when he was baptised (White, 1991: 34-35).

The modern cannibal, according to the historian Frank Lestringant (1997: 4), began with Columbus, whose reports from the New World changed European perceptions of cannibalism, from inhuman monsters to primitive, godless, uncivilised humans. Columbus acknowledged the earlier myths when he reported on the Arawak people, who told him that their 'bold' neighbours the Caribs were dog-like men who ate the peaceful Arawaks. From his account of the Caribs arose both the term 'cannibal' and 'Caribbean' (Konishi, 2002: 72). Columbus, and the colonial forces that followed him, changed perceptions of cannibalism – it now involved nutrition more than monstrosity. Columbus wrote, for example, about the Taino Indians who the Caribs hunted for food – the cannibals would capture and castrate small boys 'as we do to capons or pigs which we want to fatten and make tender for food' (Lestringant, 1997: 23).

The contemporary cannibal, since the late nineteenth century, is commonly driven by some form of psychosis and has become invisible – he (usually a male) is indistinguishable by his appearance, and only discovered by his deeds. Cannibals of any period are apt to be called monsters and, despite their human form and features, declared inhuman.

The irony is that, by definition, one cannot be a cannibal unless you belong to the same species as your prey.

What has not changed in portrayals of cannibalism, at least in Western texts, is the simultaneous fascination and revulsion of the public. The anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard observed that 'Both Europeans and Arabs seem to have a morbid interest in cannibalism and tend to accept almost any tale told them about it' (**quoted in Arens, 1979**). Contemporary popular culture seems obsessed with man-eating; a list I have compiled of 249 English-language films involving cannibalism as a significant part of their plot reveals that 145 (58%) have been released between 2000 and 2020, only 42% in the entire previous century. The many books, films and even graphic novels featuring Jeffrey Dahmer, one of many serial killers of twentieth century America, concentrate not on his murders as much as his cannibalising of his victims. Cannibals are sensationalised to titillate the public appetite ('clickbait') at a time when so much else in the news has become prosaic or squalid. Literature and Culture scholar Louise Noble asserts that 'we have an almost pathological need to believe that such behaviour occurs' (**2011: 9**).

Western accounts of cannibalism routinely assume that cannibalism is (or was) pervasive in uncivilised or recently colonised areas, that it is aggressive, involving primarily the killing and eating of enemies, and that it is, ipso facto, repulsive. These assumptions cause conflict in academic discourses about whether culturally-sanctioned cannibalism even existed, its extent, whether it is unquestionably abhorrent in all circumstances, and whether its actual existence really matters. Although I have divided instances of cannibalism into three distinct periods, classical, modern and contemporary, common to all is the occasional need to eat human flesh to survive in an emergency.

Starvation Cannibalism

No culture is innocent of cannibalism. Survival cannibalism, in which human flesh is eaten as a last resort against starvation, has happened since pre-history (**Rodríguez, Guillermo, & Ana, 2019**). Most reports describe the consumption of human flesh as a last resort as repulsive but understandable. During 'The Starving Time' in 1609-10 in Jamestown, the first permanent British settlement in the Americas, settlers ate:

... 'the flesh and excrements of man', including the corpse of a recently slain Indian, dug up from his makeshift grave and 'boiled and stewed with roots and herbs'. Some lapped up the blood 'from their weak fellows' as they bled to death. (Woolley, 2007: 257).

Starvation cannibals often go to great lengths to choose what appears the least repulsive options. The Donner Party, a group of settlers who became snow-bound in the Sierra Nevada ranges in 1846, chose to strip the flesh from the limbs of Patrick Dawson, who had first suggested eating the dead, and who was not a relative of any of the living; no one would touch the flesh of their kin (Limburg, 2001: 120-121). The Donner Party did whatever they had to in order to survive, which included eating the pack animals, members of the party who died, and eventually the Indian guides, whom they chased down and murdered for their flesh (Korn, Hawes, & Radice, 2002: 169-175). Such desperate behaviour was even less unusual on the oceans, and cannibalism among sailors drifting away from shipwrecks became common enough to be given a name: the 'custom of the sea' (Simpson, 1984: 144).

Starvation has led to cannibalism in more recent times too, leading the desperate to eat their dead (or sometimes the living). The survivors of the Ukrainian *Holodomor* in 1932-33 ate whatever or whomever they could to survive a famine deliberately engineered by Stalin (Davies & Wheatcroft, 2009: 421). Journalist Harrison Salisbury documented the cannibalism that pervaded the 900 days of the Siege of Leningrad (1941-44), in which, according to a survivor, 'Leningrad was in the power of the cannibals.' (1969: 478). During the Great Leap Forward in China from 1958-62, eating of corpses became so commonplace that measures were taken to guard cemeteries, leading the hungry to turn to murder to source their meat (Dikötter, 2010: 321). The survivors of the 1972 plane crash in the Andes famously ate their dead teammates to survive, one survivor comparing the act to Holy Communion (Read, 1975: 308).

The Classical Cannibal

The mythology of Ancient Greece saw outsiders as either gods or beasts, not humans. Aristotle wrote that the individual who by nature (not by accident) is stateless must be 'either above humanity or below it' (2000: 28 - 1.2 1253a) and quotes Homer, who wrote in *The Odyssey* of just such a stateless being, the Cyclops, Polyphemos, described as 'a formidable monster... No one would have taken him for a man who ate bread like ourselves' (Homer, 1946: 144). Polyphemos ate sheep, but was also partial to human flesh, tearing the Greek sailors to pieces for his meal (Ibid: 147). He was both a savage and a god, being the son of Poseidon (Ibid: 153).

Greek gods were not averse to eating each other. Cronos, the father of the Gods, to maintain his power, ate all his children except for Zeus, who was hidden by his mother, Cronos instead naïvely eating a stone disguised as a baby (Jordan, 2004: 163). Gods, however, could be disgorged with few ill-effects, while eating humans is irreversible, and humans who indulged in cannibalism were apt to become animals. Plato reported that the

worshippers at the temple of Lycaean Zeus in Arcadia would mince up human entrails with those of other animals; anyone who ate the resulting burger would be 'inevitably metamorphosed into a wolf' (Plato, 1997: 286). When Zeus and the other gods came to visit King Lycaon, he tried the same trick on them, slaughtering a young boy, possibly his son, on the altar and mixing his entrails in the sacrificial meat brought to the table for the gods' lunch. Zeus, unimpressed, overturned the table and turned Lycaon into a wolf, and some versions say went on to destroy most of humanity with a flood (Burkert, 1983: 86).

Humans who eat other humans are therefore no longer classified as human – in this case, physically transformed rather than socially disconnected. Robert Graves suggests this was not so much a myth as a 'moral anecdote', which reflected the disgust of 'civilised' Greeks toward the cannibalistic practices of Arcadian sacrifice (1960: 141). Cannibalism therefore reclassified the perpetrators as inhuman, unless they were superhuman. While not widespread – except perhaps among the gods (Graves, 1960) – Classical cannibalism was usually depicted as aggressive and was widely considered repulsive. It was the work of outsiders, the uncivilised who threatened the polis, and the mythology reflected the fear of the lands outside the 'known world', the people who surely would not recognise or respect the advanced ethics of the mythmakers. It established a firm boundary, for those who credited the myths, between themselves as humans and outsiders as inhuman.

Modern 'savage' cannibalism

The mercilessness of the cannibal did not need elucidation to late-mediaeval explorers, armed with an unshakeable belief in European superiority both culturally and religiously. Their 'discoveries' built on the Classical myths, revealing a New World filled instead with peoples they considered inhumans or inferior subhumans. As reports of modern, savage cannibalism arrived from the Americas and elsewhere, they were eagerly devoured by European readers in a manner that Groesen describes as 'little short of an obsession' (2008, p. 182). This even involved adjusting the text to improve the narrative, such as De Bry altering his German translation of Gasparo Balbi's account of Carnalubar islanders; the Latin had said that they were 'fond of human flesh' but De Bry changed this to say that they 'ate nothing but human flesh' (Groesen, 2008: 184).

Stories of 'savage' cannibalism from Columbus to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and on to Hollywood tend to portray tribal and primitive savages, often consuming a white victim, a narrative that serves to reinforce our Eurocentric beliefs of superiority. However, individual 'savages' like Robinson Crusoe's Friday can possibly be educated and enlightened once removed from their environment. All that was required was some

Western-style clothing and some non-human meat to 'bring Friday off from his horrid way of feeding, and from the relish of a cannibal's stomach' (Defoe, 2001: 166). God came later, although He was a splendid pretext for sending in both the missionaries and the conquistadors to either convert or exterminate these pervasive, aggressive and repulsive savages. But the duality of inhuman or subhuman humans posed a dilemma for missionaries – were such savages even capable of receiving the Gospels? (Lindenbaum, 2015: 85). If not, this just proved their inhumanity as denizens of a natural world that civilised humans had long-since disavowed.

Europeans set out to conquer the New World, confident that they were on a civilising mission, despite the litany of dispossession and casualties. The Classical cannibals that had been described in the writings of Sir John Mandeville, together with the accounts of Marco Polo, became the guidebooks for explorers like Christopher Columbus. Mandeville had thrilled the mediaeval world with his tales of lands where 'they eat more gladly man's flesh than any other flesh... And they say, that it is the best flesh and the sweetest of all the world' (1915: 120). Columbus' scouts eagerly asked local natives about one-eyed or dog-headed men and stories of cannibalism, imageries which arose not from the natives but from the writings of the Roman author, Pliny (Obeyesekere, 2005: 3). Their enquiries were confirmed, or 'yessed' (Morison, 1942: 340), due perhaps to an understandable eagerness to please the men with the guns, or a failure to understand the questions.

Cultural Studies Professor Patrick Brantlinger has written at length about the way colonial writers blamed the primitive 'savages' for their own demise through their 'interminable warfare, cannibalism and infanticide' (2003: 123). Even Charles Darwin, in his anthropological work *The Descent of Man*, described cannibalism as instrumental in the process of natural selection (2013: 182-183):

... when of two adjoining tribes one becomes more numerous and powerful than the other, the contest is soon settled by war, slaughter, cannibalism, slavery, and absorption. Even when a weaker tribe is not thus abruptly swept away, if it once begins to decrease, it generally goes on decreasing until it is extinct.

Darwin related stories of savage cannibalism among the natives of Tierra del Fuego, writing, based on hearsay, that 'they kill and devour their old women before they kill their dogs' (1871: 214).

The myth of cannibalism as a strategy for determining the humanity of other peoples was a powerful and profitable one, and the argument was political: Maggie Kilgour, who wrote an important book on cannibalism (1990), summed up the postcolonial discourse:

...the figure of the cannibal was created to support the cultural cannibalism of colonialism, through the projection of western imperialist appetites onto the cultures they then subsumed (foreword to Guest, 2001: vii).

Of course, it was easy for travellers to distant continents to invent or embroider stories with impunity since, as the explorer Jean de Léry said, 'they cannot be contradicted' (1992: ix). But it is also culturally important for societies which have been built on conquered, colonised land to see those who were dispossessed as fundamentally deserving of their fate. John Bevan-Smith, reviewing a study of Maori cannibalism, states that cannibalism as a 'metaphor of savagism helped contemporary settler societies to justify their existence while forgetting the genocidal violence on which they are founded' (2010: 204). European settlers similarly assumed the Indigenous people of Australia to be primitive 'savages' and cannibals, despite primary evidence to the contrary. Aborigines were routinely described as 'addicted to cannibalism', with stories told about 'buckets of human flesh in their camps' as well as 'dead Chinese roasted and trussed ready for their feast' (Evans, Saunders, & Cronin, 1988: 72). Horrified Europeans reacted with 'revulsion and indignation' to this 'repulsive' and 'disgusting' behaviour, which justified 'an exterminating war' (Evans et al., 1988: 73). Cannibalism was not just repulsive in itself: it was a symptom of a degenerate and vicious sub-humanity, which required excision. Hudson Fysh, one of the founders of Qantas in 1920, wrote in his history of the European settlement of Australia that a state of war with the Indigenous population had been inevitable:

Their extreme savagery and cannibalistic habits incensed the settlers and diggers and since it was impossible to secure safety and order without severe measure, extreme action had to be taken (Fysh, 1933: 185).

Modern, 'savage' cannibalism in the New World was popularly portrayed as pervasive, aggressive, and repulsive, although more recent, scholarly analyses distinguished the acts as having more nuanced motivations. Peggy Reeves Sanday, for example, in her analysis of 109 reports of cannibalism in 156 pre-industrial societies she had analysed (for a study on male dominance), said that 'cannibalism is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for non-gustatory messages...the maintenance, regeneration and, in some cases, the foundation of the cultural order' (1986: 4). Revenge cannibalism, eating the conquered foe, was aggressive

and repulsive, but other forms included famine (necessary but repulsive), mortuary (maintaining links to the ancestors), behavioural, symbolic, and personal, useful for socialising people and constructing notions of identity (Sanday, 1986: 25-26). Philosophy and Religion Professor Mikel Burley insists that the 'vast majority' of cases of cannibalism were carried out as 'an integral component of a culture, one feature of a form of life – a way of being human' (2016: 484). Is it repulsive to eat a relative as a form of respect or a mourning rite? Those who condemn cannibals for doing so, and those who deny it ever happened, seem to agree that it is. That may be the only thing on which they agree.

Did cannibalism even happen?

Social anthropologist William Arens tossed a spanner into the normative assumptions of pervasive savage cannibalism in his book, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (1979). Arens wrote that the evidence from prehistory '...does not permit the conclusion that the material evidence ever points to cannibalism as a cultural pattern, in either gustatory or ritual form in earlier times' (1979: 134). Arens challenged the routine attribution of the act to native peoples. He accused anthropologists of occasionally acting like 'erudite purveyors of attractive pedestrian myths' (Arens, 1979: 7). He added:

Cannibalism is so good to think about that the intellectual appetite is not easily satisfied... almost every anthropologist considers it his sacred duty to report that the people studied and lived among were in the past or just recently eaters of their own kind (Arens, 1979: 8-9).

The response to Arens from the world of anthropology was fierce. At the more moderate end of the spectrum, Claude Levi-Strauss, perhaps the most famous anthropologist in the world, called it 'a brilliant but superficial book that enjoyed great success with an ill-informed readership' (2016: 87). Sanday maintains that Arens 'overstates his case', because there are eyewitness accounts of cannibalism in writings by missionaries (1986: 9). Other responses were more virulent, including terms like 'offensive', 'dangerous', 'mischievous' and 'a scandal'. Lestringant, in his history of cannibalism, wrote that Arens 'is more of a sensation-hungry journalist than an exact historian [and] has received all too much attention' (1997: 6).

Some of Arens' colleagues offered the extraordinary accusation that denying savage cannibalism was historical revisionism, in league with Holocaust denial (Arens, 1998, p. 44). This argument was intended to compare Arens' disregarding of the large numbers of reports of cannibalism with the deliberate discounting of eye-witness accounts of Holocaust survivors by those who wish to valorise or excuse the Nazi

perpetrators of genocide. The comparison was unfortunate, in that it ignores Arens' main argument concerning the paucity of compelling eyewitness accounts of cannibalism, which was not the case with the Holocaust. The perverseness of this comparison is pointed out by Ganath Obeyesekere, who in 2005 built on Arens' argument in his review of the advent of cannibalism in the South Seas. Obeyesekere points out that the Holocaust relied on making Jews and Gypsies into 'others' — sub-humans, who therefore were not worthy of life. The automatic assumption that acts of cannibalism were taking place in parts of the world ripe for colonial conquest was used in much the same way by the invaders, cannibalism being the ideal concept in that it is essentially 'a discourse on the Other' (Obeyesekere, 2005: 2). Comparing the denial of cannibalism as a social system with the bizarre claim that the Holocaust had not been real, despite thousands of eye-witness testimonies, was especially unfortunate. The accusation of cannibalism has itself been an important component of antisemitic accusations since the time of Apion in the first century C.E. (Horst, 2014: 177), a discourse promoting Jewish sub-humanity that was employed until the Holocaust and even beyond (Avrutin, Dekel-Chen, & Weinberg, 2017: 14).

Lindenbaum warns that the 'counter-narrative' denying the existence of pervasive 'savage' cannibalism could be 'oversimplifying the story it seeks to overturn' (2004: 476). If the colonised people were not cannibals, then they could be imagined as just people like Europeans, different in their beliefs and practices, and sometimes, in the Romantic imagination, somewhat more attractive in their unity with nature. Cultural relativism is not new – the preferences and aversions of our culture are taught to us as we learn to speak. Herodotus wrote some 2,500 years ago of King Darius' discovery that the Greeks, who cremated their dead, were horrified at the prospect of eating their deceased relatives, while the *Callatiae* Indians were shocked at the idea of burning their loved ones, and preferred to eat them respectfully (Herodotus, 1928: 51 3:38). The unknown author of 'The Travels of Sir John Mandeville' in the fourteenth century noted that the people of Dondun killed and ate their dying relatives, but only to spare them suffering. 'Men eat their flesh for to deliver them out of pain; for if the worms of the earth eat them the soul should suffer great pain' (Mandeville, 1915: 133). In the sixteenth century, essayist Michel Montaigne unfavourably compared the 'savages' being reported by the less than reliable explorers of that time to the often brutal history of European 'civilisation':

...we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits... These nations, then, seem to me barbarous in the sense that they have received very little moulding from the human intelligence, and are still very close to their original simplicity. They are still governed by natural

laws and very little corrupted by our own
(Montaigne, 1993, p. 109).ⁱ

An uneasy consensus allows that cannibalism has happened (and still does), sometimes from need, sometimes for ritual purposes, but not in the pervasive, aggressive and repulsive ways assumed by earlier chroniclers. Claude Levi-Strauss argued that 'No serious ethnologist disputes the reality of cannibalism, but they all know as well that it cannot be reduced to its most brutal form, which consists of killing enemies in order to eat them' (2016: 87). Montaigne was the first to suggest that cannibals were simply carrying out their cultural practices, many of which were less abhorrent than the abuses happening in Europe. As he wrote in 1562 about the religious wars of the time:

I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead; to tear by rack and torture a body still full of feeling, to roast it by degrees, and then give it to be trampled and eaten by dogs and swine... than to roast and eat a man after he is dead (1993: 113).

However, the assumptions about the repugnance of cannibalism remain largely unexamined. Mikel Burley says that this unquestioned acceptance of universal repugnance to cannibalism, which often motivates the contention that cannibalism is a defamatory myth, ignores many cannibalistic practices that may be forms of respect, particularly mortuary cannibalism, in which consuming body parts may be an act of mourning or paying homage to the deceased (2016: 500). The accusation of cannibalism worked well for those looking for a pretext to invade lands with greater natural resources but less weaponry, but only because they knew that cannibalism was repulsive to their audience at home and would ignite the outrage and motivate the funds needed to launch invading fleets.

Educational scholars Sicoli and Tartabini reject the basic postulates of the argument over whether cannibalism really existed as a social system, because both sides assume the repugnance of the act:

On the one hand, colonial texts fall prey to an ethnocentric view of cannibalism; on the other hand, contemporary texts explain away this amply documented cultural phenomenon. While the two positions appear to be at variance with each other, it is suggested that what they hold in common is a schema of analysing culture that does not easily admit the existence of a phenomenon that is 'Other' without explaining it as a totalized alterity or without explaining it away. Both positions thus help reinscribe the Wild Savage-Noble Savage stereotypes (Sicoli & Tartabini, 1994: 249).

Journalist and researcher Reay Tannahill condemned the revival of the Romantic view of 'pure' tribal societies, uncontaminated by the West:

To deny the existence of, for example, human sacrifice and/or cannibalism in pre-Columbian America is simply another way of reaffirming the superiority of Western Christian morality (Tannahill, 1996: 105).

The Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposed a 'post-structural anthropology' in his book *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2014). De Castro sought to 'decolonise' anthropology by challenging the increasingly familiar view that it was 'exoticist and primitivist from birth' (Ibid: 40), and so transferred the conquered peoples from the cannibalistic villains of the West into mere fictions of colonialism. Arguing that the 'Other' is just like us is to deny any separate identity and to return the focus of anthropology to that which interests us: ourselves. Rather than deny the existence of cannibalism, which allows a reclassification of the Amerindian peoples as like the colonialists, de Castro examines the details of *Tupinamba* cannibalism, which was 'a very elaborate system for the capture, execution, and ceremonial consumption of their enemies' (2014: 140). This alternative view of Amerindian culture rejects the automatic assumption of the repugnance of cannibalism, which serves to either confront it or deny its existence. Instead, de Castro explicates Amazonian 'perspectivist' and 'multinaturalist' views, which offer an explanation of nature in which every creature, particularly the big predators and scavengers, see themselves as 'human' and often will see the human being as prey. 'Interspecific perspectivism, ontological multinaturalism and cannibal alterity thus form the three aspects of an indigenous alter-anthropology that is the symmetrical and reverse transformation of Occidental anthropology' (2014, p. 50).

Concepts such as perspectivism and multinaturalism draw anthropology into the world of philosophy and make obsolete the sometimes vicious wars over the existence or otherwise of 'savage' cannibalism, and what it implies (or would imply if it could be proved) for the perpetrators. But even as Europeans were reviling 'savages' for their cannibalism, they were ignoring it at home.

Medicinal cannibalism

Studies of 'medicinal cannibalism' reveal that European colonialists, while furiously condemning cannibalism in their conquered populations, were devouring powdered Egyptian mummies and the blood and pulverised bones of executed criminals to solve health problems. These practices were popular in Europe for centuries, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even continuing into the twentieth (Noble, 2011:

31). Crowds would gather at executions hoping to partake of the blood of a beheaded criminal, while powdered Egyptian mummy was so popular as a medicine that real or counterfeit parts were on sale in London apothecaries in the eighteenth century (**Sugg, 2016: 8**). Richard Sugg summarises the paradox: 'It was precisely as the cannibals of America were wondered at and reviled that the cannibals of Europe began their most systematic, widespread and profitable use of the human body' (**2013: 825**).

Sugg sees a contemporary continuation of cannibal medicine in the widespread occurrences of organ trafficking. He concludes that corpse medicine and organ trafficking are connected because they are examples of the powerful using the powerless: 'There is nothing which the powerful will not do to us; and that includes making us into medicine' (**2016, p. 429**). Organ transplants involve incorporating a living organ into the body of a recipient to resolve a chronic health issue. If the organ has been taken without the consent of the 'donor', such as the alleged cases of Chinese prisoners being executed according to the demand for their tissue-type (**Sharif, Singh, Trey, & Lavee, 2014: 2248**), is this fundamentally different to a cannibal feast? Although the alimentary canal is not involved, the use of human body parts to maintain the life of another human seems to be a fair use of the term.

Levi-Strauss points out that, just as humans spread bovine spongiform encephalopathy ('mad cow disease') by feeding cattle bone meal to cows, thus transforming them into cannibals, so the human version of the disease, Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease, results from cannibalistic transplantation, such as administering human brain extracts to treat growth disorders, actions which were 'properly speaking cannibalistic' (**2016: 114**).ⁱⁱ He asks, 'What essential difference is there between the oral route and the blood route, between ingestion and injection, for introducing into an organism a little of the substance of another?' (**2016: 85-86**).

Social Anthropology Professor Francis Nyamnjoh puts it more forcefully:

It is glaringly cannibalism when a 'modern' and 'civilised' people and society in the 21st century condones the savage dismemberment of corpses and the harvesting of the choicest body parts from living humans for the bodily repairs of other humans (Nyamnjoh, 2018: 23).

Europeans, whether harvesting skulls or receiving organ transplants, would be horrified and incensed to be called cannibals. Neither activity, for them, would have fallen into the categories of pervasive, aggressive or repulsive, nor affected their opinions of themselves as civilised humans. Yet to the victim, the person being sliced up for the benefit of the receiver,

there would be little difference. But organ transplants, however harvested, are by no means the only types of cannibalism found in contemporary reports.

Contemporary cannibals

Whether or not the cannibal existed in the tribes colonised or exterminated by conquistadors, we can be sure that they exist inside our own societies today. While earlier reports stressed the social nature of the cannibal tribes or bands, the contemporary cannibal is usually a loner, unidentifiably blending in with his or her society.

I date the 'contemporary' cannibal from Jack the Ripper, who reportedly sent part of a kidney from one victim to the head of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, with a note boasting that he had fried and eaten the rest. He said 'It was very nise' (sic) (**Wilson & Odell, 1988: 30**).

The contemporary cannibal still fits the profile: he is aggressive, hunting down his chosen targets, sometimes at random, but often with a logic and persistence that sees him graduate to serial killer status; his defiance of a fundamental taboo generates instant revulsion, which in turn often grants him a following and a certain allure. Just as earlier reports of cannibalism were accepted eagerly by the public irrespective of the evidence, contemporary cannibals are received with similar enthusiasm regardless of their factual basis. This is illustrated in the 'Dahmer-worship' (**Barnard, 2000: 89**) which saw the cannibal serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer receiving letters, gifts and even marriage proposals from young women, despite his admitted murder sprees, and his declarations that he was gay. This attraction to violent criminals, known as Hybristophilia (**Vitello, 2006**) functions not just for actual killers like Dahmer or Bundy, but is displayed in the phenomenon of 'Fannibals' (**Baker, 2019**), fervent supporters of the latest television incarnation of the fictional cannibal Dr Hannibal Lecter. Lecter's elegance and panache elevates him to an elite status, and therefore, to many Fannibals, make his cannibalism merely an alternative dietary choice.

The repulsiveness of cannibalism comes not from witnessing the consumption of human meat (which is practically indistinguishable from that of most other large mammals) but rather from factoring our subjectivity into the picture. Our mortality is often seen as psychologically unbearable (**see, for example, Becker, 1997**); how much worse is the disappearance of even our mortal remains, our incorporation into another human's body? From unique subject, we become objectified into animal, then meat, and finally ordure. Sherryl Vint, in her study of the presentation of animals in science fiction, points out that 'we do not question the premise that animals are always-already meat' (**2010: 28**). Accepting that

we are animals signifies that we are also edible, so the very thin line between carnivorism and cannibalism may lead to a revulsion from eating the meat of any animal. Author Joseph D'Lacey, for example, who wrote a dystopic novel, *MEAT*, about humans raised as food (2008) became vegetarian within a few months of finishing the book (Jones, 2013). Of course, for others it may just mean that humans join their list of edible prey animals. Fritz Haarmann, known as the 'Butcher of Hanover', killed at least 27 boys and young men between 1918 and 1924, often by biting their throats, and then allegedly eating or selling the meat from their corpses as pork or horse-meat (Korn, Hawes, & Radice, 2002: 190-192). Carl Grossmann was arrested in 1921, accused of up to 100 murders of women and girls, whose flesh he was suspected of selling on the black market in Berlin during the Great War (2002: 193).

Is the contemporary cannibal prevalent? Here lies the difference from the Classical cannibal, who was monstrous, subhuman or sometimes divine, and in any case easily recognised, as well as from the 'savage' cannibal, marked by his culture, his behaviour and his skin. The contemporary cannibal is invisible. He might be the 'clean-cut, polite' boy next door like Jeffrey Dahmer, the 'Milwaukee Cannibal' (Korn et al., 2002: 216), or Richard Chase, the 'Vampire of Sacramento', who expressed his regrets at killing dogs and cats, but not the humans whom he had emptied of blood for his vampire feasts (Martingale, 1993: 72). He might seem respectable and harmless like Albert Fish, the 'small, frail-looking' old man who lured small children to their death for his delectation (Diehl & Donnelly, 2006: 107), or the 'small, shy' Issei Sagawa, who invited a fellow student to his room at the Sorbonne and killed her so that he could taste her flesh (Tannahill, 1996: 263). She could be an apparently submissive young woman like Omaila Nelson, who stabbed and beat her allegedly abusive husband to death, skinned him and told her psychiatrist that she cooked his ribs in barbecue sauce and ate them (Lynch, 1993). He may be a brilliant and respected psychiatrist like Hannibal Lecter, a fictional character but probably the most famous modern-day cannibal (Harris, 1991). The contemporary cannibal looks like us, lives among us, and preys secretly on us. He may never be captured, like Jack the Ripper, and so we cannot know if he is an oddity, or if the streets are teeming with aggressive, repulsive, invisible cannibals. The cannibal has come home, and is now one of us.

The Great Chain of Being

Arens argued that when anthropologists uncovered evidence of alleged cannibalism, they did not commonly consider it a mark of shame, because citing our primitive origins is very useful to demonstrate how far we have progressed. He puts this down to popular mythologies about a 'once-upon-a-time' past when all our ancestors were cannibals (1979: 146).

Anthropologist Raymond Dart maintains that humans' 'blood-bespattered' history from earliest records to current times accords with 'early universal cannibalism' (1953: 201). Arens observes that this is convenient, because 'superior' cultures can then be defined as emerging from their 'pre-civilised' stage at the precise time when they stop thinking of human flesh as food (1979, p. 146).

Colonialists saw cannibalism as justifying, or even demanding, the enlightenment of those who are still benighted savages, raising them to our level of human civilisation, or else smoothing their dying pillows (Bates, 1947) if that cannot be achieved. Enlightenment philosophers saw 'savage' cannibals as human, unlike the monsters of the Classics. Primitive, unenlightened cultures were simply ignorant of morality or perhaps held mistaken ideas about natural law – cannibalism reflected 'an epistemological deficiency' (Avramescu, 2009: 18). The existence of cannibalism, therefore, and its replacement by enlightened civilisation, offered social scientists a handy indicator to confirm the constant improvement and progress of humanity. The Polish aphorist Stanisław Lec summed up: 'Is it progress if a cannibal uses knife and fork?' (1962: 78).

Arens explained the fascination with cannibalism as a product of the formative environment of anthropology – the mid-nineteenth century, when Western colonial power was effortlessly subjugating the 'primitive' world, and getting rich in the process (1979: 119-120). The ideology of the time was consumed by the thought of progress, and Spencer and others were appropriating Darwin's theory of evolution into a form that Darwin would not have recognised, a supremacism that was to become known as 'social Darwinism', a new faith that replaced the crumbling traditional religions with a new, aggressive humanism. Social Darwinists foresaw an inevitable victory of civilisation over savagery, as had been predicted by Darwin: 'the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races' (Darwin, 2013: 155).

The idea of linear progress toward god-like human perfection harked back to Plato and the 'Great Chain of Being' (Lovejoy, 1933: 24). Lovejoy traces this idea of a hierarchy of creation from inanimate to plants to animals to humans, then on to angels and God, through Aquinas, Leibniz, Spinoza and Bacon among many other giants of Western thought. He calls it:

...one of the half-dozen most potent and persistent presuppositions in Western thought. It was, in fact, until not much more than a century ago, probably the most widely familiar conception of the general scheme of things, of the constitutive pattern of the universe; and as such it necessarily predetermined current ideas on many other matters (Lovejoy, 1933: vii).

As scholasticism declined, the focus of the theory was ever more on humans as the critical transition point from sentience to intelligence (**Fiddes, 1991: 53**). In the age of colonialism, however, it was not humanity in general but Western civilisation that was widely considered the pinnacle of human evolution, refining and enlightening the world. Primitive society, frittering away its natural resources, was the nadir; enlightened Western colonial civilisation was the apex. Cannibalism was a signifier of the morally and culturally degenerate, the bestial subhuman. Casting doubt on its existence as a social practice threatened the structure of this humanist faith.

As Kilgour says, 'Where in the past the figure of the cannibal has been used to construct differences that uphold racism, it now appears in projects to deconstruct them' (**1998: 242**). The binaries it deconstructs, though, are fundamental to our social, cultural and political systems: East/West, white/coloured, male/female, civilised/savage, nature/culture, human/animal. To suggest that modern civilisation had not evolved out of a primitive, savage, cannibalistic past denies the teleology of a future golden humanist age. It is tantamount to denying the Freudian progression of the rational adults from grasping, sucking and biting cannibalistic babies. Without cannibals, it is harder to see where modern humans came from, and, of course, where we might be going. The loss of certainty in our history and doubt about our future helps explain the confusion evident in each morning's news bulletins.

We are all cannibals

Lestringant saw the myths of cannibalism as 'among the most traditional inventions of human memory' (**1997: 40**). He added that the temptation of cannibalism is a fundamental part of the human condition (**1997: 160**). Yet defining the cannibal is a lot more difficult than it first appears. We are drawn to popular cultural images: the 'savages' around the cooking pot (**Lane, 1928**), the raw flesh thawing on the wing of the crashed aeroplane (**Marshall, 1993**), Hannibal Lecter preparing his sweetbreads (**Fuller, 2013**); in other words, the cannibal is the person who eats the flesh of other humans. But it is important to remember the many other faces of cannibalism. Robert Myers, author of a study of the allegations of Carib cannibalism, pointed out that the narrow view is too restricted:

'There is an absence of a clear definition of cannibalism, a practice encompassing an extremely broad and sometimes ambiguous range of behaviours. Cannibalism can include drinking water-diluted ashes of a cremated relative, licking blood off a sword in warfare, masticating and subsequently vomiting a snippet of flesh, celebrating Christian communion, or gnawing on entire barbecued limbs as De Bry depicts Caribs doing (1984: 149).

Definitions of cannibalism, and confirmed instances, are therefore problematic. Claude Levi-Strauss wrote an article entitled 'We Are All Cannibals' in which he dismissed the possibility of a precise definition of cannibalism:

So varied are the modalities of cannibalism, so diverse its real or supposed functions, that we may come to doubt whether the notion of cannibalism as it is currently employed can be defined in a relatively precise manner. It dissolves or dissipates as soon as one attempts to grasp it. Cannibalism in itself has no objective reality. It is an ethnocentric category: it exists only in the eyes of the societies that proscribe it (2016: 88).

Nyamnjoh goes further, insisting 'We are all cannibals, we've always been!' (2018: 70). Cannibalism, he reminds us, involves denying the humanity of the proposed victim; colonialism and capitalism work the same way, leading to what he calls 'inverted cannibalism', where the atrocities of ferocious appetite are projected onto the victims (2018: 60).

Denying victim, living or dead, their humanity, requires objectifying humans for consumption, in the same way humans objectify other animals so that they can inculpably be used for food, clothing, entertainment, experimentation, and so on. Eating human body parts may be too narrow a definition, since it leaves out other forms of exploitation, but also too wide, as it includes forms of auto-cannibalism such as swallowing squamous epithelial cells from our basal mucosa (the linings of our cheeks) or chewing our nails.

Literary and cultural theorist Daniel Cottom sums up these incongruences:

The real issue was how to deal with the tendency shown by the concept of cannibalism, once it was allowed to be thinkable in any case, immediately to overrun its own borderlines in all cases until nothing coherent, nothing literal, was left either of the act or of the flesh that was its nominal object (2001: 145).

In other words, Cottom says, the question is not whether it happened, but what it means.

Cannibalism and ecophobia

Everyone must eat, even the mystic in a cave, and food takes us back into relationship with nature. This is usually presented as victory over nature; as Bakhtin (1984: 281) says,

Inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth.... man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself.... Man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself.

Simon Estok observes that cannibalism semiotically 'makes people beasts' (2012: 3) – it makes us a part of nature, a link that cultural traditions often do their best to ignore or deny. The victory over nature is reflected in the harvesting of plants and animals for human consumption, but cannibalism takes this encounter in a full circle, establishing us as part of nature, animals who are eating conspecifics. In colonial times, the bounty of the invaded lands seemed to obviate any limits to western appetites. But contemporary cannibalism has emerged as a reflection of what Bartolovich calls 'one of the morbid symptoms of capitalist appetite in crisis' (1998: 234). The geological epoch being called the 'Anthropocene' is defined by climate change, mass extinction and pandemics. These are symptoms of voracious appetite outrunning the resources of its environment, but the damage done points back at us, threatening our own existence (Squire, 2012). Unsustainability, auto-cannibalism of our own biosphere, threatens the privilege to which humans feel they are entitled over other animals, and other people. Estok uses the term 'ecophobia' to describe a 'fear or hatred of the natural world' (2012: 5). It is prevalent in marketing campaigns that tells consumers their natural bodies and homes are flawed, and in the massive corporations that convert the bodies of other animals into commodities, ensuring they are almost unrecognisable as flesh. The contemporary cannibal, whether motivated by psychogenic or entrepreneurial thoughts, does the same to humans, but is deemed monstrous.

Cannibals are so often categorised as monsters because, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen says, 'the monster's very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure' and 'an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond' (1996: 7). The cannibal, therefore, profoundly challenges the human/nonhuman boundary. The cannibal, Estok tells us, 'is the perfect monster' (2012: 4). But as Stallybrass and White say, 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire' (1986: 191). Accounts of cannibalism, true or fictional, horrify but also thrill the public; as Hulme points out, the existence of cannibalism within discourse is 'no less historical whether or not the term cannibalism describes an attested or extant social custom' (1998: 4). The term continues to be used to define our humanity or inhumanity, and our evolving place in, and attitudes to, culture and nature.

Clearly, cannibal texts have always been prone to emotive interpretations, and so can be easily used to valorise or demonise marginal groups, with those roles changing according to political strategies. But the cannibal,

whether literal or metaphorical, is essentially enacting an extreme form of carnivorism, and thereby questioning the conventional view of humans as above nature, as non-animal, as not made of the same meat as those we eat. The contemporary cannibal sees the rest of us as commodities, as livestock for his consumption. Today's cannibals seems to be ever more voracious; they can be anywhere or everywhere, are indistinguishable from the herd, and make us look at ourselves as edible, and so question our place in, and exploitation of, the natural world.

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To cite this article:

Bellamy, D., 2020. A 'horrid way of feeding': Pervasive, aggressive, repulsive cannibalism. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 7(3), 65-89. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v7i3.456>

Endnotes

ⁱ From the essay 'On Cannibals'.

ⁱⁱ From the essay 'A Lesson in Wisdom from Mad Cows'.