

'Bites here and there': Literal and Metaphorical Cannibalism Across Disciplines Conference Review

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Abstract

A conference review of the 2018 conference, 'Bites here and there': Literal and Metaphorical Cannibalisms across Disciplines, held at the University of Warwick and organised by Giulia Champion. This one-day interdisciplinary and international conference sought to explore the evolution of the tropes of cannibalism and the use of this taboo across time.

Keywords: cannibalism; slavery; metaphorical cannibalism; introduction; conference

Introduction

One-day conference 'Bites here and there': *Literal and Metaphorical Cannibalism Across Disciplines (Warwick, 2018)* brought together 80 scholars from around the world to discuss cannibalism, whether literal or metaphorical. Truly interdisciplinary, researchers presented on topics from psychological cannibalism to Bluebeard's castle to Brazilian anthropophagi, and provoked fascinating discussion that crossed the boundaries of academic disciplines. Housed in Warwick University's Teaching Centre, where children's colourful artwork lines the walls, I doubt even primary school children coming in for their lessons made quite as much noise as we did during the coffee breaks, concurrent panels making halls resound with the cry, 'Why can't I be in two places at the same time?' The conference atmosphere supported meaningful connection and interdisciplinarity, in part thanks to the quantity of coffee available, but mainly thanks to the brilliant organisation of Giulia Champion, who somehow managed to project calm, despite the hundreds of moving parts that make up a conference on this scale.

Particular questions that this conference provoked, asked, or complicated included: Do narratives of cannibalism always require a savage Other? How have cannibalistic narratives shaped, supported or destabilised political ideology? And, unexpectedly, are cannibals lazy? Some particularly important work this conference participated in was thinking about the relationship between 'savage' and 'civilised', the savage being the cannibal and the civilised being the non-cannibal and potential victim. Exploring anthropological and historical narratives, we were frequently confronted with how cannibalism changes the identities of both the devourer and the devoured.

The word 'cannibal' is itself a product of colonial encounters, probably derived from an Arawakan language used by the Carib people and appropriated by the Spanish. The Carib people were said to eat human flesh, so *canibal* came to mean 'man-eater' (OED, 2018). Other origin tales include the anthropophagi, first recorded by Herodotus, who allegedly ate human flesh and were without law or justice. His fusion of mythology and history sets the scene for encounters with cannibalism, which despite being reported as fact, were often entirely fantastical and utilised to resonate in specific ways with audiences reading or listening to these tall tales (Arens, 1979). One of the aims of the conference was to shed new light on this type of encounter, unearthing global histories that have been marginalised or suppressed.

Selected Papers

Henna Karhapää's (Independent scholar) paper – *Devouring His Own Empire: George III as a Cannibal in John Almon's The Allies* – looked at an eighteenth-century print in which George III is shown taking part in a cannibalistic ritual with indigenous North Americans. A dog, representing the British people, was so disgusted by their actions, that it is shown vomiting in the foreground of the print. This is expected and unexpected: the 'savage'/'civilised' binary is applied to indigenous and colonial peoples, yet the animal in the print represents the civilised, and the King of England is the most savage person in the print, abandoning that most eighteenth century of virtues: politeness. Karhapää explored the context of this print, created by 'shameless self-publicist' John Almon shortly after James Cook was killed in Hawaii, leading to particularly high popular interest in tales of cannibalistic feasts. This print was particularly shocking because it mentioned George III by name – British eighteenth century libel laws meant that the written word was under much stricter prohibition than the visual. As Karhapää argued, this represented a shift in the way George III was popularly presented in this most active and brutal propaganda form – the satirical print – becoming culpable in the perceived dismantling of the British Empire.

Further thinking about the ways cannibalism has both enforced and undercut narratives of savage Other and civilised self, keynote speaker Manuel Barcia (Leeds) narrated the tale of the Portuguese Schooner *Arrogante* in his address *White Cannibals, Enslaved Africans, and the pitfalls of the British Colonial System at the time of Abolition*. After being captured by the British in 1837, tales from the ex-slaves who had been on board the ship circulated, claiming that the sailors killed an African man, cooked his flesh, and fed it to the slaves, keeping the heart and liver for themselves to eat. There is some suggestion that cannibalised man may have been albino, and one audience member made the fascinating connection between consumption of the heart and liver and Ancient Near Eastern divination practices, implying potentially magical motives underlying this act of white cannibalism, although as Barcia pointed out, any such reading is conjectural. After the *Arrogante* was captured and taken to Jamaica, the scandal and court case worked to query predetermined cultural associations with Europeans and Africans in colonial Jamaica and further afield. Barcia dwelt particularly on the testimony of the ex-slaves during the trial, revealing paths of communication between slaves despite being locked in separate compartments on board the ship.

Similarly exploring white cannibalism, Duncan Frost (Kent)'s paper *Civilised and Heroic Cannibalism in Popular Balladry*, although it presented a very different scenario, of shipwrecked sailors drawing lots for who would die to feed the rest of the group. In eighteenth and nineteenth century ballads, this was presented as a test of virtue and a heroic self-sacrifice on the part of the person whose time was up. Emphasising the popularity of these ballads in popular culture, Frost's paper disrupts an automatically savage-civilised binary when we think about cannibalism, looking at instances where cannibalism could be heroic. This notion of heroism is tied in interesting ways to the history of ballads themselves, a genre often centred around a mythological hero like Robin Hood or Bevis of Southampton.

The ways a cannibalistic narrative can be used to define self and other connects in fascinating ways to clinical psychologists Julian Boon and Lynsey Gozna's (Leicester) panel *Cannibalism: Psychological interpretations of negativity and destruction*, which explored contemporary cannibalism from a clinical psychology perspective. Arguing that cannibalism is on a spectrum of cannibalistic behaviours, images from heavy and death metal bands gained new and even more gruesome meanings during this panel. While cannibalistic impulses, they argued, can present as benign, there are instances of malign cannibalism that can be figurative as well as literal. This is psychological cannibalism – taking over someone's personality and life, potentially replacing them in the manner

of film and book *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Presenting real life case studies of this phenomenon, Julian Boon argued that psychological cannibalism stems from laziness on the part of the cannibal: the psychological cannibal wants the life of their victim but is not willing to transform their own life, stealing an identity an 'easier' way of achieving the desired result. There may also be a sexual component, and one particularly interesting case study for our purposes – the conference being an academic one – was a case of academic cannibalism. After being romantically rejected by another academic, the academic cannibal changed their name to a version of the victim's, took on his mannerisms, bought a house that closely matched his, and removed his name from all academic papers, leaving only their own, as though to completely replace the victim. Suggesting that psychological cannibalism is intertwined with desire and status, a way of jumping through hierarchy, this panel acted suggestively in thinking about historical instances of cannibalism.

Staying on a clinical theme, this conference was significant in thinking about a medicalised discourse of literal and well as psychological cannibalism. Heather Bailey's (Florida State) paper linked early modern political ideology to a discourse of epidemiology, giving 'going viral' a new meaning. Her paper – '*But of her dainty flesh they did devise/To make a common feast:*' *Consuming Female Flesh in Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene* – looked at an early modern English discourse that rendered Catholics both diseased, spreading syphilis, and cannibalistic, encouraging literal consumption of human flesh through the Eucharist. In the sixteenth century, syphilis was a particularly terrifying threat, spread sexually and with no cure, it led to body parts (particularly the nose) dying and dropping off. Combining these two fearful motifs, Bailey argued, creates a syphilitic and cannibalistic pathogen that will consume the English body politic, represented in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* by female virgins Amoret and Serena. Looking at the intersection of the political and the medical, Bailey's paper intersected with the theme of narrating identities: by tying Catholic identities to a monstrous pathogen, Catholics are monstrous through association.

Continuing the Conversation on Cannibalism

This special issue of *Exchanges* seeks to continue the dialogues that began with this conference, thinking not only about the way cannibalism is invoked and described, but what purposes cannibalism serves for those who narrativise and participate in this practice. Often used as shorthand for difference because of its shock value, *Bites here and there* explored the wide range of cannibalism's socio-political uses. It provided an important space for nuance to emerge, thinking about the long history of eating

practices, and the ways in which they regulate difference, describing inappropriate relationships from the nuclear family to the socio-political.

Thinking about the propaganda and political value of the taboo, the shocking, makes this issue of particular relevance as we think about how messages are broadcast. Continuing this conversation on the place of shock tactics to create identities, this special issue considers the perceptions and narratives that constitute a particular identity. The binaries that cannibalism is often associated with, and that contribute to identity, of 'good' and 'bad', 'sane' and 'insane', 'human' and 'inhuman', highlight the importance of nuance, going beyond the shocking to ask why and how cannibalism is invoked.

Sophie is an Early Career Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick. She is currently working on the development of early modern celebrity, and has published in *Renaissance Studies* and *Early Modern Literary Studies*.



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