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Introduction: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Identity

KRISTEN GUEST

Until fairly recently, literary scholarship often relegated the theme of cannibalism to the margins of critical discussion, dismissing anthropophagic representations as the concern of particular authors or periods. With the publication of Maggie Kilgour's seminal study of cannibalism in literature, however, scholars have begun to reconsider the complex history of representations of the cannibal. Now, rather than relating cannibalism to contemporary events or a particular period's interest in sensationalizing its others, critics have begun to rethink how representations of cannibalism help us to produce, contest, and negotiate our identity as subjects. The wide variety of critical work now being done on cannibals and literature indeed owes much to Kilgour's argument in *From Communion to Cannibalism*, which takes as its starting point the binary definition of self and other that underpins most representations of cannibalism. As Kilgour points out, the notion of incorporation central to the idea of cannibalism "depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside," yet at the same time, the act "dissolv[es] the structure it appears to produce."[1] Insofar as it examines the relationship between cannibalism and our dominant western mode of producing meaning through strategies of exclusion, Kilgour's work has paved the way for such important reevaluative readings

of cannibalism as the cross-disciplinary collection *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson (1998), as well as for the translation of Frank Lestringant's *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne* (1997), previously unavailable in English. This volume represents another step in this reevaluative process, bringing together literary scholarship on a variety of texts and contexts—from classical epic to the contemporary novel—both to advance our understanding of how cannibalism has historically "enforced" and "dissolved" the boundaries of identity through forms of representation and to suggest how cannibalism emerges as a useful focal point for ideological critique.

It is the intention of this book to show that the cannibal, long a figure associated with absolute alterity and used to enforce boundaries between a civilized "us" and savage "them," may in fact be more productively read as a symbol of the permeability, or instability, of such boundaries. As Kilgour suggests—noting that the pair sets up a circle of cannibalistic consumption that shifts from literal to metaphoric modes—"the definition of the other as cannibal justifies its oppression, extermination, and cultural cannibalism (otherwise known as imperialism) by the rule 'eat or be eaten.' "[2] In some circles, the metaphorical notion of "cultural" cannibalism represented by imperialism has even come to be identified with the act itself. For both William Arens and Peter Hulme, the term *cannibalism* is so inextricably bound up with discourses of colonial oppression that its meaning must be separated from the act itself.[3] While the term *cannibal* is certainly inseparable from its roots in colonial enterprise, it has a lengthy history within western culture as well. In fact, vague, often unsubstantiated charges of cannibalism have historically been evoked to undermine the political, social, or economic power of marginal groups, to explore the psychopathology of criminal "others," or simply to generate the sensationalistic frisson associated with the growth of mass culture. Traditionally used in colonial enterprises to justify acts of genocide or assimilation, then, the opposition between civilization and savagery also performs significant ideological work within western culture both by containing marginal groups and by helping to articulate the anxieties of their dominant social counterparts.

In this volume, the historically uneasy relationships that have evolved between the discourse of cannibalism and the diverse ideological positions it has been evoked to support are explored in a variety of literary texts from across a range of periods and cultures. Alternately wielded to express the contradictions that exist within mainstream culture or to cri-

tique mainstream practices and construct oppositional identities outside the dominant culture, cannibalism has seemed to function either as a monolithic (and oppressive) expression of power or as a radically utopian gesture of defiance. In their own ways, each of the chapters included here questions the extremes represented by these two positions. From readings of Elizabethan "self-fashioning" to postmodern critiques of consumer culture, the contributors collectively argue in this book that the discourse of cannibalism persistently gives voices to the diverse marginal groups it is supposed to silence and questions the dominant ideologies it is evoked to support. Thus, while readings of Oswald de Andrade's Anthropophagist *Manifesto* and Ian Wedde's *Symmes Hole* recognize the value of cannibalism as a metaphor of reverse appropriation, other chapters—on Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*, for example—use cannibalism to help us understand the anxieties that haunt the apparently stable center of western culture.

If cannibalism generally fails to produce the intended domesticating result—either in the colonies or at home—it is probably because considerations of anthropophagy historically have as much to say about the convergence and exchange between apparently opposing terms as they do about their differences. The paradox, as Montaigne points out in his essay "Of Cannibals," turns on the relativity of terms like *civilization* and *savagery*. "Indeed," he suggests, "we seem to have no other level of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and practices of the country wherein we live."[4] When comparing "noble" savages to their dissolute European "others," Montaigne does not query the oppositional logic that underwrites the distinction; instead, he simply condemns his own culture for combining savagery and hypocrisy.[5] Yet, if we look beyond the oppositional logic of cannibalism as a discourse, we see that as a taboo its efficacy relies not on its participation in differential systems of meaning but rather on its recognition of corporeal similarity. Even when it seems to reinforce dominant ideologies or mainstream discourses, then, cannibalism also reveals the catch twenty-two of oppositional logic by drawing our attention to the relatedness of bodies that lie beneath the ideas they express. Indeed, the idea of cannibalism prompts a visceral reaction among people precisely *because* it activates our horror of consuming others like ourselves. Ultimately, then, it is the shared humanness of cannibals and their victims that draws our attention to the problems raised by the notion of absolute difference.

By calling our attention to the idea of a "common humanity" that unites "civilized" self and "savage" other, cannibalism would seem to repre-

sent a movement back to an older humanistic mode of understanding founded on the notion of shared essence. In the context of this volume, however, cannibalistic discourse is treated as a critical vehicle that allows us to move away from the either/or logic that has characterized both traditional humanism and much contemporary theoretical discourse. Unlike the more visually coded relationships between ideology and biology that govern distinctions based on race and gender, "savagery" is a problematic point of reference that draws our attention to the difficulties of dividing self from other by calling traditional boundaries of identity into question. This view of cannibalism is founded on the notion that the designations "civilization" and "savagery" (traditionally associated with cannibalism) are entrenched in a wider—often seemingly unrelated—network of relationships particular to distinct cultures and historical periods. Among anthropologists cannibalism is now widely viewed as a complex, diverse cultural practice whose meaning is determined by the sociohistorical context in which it is practiced rather than through a preset "universal" pattern.[6] Insofar as they see the act of cannibalism enabling the production of meanings and values within a particular social system, anthropological descriptions of the social function of cannibalism bear a striking resemblance to contemporary theoretical notions of ideology as a structure that is, in Slavoj Žižek's words, "a kind of reality whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants."[7] While ideology is almost always theorized as an imaginary structure that is functional only insofar as it remains imperceptible, cannibalism draws our attention to the problematic relationship between real acts and the imaginary structures available to make them meaningful. One result of this convergence is that the discourse of cannibalism invites us to reflect on how the construction of difference is always limited by the sociohistorical context in which it is produced. Thus, as a critical figure the cannibal does not just call into question the universality of binary structures that generate meaning, it also, as Geoffrey Sanborn argues in this volume, challenges us to "stop thinking of the co-existence of what we call 'humanity' and 'savagery'." Sanborn encourages contemporary critics to resist the binary assumptions that undergird much recent theoretical discourse, arguing instead for a model of reading which, he argues, "first became available within the discourse on cannibalism over two hundred and fifty years ago." In his or her own way, each contributor in this volume reflects on both the possibilities and limitations that the discourse of cannibalism offers textual critics. Together, we tell the story of how the anxieties surrounding difference

were (and are) addressed through literal, symbolic, and figurative representations of cannibalism.

Because it offers an imaginative context for framing and addressing ideological issues related to identity and difference, literature is an ideal vehicle through which to focus questions related to cannibalism. Not only does it allow us to address real issues on an imaginative level, it also provides a context in which broad social anxieties can be addressed on a symbolic level. The earliest literary representations of cannibalism occur in mythology, where familial cannibalism explains shifts in the balance of divine power as the gods consume each other in the struggle for authority. Among mythic human figures, too, myths of cannibalism often reflect the struggle to enforce the boundaries of social identity. Such myths depict cannibalism as the most extreme act of vengeance imaginable, an act so monstrous that it cannot be resolved within the boundaries of human society. While this taboo demarcates the boundaries of "civilization," however, it also calls attention to the tenuous nature of such distinctions. As Mark Buchan points out in his contribution to this volume, even to *imagine* cannibalizing another person calls attention to the realm outside existing social boundaries that structure our identities. For Buchan, cannibalism evokes both the "socially prescribed limits of wrath" and the fantasy of transgressing or exceeding these limits in ancient Greek warrior culture. Insofar as he argues that myth, ideology and community converge in representations of cannibalism, Buchan establishes a context for the chapters that follow, charting the mechanism through which differential systems of meaning help to produce and mirror identity.

In various ways, this volume expounds on questions about the formation and dissolution of personal and cultural identity central to literary studies today. Thus, for instance, Robert O'Brien's piece on book 6 of the *Faerie Queene* extends Buchan's argument about heroism in warrior culture to the Renaissance ideal of the gentleman and its implications for colonial enterprise, while Marlene Goldman examines the relationship between consumer culture and cultural identity in a series of modern short stories by Margaret Atwood. While such questions are raised in a variety of contexts, they address remarkably similar issues. Most significantly, they suggest the relationship between a social identity founded on a "civilized" ideal and the various types of consumption that take place within "civilized" communities that challenge these boundaries of identity. Throughout this volume, problems posed by identity are explored in relation to a variety of historically specific texts. While the chapters are arranged chronologically, then, they also introduce and complicate a series of ques-

tions related to the specific texts and contexts in which cannibalism emerges as a theme.

The chapters that follow Buchan's examine the various roles cannibalism plays in responding to "colonizing" projects depicted in literature and criticism from the Elizabethan period to the present. Most of these essays evoke the relationship between civilization and savagery as a defining structure in western culture, where real and metaphorical forms of cannibalism are used to justify acts of domination. While the texts examined all appeal to civilization and savagery as an opposing pair, the chapters also discuss the instability of the opposition and the meanings it supports in different contexts. In "Cannibalism in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Ireland, and America," for example, Robert Viking O'Brien discusses cannibalism as a metaphor and model for the discursive violence necessary to accommodate the "civilizing" ideal of self-fashioning articulated by Spenser. O'Brien reflects on how the colonial encounters with New World savages depicted in the *Faerie Queene* are complicated by Spenser's use of cannibalistic metaphors in his writing about the Irish, a connection that is further developed by Julia Wright in her essay on the gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*. For Wright, Maturin's novel enacts the breakdown of imperial stability during the Romantic period. In this context, she considers how the metaphors of familial cannibalism evoked in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century debates about inheritance law parallel the imperial disinheritance of the Irish by the British, a group whose identity was uncomfortably positioned as "other."

Taking up this question from the perspective of a different marginalized population, Kristen Guest considers both how the colonial discourse of cannibalism was evoked to contain the perceived threat to "civilization" by the lower classes and how the poor turned this discourse against the dominant middle class. Guest's suggestion that the Victorian melodrama *Sweeney Todd* engages in a pointed critique of dominant values by treating cannibalism as a model of "reverse assimilation" is further amplified in the essay by Santiago Colás that follows it. Colás takes up the issue of postcolonial resistance in a different period and context, considering how the figure of the antropófago has been appropriated by Latin American writers who attempt to reconceive this traditionally negative term in a revolutionary framework. Finally, Colás reflects on the history of this movement and its ultimate failure to bring about a true culture of the masses, a problem he suggests is implicit in the notion of cannibalism itself—which functions so well as a metaphor because of "its internal ambivalences and contradictions."

Another aspect of cannibalism that is central to many of the treatments of colonial or postcolonial enterprise here is the uneasy relationship between cannibalistic consumption and emerging consumer culture. In Minaz Jooma's reconsideration of *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, cannibalism is linked to the mercantilism that underpins the colonial enterprise. Jooma argues that in this context cannibalism focuses the relationship between consumption and power, expressing "the anxiety generated by the expansion of the domestic economy to the worldly economy." Jooma's conclusion that cannibalism represents the fear of being consumed is a theme that is also addressed by other contributors, including Wright and Guest—both of whom suggest that attempts to characterize other groups as cannibals are implicated in the discourses of emerging consumer culture.

For twentieth-century writers, the idea of the cannibal as consumer has assumed even more powerful associations, particularly for postcolonized nations that have adapted cannibal metaphors to address the imperialist threat of multinational consumer culture. Following Colás's consideration of attempts by colonized nations to appropriate the discourse of their colonizers, Brian Greenspan and Marlene Goldman both address questions about the convergence of postcolonial and postmodern concerns in texts that self-consciously pair consumerism and cannibalism. In his reading of New Zealand author Ian Wedde's metafictional novel *Symmes Hole*, Greenspan suggests that cannibalism represents "the fear of the colonizer when confronted with the emptiness of his own identity." Greenspan argues that the hollow identity associated with colonization has been carried forward in multinational consumer culture. Ultimately, Greenspan claims, Wedde uses the figure of the cannibal to challenge a passive, "easily devoured," consumer culture by placing it alongside the complex intertextual connections explored in *Symmes Hole*.

Unlike Greenspan, who examines connections between figures of past imperial power and present postcolonial resistance, Goldman draws on an indigenous cannibal figure—the Wendigo—to explore the dark side of consumer culture in Canada. For Goldman the cannibal monster central to Cree and Ojibway mythology provides an interpretive key to Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*, a collection of short stories that explore the relationship between colonial past and consumerized present by emphasizing the debilitating effects of different forms of consumption on personal identity. Through her readings of individual stories in *Wilderness Tips*, Goldman identifies the Wendigo as a "symptom of cultures in crisis," a figure of "excess" rather than monstrosity.

The final essay in this volume addresses the epistemological implications of the cannibal encounter in order to critique the political underpinnings of recent literary theory. The idea of criticism as a form of cannibalistic consumption gained currency with J. Hillis Miller's seminal poststructuralist essay, "The Critic as Host."[8] Here, however, Geoffrey Sanborn brings a more historicized approach to bear on the enterprise of criticism. Taking eighteenth and nineteenth-century European accounts of cannibalism among native groups as his starting point, Sanborn suggests that the colonial discourse of cannibalism is haunted by anxieties about evidence that belie the excessive desire among westerners for proof of a savagery that remains unauthenticated. Drawing on the work of such Lacanian social theorists as Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, and Homi Bhabba, Sanborn argues that critics who treat the cannibal as a secure symbol of savagery cover over the complex interests at stake when we use the term *savage*. If we restore questions about evidence to the visibility they enjoyed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sanborn suggests, we may reconceptualize the cannibal encounter as an example of the way colonial enterprises are already haunted by the possibility of postcolonial subversion. Insofar as it applies the critical methods employed throughout the volume to the enterprise of criticism itself, Sanborn's essay seems an appropriate place to conclude: reminding us not only that historical and literary representations of cannibalism may illuminate our attempts to define ourselves, but also that the function of criticism is best served when we reflect on the ways that the absorption and digestion of texts and theories shape our own identities as interpreters.

NOTES

1. Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1990), 4.

2. Kilgour, 148.

3. See William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), and Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 83–87. The "discursive" reading of cannibalism in both *The Man-Eating Myth* and *Colonial Encounters* has been highly controversial. In *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), Peggy Reeves Sanday responds to Arens's work from an anthropological perspective. Hulme's argument is addressed by Myra Jehlen in "History Before the Fact; or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony," *Critical Inquiry* 19

(Summer 1993), 679–685. Jehlen's article subsequently sparked further debate with Hulme; see Hulme's "Making No Bones: A Response to Myra Jehlen" and Jehlen's "Response to Peter Hulme," both in *Critical Inquiry* 20 (autumn 1993). More recently, Arens has revisited the controversy in an essay included in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998).

    4. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cannibals," in *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, vol. 1, trans. Jacob Zeitlin (New York: Knopf, 1934), 181.

    5. Montaigne, 185. Frank Lestringant offers a useful and interesting discussion of the context for Montaigne's essay in *Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Berkeley: University of California P, 1997).

    6. See, for example, William Arens's *The Man-Eating Myth*, Peggy Reeves Sanday's *Divine Hunger*.

    7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 21.

    8. J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host" in Harold Bloom et al eds. *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 217–53.