Graduate Journal of Food Studies • Volume 7, Number 1

Review: To Feast on Us as Their Prey: Cannibalism and the Early Modern Atlantic

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Published on: Oct 07, 2020

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Rachel B. Hermann. *To Feast on Us as Their Prey: Cannibalism and the Early Modern Atlantic*. University of Arkansas Press, 2019. x, 250 pp.

Cannibalism distinguishes the civilized from the uncivilized, the moral from the depraved, and the holy from the wicked – or so the dominant Western narrative would have you think. Rachel B. Hermann's edited collection, *To Feast on Us as Their Prey: Cannibalism and the Early Modern Atlantic*, contributes to the interdisciplinary historical study of cannibalism by reconsidering the traditional contexts in which the taboo practice is often explored. Transcending the common associations of starvation and savagery, contributing scholars employ narratives of cannibalism as a lens to examine the deep-rooted racist, Eurocentric beliefs which shaped the exploration of the New World.

The symposium from which these pieces were drawn was organised in recognition of new archeological discoveries which allegedly confirmed that cannibalism took place in Jamestown, Virginia, during the winter of 1609-1610, also known as the “Starving Time”. However, this collection is less interested in *whether or not* cannibalism took place than it is in examining the multiple purposes that narratives of cannibalism served as a social practice, a literary trope, a political tool, and more.

The collection explores beliefs and misconceptions about cannibalism, tracing them to European assumptions about the New World. It pushes into new territory, examining how these views were weaponized in an effort to keep power in European imperialist hands. An example of this is the opening chapter in which Gregory D. Smithers examines oral narratives of tribes from the Southeastern United States, in which the storytellers would use cannibalism as an allegorical tool. European settlers wrongly interpreted their stories as fact and used them to fuel colonization and “civilizing” missions. What becomes clear in the ensuing chapters is that both Old and New World inhabitants alike used tales of cannibalism for multiple purposes – the least of which may have been to relay factual accounts.

Later chapters delve into accounts of instances of cannibalism from the early years of European exploration, specifically the voyages associated with Columbus. For instance, in his first letter from the New World, Columbus characterized the inhabitants he encountered as innocent and peaceful. However, in first-hand accounts from successive voyages, there is explicit mention of cannibalism in the New World. Elena Daniele roots her argument in these primary sources. Her scrutiny exposes biases and reveals the beliefs, motivations, and self-justifications of their authors. The age of exploration and the people that defined it have had their actions interpreted and re-interpreted in popular discourse. By featuring original historical documents including diaries and letters, this collection brings us closer to understanding the past and the people who lived it.

To Feast on Us as Their Prey, combines a focus on cannibalism with numerous other themes, resulting in a series of original and rich essays. For example, Rebecca Earle examines early Spanish Catholic dealings in the New World and explores the complicated connection between the Eucharist and cannibalism. Spanish colonizers viewed cannibalistic rituals they witnessed in the New World as a complete inversion, if not perversion, of the holy sacrament. Earle exposes the hypocrisy of their assessment by analogizing cannibalism with transubstantiation as forms of consumption.

Closer to home, the British used stories of cannibalism to communicate anxieties, 'other' people of different ethnicities, and shape domestic society. Though inspired by real accounts, fictionalized narratives of cannibalism were used to reinforce a national identity connected to imperial expansions and British superiority. Julia Gammon traces the legend of Sawny Bean and its many iterations to identify how cannibalism was harnessed by writers throughout the 18th century to exercise control in Britain itself. The provocative report of an incestuous and cannibalistic clan in Scotland soon turned legendary and was used as a propagandic tool, as the details were repeatedly reworked to serve various political and moral ends. Their aim was transparent, as the story continually shifted in who it presented as the cannibals, who it condemned. Gammon's overview highlights the consistent socio-political purposes of cannibalism stories, even as the subject shifted, and encourages us to reflect on our current use of these tales, what they represent and who they benefit.

In the last chapter of the collection, volume editor Rachel B. Hermann examines the dynamics surrounding food, hunger, and power aboard slave ships. Threats and accusations of cannibalism were levied at the African slaves on board, not only to

provide a legitimizing theory to justify slavery, but also to signify the power, consumption, and accumulation which was transpiring. This chapter epitomizes a strength of the collection as a whole; its ability to navigate the tensions between the horrifying act of cannibalism and the complicated functions and theories behind it.

To Feast on Us as Their Prey challenges dominant notions about cannibalism and reveals the multiple meanings of a practice most often imagined in simplistic terms and with barbaric associations. The authors use first-hand and fictionalized accounts of cannibalism to highlight how they functioned to reinforced and legitimized colonial power and perspective. Their diverse sampling of cannibalism on both sides and across the passage of the Atlantic[FJ1] offers a fascinating survey of the field, while their thorough overview of existing scholarship and literature in the field makes it an accessible entryway for anyone hungering for a unique alimentary history.

This collection is an important reminder that explorers' reports of the New World are best suited to reveal European preconceptions and motivations, rather than to evaluate the New World societies they describe. However, most of these authors rely on written documents for source material and are therefore somewhat limited in the stories they can tell, confined to the history of the colonizer. Though this makes for a strong exploration into colonizers' understanding and use of the cannibal trope, it perhaps overlooks some important perspectives across the early modern Atlantic. This said, Smithers, who uses archival interviews as well as secondary works by historians and anthropologists, begins to tap into the necessity of broadening the type of source material needed in order to meaningfully engage with underrepresented narratives. Exploring more stories of cannibalism from the perspective of people indigenous to Africa and the Americas would enrich the anthology and may shine a light on how a multitude of peoples, not just Europeans, thought about or produced narratives of cannibalism, and to what end.

Biography

Stephanie Borkowsky is a master's student of food studies at New York University. She holds an undergraduate degree in history from McGill University. Her current research interest is food and power structures in modern North American societies.

Citations

1. Phrasing – more sense to say “on both sides and across the passage of the Atlantic”? [e](#)