THINKING ABOUT CANNIBALISM

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Abstract The discourse of cannibalism, which began in the encounter between Europe and the Americas, became a defining feature of the colonial experience in the New World, especially in the Pacific. The idea of exoticism, like that of the primitive, is also a Western construct linked to the exploring/conquering/cataloguing impulse of colonialism. We now live in a world where those we once called exotic live among us, defining their own identities, precluding our ability to define ourselves in opposition to “others” and to represent our own culture as universal. This chapter reviews anthropological approaches to cannibalism and suggests that we may now be in a position to exorcise the stigma associated with the notion of the primitive. If we reflect on the reality of cannibal practices among ourselves as well as others, we can contribute to dislodging the savage/civilized opposition that was once essential to the formation of the modern Western self and Western forms of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Few topics have attracted more attention in recent years than that of corporeality (Cottom 2001, p. xi). Following a shift in perspective in the human sciences in the 1970s, which gave closer attention to bodily representation, the “body” became a source of creative tension in anthropology. The body had long been “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 89). Decentering the physical body of the basic sciences and questions concerning the epistemological assumptions entailed in the production of natural facts radicalized and relativized our perspective on such recalcitrant dichotomies as nature/culture, self/other, and mind/body. The shift in perspective is also said to have incited increased reflexivity in the anthropological study of bodily practices (Lock 1993, p. 134).

At first glance it may seem that a similar story can be told about body eating. For many years the history and analysis of cannibalism was written from within a European or Western tradition little concerned with issues of power and representation. Renewed interest in the practice followed in part from Arens (1979) provocative suggestion that institutionalized cannibalism never existed because centuries of reports about cannibalism were not based on reliable eyewitness
evidence. In light of this criticism, many anthropologists reevaluated their data, and more nuanced studies became available from Papua New Guinea (Brown & Tuzin 1983; Knauft 1985, 1993, 2002; Goldman 1999), South America (Conklin 2001), China (Sutton 1995), Africa (Ellis 1999; Geschiere 1998; Guille-Escuret 1998, 2000), and Fiji (Sahlins 2003). Noting the ethnocentricity of the criticism, some anthropologists called for reflection on our own horror of the practice and for the topic to be discussed in ways that avoid resort to denial or euphemism (Gardner 1999, Ernst 1999). Brady (1982) also pointed to the strict positivism and naturalism of the criticism and proposed a return to the search for meaning in the accounts of actors in cannibal cosmologies, dramas, and rituals.

At the same time, the turn toward representation in the late 1980s gave new life to studies of cannibalism as a colonizing trope and stratagem. Cannibalism is said to be one of the most important topics in cultural criticism today, one which pierces to the very heart of current discussions of difference and identity (Kilgour 2001, p. vii). Kilgour’s (1990) anatomy of metaphors of incorporation, which examines the relationship between cannibalism and our dominant Western mode of producing meaning through strategies of exclusion, paved the way for current readings of cannibalism as a metaphor in colonial discourse. Representation of the cannibal as the cultural “other” was soon to be a theme for a wide array of studies (Lestringant 1997, Barker et al. 1998, Creed & Hoorn 2001, Guest 2001, McAvoy & Walter 2002).

By the 1990s a full counter-narrative had emerged. Cannibalism was viewed as a calumny used by colonizers to justify their predatory behavior. Postcolonial studies proposed “that the figure of the cannibal was created to support the cultural cannibalism of colonialism through the projection of Western imperialist appetites onto cultures they then subsumed” (Kilgour 2001, p. vii). The idea that some accounts of cannibalism by missionaries, administrators, and adventurers, as well as the allegations of neighboring groups, might be seen as derogatory or ethnic stereotypes, was an idea worth serious consideration. Like many counter-narratives, however, it is in danger of oversimplifying the story it seeks to overturn. The idea continues to appeal to sceptics who view cannibalism as a mere product of the European imagination, a tool of Empire, with its origins in the disturbed human psyche (Hulme 1998, p. 3). From the time of Montaigne to the present, the image of the cannibal is said to have had a tendency to overrun its own borders until nothing coherent, nothing literal, is left either of the behavior, or the flesh that is its nominal object (Lestringant 1997, p. 8; Cottom 2001, p. xvii). Just as the body is in danger of slipping from our grasp (Lock 1993), the cannibal of discourse is becoming more spectre than substance.

Our desire to think about cannibalism has a long history in a wide range of studies in history, philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and literature. In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus (1973) wrote about anthropophagi, said to be living beyond the light of Greek civilization. In the sixteenth century, Montaigne introduced us to man eating in the New World, and in the twentieth century, psychoanalysts proposed that cannibal images were projections of unconscious desires in early childhood.
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(Freud 1913, Klein 1975). In literature, Defoe, de Sade, Melville, Flaubert, Conrad, Harris, and other scholars provided readers with the frisson of pleasure to be experienced in different images of cannibal transgression.

TYPOLOGIES OF CANNIBALISM

The word cannibal is said to be a legacy of Columbus’ second voyage to the Caribbean in 1493. Referring originally to the Caribs in the Antilles who were identified as eaters of human flesh, the term was subsequently extended as a descriptive term for flesh eaters in other populations (Hulme 1992, p. 16). The discourse of cannibalism, which began with the encounter between Europe and the Americas, was to become a defining feature of colonial encounters in the New World, and especially the Pacific, during which the image of the “noble savage” suffered progressive degradation. As a prime symbol or signifier of “barbarism” the cannibal was central to the construction of the cultural “other,” and to Enlightenment notions of refinement, modernity, and Western civilization. The resilience of the conceptual opposition of the “savage other” and the “civilized self” is a question to which I return later.

Even among sceptics, cannibalism is acknowledged in several forms. Survival cannibalism and cannibalism as psychopathology are most frequently noted. Survival cannibalism, the consumption of others under conditions of starvation such as shipwreck, military siege, and famine, in which persons normally averse to the idea are driven by the will to live, applies to such well-known cases as that of the Donner Party. Caught in the Sierra Nevada mountains in 1846 during a brutal winter storm, the survivors resorted to eating those who had died, as well as two Indian scouts sent to save the expedition. In a similar case, Alferd Packer confessed to eating members of his small band of fellow travelers caught in a mountain blizzard in Colorado in 1883 (see Conklin 2001, pp. 87–88). More recently, several survivors of the Uruguayan rugby team, whose plane crashed in the Andes in 1972, spoke about the experience for television, and an early case of cannibalism was the subject of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Narrative of Gordon Pym” (1946 [1938]), based on the explorer’s confession published in the Southern Literary Magazine in 1837. Scholars have also documented the eating of human flesh during conditions of famine in France during the 1570s (Rawson 2001, p. 25), in China between 1958 and 1962 (Becker 1999), and in Cambodia in the late 1970s (N.Y. Times 1979, Kristof 1993). The evolutionary underpinnings of cannibalism as a survival strategy, said to have been practiced since prehistoric times, is the subject of The Cannibal Within (Petrinovich 2000).

The current surge of interest in cannibalism has also fed salacious newspaper and television reports of cannibalism as psychopathology, aberrant behavior considered to be an indicator of severe personality disorder or psychosis. Recent cases include a Japanese student at the Sorbonne who in 1981 murdered and ate his Dutch girlfriend. Considered mentally incompetent to stand trial in France, Mr. Sagawa
returned to Japan where he spent a year in hospital. His serialized novel of the crime and his role as a talk show commentator have resulted in his celebrity status as a “bunkajin,” a person of culture with expertise in a specific area (South China Morning Post 2000). More recent cases include that of Albert Fentress, a former school teacher who spent 20 years in psychiatric hospitals for killing and eating a Poughkeepsie student (LeDuff 1999), and a 41-year-old German software technician, prosecuted for killing and eating a man he met through a Web site where he solicited “young, well-built men aged 18 to 30 to slaughter” (Landler 2003). Other cases of cannibalism as psychopathology can be found on the Web (one can use http://www.google.com to search for cannibalism as psychopathology).

The many anthropological attempts to create a typology for the diversity of literal cannibalism (Farb & Armelagos 1980, Sanday 1986, Brady 1996, Goldman 1999, Conklin 2001, Tuzin 2001) have resulted in such well-accepted categories as endocannibalism, the volitional eating of someone from within the group, and exocannibalism, eating someone from outside the group. (See Viveiros de Castro 1992, p. 258–59 for a concept of cannibalism in South America which is neither “endo” nor “exo.”) Endocannibalism usually occurs in the form of funerary or mortuary consumption, in which all or part of the body is ingested as an act of affection (Glasse 1963, 1967; Lindenbaum 1979; Conklin 2001), or for group renewal and reproduction (Gillison 1983, Meigs 1984). Exocannibalism as an act of aggression, often in the context of warfare, has been reported from the Americas, the South Pacific, and Africa. Recent accounts include the Wari of Amazonia, who practice both forms (Conklin 2001, p. xxiii), along the south coast of New Guinea (where it is associated with head hunting), in the middle Sepik region and much of the Solomon Islands (see Knauff 1999, p. 103), as well as among inland groups in the Strickland-Bosavi region of New Guinea’s Southern Highlands Province (Ernst 1999, p. 144). We also have well-documented accounts of officially sanctioned aggressive cannibalism from Guangxi, China, during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s (Yi 1993, Sutton 1995), and more recently by soldiers in the Congo (Bergner 2003).

The many typologies of cannibalism describe a wide diversity of behaviors that shade into Western medical and dietary regimes. Medicinal cannibalism, for example, the ingestion of human tissue, has been documented in European medical literature since at least the first century A.D. Pliny said that drinking human blood was a cure for epilepsy. In addition to blood, Europeans ingested human tissue, usually that of an executed criminal, as a supposed medicine or tonic (Gordon-Grube 1988). Medicinal ingestion involving human flesh, blood, heart, skull, bone marrow, and other body parts was widely practiced throughout Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Human flesh obtained from “mummy shops,” where the remains of an embalmed, dried, or otherwise prepared human body that had ideally met with sudden, violent death, was considered to be a “universal panacea” by the Parcelsians who, in contrast to the Galenists, promoted the use of a variety of body substances. Samuel Johnson’s 1785 dictionary of English includes a description for preparing mummy, indicating that it was still being sold at that
date, and it was still available in 1909 from a reputable German pharmaceutical company (pp. 405–9).

Advances in medicine are said to have created technological cannibalism in the global traffic in human organs, as well as in the potential for human cloning.

Cadaver-derived drugs from pituitary glands for the production of human growth hormones (for enhanced body building and for clinically stunted children) were used extensively in England from the late 1960s to early 1980s, a practice that came under scrutiny during the epidemic of mad cow disease.

Auto-cannibalism (or autophagy) refers to the act of eating parts of oneself: hair, nail clippings, mucous, excrement, and placenta, but also instances in which individuals under torture or other duress partake of their living flesh, raw or cooked (Favazza 1987, Bergner 2003). Placentophagy, in which the mother eats her newborn baby’s placenta (as was the case among the Fore in precolonial times), became popular in the United States with the spread of the home-birth movement in the 1970s. In the American context, the placenta is often shared among close family members. Some vegetarians are enthusiastic about eating placenta because they do not classify the placenta as meat. For those who avoid meat out of compassion for animal suffering, placenta is said to be the meat of life, the only “unkilled” meat available (Janszen 1980).

Just as the home-birth movement provided a niche for placentophagy, consuming the ashes of a loved one became feasible in the United States as professional services for the cremated body of the deceased were no longer felt to be obligatory (C. Baird, personal communication). Bone ash cannibalism has been reported also in South America among the Amahuaca (Dole 1974) and the Yanomami (Lizot 1976).

Sacrificial cannibalism, in which the victim is treated with solicitude and honor as a prelude to sacrifice to the gods, is a widely reported form of aggression. Aztec cannibalism in fifteenth-century Mexico (Harner 1977), as well as nineteenth-century Fijian practices (Sahlins 1983), belong in this category. The Christian ritual of the Eucharist is its symbolic extension. Tannahill (1975, pp. 27–28) suggests that the biblical pattern of sacrifice from “probably human, through animal, through monetary, to its symbolic form of fasting and prayer” is a sequence found in other countries and religions.

Innocent cannibalism, a category in Tuzin’s (2001) refined inventory, occurs when a person is unaware that he or she is eating human flesh. In Greek legend, Atreus punishes his brother Thyestes for seducing his wife by tricking him into eating his own children (Tuzin 2001). The unwitting ingestion of human flesh is also a theme in popular entertainment. Sweeney Todd (http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial9/sweeney) is based on the case of a murderous barber and a baker, his partner in crime, who dispose of bodies by baking them into pies. It is also a theme in Motel Hell (http://classic-horror.com/reviews/motelhell.html), in which a farmer makes smoked meats composed of individuals he considers to be contributing undesirable elements to the gene pool.

As Tuzin (2001, p. 2) wisely notes, types of cannibalism vary not only according to motive and circumstance, but also the diversity is so great that it tends to
overwhelm the common feature of ingestion and confound efforts to understand the practice as a unitary phenomenon (Wike 1984, Lestringant 1997). The problem of coming to terms with such diversity is so great that it might be better to talk about “cannibalisms.” Moreover, cannibal typologies remain lodged within categories emerging from our own culture and institutions. How anthropology might provide an adequate account of the many forms of cannibalism is a topic I address also at the end of the review.

CANNIBALISM AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

A review of anthropological approaches to cannibalism takes us on a walk through the history of theory in the human sciences. Cannibalism, similar to incest, aggression, the nuclear family, and other phenomena of universal human import, appears to be a concept on which to exercise certain theoretical programs (Tuzin & Brown 1983, pp. 2–3). Montaigne’s (1581) essay on cannibalism is often cited as a precursor to the development of later ideologies of cultural relativism (Goldman 1999). Modern accounts might begin in the 1930s with Malinowski’s functional analyses of the way the institutions of society fit together and reinforce one another, a stance he took in recognizing the value of African culture “even to the point of defending such traditional practices as witchcraft and cannibalism” (Stocking 1991, p. 56). Evans-Pritchard’s own investigations (1937), as well as his evaluation of other accounts of cannibalism in the Zande region (1955, 1956), led him to believe cannibalism was based on a desire for meat. He also thought that there were ethnic and geographical variations and that was probably not a regular practice.

The functionalist concerns of British anthropology in the late 1950s led scholars to examine cannibalism in Highland New Guinea in the context of relationships among social structure, sorcery, politics, and warfare (Berndt 1962). In the 1970s the practice was sometimes presented in an evolutionary frame as a cultural trait reflecting a stage in humanity’s social and moral development (Tannahill 1975).

Aspects of functionalism, found compelling through the 1970s, prompted anthropologists to suggest that the consumption of human flesh was of nutritional benefit for some populations in New Guinea, and to the further suggestion that an ecological explanation may apply to tropical peoples living at low-medium population densities exploiting a diverse range of animal foods (Dornstreich & Morren 1974). A materialist explanation was also said to account for the ritual slaughter and consumption of war captives by the Aztecs in fifteenth-century Mexico during times of famine and shortage of animal protein (Harris 1977, 1985), and to support the proposition that human flesh provided incentives for warriors and helped to sustain the power of elites. The Aztec case provoked a heated debate about population levels and ecological conditions in the valley of Mexico (Ortiz de Montellano 1978), eliciting Sahlins’ (1979, p. 53) criticism of the bourgeois grounding of such Western-oriented materialist explanations.
Sahlins (1978) observations about Aztec cannibalism provide a clue to the theoretical shift taking place during 1970s and 1980s toward matters of cultural belief, cosmology, and ritual. The “practical function of institutions,” he said, “is never adequate to explain their cultural structure” (p. 45). Essays and monographs began to reflect this shift toward symbolism, ritual, and cosmology (Wagner 1967, Lindenbaum 1983, MacCormack 1983, Poole 1983, Tuzin 1983, Meigs 1984, Knauf 1985). Psychological analyses indebted to Freud were also a feature of this period (Sagan 1974; Tannahill 1975; Gillison 1983, 1986; Sanday 1986).

By the 1980s, following 50 years of theoretical engagement with the topic, global theorizing about cannibal practices was judged to be decidedly premature. Anthropologists were said to be notably uninformed about cannibalistic ideas and practices in specific cultural settings, and a volume of essays was offered in the hope of “advancing our knowledge and cultural understanding of this aspect of human fact and fantasy” (Tuzin & Brown 1983, pp. 3–4).

During the 1990s, anthropologists continued to document the diversity of bodily practices and beliefs in particular locations, asking in each instance what it meant for those who practiced it. By this time a consensus of opinion had formed among anthropologists working in Melanesia (Goldman 1999; Knauf 1999, p. 103), South America (Conklin 2001, p. 13), and in some instances in Africa and China that institutionalized cannibalism was practiced by some peoples in the past. The focus of scholarly attention turned instead to the mirrored reflections of both fact and fantasy to be found in diverse behaviors and beliefs (Goldman 1999). Reluctant to deny the “reality” of cannibal practices prior to contact, Geschiere (1998) looked at the ways in which the rubber boom in South Cameroon and the brutal confrontation between the Germans and the Makka shaped the imaginary of cannibalism for all concerned. (Compare Guille-Escuret 1998 for discussion of Central Africa; Ellis 1999, p. 265 on Liberia; and a sensationalist report from the Congo by Bergner 2003.) In China, Sutton (1995, p. 169) looked beyond the ideology of politically sanctioned cannibalism during the cultural revolution to the cultural factors underwriting and justifying the practice. Verrips (1991) suggested that cannibal themes in recent movies, books, and music, as well as in foods named after human body parts, provide substitutes and imaginary satisfaction for cannibalistic tendencies in societies where the Eucharist has lost much of its sway. The substitution of newer for older forms of sublimation thus harnesses in culturally appropriate ways the deep-seated desire (and accompanying anxiety) of humans to eat their own kind (p. 50).

Refinements of natural selection theory in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged evolutionary biologists to tackle what they viewed as the “vile or unsavory behaviors performed by animals,” such as “rape, slavery, infanticide, mate-desertion and cannibalism” (Mock 1992, p. 169). The paradigm was shifting from the view that traits evolve mainly for the good of the population or species, to the idea that phenotypic traits, including behavior patterns, evolved because of net benefit to the individual’s inclusive fitness. As in the other sciences, the topic of cannibalism had become a more-or-less respectable area for investigation. Attention turned to
the taxonomic diversity and evolutionary significance of intraspecific predation, and to the proximate cues underlying cannibalistic acts, their genetic basis, and the impact of cannibal practices on population and community structure (Mock 1992).

During the 1980s archaeologists also turned to the “darker side of humanity” to examine violence, slavery, and cannibalism, displacing an earlier focus on nationalism and gender. Some scholars are persuaded that cannibalism occurred in the prehistoric American Southwest, on the basis of reports of human myoglobin detected in a cooking pot, as well as the chemical residue of human flesh found in fossilized human feces (Marlar et al. 2000). Other archaeologists dispute these findings as well as evidence of bone damage patterns, which they believe is better explained by ritualized violence associated with the persecution and execution of witches (Ogilvie & Hilton 2000). Walker (2001) provides a summary of the debate and notes that cannibalism seems to have been widespread in both the Old and New Worlds. Recent accounts of cannibalism among early hominids in Spain (Wilford 2003) are expected to enhance our ability to explain prehistoric practices by establishing a pattern across time and space.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the topic of cannibalism continues to lend itself to explanatory trends in the human sciences. Anthropologists have come to appreciate the dangers of framing cultural difference in historical terms, ignoring the extent to which various social and cultural forms and practices encountered in the present are themselves the products of modern social, political, and cultural processes. Modern transformations of behavior and practice are now seen to involve the constant creation of new expressions of cultural difference, as well as redefinitions of alternate beliefs and practices (O’Brien & Roseberry 1991). Studies have moved from examining cultural isolates to documenting the historical processes by which people in distant locations were becoming “alternatively modern” (Knauft 2002). Knauft’s early-1980s ethnography of Gebusi social life in New Guinea, for example, provides a rich menu of all-night dances, elaborate initiation ceremonies, and a dramatic array of sorcery inquests and divinations that had led in preceding decades to the execution and cannibalism of up to one third of the adult population. When he returned in 1998, fundamentalist Christianity, schooling for children, and the marketing of garden produce had effected changes so great that indigenous dances and initiations were mostly limited to remote villages, spirit mediumship was defunct, and sorcery inquests and cannibalism no longer occurred (Knauft 2002, p. 107). Ethnographic attention to “vernacular or alternative modernities” seemed one way to counter the legacy of the Enlightenment concept of “modernity” and the social science discourse of “the West and the Rest” (Hall 1992).

As indicated earlier, the topic of cannibalism has recently provided lifeblood for postcolonial and cultural studies. Although some aspects of postmodernism had earlier filtered into cultural anthropology, the topic of cannibalism did not seem to lend itself to a postmodern pastiche of genres, voices, and identities. Taussig’s (1987) study of terror and healing in Colombia is, perhaps, an exception,
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as is Tom Harrison’s (1937) little-known work *Savage Civilisation*, an exercise in postmodernism before its time. Harrison’s boastful talk of hobnobbing with cannibals in Vanuatu and headhunters in the Borneo bush, as well as criticism of his data collection methods that seemed but an accumulation of disconnected observations, may have deflected attention from this protopostmodern creation of a plural text, its questioning of ethnographic authority, recognition of the need for reflexivity, and its irreducibly literary nature (MacClancy 2002).

As Geertz (1995) observes, cultural anthropology draws the greater part of its vitality from the controversies that animate it. Between 1992 and 2003, Obeyesekere and Sahlins have been engaged in a high-profile debate concerning how scholars should understand non-Western cultures. Obeyesekere (1992) considers that people’s beliefs and actions have practical function in people’s lives and should be understood along psychological lines. If we pay attention to the dialogical nature of cannibalistic discourse in the logs and journals of Cook’s voyages, he suggests, we see that they reveal more about the relations between Europeans and Savages than about the nature of Savage anthropophagy (pp. 630–31). The British and the Maori, both fascinated by cannibal behaviors, shared the “dark bond of cannibalism” (p. 638). The British fascination is said to have provoked the exaggerated behavior of the Maori in the relish with which they consumed the roasted human flesh that the British offered them (p. 638). A historical account of this scene (Thomas 2003, p. 214) similarly considers the Maori performance to be a response to the sailors’ manifest preoccupation with the topic and was intended to produce shock. (Compare Dening 1980, p. 287 on the “performance” and shock value of cannibalism in the South Pacific).

In contrast to Obeyesekere, Sahlins (1983) takes the view that there are distinct cultures and that they should be understood along structuralist lines. The cultural sense of cannibalism is the concept of it as set by its place in a total cultural scheme, which gives it a differential value in relationship to other categories or concepts. The project to recuperate Fijian cannibalism thus amounts virtually to the recuperation of the culture. It was “a complex phenomenon whose myriad attributes were acquired by its relations to a great variety of material, political, linguistic, ritual, supernatural elements of society” (Sahlins 2003, p. 4). Sahlins rejects Obeyesekere’s suggestion that “cannibalism” be used to refer only to a British discourse about the practice, distinguishing it from the older term anthropophagy for the sacrificial practices of Polynesian peoples.

The echo of Lévi-Strauss in Sahlins’ analysis is present also in recent French essays, where cannibalism is still “good to think.” Going beyond the narrow view of anthropophagy merely as human consumption, cannibal metaphors are said to speak about different social, cultural, and religious realities. The creativity of the metaphor establishes connections among objects in different contexts: between eating human flesh and relations of kinship and alliance, as well as notions of identity and difference, savagery, animality, the excessive use of power, and the operations of the law. The figure of the cannibal allows authors in different epochs to think reflectively about other ways of life and different ways of being human (Kilani
2001/2002). Cultural views and representations of bodily aggression associated with sorcery, warfare anthropophagy, corporal punishment, and sacrifice are also said to reveal significant connections between the body and order and disorder in cosmic and social life (Godelier & Panoff 1998). Helen Clastres (1972) suggests that the objective of Tupi warfare, in which the Tupi killed and devoured brothers-in-law, was carried out not to capture women, but as an expression of a yearning for a world without affines and dependency on others. Lemonnier’s (1992) account of the striking homogeneity of forms of bodily aggression among different Anga groups leads him to suggest transformation (in a historical and structural sense) of an older cultural system common to them all.

The Spanish ethnographer Viveiros de Castro (1992) also adopts a Lévi-Straussian stance in his analysis of cannibalism among the Arawete of eastern Amazonia. The theme of divine cannibalism, central to the Arawete definition of the human condition, is treated as part of the complex of Tupi-Guarani ritual anthropophagy. Tupinamba cannibalism has no privileged level of explication but is an element in a complex system that cannot be reduced to a simple function. It consists “in an interrelation of several explanatory levels” (p. 274).

Curiously, all the major positions on cannibalism maintained today are said to have been well represented by the eighteenth century (Cottom 2001, p. 145). Expressions of doubt can be found in John Atkins’ [1735] narrative of exploration, in which he argues that cannibalism was simply unthinkable, and in the report of William Wales, the astronomer assigned to the Resolution on Cook’s second voyage (pp. 138–39). That cannibalism was an act with an audience in mind, intended to induce terror, was proposed by a thirteenth-century Dominican friar (concerning the Mongols), by Léry in the sixteenth century (about the Tupi), and in 1778 by John Carver (about the Iriquois) (Sanborn 1998, p. 61). Jean de Léry also cites cases of famine cannibalism in France in 1573, when mothers ate their children (Lestringant 1997, p. 74). Lévi-Strauss’ suggestion (1964, p. 386) that certain of our own customs might seem barbarous to an observer from a different society was prefigured in Montaigne’s 1562 encounter with the Brazilians in Rouen. The notion that the conqueror is as savage as the savages appears in Book 1 of the Iliad, in Plato’s Republic, and in Aristotle’s Politics. It recurs in the response of some early Christians about their Roman prosecutors who called the Christians cannibals because of the Eucharistic rite (the Christians said that the Romans, who roasted their victims at the stake, were the true cannibals), and the pre-occupation with the notion of the “savage in all of us” includes Plato’s reflections on the tyrant whose brutalities are equivalent to cannibal barbarism (Rawson 1997, p. 6). The cannibal within every human being was also the judgment of a contributor to the Encyclopédie [1751–1765] edited by Diderot (Cottom 2001, p. 160).

Cannibalism as metaphor also has a long history in philosophy and literature (Lestringant 1997, Rawson 2001). Montaigne, de Pauw, Swift, Diderot, Rousseau, Bougainville, de Sade, Flaubert, and Jules Verne each drew on the topic to speak about the social realities of their time. Stepping into metaphor is said to be a
traditional maneuver whereby troubling insinuations about cannibalism can be considered without being taken for real (Rawson 2001, pp. 25–33).

THE SEMANTICS OF TRANSGRESSIVE CONSUMPTION

Shrinking from literalism is also an artifact of a selective focus on aggressive exo-cannibalism, overlooking endocannibalism, which lacks the same symbolic charge (Guille-Escuret 1998, p. 120). Reflecting a Western “cannibal phobia” (Guille-Escuret 2000, p. 186), the notion of cannibalism is described as “repugnant” (Arens), a “dark bond” (Obeyesekere), “vile and unsavory” (evolutionary biology), casting a “dark shadow” (Sartore), and one that displays the “darker side of humanity” (archaeology). Setting aside for the moment the racist and at times gendered inflection of the language, cannibalism in Western eyes is viewed as a transgressive form of consumption. The Western encounter with savage transgression provided an opportunity to test and explore fundamental boundaries in the home culture. The nature of transgressive consumption, however, is seen in a different light at different times.

Marco Polo’s ecstatic description of the natural wonders of Quilon portrayed difference as a source of pleasure and delight. For late-thirteenth-century authors, the wonders of the East had overwhelmingly positive associations. They found much to blame, such as idolatry and occasionally the alleged cannibalism of the peoples they described, but the exotic races were too remote and strange to present a conceptual or political threat. At its most transgressive state, cannibal behavior served to satirize courtly and aristocratic culture, but it did not appear scandalous or pathological. The thirteenth-century and fourteenth-century topographical literature embraced exoticism, finding expression in the topos of the relativity of the marvellous (Daston & Park 1998, p. 34).

The Renaissance image of the heroic cannibal adopted by Montaigne as well as by the first missionaries to the New World, which was linked to the aristocratic values of magnanimity and chivalry, would soon be challenged by the greed of the conquistadors and the excessive zeal of missionaries (Lestringant 1997, p. 7). The earliest images of cannibalism for European eyes, however, were provided by the illustrators of de Bry’s Great Voyages [1590–1634]. For these seventeenth-century Protestant engravers, cannibalism, although not condoned, was not a theological sin but a form of immoderate eating. The Tupinambas were thus judged to be pagans and savages for committing one or another of the four kinds of gluttony: excess frequency (eating before need); quality (seeking delicacies for pleasure); quantity (consuming immoderate amounts); or table manners (eating with avidity) (Bucher 1981, p. 51). Renaissance views of cannibalism also held it to be “natural” because the four humors make human flesh tasty to humans who are made of the same stuff (Shapin 2002, p. 21).

The literal ingestion of human flesh not surprisingly evoked the Eucharist, its sublimated variant. Debate over the Eucharist, fraught with cannibal associations
since the earliest days of the Christian Church, became a major point of polemical contest in Reformation Europe (Rawson 1997, p. 4). Carried to the New World, the sins of immoderate consumption were extended to the excesses of Spanish colonization. The analogy between the sacrament and New World anthropophagy allowed Calvinists to compare Catholics to the Outeca, bad cannibals who ate their victims raw, an allusion to the sanguinary sacrifice of the Catholic mass. The Tupinamba, who cooked their enemies after death, and who provided hospitality to strangers, were the good cannibals, who, like good Protestants, invited worshippers to gather round the communal table in devotions that were open to the whole group (Rawson 1997). The trope of the good and the bad cannibal (the noble and ignoble savage) would reappear and become transformed with French and British adventures in the Pacific, which settled on new images of transgression and desire.

Political and economic conditions in seventeenth-century Europe also provided the context for dwelling on images of gourmandizing excess. Poverty and unrest stemming from the decline of the wool trade allowed Protestant and Republican authors to focus on the sins of appetite associated with unreformed religion. Morality plays depict monks and priests as gluttonous lechers: The Spanish were the tyrants consuming other nations to satisfy their Babylonian, Roman Catholic, and absolutist ambitions (Healy 2002, p. 179). The theme of sensual and gourmandizing excess retains its political resonance in judgments about contemporary tyrants. Reports of Emperor Bokassa of the Central African Empire eating humans for breakfast, often in a flaming brandy sauce, is a way of speaking about the illegitimate use of power in Africa in cultures where the language of “eating” is used as a metaphor for power and accumulation (Bayart 1993, White 2003).

During the eighteenth century, the theme of cannibalism retains its transgressive edge for European audiences but begins to acquire new meaning. With the opening of the human body, Enlightenment thinking is said to have taken a visceral turn. “Disgusting questions of incorporation, assimilation, and digestion” were vital to the philosophical self-images of the Enlightenment (Cottom 2001, p. xii). A rhetoric of visceral embodiment and metamorphosis is threaded through the philosophical discourses of the era. Metamorphosis provided the issue around which nature was conceived, and which, in a pre-Darwinian era, the relation between sameness and difference could be articulated. The self-contradictory, self-consuming figure of the cannibal, confounding the distinction between self and other, stood for all the uncertainties in the Enlightenment conception of the world (Cottom 2001, p. xiv).

In the context of increasing overseas trade, religious proselytization, and imperial expansion, some eighteenth-century writers began to explore the perverse attractiveness of the image of the cannibal in order to reflect on certain features of their own societies (Cottom 2001, p. 153). Defoe (1719) portrays the cannibal as a nexus of ambiguous desire. Robinson Crusoe is attracted to the idea of eating human flesh and to being eaten, illustrating the way in which the bourgeois subject was being defined by the exclusion of what is marked as dirty, repulsive, or contaminating, an exclusion that bears the imprint of desire (Stallybrass & White 1986).
The ambivalence of cannibal transgression perhaps reached its extreme in de Sade’s (1797) description of his characters gorging on wines, liqueurs, shit, semen, and bits of human flesh. His critique of colonial exploitation is perhaps undone by his own exploitation of cannibal eroticism. Flaubert’s 1862 novel Salammbo was also designed to flout the conventions of the literary world and vilify the bourgeoisie. Set in Carthage in the fourth century B.C., Salammbo is a story of cannibalism, torrid eroticism, the din of battles, and the sacrifice of children, written in what he calls his “cannibal style,” transgressive writing about a transgressive topic. At a dinner to launch the book he is said to have offered his guests “human flesh, brain of bourgeois and tigress clitorises sauteed in rhinoceros butter” (Slater 2001, pp. 4–5).

In the postmodern world the idea of the cannibal has been emptied of the urbane irony present in Swift’s (1729) Modest Proposal in which he argued that the sale of small Irish children for human consumption would rescue the economy, please the Irish nation, prevent the children of the poor from being a burden to their parents, work in favor of marriage, put a stop to abortions, and make men as fond of their pregnant wives as they were of their mares in foal, cows in calf, or sows ready to farrow, no longer beating them for fear of miscarriage. Contemporary performances of “immoderate eating” for profit and entertainment have also lost the moral edge and political resonance we associate with early forms of transgressive consumption. Competitions in the United States and Japan, in which people eat as much of a given food as possible in a set time, receive television coverage and attract a wide audience (Hesser 2002, Ballard 2003), as does the sight of Americans eating beetles and other culturally questionable substances (Ogunnaike 2003). No longer regarded as a sin of gluttony or a platform for ridiculing bourgeois behaviors, popular enactments of immoderate eating merely play with the borders of modern sensibilities. When Tobias Schneebaum consumed human flesh while living with the Amarakaire in Peru, he crossed the boundary and was judged by many Americans to have descended into primitivism, illustrating the resilience of the taboo, since cannibalism is not a crime in the United States. The event is recorded in Schneebaum’s 1969 autobiography and retold in the film Keep the River on Your Right (see Zalewski 2001). Schneebaum’s experiment with transgressive consumption ran afoul of a European discourse on cannibalism, highly developed in the nineteenth century (Obeyesekere 1992, p. 641), and which depended on the opposed concepts of the primitive other and the civilized self.

FROM PAGAN TO PRIMITIVE IN THE PACIFIC

During the eighteenth century a significant change was taking place in the way native inhabitants of new worlds came to be understood and described. Renaissance perceptions of difference had been religious rather than racial or national. The intruders were described not as Spaniards, Europeans, or whites, but Christians, and the Indian was not a savage of any particular type, but a naked pagan, available to be
converted. The shift away from religiously framed difference entailed new models for constructing otherness couched in a narrative of natural history. Humanitarian and appreciative assessments of dissimilarity (as well as some negative judgments) were displaced from the late Enlightenment onward by a more uniform, intolerant, and less subtle denigration of physical inferiority and moral fault (Thomas 1994, pp. 77–79). The decisive move in Enlightenment thinking away from mythological, religious, and other “causes” of social evolution to material causes recast the history of mankind in a single continuum, with societies ranked lower or higher on the same scale. This Enlightenment discourse about social progress depended on the discursive figures of the “noble” and “ignoble savage,” formulated in terms of “the West and the Rest,” and provided the language in which “modernity” first came to be defined (Hall 1992, pp. 312–14). Cannibalism was to become the prime symbol or signifier of “barbarism” for a language of naturalized typification and essentialized difference that would harden in the negative racism of the nineteenth century (Thomas 1994, p. 79).

The image of the noble savage had attained sociological status with Rousseau’s account of simple, unsophisticated people living in a state of nature, unfettered by laws, government, property, or social divisions. This state of paradise was discovered anew with French and British exploration of the Pacific. Bougainville’s reports from Tahiti (“I thought myself transported into the Garden of Eden”) seemed to fulfill this preoccupation with an image that provided a vehicle for criticism of over-refinement, religious hypocrisy, and social inequalities in the West (Hall 1992, p. 311). When Cook arrived in Tahiti in 1769, the same idyll of a sexual paradise and ideas of innocence were repeated again (p. 302), and early paintings of Cook’s death in Hawaii portrayed both Cook and the natives who killed him in the “heroic” mold (p. 310). When Cook brought the Tahitian Omai to Europe in 1774, his tattoos fascinated London society, sparking a tattooing vogue among the English aristocracy. The noble savage was still alive when Kabris, a French seaman shipwrecked and tattooed in the Marquesas, was rescued and taken to St. Petersburg, where his tattoos were admired at the Court of the Tzar. When he reached France in 1817, however, his tattoos were no longer viewed with wonder and delight. Now marked as a savage, the tattooed Kabris found employment only in Bordeaux’s Cabinet of Illusions and in fairs where he had become “a monster in a menagerie of anatomical and morbid curiosities” (Le Fur 2001, pp. 38–41).

During the nineteenth century, missionaries in the Pacific began to denounce the tattoo as an unpardonable mockery of the divine work. By 1875 Cesare Lambroso had outlined his theories concerning heredity and criminal behavior (“L’homme criminel”), noting the tendency for criminal offenders to be tattooed, the sign of pathology (Boulay 2001, p. 110). For Pierre Marie Dumoutier, the phrenologist on Dumont D’Urville’s 1837–1840 expedition to the South Seas, the intricate designs tattooed on the skin of high-ranking and common people in the Marquesas were judged by the yardstick of their supposed barbarity. They represented the outward marks of a society of cruelty, which refused to allow the “natural” expressions of human nature (Rochette 2003).
By the end of the eighteenth century, as maritime exploration turned its focus to the scientific classification of animal and human species (Boulay 2001, p. 32), and with the death and disappearance of the navigator Defresne (killed and eaten by the Maori), the disappearance of De Lange and La Pérouse, and the death of Cook in 1779, the idealized image of the noble savage was no longer tenable. The stereotype of the noble savage had always contained within it its mirror opposite, the ignoble savage. In this new location, the dualism became gendered in the form of the beautiful, enticing siren and the malicious, bestial cannibal, a distinction that, as colonial intentions became more focused, would be extended to civilized, white Polynesians and savage, black Melanesians. In the South Pacific, the Western sense of self had produced another fantasy of longing and transgression: a world of sirens without men and cannibals without women (Boulay 2001, p. 114).

The construction of the stereotype of the South Seas savage took place on many fronts. Beginning in London in 1851 and ending in 1931 in Paris, international exhibitions proclaimed the superiority of Western civilization. Visitors to the 1889 Paris exhibition were invited to view the skulls of primitive men organized by the exhibition’s director of anthropology, illustrating the ladder of races with whites at the summit. One hundred “kanaks” were imported from New Caledonia for the 1931 Paris exhibit, where they were installed in the Bois de Boulogne, a park for exotic plants and animals. Newspapers ran stories about two sensational attractions: wild cannibals and 1000 crocodiles. The “kanaks” were subsequently exhibited as savage cannibals and polygnists in a number of German towns, although most of the Polynesians were practicing Catholics (Le Fur 2001, pp. 44–45).

The image of the primitive savage was also a creation directed at young minds. A pedagogical discourse on the antipodes was developed in nineteenth-century French atlases and encyclopedias designed for children. A 1910 history book for primary schools still noted that barbarians are people who do not know how to cultivate the earth, have no metal nor schools, and are ignorant. In addition, they do not know how to nourish, clothe, or house themselves properly, they are always quarrelling with one another, and they have no understanding of justice. They are the reverse of all that is civilized. Jules Verne’s novels, in which children survive a terrible confrontation with Pacific cannibals, represent a genre of adventure stories reflecting these views. Between 1880 and 1910 his contemporary, Louis Boussenard, published more than 50 similar adventure books: Le Tour du Monde d’un Gamin de Paris (1880) and Aventures d’un Gamin de Paris en Océanie (1890) were among the most popular (Boulay 2001, pp. 146–62).

Nineteenth-century missionary literature was particularly skillful at creating an image of primitivism. Called on to explain the existence of savagery in divine creation, the ecclesiastics proposed that the long migration of the sons of Ham from the banks of the Euphrates, passing through India, had come to rest in Melanesia. Thus, one finds among the blacks in Africa, Asia, and Oceania “loathsome vices...and cannibalism in all its hideous subtleties” (Boulay 2001, pp. 104–9). Such nineteenth-century romanticism, which dwelt on an image of the heroic missionary marching toward the supreme sacrifice, perhaps destined to impress
mission donors, continued well into the twentieth century (e.g., Dupeyrat’s 1954 autobiography *Savage Papua: A Missionary Among Cannibals*). The discovery of gold in Papua New Guinea extended the life of similar tales of personal encounters with savage cannibals (Booth 1929, Demaitre 1936).

Airbrushed out of these mythologies of heroic adventure are the complexities of interethnic encounter and sexual confrontation, as well as the more gruesome story of conflict, violence, and dispossession (Thomas 1994, p. 76; Rawson 2001, p. 150). To justify political intervention and colonization, however, the literature on adventure by the end of the nineteenth century had settled on the Fijian King Thakombau (for the English) and chief Bourarate de Hienghene, the “king” of New Caledonia (for the French) to represent the abominations of anthropophagy (Boulay 2001, p. 60).

**THE END OF EXOTICISM**

The idea of exoticism, like the notion of the primitive, is a Western construct linked to the exploring/conquering/cataloging impulse from the late fifteenth century to the present, a concept now undermined by changing historical and material conditions. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Tupinamba of Brazil quickly came to represent the extreme of exoticism in the European imagination (Guille-Escuret 2000, p. 195). More than a lyrical celebration of things tropical, the concept of exoticism was a particular way of introducing the “foreign” to the West. The generic representation of otherness found in Western texts allowed subjects of a dominant culture to counter that culture in the very process of returning to it (Célestin 1996, p. 3). The factors that form its basis are found in a predominantly French literature representing colonial exploration and the discovery of new territories (p. 23). Montaigne, for example, presents the exotic as a viable alternative to the “civilized” world. He considers the absence of laws among the Tupinambas to be more desirable than their proliferation in France, a decentering of the assumptions of his world through the use of the exotic (Célestin 1990).

We now live in a postmodern world in which those we once called exotic live among us. Writers from formerly exoticized locations define their own identities as they find exoticism in the streets of Paris or New York. We are said to have reached the limits of exoticism in a world in which cultural differences have become so diffuse and shifting. When the exotic becomes part of “home,” we experience a break in the clear opposition between the Western self and the exotic other and in the ability of the West to represent its own culture as universal (Célestin 1996, pp. 16–18).

International flows of capital have also conflated the idea of “inside” and “outside,” of center and periphery. In the West, we have become consumers of the products of our own exported capital. Exotic goods arrive in our markets as kitsch, leached of local meanings. Hotels in the Pacific offer for sale skulls that hint at the
“mana” of the savage victor who has appropriated this important body part, and France Telecom promotes the “tatoo,” a small reception device worn as a bracelet for elite consumers to “stay in contact with your tribe” (Boulay 2001, p. 177). Ethnic fusion in dance, dress, music, art, and cuisine undermine the political valence of “exoticism,” which had coincided with the high point of colonial expansion (Célestin 1996, p. 19). The once-seductive siren of the Pacific, now revived to promote tourism to Polynesia, has lost much of her ideological presence.

THE END OF PRIMITIVISM?

The image of colonized peoples, however, depended on the idea of the “primitive” as well as the “exotic.” Primitivism, like exoticism, formed part of the larger conceptual framework that produced a history of “mankind” on the basis of a single continuum divided into a series of stages. Although exoticism may have reached something of an endpoint (Célestin 1996, p. 3) and we are said to be witnesses to the end of “serious academic exploration of exoticism” (Goldman 1999, p. 3), this is not the case with primitivism. Sometimes conflated, the “primitive” and the “exotic” are not the same. Exoticism has more to do with difference and strangeness rather than with an antithetical relation to modernity. The primitive, in contrast, assumes some kind of originary, socially simple and natural character (Thomas 1994, p. 173). The figure of the “cannibal,” an icon of primitivism, retains much of its ideological force.

As this review suggests, however, we are at a turning point in thinking about cannibalism. The common factor in the history of cannibal allegations is the combination of denial in ourselves and attribution of it to those we wish to defame, conquer, and civilize. In these so-called egalitarian times, and in the current atmosphere of postcolonial guilt and imperial self-inculpation, denial about ourselves has been extended to denial on behalf of those we wish to rehabilitate and acknowledge as our equals (Rawson 1997, p. 3).

The literal figure of the cannibal has recently reappeared, however, even flourished, in both non-Western and Western settings. Anthropologists working in the Americas, Africa, and Melanesia now acknowledge that institutionalized cannibalism occurred in some places at some times. Archaeologists and evolutionary biologists are taking cannibalism seriously. We have evidence of the incorporation of human body parts in Western medicinal and technological procedures, as well as in some birth and mortuary rituals. The possibility that cannibalism was a widespread practice among early humans was suggested recently by a British team of investigators studying a common polymorphism in the human prion protein gene (PRNP) known to confer resistance to prion diseases. Studies among the Fore of Papua New Guinea showed that in marked contrast to younger Fore who had not eaten human flesh, and who were thus not exposed to the prion-causing kuru, the protective gene was most prevalent among Fore women over 50 years of age who had participated in multiple mortuary ceremonies, and who had survived
the kuru epidemic that devastated the population from the 1920s to the 1950s. The spread of prion-related disease triggered by endocannibalism, it is suggested, could have increased pressure to develop the protective polymorphism. This same genetic variation is said to protect against a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, the human form of mad cow disease in Britain (Mead et al. 2003).

The suggestion that cannibalism might have been a widespread practice among early humans provides a welcome opportunity to move from double denial to double acknowledgment, freeing us from fabricating conceptions about ourselves that depend on defaming others. A willingness to accept the idea of cannibalism as a widespread practice is impelled by the urge, common to both camps, to close the conceptual space dividing the West from the Rest.

How might we write about cannibalism today? In recent years, some anthropologists have called on their colleagues to provide information they have about the practice. Reticence not only damages the ethnographic project by failing to document the varieties of ways of being human; it has done nothing to modify popular stereotypes and racially defamatory discourses and gives weight to the bourgeois tendency to universalize its own standards of behavior (Ernst 1999). Acknowledging the possibility that cannibalism has been part of the human record, including our own, could perhaps meet Brady’s call (1982) for philosophical housecleaning around the complexities of getting to know cannibals. We are encouraged also to take seriously the notion that anthropology is one of the moral disciplines whose characteristic modality is not only the study of their objects but also an ethically relevant engagement with them (Gardner 1999).

An anthropology of cannibalism that steps beyond metaphors about our own behaviors could unsettle dominant Western systems of knowledge, said to be lacking in recent literature on the topic (Ernst 1999, p. 155). Even Montaigne, who we rightly honor for his ethical exploration of cannibalism not weighed down by the need to make moral judgment, suppresses the fact that cannibal acts about which he must have known occurred during the religious wars in France. An especially famous case occurred in the Protestant city of Sancerre, and several other instances were reported about the public sale and consumption of parts of mutilated Huguenots in Paris, Lyon, and Auxerre, events witnessed and reported by Léry in 1574, before Montaigne published his essay (Rawson 2001, pp. 25–26).

The task of writing about cannibalism will not be left to anthropologists alone. People in Papua New Guinea have recently expressed their views about the practice. During a number of court trials held in the 1960s and 1970s, villagers brought to court to face the charge of cannibalism, which they did not contest, were acquitted. In 1971, for example, an Australian judge acquitted seven men from Western Papua because cannibalism was “not improper or indecent in the community to which the charged men belonged,” and there was at that time no specific charge in Territory law (Courier-Mail 1971). By 1978, however, another judge convicted 3 men of “improperly interfering with a body,” but he admitted he labored under the disability of not being a Papua New Guinean by birth. Recently appointed
to the Papua New Guinean national court, the judge made it clear, however, that cannibalism was now contrary to the new Papua New Guinea national constitution, which guaranteed certain basic human rights (Baker 1978, Smales 1978).

Papua New Guinea writers have also addressed the issue. Douglas Waiko interviewed elderly men from the Binandere community in Northern Papua, who recalled with pride their own practices of “cannibalism, raiding and the like” (Waiko 1970). In 1995, Buluna discussed famous cases of cannibalism in the Milne Bay area with people who provided detailed descriptions of the protocol associated with the treatment and consumption of victims, and of the accompanying elaborate feasting and dancing (Buluna 1995).

The topic also received recent attention in the national parliament. In 1972, a member from the Eastern Highlands informed the House of Assembly that he had eaten human flesh and requested that education be extended to his area so his children would not continue to do the same thing (Sun 1972). Greater publicity was given to Prime Minister Skate’s remarks following an insensitive joke about cannibalism by Prince Philip of Britain during his 1998 visit to Papua New Guinea. Mr. Skate said he was saddened by suggestions that cannibalism is still practiced in Papua New Guinea. Two months later, however, at a ceremony celebrating the opening of a school in the Gulf province, the Prime Minister cautioned oil industry representatives present at the ceremony that should they decide to abandon Papua New Guinea, he would readily lead his people back to the days when his ancestors killed and ate a white man (Goldman 1999, p. 20).

Skate’s invocation of cannibalism as a sign of strength, self-reliance, and possibly a threat to outsiders could be compared to the heroic phase (1920–1930) of Brazilian “modernismo,” when intellectuals and artists self-consciously adopted a primitivist identity in an attempt to promote an aesthetic revolution commensurate with modernity. Andrade’s Revista de Antropofagia used anthropophagy as a metaphor for the cosmopolitan enterprise of absorbing foreign and native cultures as the means to construe a unique Brazilian identity. Adopting a cannibal identity transformed a taboo into a totem and redefined anthropophagic primitivism as a positive value—a witty and self-reflective critique of colonialism (Bellei 1998).

The Enlightenment sciences of man provided the framework within which modern social science and the idea of “modernity” were formulated. The discourse of the West and the Rest is still at work in some of the conceptual categories, stark oppositions, and theoretical dualisms of contemporary social thought (Hall 1992, p. 313). The figure of the cannibal, long used to establish difference and construct racial boundaries, can now be called on in projects to deconstruct them (Kilgour 1998, p. 242). The stigma of savagery and primitivism, it seems, is best countered when we forgo our attachment to metaphor to describe our own behaviors and reflect on the reality of cannibal activities among ourselves as well as others. We are then in a position to dislodge the savage/civilized dualism, once essential to the formation of a modern Western identity and Western forms of knowledge, as we fashion a new understanding of our postmodern selves.
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