ENCOUNTERING CANNIBALISM: A CULTURAL HISTORY

Kelly L. Watson

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Committee:
Erin Labbie, Advisor
William Albertini
ABSTRACT

Erin Labbie, Advisor

"Encountering Cannibalism: A Cultural History" explores the relationship between the trope of cannibalism and the notions of civilization and savagery. This thesis intervenes in scholarship on cannibalism by analyzing the surrounding discourses from a cultural studies position. Despite the advancements in scholarship in the past fifty years that have seen the breakdown of many binary systems, criticism that addresses cannibalism continues to perpetuate the civilization/savagery binary. Working from a meta-discursive position in American Culture Studies, my thesis interrogates the history of cannibalism in order to understand this stubborn persistence of the civilization/savagery binary in studies of cannibalism across other disciplines. Tracing the development of cannibal discourse, we discover the place of the cannibal within a fantasy of wholeness of American identity. The cannibal is both a disruption of civilization and a foundational element as neither civilization nor savagery can exist independently. The trope of cannibalism allows the scholar to make connections and draw conclusions across disciplines, time periods, and theoretical positionings, and provides a unique entry point for discussions of race and gender.

Chapter I: Encountering Cannibalism explores the development of cannibal discourse. In order to understand the discursive development of the cannibal, one must first interrogate European understandings of civilization and savagery. The early writers of the New World
created the cannibal trope and used it to justify colonialism so that the figure of the cannibal became the most powerful descriptor of savagery.

Chapter II: The Functions of Cannibalism explores the relationship between cannibalism and warfare. After the “discovery” of America by Europeans, cannibalism becomes an integral part of warfare for many Native peoples. Indeed, to eliminate cannibalism was to eliminate warfare.

While writings about the New World are important in the discursive creation of the cannibal, due to the flawed and Eurocentric history of the cannibal as Other, the analysis of visual representations allows an understanding of what falls into the gaps in European verbal discourse. Chapter III: Representing Cannibalism looks at several images of the New World and examines their contribution to the trope of cannibalism. These images prompt an enquiry into the role of gender within this discourse and the colonial project.

The cannibal becomes the ultimate Other for the European Subject and is therefore simultaneously rejected and fetishized. The notion of the cannibal Other persists and plays an important role in modern discourse which still insists on the clear separation of civilization and savagery. This thesis seeks to assert the first cultural history of cannibalism so that other disciplinary work on the subject may be illuminated and altered.
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INTRODUCTION

The 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, which was known as the World’s Columbian Exposition, drew nearly 27 million visitors and offered a never before seen gathering of amazing inventions, curiosities, artifacts, art, scholars, etc. The Fair was, on the surface a celebration of the discoveries made by Columbus and their legacy. By its title alone, the fair reinforced America as a conquered land with no relevant history before its discovery by Western Europeans. The exhibit was a glorification of colonialism, and of the subjugation of the land and its inhabitants. It took place in Chicago, which in the recent past would have been a “hostile” land occupied by Native Americans. By placing the World’s Fair far from the eastern seaboard in the middle of the nation, it acknowledged the successful expansion of the United States and emphasized the accessibility of the frontier. The modern bustling metropolis no longer resembled a frontier. In 1871, Chicago had been nearly destroyed by a great fire. The beauty and grandeur of the Fair emphasized the resiliency of the city and Americans. In many ways, the fair also lauded a newly reinvigorated sense of “Americaness,” a celebration of American spirit and culture. Scholars argue that fairs, in general, have helped to craft the modern world. They were arenas where manufacturers sought to promote products, where states and provinces competed for new residents and new investments, where urban spaces were organized into shimmering utopian cities, and where people from all social classes went to be alternately amused, instructed, and diverted from more pressing concerns.¹

In other words, fairs serve the dual purposes of creating and illustrating culture. They tended to reinforce traditional notions while simultaneously providing a space for innovation. Furthermore, the Columbian Exposition,

attempted to redefine America for itself and the world, and in doing so introduced many themes and artifacts still prevalent in American life: the connection between technology and progress; the predominance of corporations and the professional class in the power structure of the country; the triumph of consumer culture; and the equation of European forms with ‘high culture’ . . .

In addition to introducing many of the themes evident in modern American culture, the Columbian Exposition reinforced the American understandings of the early modern world and ensured their place for the future. The representations of the past presented at the fair emphasized difference, thus creating a visible break with the savagery of history. In its attempt to create distance between civilization and savagery the fair, in fact, reinforced their dependency on one another. In order to create the technological wonders shown at the fair, it was necessary for the West to rid itself of savagery. What is significant about the 1893 World’s Fair is that in its self-proclaimed inauguration of the modern world, it carried with it the legacy of the old world, in which humanity and humanness came with clear hierarchies.

The Fair’s Midway Plaisance, a collection of curiosities and exhibits from around the globe, was designed to entertain and educate the viewer. The Midway featured living displays of life throughout the world including (but not limited to): A Wild East show (which featured “Arab spearmen”), Sitting Bull’s Cabin, a Dahomy Village, an Austrian Village, a Chinese Village, an American Indian Show, a Lapland Village, Algeria and Tunis exhibits, a Street in Cairo display, a Moorish Palace, a Turkish Village, a German Village, a Javanese Village, and an Aztec

2 Ibid.
Village. Many scholars have noted that the framers of the fair believed that there existed a clear and precise progression of humanity and that this is evident in the displays on the Midway Plaisance. Walking from west to east through the Midway was a journey through the categories of humanity. At the east end there were displays of the technological innovations of mankind, the tools of civilization. The western end focuses more on ethnological displays and war entertainment shows. The displays on the Midway generally fell into two types, a relatively accurate international display such as a German beer hall on the one hand, or a kind of cultural parody on the other. The latter was typically reserved for cultures that were the subject of bias. The Dahomy Village, for instance, emphasized their reputed savagery and their reputation as cannibals. Historically the Dahomy of West Africa were notorious for their ferocity and savagery. They were said to be feared by all who came in contact with them. The Dahomy represented the late 19th century stereotype of the savage cannibal. Two centuries earlier the stereotypical cannibal was likely an inhabitant of Brazil, but by the close of the 19th century the paradigmatic cannibal was African.

The Women’s Building, in which the artistic and intellectual achievements of women were honored, was an innovative element of the fair. The works of women were restricted to one small building in the expansive fair, but that fact that they were displayed at all was a step forward. The Woman’s Building was located directly between the White City (the portion of the Fair dedicated to the glorification of civilization’s achievements) and the ethnological exhibits of the Midway Plaisance; placing women in the liminal space between civilization and savagery. Therefore, in addition to privileging the accomplishments of men, the fair also clearly linked women with primitivism.
The modern civilization on display at the Fair (as the exhibition was called) owed its proud accomplishments to the foundation laid by the primitive woman. Moreover, the desirable and noble characteristics of the modern woman could all be traced to the primitive: ‘The savage woman is really the ancestress and prototype of the modern housewife.’

The modern housewife, the paragon of late 19th century womanhood, owed much to primitive women. The exhibits at the Fair that focused on the accomplishments of men and did not evoke reverence for a primitive past, instead they emphasized advancement and innovation. Within the Women’s Building itself there were murals entitled “Primitive Woman” and “Modern Woman.”

The exhibits at the fair indicated that the distance between women and their “primitive sisters” was not that great. Women were shown to be indebted to their primitive past in their role as modern housewives. The handicrafts of primitive women were prominently displayed in the Woman’s Building. The rest of the White City showed no such link between the achievements of men and primitiveness. The Woman’s Building provided more than just a spatial link between the two sections of the Fair. Women and women’s work acted as the literal and figurative link between modernity and primitive society. Men were to distance themselves from primitivism as much as possible, but women were to find comfort in their primitive heritage and find solidarity with their primitive, savage sisters.

The 1893 World’s Fair ushered in a new modern era and had a profound and unquantifiable impact on future generations. That a display of a cannibal tribe of Africa was present at the same fair in which Frederick Jackson Turner first presented his seminal study of

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4 Ibid., 217.
the death of the American frontier is significant; together they signaled a great change from earlier eras of American history implying that the period of American history which defined itself against savagery had ended by 1893.\(^5\) In its ethnological, technological, and artistic displays, the World’s Colombian Exposition stressed the end of savagery in America, depicting America as a land of technological achievement and innovation. The exhibits inundated their audience with the subtle message that America had conquered its savage past. By the start of the 20\(^{th}\) century, it is clear that the cannibal was no longer believed to be among “us.” Cannibals had ceased to exist on the American continent and remained only in the most remote regions of the earth (i.e., Africa, and Polynesia). The notion that savagery cannot coexist with modernity in the United States is pervasive. Modern discourse still seems to indicate the savagery of the Other and depicts America as the pinnacle of civilization. Thus, the traditions begun at the World’s Colombian Exposition persist. Despite this, there are many instances where we witness the fabric of civilization beginning to break apart. Such incidents are always shown as aberrations and the individuals responsible for them are framed as enemies of the modern state.

Much early scholarship of American history focused on the triumph of civilization over savagery, which played out in notions such as Manifest Destiny. The essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” by Frederick Jackson Turner is an integral part of the history canon. It was presented at the World’s Colombian Exposition, and helped to usher in a new era of American history. While modern scholars recognize its faults and attempt to distance themselves from Turner’s blatantly racist, civilizing agenda, such ideas still permeate historical discourse. According to Turner, American character has long been defined by its contact with savagery. The America that we know is the culmination of the continual “struggle” faced by early settlers to “tame” America. Turner explains that the meeting point of civilization and

\(^5\) Ibid.
savagery is the frontier, thus every aspect of American culture rests upon the constant expansion westward. He states, “Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”

He further explains “American character” stating, “This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.” Therefore, America exists because of its contact with primitive peoples. There is no America without savagery, yet America defines itself as civilized.

While it may seem obvious to point out that the notion of the superiority of civilized life is inherent in Turner’s viewpoint, it is important to understand that his idea of civilization is the product of the Western European colonial agenda. Turner uses the frontier metaphor to explain how and why America differs from other colonial powers and to justify future claims of American exceptionalism. Turner says “America . . . has the key to the historical enigma which Europe has sought for centuries in vain, and the land which has no history reveals luminously the course of universal history.” He takes this statement one step further by stating, “Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution. It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance

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7 Ibid.

8 One can certainly debate the savagery of the Natives and the savagery of the conquerors.

9 Ibid. Turner is quoting the Italian economist Loria.
of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization . . .”10 Clearly, the westward movement of civilization rests on the suppression of Native ways of life, as it is characterized by (presumed) savagery. Manifest Destiny reinforces the destruction of savagery in its push westward.

For Turner, the end of the American frontier signaled a scholarly crisis. He insists that scholars change the way that they view American character from that moment on. He believed that since the “savages” had been all but removed from the American landscape the nation must find a new way to define itself. Turner does not propose an answer or a new way to view America; he simply opens up the discourse for a new definition. What Turner and the World’s Columbian Exposition do is to acknowledge (in slightly different ways) the savage/primitive past of America and insist that the nation has moved beyond it. This acknowledgement is not well-developed, as neither provided any detail about this mythic past and both tend to homogenize and fantasize it. While the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner and the World’s Columbian Exposition recognize a savage past, the recollection and recreation of this past begins with the moment of encounter.

Turner presumes that America does not have any history prior to its settlement by Europeans. The vast majority of early histories of America also make this presumption. Very little historical work of the Americas treats the history before and after Columbus with any sense of continuity. American history is almost always divided between pre-Columbian and Columbian, or equally as problematically, between the pre-historic and historic periods. In such a way, the history of the Americas is defined by Columbus. It is at the moment of contact that the history of the western hemisphere as we know it begins.11 Children are still continually subjected

10 Ibid.

11 While it is clear that Columbus was not the first European to encounter Native Americans, it is his discovery which defines the modern era and divides history.
to this notion when we teach them of the achievements of explorers and have Columbus Day celebrations in our schools. We learn of the glories of Rome and the success of London; yet, most of us learn nothing of Cahokia or Teotihuacán. It can be (and has been) argued that there is less tangible historical evidence (especially in North America) prior to Columbus and therefore reconstructing this history is a frustrating, and often fruitless, endeavor. The deficit of evidence is often blamed on the Indigenous Americans failure to tame the written word. According to this narrative, as the Natives have failed to leave a proper record of their events, they are to blame for the resulting historical inadequacy. In this view, it is not the fault of the historian, but the fault of the history-maker that we do not account for the history of Native Americans.

History privileges those who have written records of their deeds. Indeed, some have argued that all history is European history.¹² Beyond simply privileging the historical inquiry of certain groups, writing and reading can be tools of subjugation. Early explorers would often read decrees to confused natives who did not understand their words and then expect them to abide by the terms laid out therein. For decades historians and other social scientists have privileged the histories of the literate. As Jill Lepore in *The Name of War: King Phillip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* explains:

Not only does the invention of writing mark the advent of history proper, they [historians] claimed, but the ability to write down and record events also creates a “historical sensibility,” an awareness of the “pastness of the past.” People who communicate orally can understand the past only in terms of their present-day face-to-

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face relationships; thus they create “myths” that emphasize continuity between the past and the present.\(^\text{13}\)

This notion reinforces the hierarchical understanding of humanity. Those that can write do not need “myths” to explain their world, they are free to explore science. Those who can write are the only ones truly capable of understanding history, as history is a product of literacy. This is no longer the pervasive understanding of history among social scientists. More recent scholarship has shown that non-literate peoples have an understanding of history. Most notably scholars have also deduced that literacy itself is more than a technological innovation and that it is culturally constructed.\(^\text{14}\) Modern scholars struggle to compensate for a perceived lack of sources of Native American life, particularly in the “pre-Columbian” period. According to Lepore scholars typically acknowledge the lack of Native sources and choose one of three methods in their readings of colonial sources. She states that they read them with a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and accept or reject them according to whether or not they are corroborated by other evidence; claim that questions of truth and falsehood are irrelevant and that ‘verisimilitude’ is a more appropriate indicator of a source’s value; or piece together the sparse Indian sources to create a new, Indian-centered narrative.\(^\text{15}\)

For instance, in his book *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*, historian Daniel Richter attempts to piece together the scant evidence of Native life and rewrite early American history. He relocates the center of power from colonial settlements in the east to


\(^\text{14}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 46.
the city of Cahokia, in modern-day Illinois. Each method of historical enquiry has its strengths and weaknesses but there are several consistent elements including: the acceptance of the lack of Native sources and the focus on compensating for this perceived/assumed lack. I draw almost exclusively from European sources because my focus is not necessarily on the incidents of cannibalism themselves, but is rather to determine the role that the cannibal has performed in the construction of western discourse. I argue that European discursive construction of the cannibal as savage allows explorers and conquerors to justify their oppressive treatment of the indigenous and to see them as non-human/inhuman, mythical beings, indeed as monsters. This is precisely the incomplete European history that reveals the flaws and gaps in knowledge and provides a means of interrogating the cannibal. While I choose not to dwell on the “truth” behind each occurrence of cannibalism to reach a conclusion about its proliferation, that does not exclude the inclusion of “real” events. Each event, whether real or imagined, is created and maintained by discourse. It is how these events are framed that is of most interest to this study. For instance, the works of anthropologists tend to search for ways to understand and justify acts of cannibalism. They search for ways to make sense of and contextualize the reasons for the performance of cannibalism. The need to explain and categorize the actions of the Other is a common theme in Western discourse. It matters more to this study how the act of cannibalism is discussed and constructed than what “actually” occurred. Therefore, there is little need to compensate for the lacking historical record in this study.

From the first moment of contact between the Native peoples of the Americas and Europeans, the world would be irrevocably altered. The Americas would suffer greatly at the hands of conquerors, countless individuals would die, and entire civilizations would be lost forever. The Europeans, however, fared much better. There are stories of the horrible atrocities
that Europeans suffered at the hands of the Natives peoples, but how can one compare these incidents to large-scale genocide? This is not to downplay the role of active Native resistance to European colonization. The Algonquians, for instance, fought many battles against the Europeans and maintained sovereignty for many years. The final blow to their power came only after fighting (and losing) the one of the bloodiest conflicts in American history, King Philip’s War. Native peoples did not sit idly by and allow themselves to be conquered. Rather, it seems that the cultural, linguistic, and religious differences between the peoples of the New World and those of the old afforded the European conquerors a tactical advantage. A portion of this advantage stemmed from the European assumption that they were superior to the Natives. Europeans tended to view the world as hierarchical and systematic.  

Although they had never encountered the peoples of the New World, their worldview provided a means of interaction and comprehension. Without glossing over the differences between the various nations of Europe, it is fair to say that Europeans had already come into contact with Others, and therefore had constructed a pre-existing discourse about savagery which included cannibalism. An important consequence of the need to categorize peoples is that the categories tend to be rigid and unchanging and therefore it is the people who must be changed, not the category. Because of this, the civilizing/conquering agenda was established almost at first contact. The writings of early explorers tend to focus on the differences between the inhabitants of the Americas and civilized Europeans. At times, the early explorers idealize the life of the Natives. At other times, they demonize and castigate them for their heathen ways. It was the differences between the two

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worlds that perpetuated subjugation and warfare, and these differences were highlighted quite clearly in the writings of early explorers. It was common for Europeans to label civilizations that differed greatly from theirs as cannibalistic. Therefore, they readily accused the residents of the Americas of cannibalism. As soon as Columbus landed in the Caribbean and continuing even today, the trope of cannibalism has woven itself into the fabric of the world.18

The trope of cannibalism represents an “ideal” notion of the savage. Cannibalism equals savagery. Both of these concepts and terms are diametrically opposed to civilization, and yet the notion of civilization cannot exist without them. A discussion of cannibalism provides a means of interrogating various binaries, but even more than that it provides a means of connecting a variety of theoretical positionings. Cannibal discourse often locates itself within the realm of race theory, asserting that the cannibal is always “raced.” An interrogation of the cannibal figure reveals a more complex set of intersections. A thorough study of cannibalism must include the theories of historians, post-colonialists, feminists, anthropologists, etc. The cultural studies scholar is in a unique position to author such a work. Unbound by the methodological limitations placed by traditional disciplines such as anthropology or history, and afforded the broad scope of an interdisciplinary approach, the cultural studies scholar is in a position to use the strengths of all of these to create a thorough and more complete study of the cannibal.

Cannibalism has been discussed from the earliest times, but it is at the moment of encounter between Europeans and the peoples of the Americas that it begins to take on a life of its own and move beyond its function as a mere descriptor of savagery. As Frank Lestringant

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18 Harold Bloom defines a trope as: “the linguistic equivalent of a psychological mechanism of defense (a defense against literal meaning in discourse, in the way of repression, regression, projections, and so forth are defenses against the apprehension of death in the psyche), it is always not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviations towards another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right proper and true ‘in reality.’” As quoted in: Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 2.
notes in Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of Cannibals from Columbus to Jules Verne, “For Columbus can be credited with the discovery not only of America, but also of the Cannibal.”

Because of the assumptions made by the conquerors and the flimsiness of the historical data, it is very difficult to determine the extent (if any) of the practice of anthropophagy in the New World. However, the actual extent of the practice is not at issue here, it is primarily the discourse of cannibalism which is of concern to this study.

For decades, there has been a lively debate over the existence of cannibalism in America. Scholars like William Arens believe that there is not proof of any society that has ever positively sanctioned anthropophagy. Such scholarship acts under the assumption that all of the evidence for cannibalism is merely propaganda to support European imperialism and serves only to emphasize the “primitiveness” of conquered peoples. However, the majority of modern scholarship recognizes that many peoples did, in fact, practice cannibalism.

What is often misunderstood about William Arens is that he does not categorically deny the existence of cannibalism. He argues that whether or not cannibalism is a real social practice, it exists as a discursive trope. He asserts that the real and/or imagined existence of cannibalism does not diminish its importance in historical discourse. “Firstly, even for the skeptics, cannibalism does exist: it exists as a term within colonial discourse to describe the ferocious devouring of human flesh supposedly practiced by some savages. That existence, within discourse, is no less

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19 Frank Lestringant, Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.

20 Until fairly recently, much of the scholarly work regarding cannibalism in North America has centered on whether or not it even existed. Please see The Man Eating Myth by W. Arens and Iroquois Cannibalism: Fact not Fiction by Thomas Abler for a useful and lively discussion of these matters.

historical whether or not the term cannibalism describes an attested or extant social custom."22 In fact, there is a debate within anthropology as to whether or not the term cannibalism should be reserved for use “for the ideology that constitutes itself around an obsession with anthropophagy.”23

Given this debate, much of the work performed in the 1970s and 1980s regarding cannibalism in North America continued to center on whether or not it even existed, attempting to distinguish the real from the fabricated. Contemporary scholars tend not to take extreme positions, instead they acknowledge the limitations and inherent biases in the sources but still accept cannibalism as a real phenomenon. Although most European observers did not have a nuanced understanding of Native American life and ritual, contemporary scholars tend not to assume all accounts of cannibalism to be nothing more than European propaganda. In The Man-Eating Myth, Arens challenges the notion that there has ever been a society that condoned the eating of human flesh, arguing that previous scholars have not met the burden of proof with regard to cannibalism.24 Arens questions the validity of the numerous accounts that exist, systematically debunking many of the widely accepted accounts of cannibalism. The strength of Arens’ work lies in his keen understanding of the cultural and temporal factors that affect the interpretation and acceptance of cannibal accounts. He states,

The credibility of these published accounts diminishes as they begin to impinge upon us culturally and temporally. Rather than permitting cherished ideas to be challenged, reinterpretation or denial of the material is called for. Consequently, the Roman

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23 Ibid.

24 Abler, 309.
accusation that the emerging Christian sect used blood in mysterious secret rites is dismissed by historians as having been a politically inspired slander. The possibility that early Christians may have been cannibals is never seriously considered.25

The historical record privileges the actions of Europeans and has not allowed for an equitable discussion of the atrocities of either group. Communion, the symbolic act of cannibalism performed in churches across the world, is rarely regarded as similar to the “real” acts of cannibalism performed by the Indigenous peoples of the world. Arens counters this eurocentrism by stating:

In contrast to this critical position, the idea that Africans, Polynesians, New Guineans, American Indians are or were man-eaters until contact with the benefits of European influence is assumed to be in the realm of demonstrated fact. To recapitulate beliefs of this sort about representatives of our cultural tradition are dismissed out of hand as prejudice as racism, while similar notions about others already defined as categorically different from us are treated as facts worthy of further scholarly tradition.26

Therefore, the relevant questions that emerge from The Man-Eating Myth do not pertain to the existence of actual occurrence(s) of cannibalism, but rather to the genesis of cannibal tales and the reception and interpretation of such. Arens summarily concludes that, “excluding survival conditions, I have been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society.”27 This is often interpreted as a wholesale denial of the existence of cannibalism. What he says is, in fact, much more subtle. He criticizes the sources of cannibal

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26 Ibid., 19-20.

27 Ibid., 21.
tales and their subsequent interpretation and analysis and is therefore unable to accurately prove the existence of culturally practiced anthropophagy. *The Man-Eating Myth* was widely and harshly criticized by many anthropologists and historians. However, Arens’ work forced the discipline of anthropology to reexamine its practices and assumptions.

Thomas Abler confronts Arens in his article “Iroquois Cannibalism: Fact not Fiction,” and is able to concretely debunk several of his assertions. While it is not within the scope of this paper to detail Abler’s entire argument, a few examples will suffice. Arens states that there is no definitive evidence of cannibalism in the *Jesuit Relations*. However, as Abler adroitly points out, by simply looking at the index to the Thwaites edition, 31 of the 71 volumes contain reference entries for cannibalism.  

Certainly, the mere preponderance of references in the *Jesuit Relations* does not prove that the practice actually occurred. It does, however, help to illustrate the importance of the trope of cannibalism in the discourse of the New World. There is also evidence for Iroquoian cannibalism contained in various speeches and captivity narratives. Scholars continue to debate the veracity of the references to cannibalism in the captivity narratives of the time. According to Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and James Arthur Levenier, “Whether Indians actually practiced cannibalism made little difference. Anxious to foster the image that Indians were truly beyond the limits of all things civilized, captivity writers were quick to accuse Indians of this practice.”

Scholars often look to evidence of other indigenous peoples who came in contact with Europeans and suffered a similar fate of character assassination as proof – for instance, Africans or Polynesians – as Europeans brought back reports of savagery and horror stories of the man-eating natives that occupied these fertile lands.

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28 Ibid., 312.

as well. To scholars like Arens, this serves to negate the evidence of Native American
cannibalism by placing such stories within the context of a European slanderous public relations
campaign against indigenous peoples. Even if it is accepted that much of the evidence for
cannibalism is part of such a campaign that does not fully explain the preponderance of the
evidence. It is spread out among English, French, Spanish, and Dutch sources. The evidence
comes from written sources as well as archaeological remains.

The core problem with this entire debate is that it continues to be centered on the stark
separation between civilization and savagery. Scholars still see cannibalism as an element of
those “less-civilized” than themselves. Cannibalism, in various forms, exists even today. It exists
amongst tribal peoples as well as among “civilized” urban people in first world nations. It exists
in the imagination; in film and literature. There cannot be a proper discussion of cannibalism as a
cultural phenomenon when the pervasive thought is that cannibalism discriminates – that is, that
it only plays an important role in societies that are “primitive.” Thinking of Jeffrey Dahmer, of
the Donner Party, or even the popularity of the film Alive, and one cannot help but see that the
trope of cannibalism endures. Perhaps the role of cannibalism in society has changed, but that
does not negate its (discursive) existence.

Cannibalism has been deemed an element of savagery, historically as well as in
contemporary society. The civilization versus savagery debate has been prevalent in the
Americas since the coming of the first Europeans. People are apt to see cannibalism as an
element of cultures that are presumed to be “primitive” and “savage.” It was, and still is to some
extent, believed that civilized nations do not practice or condone cannibalism. Historical
discourse tends to presume that cannibalism is a cultural phenomenon that only occurs in less
“civilized” cultures. This distinction is devoid of any sense of cultural relativism and does not
allow for a complete understanding of the cannibal. Early European sources were quick to point out the cruelty of Native Americans, particularly when it came to cannibalism, but often failed to recognize the violence inherent in their own. According to Dean Snow, “The Iroquois were not monsters to any greater or lesser degree than any other human beings; they were only acting as many humans have done when faced with a particular set of predilections and stressful conditions.”

Cannibalism has traditionally been a very difficult topic to discuss as it is often accompanied by Euro-centric biases and the pervasive fear of the unknowable and unquantifiable.

It may seem logical to dismiss cannibalism as an element of the past, something that we, as humans, have “moved beyond,” but this dismissal is too easy. It ignores the contribution of cannibalism in constructing modern identity. In many ways, cannibalism is inseparable from racism, colonialism, sexism, etc. The trope of cannibalism was the single most important justification for the subjugation of peoples. It was the discursive presence of cannibalism that indicated savagery long before race, as we understand it in the modern context, became fully developed.

Chapter I: Encountering Cannibalism provides a brief history of cannibal discourse. In order to understand the formation of the cannibal discourse, one must first examine how European society has defined both civilization and savagery. Chapter II: The Functions of Cannibalism explores the interconnectedness of cannibalism and warfare. These two concepts are often linked and provide a means of interrogating both the causes and effects of cannibalism. In addition to written works, cannibalism was also often the subject of visual art. The effects of such images are explored in Chapter III: Representing Cannibalism. The emergence of the visual within cannibal discourse allows for a more in-depth exploration of the place of women within

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this discourse, thus providing a means of combining feminist and postcolonial theory to create a more nuanced understanding of cannibalism. An examination of cannibalism opens up avenues of enquiry as varied as the practice of cannibalism itself and affords insight into many different facets of existence.
I: ENCOUNTERING CANNIBALISM

The image of the cannibal has been shaped through the ages by many different European cultures. The earliest peoples to write of the cannibal often were the ancient Greeks and they laid a foundation for centuries of discourse. The Greeks believed that there existed a hierarchy of humanity, which was determined not only by morality but by geography as well. In Greek myths one finds “the early roots of modes of thought that have remained pervasive in the West.”31 For the Greeks, savagery and barbarism were represented most clearly in the Scythians. Throughout time, the Scythians have remained a common point of reference in cannibal discourse. In book IV of The Histories, Herodotus calls the Scythians barbarous and cannibalistic. In his influential essay “On Cannibals,” Michel de Montaigne mentions the Scythians several times.32 The Scythians represented everything that the civilized Athenians were not. Specifically, it was their nomadic nature which, to the Greeks, was a sure sign of their barbarity. Their (obvious) barbarity provided a justification for their ultimate subjugation, a pattern which would be repeated in the Americas. Herodotus begins a lengthy textual cannibal tradition that not only provides a model through which countless peoples have called those different from themselves cannibals, but also provides a very real literary model for many of the cannibal texts to follow. Michel de Certeau states, “‘On Cannibals’ is inscribed within the heterological tradition, in which the discourse about the other is a means of constructing a discourse authorized by the other. It exhibits the same structural features as the fourth book of Herodotus, although it makes different use of them.”33 Thus, Montaigne attempts to give back a limited sense of agency to the New World

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33 Ibid.
cannibals by providing an alternative discourse while simultaneously denying them a voice.

What is important to realize is that even though the moment of encounter was unique in human history, everything that transpired between the European conquerors and the Native Americans was built on pre-existing traditions. As Olive Patrick Dickason states in *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*,

> Europe’s discovery of the Amerindian is usually represented as affording her the first large-scale encounter with man living in a state of nature. According to this view, that discovery was largely responsible for the development of the European idea of *l’homme sauvage*, the savage who could be either noble or debased, but who in any event was not civilized . . .

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35 Ibid.

When Europeans encountered Indigenous Americans, it was not the first time that savagery had entered their world. There are innumerable accounts of wild-men and witches living among them that were considered to be savage and uncivilized. What distinguishes the encounter with the savage Americans is its scale, not necessarily its uniqueness.

An examination of the concept of savagery reveals that its origin is both more complex and far older that such a view would indicate. In fact, it involved the well-known Renaissance folkloric figure of the Wild Man, the early Christian perceptions of monkeys, apes, and baboons; and the Classical Greek and Roman tradition of the noble savage.

Dickason goes on to describe the tradition into which the American cannibal was born. She states. “Columbus’s encounter with the Arawaks and Caribs did not introduce Europeans to a
previously unknown kind of man; what it did was to add a new dimension to an already existing idea . . .”36 I argue that it is from the moment of encounter that the cannibal becomes a fully developed image, however this was possible only because of the traditions which preceded it.

There is a rich European tradition of encounter with monstrous races. Ancient texts are rife with examples of the horrors that travelers faced if they left the safe confines of the polis. For instance, the writings of Marco Polo detail the amazing “things” he “witnessed” on his journeys. Based on this intellectual tradition, Columbus fully expected to come into contact with creatures beyond his imagination when he arrived in the New World.

When Columbus embarked on his first voyage, belief in the Plinian races was still firm . . . Columbus confidently expected to come across specimens of monstrous races. In the course of his subsequent voyages he took every opportunity of enquiring about them, and was rewarded with reports of anthropophagi, men with one eye, men with tails, amazons, giants, and creatures with dogs’ heads. Given the fact that communication with the Indians was difficult and largely conducted by means of gestures, it is evident that Columbus must have heard what he wanted to hear. Personally he recorded only having seen three sirens (who turned out not to be particularly beautiful), and later he admitted, with apparent regret, not having been able to establish the presence of several of the monstrous races; anthropophagy (man-eating), however, was regarded by Columbus and most of his successors as being widespread.37

Certainly, no modern scholar would purport the existence of the fabled dog-headed men, yet in Columbus’ day they were a part of the same family as cannibals. “Columbus believes not only in Christian Dogma, but also (and he is not alone at the time) in Cyclops and mermaids, in

36 Ibid.

37 Jahoda, 15.
Amazons and men with tails, and his belief, as strong as Saint Peter’s, therefore permits him to find them. Cannibals were members of the so-called monstrous races. It is important to note that many of the early writings that mention cannibalism treat it with the same regard as other residents of the realm of the imaginary.

It is difficult to obtain the proper historical and theoretical distance necessary to interpret the actions of early explorers. Scholars tend to apply modern epistemologies to the writings of discovery and encounter. We must always remember that Columbus did not understand the world in the same way as a modern academic. As Tzvetan Todorov argues,

Columbus performs a “finalist” strategy of interpretation, in the same manner in which the Church Fathers interpreted the Bible: the ultimate meaning is given from the start (this is Christian doctrine): what is sought is the path linking the initial meaning (the apparent signification of the words of the biblical text) with this ultimate meaning. There is nothing of the modern empiricist about Columbus: the decisive argument is an argument of authority, not of experience. He knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to pre-established rules in order to seek the truth. In this way, Columbus knew what he would find in the New World. He knew that there would be mermaids, cyclopes, cynocephali, as well as cannibals. He also knew that he had discovered a path to Asia. He decided in advance that the people he encountered were Asians, regardless of the evidence to the contrary. The development of America is thus based on myth. Modern American society reveres explorers like Columbus, Cabot, and Vespucci as men of science who

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39 Ibid., 17.
boldly journeyed into the unknown in a heroic quest for knowledge. This is not the image of Columbus (or Vespucci) that we see in his writings of the New World. Instead we are able to recognize the flawed humanness of these explorers and be mindful not to idealize them.

It is curious how we have come to refer to these lands as America. We credit Columbus with their “discovery,” yet these lands are called America not Columbia.\textsuperscript{40} The first reference to the name America comes from 1507 in the \textit{Cosmographiae introductio}. The editors chose to honor Amerigo Vespucci rather than Columbus as the namesake of the New World.\textsuperscript{41} There is no one answer as to why they chose Vespucci over Columbus. Some argue that since Vespucci was the first to step foot on the actual continent he deserves the honor. However, it is questionable whether Vespucci even made the momentous journey in 1497. He was not in command of the vessel, and typically the credit of a voyage goes to its commander. His is simply the only account to survive. Also, evidence suggests that “it was Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), a Venetian explorer in the service of England, who reached it [the mainland] first in 1497.”\textsuperscript{42} Columbus also reached the mainland this same year just a few months after it is reported that Vespucci did. Other scholars have attributed the importance of Vespucci not to his physical discovery of the mainland, but to his intellectual discovery of it. That is, that he was the first to realize that it was a New World. “From this perspective it matters little in the end if Amerigo made the journey or not; the main thing is that he understood, and he could have done that simply by staying in his study.”\textsuperscript{43} This reason is problematic as well since several other sources dating earlier than

\textsuperscript{40} Despite the fact that the evidence that Columbus was not the first European to come to the New World, Americans tend to glorify Columbus and divide the world between pre-Columbian and modernity.


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 101.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, Emphasis in original.
Vespucci’s first reference to the *Mundus novus* in 1503 exist, including references in the writings of Columbus and Peter Martyr of Anghiera.\(^{44}\)

Given all of this, why did the editors of the *Cosmographiae introductio* choose Vespucci? Tzvetan Todorov proposes that the answer lies not in Vespucci’s skill as a navigator but rather in his skill as a writer. He states,

*Only one answer can be found: it is because the accounts in which Amerigo is the main character are better written than Columbus’s letter (and, in another way, than Peter Martyr’s). It is not the intellectual discovery that the naming of the new continent celebrates; it is – whether its namers knew it or not – literary excellence. Amerigo owes his glory to the forty or so pages that make up the two letters published during his lifetime.*\(^{45}\)

The main difference between the accounts of Columbus and Vespucci is in their ability to draw the reader in through the use of fantasy and fiction. “Columbus was writing documents, whereas Amerigo was writing literature.”\(^{46}\) They both provide the same basic details about the inhabitants of the Americas. Both describe them as irreligious, naked, and cannibalistic. Vespucci, however, provides a level of detail not found in the Columbus accounts. Columbus reports the cannibalism of the Caribs as second-hand information reported to him by the Arawaks. Vespucci, on the other hand, gives a lengthy and astonishingly specific account (given his lack of understanding of the Native’s language) of Native cannibalism. He describes how, “the Indians take prisoners of war in order to eat them later; the male eats his wife and children with pleasure. A man confided in

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 102. Emphasis in original.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 104.
him that he had devoured more than three hundred of his fellow beings.” It is well known by modern scholars that Vespucci embellished his accounts. As Angel Delgado-Gómez describes in “European Views of the New World Natives,”

Vespucci is therefore an exception, the other authors . . . generally did a remarkable job of describing entirely unfamiliar people in the most objective way that could be expected of them. All the authors showed genuine interest and respect for the natives. The infrequent instances in which their writing reveal a condescending or derogatory perception are balanced by the more numerous cases of sincere praise.

Amerigo Vespucci became the namesake of the continents he “discovered.” His tendency to embellish would be the beginning of a lengthy literary tradition. His works provide the basis for the noble savage tradition which would follow and dominate writings about the New World for centuries. Vespucci’s writings describe for the reader a world that was understandable to Europeans, yet fascinating and worthy of exploration.

Columbus came to the New World hoping to find a path to Asia among other things and he assumed that he would come across monsters and beings beyond his imagination. The New World that we see in Amerigo Vespucci’s writings, however, is not a world of fantastical beasts. His world is decidedly human. Vespucci may describe a land full of imaginary creatures, but he does so in a way that emphasizes the humanness of that world. Columbus’ beasts live in a world that functions outside of the rules, norms, and traditions of Europe; Vespucci’s do not. Instead, they are subject to the same physical, spiritual and intellectual “laws” of all Europeans. “The

47 Ibid.
only implausible things we find in Amerigo are due to exaggeration; they demonstrate the bad faith of the tall-tale teller rather than the naïveté of the believer.”50 Both Columbus and Vespucci make reference to the terrestrial paradise. The difference between them is that, “Columbus believes in it literally and he thinks he caught a glimpse of it (in South America); Amerigo uses it as mere hyperbole.”51

While most Americans may not as easily recognize the name of Amerigo Vespucci or be aware of his achievements (or non-achievements), it is the traditions that he set forth in his works which endure. We may celebrate Columbus Day, but modern Western culture owes much more to the intellectual legacy of Amerigo Vespucci. He set forth a way of viewing America which persists even today. Vespucci wrote of the New World as a place that was not notable for its fantastic beasts and amazing mysteries but was legendary in its ability to create space for fantasy. Vespucci provides a glimpse into the fragmented construction of the modern Self, which is on the surface a very real and tangible thing but rests upon a foundation of myths and half-truths. America simultaneously disavows and yet relies upon myth just as Vespucci depicts a realistic world of pure fantasy. Modern America insists upon the separation from its primitive history and emphasizes the distance between itself and its savage brethren, yet it could not exist without it. This disavowal is symptomatic of the condition of the modern Self. The success of the West, as both colonial and economic power, is possible only because of the (assumed) successful conquest of savagery. Modern humanity flourishes because it presumes its own civilized nature distinct from a savage past/other. Yet, this savage past is in itself a myth, a creation of the minds of European men.

50 Ibid., 107.

51 Ibid.
As the sixteenth century wore on, cannibal discourse shifted; no longer were cannibals fantastical beasts, but they had become real living breathing “humans.” Henceforth, European accounts of cannibals are primarily philosophical searches aimed at understanding (and often justifying) their actions. One of the first explanations for the cannibal appetite was the simple need for food. Cannibals ate people because they needed the sustenance that their inferior lands were not able to provide.

The need for food seemed a logical explanation of some aspects of the symbolic economy of American anthropophagy. For example, the fact that women were not slaughtered was easily explained by the need for breeding stock. Meat had to be fattened for the table, and that is why young women were not only kept alive, but even ‘cared for’ and fed by their conquerors: ‘They keep them to bear young, as we do hens, sheep, cows, and other beasts, and keep older women as slaves for their use.’

There is (obviously) no evidence that the Native peoples of the Americas kept women as caged beasts of burden. However, there are accounts in which they bestowed one of their fellow tribeswomen as a wife to a prisoner. The offspring of the tribeswoman and the prisoner, and sometimes the prisoner himself, were occasionally eaten. The Caribs attributed more significance to the flesh of men than to women. This most likely has more to do with the tribal conceptions of virility and bravery than with breeding stock.

The writings of Peter Martyr of Anghiera (c. 1511) mark the beginning of the shift in cannibal discourse out of the realm of the fantastic. “Peter Martyr, unlike Columbus, is not concerned with deciphering the tracks left on the virgin sands of the New World. His primary

52 Ibid., 24.
53 Ibid.
concern is not . . . the interpretation of the Other. He was not really interested in the modern Caribs as a realization of pre-existing meanings or models.” 54 Frank Lestrigant argues that with the loss of mythic status, the cannibal began to represent the opposite of continental repression. The cannibal became a powerful symbol of sexual and cultural liberation. 55 Thus, Native peoples were perceived to be lacking in “religion, laws, rulers, and private property, but also the incest taboo.” 56 The cannibals of the New World represented everything that Europe would become if its morals should falter, for surely moral depravity and anthropophagy went hand in hand. “These peoples [the cannibals], with their ferocious appetites and unrestrained sexuality are the precise opposite of Christian society, as conceived by the Renaissance.” 57 Sometimes this freedom from repression is glorified and at others it is vilified.

As the cannibal came to represent the worst possible aspects of humanity, a notable assortment of scholars began to search for the redeemable, honorable cannibal. The most well known and well studied of these is Michel de Montaigne. Some scholars see Montaigne’s essay, “On Cannibals,” as the first example of the noble savage, others struggle to make sense of its often contradictory and circuitous logic. What makes the study of Montaigne so intriguing (and so frustrating) is the complexity of his depiction of the cannibals of the New World. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he does not (for the most part) distinguish between the good and the bad cannibals; they are one in the same. 58 Montaigne owes much of his work to early visitors to the Americas, most notably Jean de Léry and André Thevet, as he never actually traveled to the New

54 Ibid., 27.
55 Lestrigant, 72.
56 Ibid., 28.
57 Ibid., 29.
58 Ibid., 53.
World. Thevet, “though rejected by some later generations, is the cornerstone of all anthropological discussion of the subject [New World cannibalism].”

These early works helped form the cannibal as Other. Labeling the Other as cannibal is a long-standing preoccupation of conquering nations. The finger was not always pointed at racial minorities however, since “before Europeans had come into direct contact with savages, it was not unusual for accusations of cannibalism to be directed against minority groups of various kinds, usually religious or political opponents.” It is also important to note that this trend of labeling the Other as cannibal is not reserved for Europeans alone, but often accompanies colonization as the colonized begin to appropriate the tactics of the colonizer. Frantz Fanon mentions learning of the savage cannibal Senegalese from the French colonialists in his youth.61 This also occurred throughout much of the Americas. When Europeans arrived in California, more than half of the tribes accused other tribes of cannibalism, yet there is little evidence of cannibalism before European contact.62 A wide variety of groups and peoples throughout time have been labeled cannibal. No matter who is the cannibal the link with savagery remains. “Through the ages cannibalism has been attributed to the Other, and still remains probably the most powerful symbol of savagery.”

59 Ibid., 55.
60 Jahoda, 99.
63 Jahoda, 97.
In *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice* Gustav Jahoda explores the various tropes of savagery, devoting an entire chapter to cannibalism. When discussing the consequences of labeling the Other as cannibal savage, he states,

In order to bring out the implications of such a view, it is necessary to return for a moment to the two images of animality and child-likeness. These involve the belief that savages are humans or semi-humans who have certain characteristics that render them inferior to civilized Europeans. These characteristics were commonly conceived as stemming from their innate disposition or ‘race.’

Race is not the sole determining factor of who is labeled “cannibal,” however, it is a key element in the development of the discourse of cannibalism and the ways in which cannibalism was viewed by European conquerors in the Americas.

After the “discovery” of America, Europe began to define itself against the inhabitants of the Americas. This revealed itself in any number of ways. Europeans were Christians, Native Americans were not. Europeans maintained a “civilized” diet, Native Americans were cannibals. Europeans wore clothes, Native Americans were nude. Europeans were white, Native Americans were not. Europeans were masculine, Native Americans were feminine. But also, Native Americans were innocent and Europeans were corrupt. The key to this self-definition lay in its basis in fantasy. These binaries do not reflect real or inherent qualities. Rather, they are constructed notions based on scant information from biased sources. The ways in which Europeans view the New World follows a tradition begun by Vespucci which does not rely on any actual perceived reality, but a fantasy created as a method of subjugation. The intellectual history of Europe and America shows a bitter fight between those who revere the (perceived) innocence of the Americans and those who proclaim their (perceived) barbarism. These

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64 Ibid.
intellectual battles reflect the tension in the notion of the Self. In order to create a “whole” Self which was defined against the Natives peoples of the Americas, one had to first decide if they were “good” or “bad.”

In 1550, the academic and theological communities in Spain were embroiled in a bitter fight to determine the status of Native Americans. This manifested itself in a very real debate between Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas conducted in front of a panel of their peers: scholars and theologians. Sepúlveda, an Aristotelian scholar, argued that the conquest of the Americas and subsequent enslavement or death of the Native Americans was justified based on the popular belief in the hierarchical nature of the world.65 Las Casas explains Sepúlveda’s understanding of the world (which draws primarily from Aristotle and St. Augustine) by stating, “But, for their own welfare, people of this kind are held by natural law to submit to the control of those who are wiser and superior in virtue and learning.”66 He continues explaining the result of this natural law,

The conclusion drawn from this is that the Indians are obliged by natural law to obey those who are outstanding in virtue and character in the same way that matter yields to form, body to soul, sense to reason, animals to human being, women to men, children to adults, and finally, the imperfect to the more perfect, the worse to the better, the cheaper to the more precious and excellent, to the advantage of the both.67

Native Americans are thus compared to animals, women, and children; comparisons which will follow them through the colonial period. Sepúlveda provided examples of natural superiority in

65 Todorov, The Conquest of the Americas, 152.


67 Quoted in Todorov, The Conquest of America, 152.
his argument stating, “In wisdom, skill, virtue and humanity, these people are as inferior to the Spaniards as children are to adults and women to men, there is as great a difference between them as there is between savagery and forbearance, between violence and moderation, almost – I am inclined to say – as between monkeys and men.”68 The identification of Native Americans with women (and monkeys) is commonly made; as Tzetvan Todorov points out this identification “makes an easy transition from internal to external other (since it is always a Spanish man who is speaking).”69 Additionally, Native peoples are said to be of the body. That is, rather than reflecting the traditional European understanding of the supremacy of the soul over the body, the Natives appear to represent the primacy of physicality. Therefore, “the other is our body itself; whence, too, the identification of the Indians, as of women, to animals, creatures which, though animate, have no soul.”70 It is almost as if the indigenous Americans are a combination of the basest characteristics of animals and women. They are defined by their bodies; driven by the desires of the physical rather than spirituality. The inherent contradiction in this should be evident. If the Natives are indeed soulless animals, why are they judged by the same standards as the Europeans? Would Columbus have cared if he witnessed one dog consuming another?

There is a delicate balance to be found among the colonial accounts. At any time the Native peoples are representative of both sides of a given binary. They are at once savage and genial, grotesque and beautiful. Columbus’ early writings are rife with these contradictions. The first thing about the Natives upon which Columbus remarks is their nakedness, finally

68 From Sepúlveda’s Democrates Alter, Quoted in Todorov, 153.

69 Ibid. Emphasis in original. This gendering of Native peoples will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

70 Ibid., 154. Emphasis in original.
concluding that even though they remain naked and without shame it appears that they are, in fact, closer to humans than beasts.\textsuperscript{71} Columbus also remarks on their timidity and poverty. The early explorers often noted the homogeneity of the inhabitants of the New World. Not only did they resemble each other culturally but also physically. “The Indians resemble each other in that they are all naked, deprived of distinctive characteristics.”\textsuperscript{72} Given this trend, the modern scholar is left with precious few detailed descriptions of the inhabitants. “During the seventeenth century, French and English writers were calling all inhabitants of the New World savages, whether they were descended from the court poets of the city-states of Central and South America, or were nomadic hunters following caribou in the austere north.”\textsuperscript{73}

Countless cultures and traditions have been lost to history. The only physical descriptions of the Caribbean natives by Columbus contain references either to their pleasing countenance or their grotesqueness. On many separate occasions he remarks on their beauty, “All of splendid appearance. They are very handsome people.”\textsuperscript{74} “These were the handsomest men and most beautiful women whom he [Columbus] had hitherto encountered.”\textsuperscript{75} This admiration for their physical beauty often carried over into admiration for their kindness. From the earliest meetings, Columbus declares that the Natives are the “best people in the world and the most peaceable,” and that he does not believe that “in all the world there are better men, any more than there are better lands.”\textsuperscript{76} The Indians are described as overly generous and placating. \textsuperscript{77} One might think,

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{73} Dickason, 65.
\textsuperscript{74} From Columbus’ journal 10/11/1492. Quoted in Todorov, \textit{The Conquest of the Americas}, 36.
\textsuperscript{75} From Columbus’ journal 12/16/1492. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} One might think,
given all of these sentiments of admiration, that Columbus had great respect for the peoples he encountered, yet his journals and the writings of his compatriots also reflect their darker perceptions. The native peoples are at once kind, generous, beautiful innocents and savage, brutish, godless heathens. Columbus simultaneously perceived the Natives as human beings on the same physical and spiritual plane as himself or as lesser beings whose purpose was to serve those above them.

Either he [Columbus] conceives the Indians (though without using these words) as human beings altogether, having the same rights as himself; but then he sees them not only as equals but also as identical, and this behavior leads to assimilationism, the projection of his own values on the others. Or else he starts from the difference, but the latter is immediately translated into terms of superiority and inferiority (in his case, obviously, it is the Indians who are inferior). What is denied is the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself.\(^{78}\)

This refusal to allow the Other a fully-fledged existence is common occurrence under colonialism. The colonial subject is constructed in such a manner that they can only be seen as dualistic. They are either good or bad, wicked or virtuous, consumer or consumed, savage or civilized. The colonial subject, according to Frantz Fanon, is forced to take on the persona of the oppressors simply to have an identity. He states, ‘I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 42.
me of all worth, all individuality . . .”79 The historical record does not allow colonized natives to construct their own identity outside of their interactions with their conquerors. It is easy given the proper amount of historical distance to accuse the early explorers and their successors of racism, closed-mindedness, even ignorance, however this does little to further understanding of any sort. It is more beneficial to comprehend the European worldview alongside an analysis of their actions.

This association with binaries has plagued the inhabitants of the New World from the moment of encounter. The moment of encounter was (according to Europeans), at its basest level, a meeting between civilization and savagery. As with all binaries, one cannot exist without the other. Therefore, the civilized European citizen could not exist until they had encountered savages. Countless scholars have interrogated the meaning (or relative meaninglessness) of the terms civilization and savagery. Dickason provides the following definitions for civilization and savagery.

The word “civilized” is usually applied to societies possessing a state structure and an advanced technology; the general presumption is that their members must therefore have attained a relatively high degree of refinement in their manner of living. The term “savage” is applied to societies at an early stage of technology, a stage at which they are believed to be dominated by the laws of nature. Its use implies that Amerindian societies did not match the refinements of those of Europe, and that they were more cruel.80

Given this understanding of civilization and savagery it becomes even clearer that these two terms are dependent on one another. There is an obvious supremacy implied by the use of

79 Fanon, 98.
80 Dickason, xi.
technology. For the “civilized” world, nature is something to be conquered, to be subdued, through the use of technology. This technology comes in many forms, the astrolabe, the printing press, the sword, etc. The “savage” world on the other hand views nature as more rigid and unchangeable. Instead of adapting nature to meet their needs, they adapt themselves to nature, demonstrating to the European conquerors their inherent weakness and feebleness of mind. From the privileged position of a scholar in the 21st century (a position I would not be in if it were not for the civilizing process) it is easy to say that early European visitors to the Americas greatly underestimated the “civilized” ways of Native peoples and that their European traditions, mores, folkways, etc. prevented them from being able to function as objective observers, but this would be an oversimplification.

Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*, conceptualizes civilization as “a wide variety of facts: to the level of technology to the type of manners, to the development of scientific knowledge, to religious ideas or customs.” He asserts that when one carefully examines the concept of civilization, however, one discovers that at its core, “this concept expresses the self-consciousness of the West. One could even say: the national consciousness.” If civilization has come to express itself as the national consciousness of the West, it has occurred at the expense of “savage” nations. In order for civilization to function as national consciousness it must be secure in its position, there must not be any threat of the infiltration of savagery. Thus, the culture of the peoples of the Americas (defined as savage by Europe) had to be destroyed for the modern, civilized world to be born.

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82 Ibid.
While explorers, conquistadors, settlers, missionaries etc. were busy civilizing the “brutish” inhabitants of the New World, Europe itself was undergoing a civilizing revolution. As Elias notes,

Western man has not always behaved in the manner we are accustomed to regard as typical or as the hallmark of “civilized” man. If a member of present-day Western civilized society were to find himself transported into a past epoch of his own society, such as the medieval-feudal period, he would find there much that he esteems “uncivilized” in other societies today . . . he would at any rate feel quite unequivocally that society in this past period of Western history was not “civilized” in the same sense and to the same degree as Western society today.83

The civilizing process was occurring on both sides of the Atlantic. Early explorers were simultaneously civilizing the Natives of the Americas and themselves. Inherent in the civilizing process is the furthering of the distance between adulthood and childhood. Thus, some cultures are viewed as more child-like or less developed. Elias notes, “The distance in behavior and whole psychical structure between children and adults increase in the course of the civilizing process. Here for example, lies the key to the question of why some peoples or groups of peoples appear to us as ‘younger’ or ‘more childlike,’ others as ‘older’ or ‘more grown-up.’”84 The definition of what constitutes civilized society is constantly evolving. Social habits change and with them the rules of civility. While, the definition of civilization changes, there are constants in the European definition of the uncivilized. To the European those who eat their fellow man, those who go about naked, and those that are “irreligious” are, and always will be, uncivilized.

83 Ibid., xi.

84 Ibid., xiii.
In the mid-seventeenth century, Pierre d’Avity detailed what he believed to be the five primary indicators of brutishness. These included: the inability (or lack of desire) to use reason, savage diet, nakedness, the poor quality of shelter, and the lack of government. The Native American’s inability to use reason manifested itself for the Europeans in their failure to comprehend the benefits of the European way of living. In other words, any society that was not very similar to their own was automatically illogical and unreasonable. In his references to the savage diet of the Native Americans, d’Avity was not necessarily pointing to cannibalism, though the application is obvious. Instead he was calling attention to their lack of table manners and their consumption of strange and “disgusting” foodstuffs. “This concern with the diet of the Amerindian was the logical consequence of the widespread belief that we are what we eat. The implication of this, for the Renaissance mind, was that ‘savage food necessarily produces a savage nature and temperament.’” Taking this analogy a bit farther, Renaissance thinkers could have concluded that it was not savagery that made the Natives cannibals, but their propensity for cannibalism which made them savage. Nudity was often mentioned by early explorers of the Americas as one of their primary points of reference for the differences between themselves and the American inhabitant. D’Avity believed that nudity indicated “a complete absence of a sense of morality when persons do not cover even their shameful parts.” Lack of adequate (by European standards) shelter is the fourth indicator of brutishness. D’Avity believed in a clear hierarchy of dwelling places, with caves and trees being at the far end of the spectrum. Like many of the European concepts of savagery, this is in conflict with much of the evidence as to

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85 Dickason, 66-67.
86 Ibid., 66.
87 Ibid., 67.
how Native Americans actually lived. The final indicator of savagery was the lack of
government. He stated, “They are entirely barbarous who live without any laws and without
chiefs in times of peace, only accepting them during wars.”

D’Avity was willing to concede that some of the peoples of Central and South America did, in fact, have established
governments. This was disputed by many who concluded that although there were governments;
they were too brutish themselves to be considered civilized.

Civilization and savagery are evolving concepts. Each intellectual revolution brings about
changes in their definitions. Actions that were once perceived as the height of civility are now
out of fashion, just as things that were once considered savage are widespread. It is common
nowadays to see individuals with tattoos or piercings that not long ago would have clearly
marked them as savage. While the specific meanings of the terms change, the power that they
exert over discourse has not. The separation between what is civilized and what is not is still a
central concern. The place of cannibalism in the civilization and savagery binary has not
changed. Since the first encounter between Europeans and Native Americans the cannibal has
represented the basest aspects of humanity. The discourse of cannibalism provides a means of
revealing the civilizing process and understanding the perpetuation of the myth of the savage.

88 Ibid.
II: THE FUNCTIONS OF CANNIBALISM

There is a curious little text entitled *A Defense of Cannibalism* that sheds light upon cannibal discourse (See Appendix A for the full text). This thirteen-page booklet supposedly recounts a speech given around 1750 by a Carib piai (medicine man or shaman) about the European invaders’ desire to eliminate cannibalism from their culture. The very brief translator’s introduction states that this speech should “remind the reader of certain books and articles now written to prove that war is normal and inevitable and that the hope of international peace is essentially chimerical.”89 This text highlights the complicated relationship between cannibalism and warfare. Arguably, it is defending continual warfare, with which cannibalism is inextricably linked, rather than defending cannibalism itself. For many societies in the New World after their initial encounter with Europeans, evidence suggests that cannibalism became an integral and inseparable part of how they conducted warfare. The Iroquois for instance were said to have practiced cannibalism both inside and outside of the context of war. European sources suggest that since the “success” of the tribe lay in their ability to win wars, it became more essential for them to practice warfare cannibalism. The discourses of war and cannibalism often coalesce in the early contact period. Despite this, the two are usually regarded as separate entities which occasionally intersect in scholarship. The connection between warfare and cannibalism is well studied, but most studies fail to understand the cannibal as a discursive being and do not interrogate both its function within warfare and the development of the cannibal trope. Discussions of cannibalism are often limited by their failure to understand the complex relationship between warfare and cannibalism. Cannibalism must be treated with the same depth

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and sincerity of scholarly enquiry as any other cultural phenomenon and its relationship to other elements of culture must be explored before a more complete picture begins to emerge. This chapter explores several ways in which cannibalism functioned in the New World, especially as it pertains to warfare. Cannibalism was often a part of the acts of war themselves, as well as a part of the justification for war. It functioned as a way to ensure the continuation of warfare as well as creating a symbolic end to it.

As with many primary sources the reliability of *A Defense of Cannibalism* is highly questionable. In the introduction the editor indicates that even he doubts the validity of the account stating,

> It will doubtless be thought that this piai speaks in a fashion rather academic for a savage. Perhaps he was a relative of Voltaire’s Huron. It is permissible to suppose also that the missionary who has reported for us this harangue had been trained in the belles-lettres and that he transcribed into the style of a philosopher the rude language of the medicine man.90

This passage demonstrates the pervasive attitude of the Western scholar to the works and ideas of indigenous peoples well into the twentieth century. The entire speech is treated as a piece of absurdist literature, something to be valued simply as a curiosity. The editor asserts the importance of the speech and informs the reader that it deserves attention based on the speaker’s rhetorical skill and for the enthusiasm with which cannibalism is defended, rather than for the actual validity of the argument.91 There is also the issue of historical distance. The Carib’s speech is said to have occurred in the middle of the 18th century. We are given no information as

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90 Ibid.

91 Ibid., 4. The connection between cannibalism and absurdity is a common one. The works of Jonathan Swift often use cannibalism as an absurdist device.
to how the speech came into the hands of its (presumably) European editor. One certainly can question the honesty of the account and wonder if it has any basis in the 18th century. If we are to believe its origins we must also acknowledge the trajectory of this piece. It began in the Caribbean, traveled to Europe and was eventually translated into English and presented in New York. This text must be approached cautiously as there is little corroborating evidence to balance the account. One cannot accept the descriptions of Carib rituals as truth, but one cannot discount them either. The fact that so little can be determined about the origin of *A Defense of Cannibalism* calls attention to the unknowability of the hidden rituals of cannibalism. There is an element of fantasy in almost all discourse about the cannibal, an indeterminability that permeates the historical record. One could attempt to locate the cannibal amidst the fantasy, but the results would be questionable. Rather, the scholar must see the cannibal as a production and creation of a discourse of fantasy. *A Defense of Cannibalism* reveals this fantasy through its depiction of the relationship between cannibalism and warfare.

After a brief introduction, the editor recounts the Carib speech in its entirety. It begins:

A stranger came among us to teach us a new religion. There are among the doctrines which he preaches a great many things which are indifferent to us, but there are also some very dangerous for the tribe. He declares, for example, that cannibalism ought to disappear from the earth and that it is necessary to renounce our custom of eating human flesh. There have been in all ages individuals to whose stomach this ailment was repugnant. But this is a rare physiological idiosyncrasy. Even those who suffered from it regarded it is an infirmity. This is the first time that an attempt has been made to make a dogma of this pathological distaste. The propaganda of this stranger might prove fatal. At the last public feast where ten prisoners were immolated, three of our warriors have
refused to touch the flesh. That is why I have resolved to demonstrate to you that this
doctrine is absurd and that those who permit themselves to be seduced by it will be
traitors to their tribe.  

Several assumptions have now been made clear about what the text asserts is the nature of Carib
(and without an unreasonable imaginative leap, all indigenous peoples) culture. First, the Caribs
are “practicing cannibals” and have always been so. Second, cannibalism is an integral part of
their religion. Third, their worldview is such that those who are not cannibals are viewed as
strange and threatening. Fourth, they fear the influence of foreigners on their society and fiercely
praise tribal and cultural loyalty. The Carib medicine man continues to logically explain the
importance of the cannibal ritual to their culture and why it must be preserved at all costs.

However, below the surface there lies an argument more for the necessity of the continuation of
warfare than anything else. The speaker deduces that without warfare (with which cannibalism is
inextricably linked) their lands would become over populated and unable to sustain them.  

Anthropologists have surmised that non-state societies often engaged in warlike behavior
in order to maintain sustainable population levels. This can function in two ways, either reducing
the overall population or providing a means of maintaining the levels of population.  

The Iroquois conceptualized the process of population maintenance in terms of individual
and collective spiritual power. When a person died, the power of his or her lineage, clan,
and nation was diminished in proportion to his or her individual spiritual strength. To
replenish the depleted power, the Iroquois conducted ‘requickening’ ceremonies at which

92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., 5.
94 I use the example of the Iroquois not because they are a group of great similarity to the Caribs, but rather
because so very little remains of Carib culture and the Iroquois are a much more thoroughly studied and well-
documented people.
the deceased’s name—and with it the social role and duties it represented—was transferred to a successor.95

The link between cannibalism and warfare is a well-studied phenomenon. Continuing with the example of the Iroquois, one of the functions (as relayed by Europeans) of the cannibal ceremony was to alleviate the rage and sadness caused by the death of a beloved member of the tribe. Members of the tribe who were not able to actively participate in war (children, women, the elderly) were able to participate in the symbolic defeat of their enemies through their torture and consumption. Thus, such rituals served to support group cohesiveness and identity.96

Anthropologists suggest that non-state societies tended to engage in warfare for different reasons than state societies.97 Their wars are not usually about money or territory. For the Iroquois war was, “a specific response to the death of specific individuals at specific times, a sporadic affair characterized by the seizing from traditional enemies a few captives who would replace the dead literally or symbolically, and ease the pain of those who mourned.”98 Discursive evidence indicates that warfare was a self-perpetuating occurrence and an integral part of the continued existence of the tribe.

The Carib speaker99 goes on to explain a few ways in which the tribe could deal with the elimination of cannibalism and ultimately concludes that “civil war would break out in all parts


96 Ibid., 534.

97 Despite the fact that the Iroquois did have a form of central government, they are typically considered to be a non-state society. The Iroquois League was a loose conglomeration of tribes that did not serve many of the functions of most European governments.

98 Ibid., 536.

99 While it is never made explicitly clear that the Carib speaker is, in fact, male, it is fair to assume given the circumstances and assumptions that went into the publication of this document that the speaker can be presumed to be male.
of the country at once. Foreign war is a hundred times preferable.100 Therefore, to the Caribs it is clear that warfare was an inevitable and almost preferable consequence of existing. He indicates that if warfare were not the answer the tribe might then be forced to sacrifice a small number of elderly and children in order to allow for the effective distribution of the limited resources. He laments that in times past the elderly may have offered themselves up as sacrificial victims for the betterment of the tribe but this is no longer possible as “these heroic times are past. Egoism has grown in our hearts and it would be in vain to hope to see the men of to-day offer themselves upon the altar of the tribe.”101 It is possible to conclude from this statement that it is because of European influence that this solution is no longer viable. Therefore, the text asserts that it is the fault of the West that the Caribs must consume one another (intra-tribal rather than extra-tribal). This form of cannibalism is known as endocannibalism and refers to the eating of individuals inside of one’s social group. It stands in opposition to exocannibalism, which is the consuming of outsiders and usually accompanies warfare.102

The first part of the speech concludes by saying, “In a word, those who protest against the custom of eating our enemies are blind if they do not see that the success of their doctrine would unchain civil war and condemn the members of the same tribe to eat one another.”103 Thus the boundary between Self and Other become blurred. If we are to understand the Self as constituting more than the individual, but the community as well, then the European presence forced the Caribs to consume themselves in order to maintain sustainable population levels. This

100 Beau, 5.
101 Ibid., 7.
103 Beau, 7.
would result in the destruction of the Carib sense of identity; the boundary that separates the tribe from the outside world begins to collapse in upon itself. Much of the European discourse of cannibalism centers on the dissolution of such boundaries. Maggie Kilgour states in “The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time,” that “the newly defined cannibal (itself a misrecognition of the ‘other’ created through a misappropriation of an alien language) served both as a foil for the emerging modern subject, and conveniently, as a legitimisation of cultural appropriation.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the very existence of the modern European Subject depended upon dissolving the Selfhood of the Native peoples they conquered. Kilgour continues, “As the modern Western ego is founded upon faith in production, progress, and individual autonomy, the cannibal inversely represents consumption, regress, and the annihilation of discrete identity.”¹⁰⁵ Colonialism depended upon the destruction of indigenous identities, for these identities must be destroyed so that the newly conceived colonial subject can be born. To Europeans, cannibalism represented the worst aspects of indigenous identity and therefore they went to great lengths to ensure its termination.

Part II of the piai’s speech asserts that cannibalism is more than a “beneficent necessity” but also an integral part of religious devotion.¹⁰⁶ He continues to further equate the importance of warfare and cannibalism. The Carib speaker sees warfare, in part, as survival of the fittest. He states, “there return from the combat only the strongest and most robust, that is, those who are truly worthy to live and perpetuate themselves.”¹⁰⁷ The speech indicates that the Caribs valued virility and heroism and viewed the fragile and feeble members of their society as a burden. Yet,

¹⁰⁴ Barker, 242.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 243.
¹⁰⁶ Beau, 7.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 8.
this contradicts the speaker’s previous denunciation that the elimination of cannibalism would force the tribe to sacrifice its weakest members and that this would result in horrible consequences for the mental well being of the tribe.

The penultimate portion of the speech begins with an affirmation of tribal superiority. Prior to the coming of Europeans, an important facet of Carib identity was the assumption of superiority over their neighbors according to the text:

With our neighbors these reasons would be sufficient; they are barbarous and without culture. We Oyampis are not solely concerned with spiritual well being. True civilization recognizes the value of the Good and the Beautiful. Now from this point of view cannibalism is also beneficial. Whence comes the beauty of our warriors and our children? . . . Is it because, every year, war eliminates the feeble. That it is which has made and conserves the beauty of our race.108

The speaker attributes the beauty, and by extension virility, of his people to their reliance on cannibalism as a form of eugenics. He continues, “If we lost our taste for the flesh of the vanquished . . . The race would soon become ugly and the day would arrive when fine specimens of humanity might easily be numbered among us.”109 While Europeans might not have appreciated the Native American concept of beauty, the text asserts that the Natives saw beauty in their natural surroundings and felt that it was imperative to preserve such beauty or risk upsetting the balance of the world. According to the piai, cannibalism serves in the long run, to make the world a more beautiful and therefore more successful place. Cannibalism allows the

108 Ibid., 8.
109 Ibid., 9.
strongest and most “worthy” individuals to carry on the tribal legacy, while sacrificing the weaker individuals for the benefit of the rest.

The speaker cannot understand why the Europeans value warfare and wish to preserve it, but abhor cannibalism. “It is, therefore, absurd, to pretend to preserve war while, proscribing cannibalism, for this is at once the principal cause, the necessary condition and the real justification for it.”110 He refers to the European doctrine as evidence of their “intellectual feebleness.”111 The Europeans came to the Americas with a long history of warfare and conquering, incorporating the lands into their own, a concept that was likely to be unfamiliar to many Native Americans.

Much research has been done on the Iroquois understanding of warfare.112 The well-known Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune remarked in 1657, “The chief virtue of these poor Pagans being cruelty, just as mildness is that of Christians, they teach it to their children from their very cradles, and accustom them to the most atrocious carnage and the most barbarous spectacles.”113 In his essay, “War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience,” Daniel Richter attempts to put Iroquois warfare in context. He tries to compensate for the shortcomings and misinterpretations of earlier studies of Native American warfare. He points out that early European visitors to the New World often ignored the violence inherent in their own societies and viewed Native warfare

110 Ibid., 12.

111 Ibid., 10.

112 I understand that one cannot equate the views of the Iroquois to those of the Caribs and that it would be irresponsible scholarship to do so. However, it is possible to draw generalized parallels between the people of the Americas. Much early European writing deals with what they viewed to be the warlike tendencies of the inhabitants. I feel that it is worthwhile to digress for a bit and generally explain indigenous concepts of warfare. My decision to use the Iroquois is two-fold; first, they are one of the most well-researched and widely studies groups in North America, and secondly, the vast majority of my own research with regards to cannibalism has focused on the Iroquois and I feel most confident explicating their understandings of warfare.

as one-dimensional and savage. \(^{114}\) Richter is quick to point out that Iroquois warfare was not a one-dimensional affair as it was conducted for many reasons. He states, “the non-state societies of aboriginal North America may have waged war for different – but no less rational and no more savage – purposes than did the nation-states of Europe.” \(^{115}\) Thus, when the Carib piai defends cannibalism and states that “it is because we wish to eat the flesh of our enemies that every spring our warriors go forth to war,” \(^{116}\) this is probably an oversimplification as well. What is important to note however is that evidence suggests that warfare was central to many Native Americans societies after the time of contact with Europeans. In an informative footnote, Richter states, “While anthropologists disagree about the precise distinctions between the wars of state-organized and non-state societies, they generally agree that battles for territorial conquest, economic monopoly, and the subjugation or enslavement of conquered peoples are the product of the technological and organizational capacities of the state.” \(^{117}\) Therefore, for many Native American peoples warfare was conducted for far different reasons than for the Europeans, as most could be classified as non-state societies. \(^{118}\) To return to the original discussion of warfare among the Caribs, it is most difficult to conclude anything about the nature of their warfare as the only evidence which remains of them is found in the pages of European texts. *A Defense of Cannibalism* asserts that the Carib piai cannot understand what Europeans gain from eliminating

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\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 528-529.

\(^{116}\) Beau, 7.

\(^{117}\) Richter, “War and Culture,” 529.

\(^{118}\) The classifications of state-organized and non-state are themselves problematic, however this is a discussion best suited for another essay.
cannibalism from their society and thus crippling warfare, just as Le Jeune does not understand the critical role that cannibalism played in warfare for many tribes.

The final section of *A Defense of Cannibalism* further illustrates the cultural misunderstandings evident on both sides. The Carib speaker reminds his tribesman that if they adopt the ways of the white men that they will become traitors to their tribe.\textsuperscript{119} He uses cannibalism as a way to arouse tribal loyalties. He fears for the future of his people and he refers to the fate of those who adopt the “absurd doctrine” preached by the Europeans.

It is always fatal in the end to those who adopt it. Ignorance of reality sooner or later brings its own punishment. Even desiring to renounce, under the pretext of humanity and pity, the custom of our ancestors would bring destruction upon us. Our women, our children, we ourselves, would contribute to the feasts of our neighboring tribes.\textsuperscript{120}

Therefore, continuing their anthropophagus ways was not only a powerful symbol of tribal loyalty, but essential to the survival of their culture. The previous passage also informs us of the audience for the speech. Obviously, it was intended to be heard/read/consumed by men, the “warriors” of the tribe. If we are to believe that the recitation of this speech ever actually occurred, then it is fair to assume that it may have functioned as a pre-battle morale booster as well as a warning.

The European editor closes the work with a troubling sentiment. First he informs the reader that after hearing this speech the missionary to whom we owe its recounting fled. The missionary feared falling victim to cannibalism and was afraid that he could not adequately respond to the piai’s claims. The last line states, “Nevertheless, the Caribs themselves no longer

\textsuperscript{119} Beau, 12.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 12-13.
eat one another.”  Given the historical record, this reads as an ominous prediction. The Carib tribe no longer exists and therefore the worst fears of the piai came true. His people stopped consuming the flesh of men and have since disappeared. They are now nothing but historical remnants, remembered best for their etymological namesakes, the Caribbean Sea and the cannibal.

What is evident in this example are the ways in which the trope of cannibalism can be manipulated for competing purposes. For the Europeans, cannibalism was symptomatic of the savagery of the inhabitants of the Americas. In 1503 Queen Isabella of Spain passed the so-called “Cannibal Law” which asserted that the souls of all of the Indigenous Americans are redeemable and therefore they should be offered the chance to convert to Christianity, unless they are cannibals. First the law spells out the rights afforded to Native Peoples:

Let it be known that my Lord the King and I, intending that all people who live and are on the islands and Terra Firma of the Ocean Sea become Christians and be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith, have ordered by means of a letter of ours that no person or persons who by our command went to those islands and Terra Firma should dare to apprehend or capture any person or persons of the Indians . . . in order to take them to any other place, and that no injury either to their persons or their property be done unto them, under certain penalties spelled out in our letter, even if the motive be to help the Indians.  

The decree continues to describe the efforts of conversion made on the early voyages. Isabella notes that on certain islands the explorers and the accompanying priests and missionaries were

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121 Ibid., 13.
greeted kindly and treated with respect yet on other islands they encountered vicious cannibals who were hostile to their presence. Based on these observations the Spanish crown gives permission for its subjects to use any means necessary to subdue the cannibals.

... every person under my command who should go to the islands and Terra Firma of the said Ocean Sea... that if the said cannibals should resist and not wish to receive and welcome in their lands the captains and peoples who by my command go and make the said voyages, and if [the cannibals] do not wish to listen to them in order to be indoctrinanted in the things of our Holy Catholic Faith and enter my service and become subject to me, [then persons under my command] may and can capture [the cannibals] in order to take them to whichever lands and islands... in order that [the cannibals] might be sold and a profit be made... 123

Notably, this embraces a slippage of identity as any who resist colonization become cannibals in the eyes of the Spanish Crown. This and other such laws provide a shaky security to Native Americans who are eager to give up their freedom to serve the Spanish Crown and their religion for Catholicism. 124 This is, of course, an ideal that would likely never exist. How many peoples are eager to give up their sovereignty? Therefore, in practice this law paves the way for the slave trade in the Americas which led to the extinction of many of the peoples of the Caribbean, including the Caribs and the Arawaks. The slaves of the New World provided the resources and labor necessary for any large-scale settlement in the Americas. The success of European expansion in the Americas depended upon the blood and labor of cannibals.

123 Ibid., 24.

124 There are several other similar examples, but the Cannibal Law of 1503 is the earliest.
In an essay entitled “Rethinking Anthropophagy,” which serves as a response/follow-up to his controversial earlier work *The Man Eating Myth*, William Arens states,

Thus, in terms of the particulars, I continue to aver not only that the Caribs, Aztecs, Pacific Islanders, and various African, Native American, and New Guinea ‘tribes’ have been exoticized, but also – and equally importantly – that Western culture has congratulated itself for putting a stop to this cultural excess through colonial ‘pacification’ and introducing Christianity to once-benighted natives.125

Labeling the Other as cannibal figures prominently into this process. Homi Bhabha states, “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify the conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”126 Bhabha places this distinction explicitly in terms of race. While this is a relevant and important connection in terms of general colonial discourse, the figure of the cannibal is more complex. The cannibal played(s) an integral role in the formation of race as a concept. Cannibal discourse cannot be placed exclusively within the realm of race theory nor does it lie wholly outside of it. Cannibalism is an important constitutive part of the concept of race. This is what makes the figure of the cannibal so unique and intriguing.

A study of the Iroquois is illuminating, as they embody many of the contradictions and stereotypes of the cannibal and help to further our understandings of the functions of cannibalism in the New World. It can be safely said that the Iroquois are notorious both for their reputation as the most “civilized” tribe and for their reputation as an incredibly violent society. Study of the Iroquois also allows for the connection between the much more well-studied/well-known

125 Barker, 41.

cannibalism of South America and that of the North. The term Iroquois actually refers to a union between five (later six with the inclusion of the Tuscarora) tribes into a League: the Mohawk, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas. Although these groups are those traditionally termed Iroquois many others speak Iroquoian languages including, “the five nations of the Huron confederacy, the five nations of the Neutral confederacy, perhaps three nations of Erie, and at least three independent nations, the Petun, Wenro, and the Susquenannock.” The peoples of the Iroquois League occupied roughly the region that is now New York, southern Ontario, and adjacent portions of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Quebec. Although it is impossible to determine the exact population of Iroquois, scholars have estimated that they numbered roughly 90,000 prior to the founding of the Iroquois League in 1525. Early European visitors found the Iroquois to be well organized, powerful, and unimaginably cruel. Their violent tendencies were well known throughout much of North America and caused one early visitor to the continent to remark that there “are none as cruel to their prisoners as those of Canada . . .”

Prior to European contact there remains scant evidence of the practice of cannibalism among the peoples of Iroquoia. The earliest archaeological evidence comes from Ontario in the 14th century. The evidence is sporadic and hardly convincing enough on its own to label the pre-Columbian Iroquois as cannibals. Additional evidence begins to surface around the 16th

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127 Snow, 1.

128 Ibid.

129 The dates for the founding of the Iroquois League are an approximation. There is no definitive evidence from which to precisely date the League. Some evidence points to 1451, however 1525 is generally the accepted date. Ibid., 60.


131 Snow, 38.
century.\textsuperscript{132} After 1525, the Iroquois were faced with a period of escalating warfare where small villages and bands began to condense into larger fortified villages.\textsuperscript{133} This increase in the defensive nature of villages and intensified warfare contributed to the rise of cannibalism. As Dean Snow notes, “General anthropological research has shown that such extreme behavior arises only under specific circumstances. Feuding or warfare must be truly prominent and the taking of prisoners must be an important objective.”\textsuperscript{134} Evidence suggests that cannibalism among the Iroquois developed in response to Europeans. In order to function in a world of European settlers, traders, invaders, and missionaries, the Iroquois were forced to develop new ways of coping. Iroquoia was in turmoil, Iroquois traditions were problematized by the European colonial agenda. Just as they developed new diplomatic strategies to deal with Europeans, the Iroquois began to practice more widespread anthropophagy.

Historian Richard White’s concept of the \textit{middle ground} is very helpful when looking at Iroquois cannibalism.\textsuperscript{135} The middle ground is the symbolic land of cultural compromise and change that existed between European invaders and Native peoples. Each group was forced to reevaluate and change elements of their culture in order to accommodate the other. The power dynamic between the Europeans and the Natives was not always equal on the middle ground, but each did have to adapt. Cannibalism can be seen as an element of the middle ground as it presumably developed among the Iroquois in response to European contact. European ideology fostered many changes in Iroquois society; from religion to warfare. Cannibalism became a

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid, 52.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 53.

coping mechanism, a way of adapting former traditions to suit the needs of changing times. In order for the notion of civilization to develop, savagery had to arise as well. In the case of the Iroquois, one did not necessarily precede the other. The savagery of the Iroquois, as defined by their cannibalism, developed at the same time, and as a result of the civilizing of Europe. Thus, one can view cannibalism as a product of the middle ground.

One of the main sites of discourse about Iroquoian cannibalism is the Jesuit Relations, an extensive collection of the writings of Jesuit missionaries in the New World. The Jesuit Relations constitute the record of Jesuit missionary activity in the Americas. More than just recording missionary activity, they also provide a level of detail about Native peoples that is nearly unparalleled. As with any European record of life in the New World, it is important to treat the Jesuit Relations with informed skepticism. These accounts, though often seemingly ethnographic in nature, were used by the missionaries to assert the necessity of continued support for their presence in the New World. Volume 41 of the Jesuit Relations details a visit to Montreal by representatives of the Six Nations. The visiting Iroquois bestow six presents of great importance on the French. The first five were given to strengthen the friendship between the two peoples. The last present was the symbolic casting off of the Iroquois cannibalistic past.136

The sixth and last present was to bury so far under ground their war-kettle,—in which they were accustomed to boil human flesh and the dismembered bodies of their captives, whom they cruelly devoured,—that that abominable kettle should never be seen on earth again, because all their hatred was changed into love.137

By doing away with “that abominable kettle,” the Iroquois were attempting to present themselves as both civilized and trustworthy. However, this grand gesture appears to have had little effect on

136 Snow, 53.

137 Ibid., 52.
actually curbing cannibalism as a practice. There are numerous examples in later issues of the
*Jesuit Relations* which detail the continuation of cannibalism. What is important to note about
the passage above is that according to its European author, the Iroquois had developed a keen
understanding of how Europeans viewed cannibalism and its psychological effects.

Volume 42 of the *Jesuit Relations* contains a very revealing passage relating to
cannibalism.

In the same Village of Oiogoen, there occurred last year an event which caused all the
inhabitants much anxiety. One of them, having dreamed that he gave a feast of human
flesh, invited all the chief men of the Country to his cabin to hear a matter of importance.

. . . and then asked them to guess his dream. All struck wide of the mark, until one man,
suspecting the truth said to him: "Thou wishest to give a feast of human Flesh. Here, take
my brother; I place him in thy hands to be cut up on the spot, and put into the kettle." All
present were seized with Fright, except the dreamer, who replied that his dream required
a woman. Superstition went so far, that they adorned a girl with all the riches of the
Country. . . . and that poor innocent, not knowing why she was made to look so pretty,
was actually led to the place appointed for the sacrifice. All the people attended to
witness so strange a spectacle. The guests took their places, and the public victim was led
into the middle of the circle. She was delivered to the Sacrificer, who was the very one
for whom the sacrifice was to be made. He took her; they watched his actions, and pitied
that innocent girl; but, when they thought him about to deal her the death-blow, he cried
out: "I am satisfied; my dream requires nothing further." Is it not a great charity to open
the eyes of a people so grossly in error? 138

Although no actual act of cannibalism takes place in the above passage, the significance of it is
not lessened. It illustrates how the Iroquois people abhorred and yet practiced cannibalism, or at
least that Europeans believed it to be so. The actual reaction of the Native peoples to the sacrifice
is difficult if not impossible to infer from the above passage. It cannot be known how much the
author inserted his views into the story. As evidence suggests that the Iroquois did regularly
practice cannibalism in this period, it is questionable that they would have reacted with such
horror. Perhaps the above reference more clearly exemplifies European views of cannibalism
than the actual view of the Iroquois. Importantly, it hints at a presumption of progress being
made by the civilizing process. It illustrates the European perspective of Native peoples and
indicates the purpose of the author in including this particular passage in his writings. The writer
points out that although the Iroquois were willing to commit an act of unwarranted cannibalism,
they did so reluctantly. This passage does not depict a group of savages eager for the flesh of
men. The fellow villagers watched “so strange a spectacle” and feared for the innocent girl about
to be sacrificed. The above passage represents the gradual success of European conquerors and
missionaries to convince the Natives of their “savage” ways. The innocence of the young girl is
strongly emphasized, ensuring the sympathy and horror of the reader and hinting at the
redeemibility of the Natives.

The practice of cannibalism among the Iroquois, as Europeans recounted it, varied
greatly. Sources indicate that cannibalism occurred for a number of reasons. At times it served a
function that resembles what we would call terrorism and at other times it served a more ritual

138 The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents; Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New
October 27, 2004), 153.
function. Sometimes cannibalism was an act of mourning, or it was performed to strengthen the bodies of warriors and provide them with courage.\textsuperscript{139} Le Jeune refers to such an instance in the \textit{Jesuit Relations}.

Here is a strange Hiroquois custom: We have been told that they sometimes take a newborn child, stick arrows into it, and throw it into the fire; when the flesh is consumed, they take the bones and crumble them to powder; and when they intend to go to war they swallow a little of this powder, believing that this beverage increases their courage. They also use these ashes for their charms and superstitions. The mother who gives her child for this abominable sacrifice is rewarded with some valuable present. Is not this horrible?\textsuperscript{140}

Cannibalism cannot be described as a singular act. No two societies perform it for exactly the same reasons, or in precisely the same ways. Just as Columbus saw the inhabitants of the Americas as homogenous, scholars tend to treat acts of cannibalism as undifferentiated from one another.

Sources indicate that the Iroquois sometimes cannibalized captives who had shown extraordinary bravery in battle. They expected brave warriors to take torture stoically and expected them to sing throughout the ordeal. Captives were also sometimes expected to partake of their own roasted flesh. The heart and/or blood of the bravest captives were given as rewards to members of the tribe.\textsuperscript{141} There were also incidents of ritual cannibalism that took place outside of war captive-taking scenarios. “It was also most important to eat at solemn feasts the flesh of

\textsuperscript{139} The Jesuit Relations provide numerous examples which demonstrate the breadth of functions of Iroquois cannibalism.

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Jesuit Relations}, vol. 19, 71.

\textsuperscript{141} Knowles, 188.
the woman sacrificed to the war god, and it is significant that the Iroquois made a feast of bear meat to the war god as atonement for not eating captives, and promised to do so in the future if success in war were granted.”142 For the Iroquois at this time, much like the Caribs, performing acts of cannibalism provided the strength and security needed for the success of the tribe by ensuring the continuation of warfare.

Cannibalism served to allay the ravages of famine as well. The Jesuits distinguished between incidences of cannibalism among starving peoples and ritual cannibalism.143 After being devastated by war with the Iroquois, the Hurons faced an unprecedented famine which caused Father Ragueneau to remark, “no less unusual among our savages than among the Europeans, who abhor eating flesh of their own kind. Doubtless the teeth of the starving man make no distinction in food, and do not recognize in the dead body him who a little before was called, until he died, father, son, or brother.”144 There is even some evidence that after an outbreak of famine, three fugitive Frenchmen resorted to cannibalism for survival. Kenneth Morrison notes in the *Solidarity of Kin* that “the Jesuits were coming to realize that such incidents were perhaps inevitable considering the extreme harshness of living conditions in the North America of the day.”145 For many Europeans at this time, cannibalism for survival was excusable, but ritual cannibalism was demonized. This stands in sharp contrast to earlier European conceptions of cannibalism in which even those who consumed the flesh of the dead in times of famine were often put to death.

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142 Ibid., 189.


144 Ibid., 70.

145 Ibid.
Jean de Léry, the famous sixteenth century ethnographer of the cannibal tribe the Tupinamba of Brazil, discusses an incident of famine cannibalism in France in his autobiography. Léry was horrified and sickened (which he never claims to be among the Tupinamba) by a family who consumed their child rather than starve to death during a siege of the town of Sancerre. He blames an old woman in the household for instigating the cannibalism and believes that being condemned to burn alive was not a harsh enough punishment for her crimes. For Léry, “the cannibalism of the Tupinambas seems to lend itself to interpretation on a higher level, the anthropophagy of Sancerre is apparently inexcusable. Far from being part of any social or religious symbolism it was diametrically opposed to the Christian religion . . .”

Léry’s understanding of famine cannibalism is deeper than simply holding Christian Europeans to a higher moral standard, it is also decidedly misogynist. He believed that the from the beginning of time the tempter was always female (Eve) and yet in Brazil the economy of vengeance cannibalism seemed to be essentially masculine . . . women had only walk-on parts, or so Léry would have us believe. They [women] dragged the ritual down to a lower level, towards the flesh and purely animal appetites, whereas the haughty speech of the prisoner, defying his vanquisher on the brink of death, raised it to a symbolic level.

Thus, starvation cannibalism is feminized and demonized, representing weakness of character and lack of moral fortitude.

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146 Lestringant, 75.
147 Ibid., 77.
148 Ibid., 77-78.
Anthropologists have spent a great deal of time attempting to contextualize and justify the rites and rituals of “savages.” As a discipline, anthropology often accepts that social and cultural actions are explainable and able to be categorized. Given this need for explanation anthropologists have deduced that the existence of cannibalism as a cultural practice in a society is nearly always accompanied by six factors.

First, militarism and intergroup conflict are always prominent. Second, the taking of prisoners is always an important objective of conflict. Third, there is invariably a great social emphasis on conformity, compliance, and generosity, which displaces aggression to outsiders. Fourth, the world view must be personalistic, where all everyday occurrences, both good and bad, are regarded as the doings of supernatural forces or other human beings. Fifth, sacrifice to supernaturals must be part of regular religious observance. Finally, there must be intensive intergroup competition for scarce resources, with great uncertainty about outcomes.149

All six of these factors have been noted in Iroquois society after the coming of the Europeans.150 Incidents of cannibalism increase rapidly in the decades and centuries following European contact as the Iroquois are faced with increasing external and internal pressures. These six factors serve to reinforce the idea of cannibalism as an element of the middle ground, as they developed either in direct response to European actions or in order to deal with the indirect consequences of European invasion. Each factor shall be addressed in more detail below.

Militarism and intergroup conflict were very prevalent in Iroquoia in the sixteenth century. It has been theorized that the Iroquois League itself was formed in order to combat

149 Snow, 128.
150 Ibid., 52.
increasing warfare between the tribes. The formation of the League diminished warfare between the five nations (this occurred prior to the addition of the Tuscarora into the League). This did not however, end external threats. The sixteenth century was a violent time, in which smaller villages and hamlets combined to form larger more defensible towns. It is from this time forward that evidence for cannibalism turns up *en masse* in Iroquois villages.

Captive taking was a fundamental aspect of Iroquois society. Captive taking was popular among many Native tribes and fulfilled an important need for many villages. Captives could be taken for adoption, ransom, or for torture and death. The Mourning War functioned as an important instigator for many battles fought by the Iroquois. In order to satiate the pain of loss of loved ones killed in battle, warriors would seek to capture individuals to ritually take their place. Those captured and unsuited for adoption were often tortured and sometimes cannibalized.

The Iroquois placed a great deal of emphasis on conformity, compliance, and generosity. Warfare occurred only through consensus of the tribe. War Chiefs were virtually powerless without the support of the tribe as coercion was not an effective method for Iroquois headmen. In fact, generosity, above all else, was revered as the most important quality a leader could possess. Many Europeans remarked upon the generosity of the Native Americans. Columbus often noted the kindness of the people he encountered. The Iroquois and many other tribes also expected some sort of compensation for their dead, whether it is in the form of presents, revenge, etc.

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151 Ibid., 49.

152 Ibid., 53.


154 Snow, 54.

or captives. Once the proper action was taken, tribal members were expected to accept the outcome and look past their grief.156

To the Iroquois no deed, whether good or evil, was accidental. Good and evil existed in everyone and the definitions were flexible, thus they had a personalistic world view. Before embarking on almost any task, the Iroquois would consult the spirits and perform a ceremony.157 Embedded in their world view and their interactions with the spiritual world were the notions of “reciprocity and exchange, war and peace, and alliance and spiritual power.”158

Ritual sacrifice formed a vital part of Iroquois culture. As mentioned previously, human sacrifice was reported to be practiced by the Iroquois, as was animal sacrifice. The White Dog ceremony is a well documented sacrificial ritual. “In the classic and historic pattern of the White Dog Sacrifice one or two dogs of a ‘pure white breed’ were strangled, hung up, and ceremonially burned with prayers to the Creator.”159 The White Dog Sacrifice continued to be performed long after they stopped practicing anthropophagy.160

Since the coming of the Europeans, resources in Iroquoia had become vastly depleted. Disease decimated Native populations. The increase in European settlers threatened to upset the delicate balance of Iroquois life. Competition for resources spurned many conflicts, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.161 For instance, at the heart of King Phillips War was the

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157 Snow, 54.

158 Richter, The Ordeal of the Longhouse, 29.


160 Ibid.

161 Snow, 82.
lack of resources available to Metacom and his people. The only available resource left was land and even it was under threat.162

As the decades and centuries wore on cannibalism amongst the Iroquois, and Native peoples in general, decreased. It can be said that cannibalism fell out of favor. This might be due to European influence, or perhaps, more correctly, to the eventual stabilization and loss of power that occurred among the tribes. The six factors that contributed to the formation of cannibalism as a cultural practice eroded, as did the middle ground. As noted by Harold Blau in 1964, even the Iroquois White Dog Sacrifice changed to eliminate the actual sacrifice of animals. Instead, tobacco became the sacrificial replacement for blood.163 Among the Algonquian peoples a more curious development occurred. Like the Iroquois, the Algonquians are presumed to have once practiced cannibalism. However, cannibalism came to be highly vilified among them, and even became classified as a psychiatric condition called the Windigo Psychosis which manifests only among Algonquians. It is characterized by an insatiable desire to consume human flesh and its sufferers are ostracized.164

The onset is withdrawal into melancholia . . . He lies inert, and is said to be brooding over the possibilities of cannibalism, wanting to eat men and yet afraid. His family around him like luscious beavers heavy with fat . . . He neither eats nor sleeps and seems insensible to all about. The next stage is that of violence, which may follow almost immediately or only after a considerable period.165


163 Blau, 98.


165 Ibid., 2.
The Windigo is a mythical beast said to consume the flesh of men and infect its victims with the desire to do the same.\textsuperscript{166} This pathologizing of cannibalism contrasts sharply with the presumed historical prevalence of Algonquian cannibalistic practices. The cannibals of North America faced much the same fate as those in the Caribbean and South America (though they may have practiced cannibalism for different reasons). The abandonment of the practice of cannibalism, indicated the destruction of indigenous culture which resulted from the efforts of colonial powers.

In addition to the writings of early explorers, the artwork and images produced about the Americas have also helped to perpetuate and maintain the image of the savage cannibal in a savage land. Visual representation of savagery was just as powerful (if not more) than the written word. These depictions act as propaganda, instilling the image of the New World cannibal savage deep in the recesses of our minds. The average European would likely not have read the journals of Christopher Columbus or Amerigo Vespucci, either for lack of access to books or because they were illiterate. What makes an image so powerful is its ability to transgress social, economic, and language barriers. One need not speak or understand Italian, or Spanish, or German to “read” the image. Images can be reprinted in countless texts dispersing their messages. The visual images of the New World eliminate much variety in the interpretations of the Americas and create a more singular understanding. These depictions take the place of the real lands of Americas in the minds of Europeans who never visited the New World. Many prominent writers in the early modern period wrote of the New World but had never stepped foot upon it (i.e. Montaigne). It is safe to assume that such writers believed that the images produced
about the Americas were based in fact. If most images contained a rendering of a cannibal, one would naturally presume the widespread proliferation of cannibals in the New World.

Visual depictions of the cannibal are no more reliable as sources of “factual” information than the writings they often accompanied. Simply interrogating the writings of early explorers cannot provide a complete picture of the cannibal instead, images of cannibalism help to fill in some of the gaps in knowledge. Together, writing and images open new avenues of discursive exploration. For instance, the role of women and the feminization of the New World become clearer through this exploration. Women feature more prominently in the images produced about the New World than in the writings of early explorers. In such images, women are often shown taking on a more active role in the performance of cannibalism. The descriptions of cannibal women in European writings of the time are often very contradictory, unclear, or left out all together. The combination of the visual and textual provides a space to combine postcolonial and feminist theories, which helps to create a more complete picture of the cannibal.

Images played a critical role in the “construction and maintenance of relationships of colonial power and subordination in the early modern Atlantic world.”\textsuperscript{167} The success of the writings of Amerigo Vespucci’s work can be attributed not only to his literary skill, but also the illustrations printed in his published works. Columbus’s works are illustrated, but with simple practical engravings, not at all like the fanciful creations published alongside Vespucci’s words. The narrative style of Vespucci lent itself to more spectacular and enthralling images.\textsuperscript{168} His penchant for exaggeration and hyperbole in writing is clearly evident in his accompanying images. There are numerous depictions of the “savages” of the New World. By the late sixteenth

\textsuperscript{167} Michael J. Schreffler, “Vespucci RedisCOVERS America: The Pictorial Rhetoric of Cannibalism in Early Modern Culture,” \textit{Art History} 28, no. 3 (June 2005), 295-296.

\textsuperscript{168} Todorov, \textit{The Morals of History}, 109.
century, representations of the New World as a nude female had become prevalent. One very famous image is an engraving created by the Flemish artist Jan van der Straet [Figure 1]. This image was later reproduced by Theodore Galle and used to illustrate the seminal book Nova Reperta (New Discoveries), which was first published around 1600. The images that accompanied the text documented the discovery of many different things such as, gunpowder, the printing press, olive oil, and eyeglasses in addition to the discovery of the New World. The caption added to the image in the print edition reads in Americen Americus retexit - Semel vocuit inde semper excitam (Amerigo rediscovers America – He called her but once and henceforth she was always awake). The waking figure is positioned next to a sloth, whose very name represents inactivity. On the other side of “America” is Vespucci himself. He carries the symbols of western technological innovation, progress (re civilization), and conquest; “a cruciform staff with a banner bearing the Southern Cross, a navigational astrolabe, and a sword – the mutually reinforcing emblems of belief, empirical knowledge, and violence.”

Van der Straet depicts the moment of encounter in symbolic form. We are shown the meeting between a man, Vespucci, who represents Europe, and a woman, representing America. The sexual overtones in their meeting are undeniable. This type of depiction of a physical encounter represented as a sexual encounter is a common one in early modern texts. This image did more than follow in the footsteps of its predecessors, it also paved the way for

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170 Schreffler, 297.

171 Montrose, 4.

172 Ibid.

173 Schreffler, 297.
depictions of America for generations to come. In his article, “Vespucci Rediscovery America: The Pictorial Rhetoric of Cannibalism in Early Modern Culture,” Michael J. Schreffler offers an insightful interpretation of the role of cannibalism in Van der Straet’s images. He asserts that unlike many contemporary and subsequent images the association of cannibalism with the allegorical figure of America occurs more subtly in this image. It is relegated to the background, yet remains centered and visually enthralling. Schreffler notes the juxtaposition of the cannibal scene with the figure of America’s outstretched hand and asserts that this reveals the nature of depictions of colonial power in early modern images. He states:

This vignette depicts several figures seated around a fire, where they cook a human leg on a spit. Its place near the centre of the composition is, I believe, crucial to the operation of the image; it is as if Van der Straet, in appropriating the image from an atlas, removes the sign of cannibalistic activity from America’s grasp, leaving her empty-handed as she addresses Vespucci. Relegated to the background of the pictorial space, the reference to cannibalism in the Van der Straet image – the cooking scene – is thus initially indistinct. To begin with, therefore, the relationship between Vespucci and America, positioned in the foreground of the pictorial space, overwrites the relationship between America and her surroundings.

The image, therefore, foreshadows the future of American anthropophagy. The Europeans brought with them a desire to eliminate the scourge of man-eating. The image shows that the benefits of contact with the Native peoples of the Americas far outweighs the danger imposed by their cannibalistic nature. Cannibalism is but a secondary feature of their societies. However, even though the cannibal scene is relegated to the background, it is still ever-present in this

174 Schreffler, 299.

175 Ibid., 301.
rendering. Vespucci’s arrival awakens the formerly sleeping figure of America, but the cannibals are already awake preparing their feast. They lurk in the background, present but not active in the scene. Their presence appears to offer no danger to Vespucci, yet there is a sinister nature to their persistence in the scene. According to Louis Montrose in “The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery,”

In Van der Straet’s visualization of discovery as the advance of civilization, what is closer to the horizon is also closer to the point of origin: it is where we have come from – a prior episode in the history of contacts between Europeans and native Americans, and an earlier episode in the history of human society; and it is now what we must control – a cultural moment that is to be put firmly, decisively, behind us.176

Thus, the cannibal scene is one that will soon be relegated to the past. The allegorical figure of America is the civilized version of the continent. She is what the inhabitants of the Americas are moving towards: what contact with the European explorers will bring to them. Although she is mostly naked, her breasts are bare, her modesty is still somewhat protected. She is seated on a hammock, not on the bare ground like the cannibals in the distance.

The placement of the cannibal scene in a distinct and separate space from the two central figures also indicates, according to Schreffler, the “anxiety about the practice of cannibalism as well as the ambivalence and instability of early modern discourses of colonial power.”177 The image represents the European assurance that cannibalism existed in the New World and also indicates their inability to adequately witness and document it.178 This pattern would continue

176 Montrose, 5.
177 Schreffler, 304.
178 Ibid.
through the centuries. Columbus was certain that the Caribs were cannibals, although he never actually witnessed one of their legendary human feasts. The image forces the viewer to acknowledge the existence of cannibalism but allows for an understanding of its elusive nature. Schreffler notes, “This anxiety about truth and believability in the text pervades sixteenth century literature on modern-day anxieties about cannibalism and the question of whether or not it occurred, or continues to occur, in certain parts of the world.”179 This anxiety has contributed to the continued presence of cannibalism in discourse.

The image also shows a compartmentalized vision of the Americas. The depiction of Europe is more cohesive and embodied by Vespucci and his invading ships. America is represented by its flora and fauna, the sexualized reclining allegorical woman, as well as the cannibal scene. European colonial power persisted on the ability to perceive the inhabitants of the Americas, and indeed the land itself, as consumable. Therefore the scene of physical consumption (represented by the cannibal feast) is pushed into the background.180 Native peoples are first and foremost consumable and only secondarily consumers. This recasting of Native peoples is evident throughout the era of European colonization. The settlers in North America felt that it was their right, their duty in fact, to consume the land which they felt the Native peoples were letting go to waste. Europeans saw the New World as the ultimate vessel for their consumption.

Montrose asserts that the image created by Van der Straet depicts an actual event experienced by Vespucci. The event occurs as follows:

179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
At length they broughte certayne women, which shewed them selves familiar towarde the Spaniardes: Whereupon they sent forth a young man, being very strong and quicke, at whom as the women wondered, and strode gasinge on him and feling his apparel: there came sodeynly a woman downe from the mountayne, bring with her secretly a great stake, with which she gave him such a stroke behynde, that he fell down dead on the earth. The other wommene forthwith toke him by the legges, and drewe him to the mountayne, whyle in the mean tyme the men of the countreye came foorth with bowes and arrows, and shot at oure men . . . The woman also which had slayne the yong man, cut him in pieces even in the sight of the Spaniardes, shewinge them the pieces, and rosting them at a great fyre.181

Montrose offers little evidence as to why he believes this incident to be that which may have inspired the Van der Straet image. He sees this particular account as an early occurrence that reinforces the emergent themes of cannibalism, savagery, and deceit. He states, “Of particular significance here is the blending of these basic ingredients of protocolonialist ideology with crude and anxious misogynistic fantasy, a powerful conjunction of the savage and the feminine.”182 While the account does provide all of the elements interpreted by Montrose, it is not wholly unique among the writings of early explorers. Thinking of the Van der Straet image as an allegorical recreation of a real occurrence limits the power it possesses. It forces it to remain constrained within the imagery and the implications of its real world counterpart. The worldview of the European conquerors of the Americas must then be drawn out from the image; extrapolated, expanded, and then applied to their understandings. However, if the image is treated as an allegory for the European conception of the New World, the discourse is contained

181 Quoted in Montrose, 4. From the mid-sixteenth century translation by Richard Eden.
182 Ibid., 5
within the image itself. This is not to discount context, but rather that such allegorical depictions need not point to a real tangible incident to have discursive meaning. Their meaning is created in their visual resonance.

“Nova Reperta: Vespucci Awakens a Sleeping America” foreshadows the role that gender played and continues to play in the colonial project. Anne McClintock writes of this image, “her nakedness and her gesture suggest a visual echo of Michelangelo’s ‘Creation.’ Vespucci, the godlike arrival, is destined to inseminate her with the male seeds of civilization, fructify the wilderness and quell the riotous scenes of cannibalism in the background.” Thus, the encounter itself is an act of penetration. As Vespucci penetrates the lands of the Americas, he also positions himself as the purveyor of civilization which he provides through his masculine dominance over the feminized figure of America. He awakens the sleeping continent and calls her by name. Thus “invested with the male prerogative of naming, Vespucci renders America’s identity a dependent extension of his and stakes male Europe’s territorial rights on her body and, by extension, the fruits of her land.” It is through Vespucci’s utterance of the name America that the continent wakes up. Without the masculine force provided by the European conquerors, the Americas would never awaken to realize their true potential and would remain forever primitive and cannibalistic (and feminine).

The work of gender is evident in this image beyond the central awakening figure as the cannibal figures in the background also appear to be women. Again, McClintock writes,

Here, women mark, quite literally, the margins of the new world but they do so in such a way as to suggest a profound ambivalence in the European male. In the foreground, the

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184 Ibid.
explorer is of a piece – fully armored, erect and magisterial, the incarnation of male imperial power. Caught in his gaze, the woman is naked, subservient and vulnerable to his advance. In the background, however, the male body is quite literally in pieces, while the woman are actively and powerfully engaged. The dismembered leg roasting on the spit evokes a disordering of the body so catastrophic as to be fatal.\textsuperscript{185}

McClintock presumes the body roasting in the background to be male. Yet, there is little evidence to prove such an assertion. The portions of the dismembered body seen in the image do not represent characteristics traditionally deemed male or female. The presumption of a dismembered male corpse allows for the image to be read as one that is “less about the soon-to-be-colonized ‘Other,’ than it is about a crisis in male imperial identity.”\textsuperscript{186} While it cannot be decidedly determined whether or not the dismembered figure is male or female, the image still embodies the idealized encounter as well as depicting what McClintock calls “a dread of engulfment.”\textsuperscript{187} The figure of the cannibal most easily represents this fear. The fear of being “engulfed by the unknown is projected onto colonized people as \textit{their} determination to devour the intruder whole.”\textsuperscript{188} The projection of the cannibal trope onto the unfamiliar inhabitants of the Americas allows the Europeans to name their fear. By calling the Natives cannibals, they are no longer fundamentally unknown but can be categorized and dealt with accordingly.

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. Emphasis in Original.
The feminizing of the American landscape does not begin with Vespucci, but occurs several years earlier with Columbus. After landing in the Caribbean, Columbus writes of the errors of earlier navigators. Instead of assuming that the earth is flat, he believes that it is actually shaped like a woman’s breast with a center that resembles a nipple.¹⁸⁹ Columbus’s words bring to mind the image of a man searching for sustenance from the earth through its nurturing nipple. It is not male virility and strength which this image asserts, rather, we are forced the see the conqueror as infantilized.¹⁹⁰ The conqueror seeks enlightenment, riches, and salvation from within the female body, from his conquest of the woman comes his domination of the world.

The conflation of the breast with the New World is seen in many of the visual depictions created in the “Age of Discovery.” Images of cannibal woman with a suckling baby in tow are common and create a strange visual resonance that indicates both savagery and humanity, but more importantly point to the maternal character of the New World. This is clearly evident in the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 22.
image from 1505 entitled “The People of the Islands Recently Discovered,” [Figure 2]. Towards the center of the visual space we see a woman with a suckling child nursing from her breast and two other children who appear dependant upon her. This family is calm and serene yet are surrounded by a scene of cruelty where human flesh is being carved and hung from the rafters. In the background we see the approaching European ships coming to interrupt the young mother from her nursing. The ships spell doom for the way of life for the Natives. The children who once sought their sustenance from the “cannibal mother” will now be products of European civilization. It is the women who appear to be cutting up the body of some unfortunate man. The men stand poised for battle in full regalia, yet shockingly ignorant of the imposing ships on the horizon. Thus, they are emasculated and unable to protect the women and children from the advancing Europeans. One woman gnaws on the uncooked flesh of the man’s arm. We are shown an image which represents the New World “savage” as feminine and maternal. She embodies the fear of being consumed as well as the possibility of consumption.

Figure 3: "Amerigo Vespucci: Letter to Sonderini (German Edition) - Life Among the Indians," 1509.
Figure 3, (“Life among the Indians”) also shows the maternal side of the Americas. We see a group of Natives engaged in the preparation of a cannibal meal. Each figure is remarkably similar to the others. It is difficult to determine which figures are male and which are female. It is clear that the figure with the suckling infant is female, yet her body is not very different from the others around her. Her breasts are small and not very distinct from the pectoral muscles of her fellow tribesman. The figure on the right of the image is male, as we are able to witness his urination. The two figures in the back engaged in the dismemberment of the body appear to be a woman and a man. The woman (left) seems to be cupping her breast as the man lowers his axe towards the body splayed out before them. The image of the female breast features prominently in this image. We see the suckling infant who, once again, survives on the life-giving milk of the cannibal mother. The woman in the back gazes at the dismembered body part and reaches towards her bosom. Her position reinforces the cyclical nature of the act of cannibalism. The sustenance provided by the human body before her will in turn be processed and redistributed to the next generation of her tribe through her breasts, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the cannibal tradition. What differentiates this image from Figure 2 is that this represents an uninterrupted cannibal scene. There are no European ships lurking on the horizon. The cannibal mothers continue to nurse their children from the blood of humans.

Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein believes that the breast itself is the source of the cannibal impulse. She states,

I believe that oral-sadistic impulses towards the mother’s breast are active from the beginning of life, though with the onset of teething the cannibalistic impulses increase in strength . . . In states of frustration and anxiety the oral-sadistic and cannibalistic desires are reinforced, and then the infant feels that he has taken in the nipple and the breast in
bits. Therefore in addition to the divorce between a good and a bad breast in the young infants phantasy, the frustrating breast – attacked in the oral-sadistic phantasies – is felt to be in fragments; the gratifying breast, taken in under the dominance of the suckling libido, is felt to be complete.¹⁹¹ Thus the suckling infants in these images represent more than just the perpetuation of cannibalism through the sustenance provided by breast milk. They also symbolically depict the relationship between the Old World and the New. The relationship between the two is in its infancy, and as it develops the cannibal impulse develops as well. It was common for the inhabitants of the Americas to be likened to children. Thus as relationship between the child (America) and the mother (Europe) is born, the cannibalistic impulses of the child grow and the desire to consume the mother increases. What is most profound about these images however, is that while they depict the cannibalistic impulses of the New World Natives at work, they were used as part of the justification for the consumption of the land and resources of the Americas. The Natives physically recreate their childhood fantasies by consuming the bodies of humans. The Europeans more subtly enact these fantasies by subjugating the lands, people, and resources of the New World.

Figure 1 shows a compartmentalized version of the Americas. Klein believes that an integral part of the oral-sadistic/cannibal phase is the rending of the breast into pieces. The lands of the Americas (and its people) must therefore be carved up as well and divided amongst the conquerors, governed and subjugated. Its people must be separated from one another and disharmony amongst them promoted in order to ensure the masculine success of colonialism. Columbus in his journey of exploration was able to conquer the great breast that is the world. His

potency and libido allowed him to consume the object of his desires (the world/exploration) and to consume the breast and rend it “in bits.”

These images demonstrate the depth and complexity of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The cannibal is a complicated figure; a woman, a child, a beast, an innocent, etc. What has been left out of much of the discussion up until this point is the role that gender plays in labeling the Other as cannibal and savage. While race plays an integral role in this, any discussion would be incomplete without the addition of gender as a factor. Postcolonial theory and feminist theory become intertwined in cannibal discourse. The cannibal is both racialized and feminized. Whether the cannibal is a man or a woman, it is discussed with much the same tenor. As Anne McClintock points out, “a mapping of progress depends on systematically inventing images of archaic time to identify what is historically new about enlightened national progress.”192 For the Europeans the image of the cannibal hearkens back to an earlier era, a savage time that has been all but eliminated by the march of civilization. When these conquerors encountered “real live” cannibals, it was easy to see them as holdovers from the past. McClintock continues, “women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural) . . . men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent, and historic).”193 Not only were the conquerors very truly men, but they viewed the native peoples as feminine. Descriptions of the natural way of native life abound, in literature as well as art. Michel de Montaigne spends much of “On Cannibals” describing the natural and ahistoric culture of the indigenous peoples of

192 Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 92.

193 Ibid.
Brazil. Native peoples are described as child-like and innocent, both of which are common in the discussions of femininity.

Cannibalism provides an arena in which to combine much of the work of postcolonial theorists and feminist theorists. This is not to imply that the two are mutually exclusive, rather that they can work in concert with one another to provide the most useful set of tools. In the Introduction to *Feminist Postcolonial Studies*, Reina Lewis and Sara Mills expand upon these notions stating, “But, as postcolonial studies has become established in the Western academy, to the extent that it is now de rigueur to have at least some work on the theme available at the graduate and undergraduate level, we note that the dynamism that feminism provided for the early development of critical studies in colonialism, imperialism, race and power has often been overlooked.” It is imperative for the cultural studies scholar to use the intersections of theories and disciplines to his/her advantage. Moving the study of cannibalism out of the realm of history and anthropology frees it from the limitations of single-disciplinarity.

There has been much recent scholarly work which deconstructs the Westernized version of the process of Othering. In the forward to Michel de Certeau’s *Heterologies*, Wlad Godzich explains that the modern preoccupation with the organization of knowledge leads the scholar (specifically de Certeau),

to pay special attention to the question of the Other, a question that figures as a leitmotif in many of the current discussions of knowledge . . . it may be useful to recall two somewhat different areas in which it [the Other] has imposed itself on our consciousness far beyond any theoretical concern that we may have: the conception of the subject as the organizer and sense-maker of lived experience, and the challenge posed to forms of

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Western thought by the liberation movements of the past forty years. Both of these have contributed to a sense of fragmentation that is widespread in our culture and has been diversely theorized in recent years.\footnote{De Certeau, viii.}

It is nearly impossible to provide an accurate definition of the Other, for the term is purposely difficult to describe. The definitions of Self, Subject, Other, and Object are elusive. The Other comes in many disguises. It can take the form of anything from a woman, a circus performer, a medical marvel, even a cannibal.

The Other serves to provide a culture with a point of reference, something which it is not and something which it must strive not to be. Although the Other represents what a society should not be, there is also often a fetishistic reverence for the culture of the Other. The Other stands in opposition with the Self, the Subject, the Signifier. In order to define itself, a being must determine what it is not; thus the birth of the Other. The Subject is not merely constructed in opposition to its Object however, as the reverse is also true. As Frantz Fanon points out, “when the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth.”\footnote{Fanon, 154.}

The “civilized” being exists because of the cannibal, just as the cannibal takes form because of the existence of the civilized world.

The balance of power between the Self/Subject and the Object/Other remain fairly consistent until the Object/Other begins to transgress the established boundaries. Transgression can take many forms. In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Peter Stallybrass and Allon

\footnote{De Certeau, viii.}
\footnote{Fanon, 154.}
White argue that transgression occurred in traditional European societies when the boundary between high and low culture was blurred.\textsuperscript{197} This happened in four symbolic domains: psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order. These domains are not inseparable, however, as “transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order in any one of the domains may have major consequences in the others.”\textsuperscript{198} The large portion of Stallybrass and White’s work focuses on literary boundaries and the carnivalesque, however these concepts can be a useful way of looking at cannibalism. Clearly at the simplest level, cannibalism is a transgression of the boundaries of the body. Not only does it blur the line between Self and Other by combining the physicality of two beings through the act of consumption, but it also blurs the line between conquerors and conquered, between Subject and Object. In the seminal essay “Any Theory of the ‘Subject’ has always been appropriated by the ‘Masculine,’” Luce Irigaray explains that all discussion of the Subject and/or the Object is by its very nature a representation of the masculine/feminine dichotomy. The discourse of the Subject is inherently masculine, as the discourse of the Object is inherently feminine. Therefore, as cannibal discourse is the discourse of the Other, the Object, it is the discourse of gender. The study of cannibalism provides a lens to examine the dichotomous, prejudiced, sexist, colonialist, etc. agents that have helped to shape the modern world.

Otherness played (and continues to play) an important role in the colonial project. Gustav Jahoda explains with regards to the Americas in \textit{Images of Savages} that there are numerous examples of responses by people who have come into contact with Others who are radically different from themselves in physical appearance, language, customs,

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\textsuperscript{198} Ibid, 3.
\end{flushleft}
and manners. They fell back on their cosmology in order to find a meaningful place for the strange Europeans who had penetrated their works. There was, however, an asymmetry stemming from the fact that the Europeans usually arrived as explorers or conquerors. In both roles they almost invariably saw themselves as superior . . . and often came to be perceived as such by the Others. This enhanced the probability that the Europeans would view them as less than fully human, more like animals or children, and accordingly treat them as such.\footnote{Jahoda, 10.}

To justify their actions the European conquerors had to construct an identity for the indigenous populations that placed them clearly on a lower rung of the ladder of civilization.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha puts forth a methodology for the analysis of the Other in colonial discourse. He states, “my reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the \textit{process of subjectification} made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.”\footnote{Bhabha, 95. Emphasis in original.} The cannibal is a key site for mapping subjectification. While there have been some texts that are more “sympathetic” to the cannibal most hold the image of the cannibal as the supreme representative of savagery.\footnote{The most obvious example of this can be seen in the essay “Of Cannibals” by Michel de Montaigne, who although sympathetic in some ways is often very contradictory.} The cannibal is not irredeemable however. The European historical sources indicate that this redemption can only come through the adoption of more civilized patterns of behavior. As civilization and colonialism are inextricably intertwined, the logical deduction is that the cannibal can only be redeemed through the efforts of Europeans. To oversimplify the matter, I argue that it is not because Native peoples
were cannibals that the Europeans felt they needed civilizing, rather that since they needed civilizing they must be cannibals.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon quotes Jean Paul Sartre stating, “The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start . . . It is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew.” The same could be said of the cannibal. It is important to separate the very real physical act of anthropophagy/cannibalism from the cannibal him/herself. The cannibal is a construct, produced by colonialism, maintained through discourse. The question that arises is whether or not one who consumes human flesh is always a cannibal. Is Jeffery Dahmer representative of the same level of cultural and social “degeneracy” as the Aztecs, who are rumored to have sacrificed and cannibalized a great number of people as a part of their state religion? The image of the cannibal is the product of a complex set of interaction and assumptions.

To concentrate on the notion of a dialogue is to insist on two emphases, not always present in discussions of cannibalism; on the agency of those described as cannibals – difficult to access but necessary to posit; and on the relationship between describer and described, between Europe and its others. The figure of the cannibal is a classic example of the way in which that otherness is dependent on a prior sense of kinship denied, rather than on mere difference.

The cannibal is distinguished from other agents of racialization and dehumanization by its reciprocal nature. Many sources reveal instances where the Native peoples called the Europeans

202 Fanon, 93.

203 Barker, 6.
cannibals and feared them for their cannibalistic reputation. What differentiates this kind of cannibal relationship is the vacuum of power that exists between colonizer and colonized. The image of the savage cannibal Native is one that remains, one that has lingered and prospered over time. The figure of the bloodthirsty cannibal European however, has not. Thus, cannibalism still remains perhaps the most powerful and enduring image of savagery.

The formulation of the cannibal trope is directly tied to concepts of race from which notions of savagery emerge.

In order to bring out the implications of such a view, it is necessary to return for a moment to the two images of animality and child-likeness. These involve the belief that savages are humans or semi-humans who have certain characteristics that render them inferior to civilized Europeans. These characteristics were commonly conceived as stemming from their innate disposition or ‘race’.

Prior to the “discovery” and colonization of the new world, Europeans often lodged accusations of cannibalism at other minority groups. The colonization of the new world coincided with the “discovery” of race and racism. The cannibal played an important role in this development. It was both a part of the project of racialization and a catalyst for its rapid expansion.

For the inhabitants of the Americas all of these things manifested themselves through warfare and destruction. Being called a cannibal was a death sentence, which is clearly defined in decrees such as the Cannibal Law of 1503. The possession of the land by Europeans and the destruction of its peoples pivoted on the cannibal. One final example comes from the writings of one of Columbus’ shipmates, the aristocrat Michele de Cuneo, on October 28, 1495. He writes,

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204 Jahoda, 109.
205 Ibid., 97.
We captured this canoe with all the men. One cannibal was wounded by a lance blow and thinking him dead we left him in the sea. Suddenly we saw him begin to swim away; therefore we caught him and with a long hook pulled him aboard where we cut off his head with an axe. We sent the other Cannibals together with the two slaves to Spain. When I was in the boat, I took a beautiful Cannibal girl and the admiral gave her to me. Having her in my room and she being naked as is their custom, I began to want to amuse myself with her. Since I wanted to have my way with her and she was not willing, she worked me over so badly with her nails that I wished I had never begun. To get to the end of the story, seeing how things were going, I got a rope and tied her up so tightly that she made unheard of cries which you wouldn't have believed. At the end, we got along so well that, let me tell you, it seemed she had studied at a school for whores. The admiral named the cape on that island the cape of the Arrow for the man who was killed by the arrow.206

For Michele de Cuneo, the success of their voyages to the New World depended upon the forceful possession of the land and its peoples. His account parallels the events that unfold in the New World after the European encounter. The poor cannibal girl (who we are assured is a cannibal because she is member of the Carib tribe) protests her forcible possession but is unable to fight off de Cuneo’s advances and is thus debased even further and degraded for her submission. It is a lose-lose situation for the young woman. Her acquiescence cost her her dignity while her continued protests would have surely cost her her life. Columbus gives the young woman to de Cuneo. Therefore, she is nothing more than a possession, the lowest of the low, a cannibal and a woman. De Cuneo seems far more interested in turning the young woman

into an object of pleasure than making her a Catholic subject of the Spanish Crown.\textsuperscript{207} The conquest and subjugation of her body foreshadow the fate of the Americas. Her tale also clearly resembles the much more famous tale of Pocahontas. Both women were abducted and became erotically charged gifts from one man to another, holding the fate of their peoples within their bodies. The rape of the Carib girl is among the earliest blameworthy actions of the Europeans. It was an unprovoked violation and attack on a tribe, not in response to any specific action undertaken by the tribe, but simply because they were cannibals. The Carib girl suffered for the (presumed) unforgivable acts of cannibalism perpetrated by her people. Through her rape and the murder of her fellow tribesman, Cuneo (and by extension, Columbus) made clear his intentions in the Americas: submission and debasement, or death. There was no room for cannibals in their New World.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid.
CONCLUSION: THE FUTURES OF CANNIBALISM

Discourse is a powerful force that exerts its influence in subtle ways.\footnote{I refer here to discourse in the Foucauldian sense. In \textit{Power/Knowledge}, Foucault writes, “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the concept’s complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” Discourse is the way in which we talk about our identity, and this creates a complex web of power and influence. A study of the discourse of cannibalism can be a point of resistance against the continued presence of the civilization/savagery binary in scholarship. The constructed nature of discourse and identity is what makes the figure of the cannibal so telling. See, Michel Foucault, \textit{Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977}, trans. by C. Gordon, edited by C. Gordon. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).} The march of colonialism has ensured both the birth and the death of the cannibal figure. Homi Bhabha indicates that colonial discourse is founded upon the simultaneous rejection and recognition of difference in order to create the colonial subject.\footnote{Bhabha, 100.} In other words, the colonial subject is formed from its binary constructions. In the New World, the colonial agenda provided a space for new discursive trajectories of cannibalism. As the Native peoples become colonial subjects their identities became increasingly polarized. Thus the cannibal is fetishized and demonized. It is this binary construction of the cannibal which persists in discourse. Cannibalism is depicted as the ultimate act of the savage. This continued association with savagery allows for the civilization/savagery binary to persist in discourse. The cannibal is given identity through this binary, but that identity is incomplete. Bhabha continues, “colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible.”\footnote{Ibid, 101.} Just as Columbus knew that he encountered cannibals in the New World, despite never actually witnessing their acts, the cannibal is given an existence which is based in fantasy but presumed to be reality. Anthropologists and early writers of the Americas mention the rituals of
cannibalism often but the vast majority of the stories are related as hearsay. The historical record of cannibalism does not provide the detail necessary to have a full picture of its performance. We are then left with an act that is well-known and proliferates in discourse, yet is mysterious and unknowable. Research into the trope of cannibalism, “should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the process of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.”211 It is imperative that scholars rid themselves of the desire to assert the abhorrent nature of cannibalism and instead treat it as any other cultural practice.

The contemporary discourse of cannibalism continues the traditions/contradictions of colonial discourse. Audiences are simultaneously drawn to depictions of cannibalism, and disgusted by it. In light of this, certain peoples have appropriated the cannibal trope for more empowering reasons. There is a movement, primarily located in Brazil, of writers, artists, and theorists known as Anthropofagia. This movement attempts to connect people to the past as well as to connect them to one another. Begun by Tarsila do Amaral and Oswaldo de Andrade in the 1920’s, the movement centers around the notion that cannibalism can be a culturally unifying factor. In Manifesto Antropofago, Andrade states that “only cannibalism unites us.”212 Anthropofagia involves the search “for a national hybrid culture in which the spiritual, native, African, and European elements were brought together and appropriated in an act of devouring and digestion.”213 In this way the once abhorrent act that contributed to the near destruction of an indigenous people is the very thing which holds its descendants together. Cannibalism is viewed

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211 Ibid., 95. Emphasis in Original

212 Catherine de Zegher, "The Inside is the Outside: The Relational as the (Feminine) Space of the Radical," Invisible Culture: The University of Rochester (2002).

213 Ibid.
as both a symbol of national pride, and a reminder of a shameful past. It is these contradictions that make the study of cannibalism so alluring and so crucial to cultural studies today.

The trope of cannibalism often intervenes in moments of crisis. For Europeans encountering the Natives of the New World was an intellectual crisis. They struggled to find ways to incorporate America into their intellectual lexicon. The mere existence of Native Americans created a religious crisis for the Christian European, for how could entire continents have existed without access to the word of God? This is among the reasons why Europeans questioned the humanness of Native Americans. Respected scholars in modern times do not refer to Others as sub/non-human, but below the surface such notions still linger. There are moments when we can still clearly witness the persistence of the civilization/savagery binary. This persistence of notions of savagery should be seen as a moment of crisis for the discipline of cultural studies. Before moving forward and progressing as a discipline, cultural studies must first acknowledge its position as the product of historical discursive constructions. At times of human suffering cannibalism emerges as a scapegoat, preventing the discipline from interrogating the meaning behind it. It is at such moments that scholars must examine the role of cannibalism in order to further the production of knowledge.

In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States with destructive force. Despite the advanced warning of possible devastation, the city of New Orleans was unprepared for the extent of the damage the Hurricane would cause. As the floodwaters covered much of the city, many Americans were astonished to learn of the conditions faced by the survivors. In the aftermath, the local, state, and federal governments drew harsh criticism from a large number of citizens for their presumed lack of preparedness. Journalist Randall Robinson was among the outraged and posted a scathing report on the online blog forum, The

215 Ibid.


Some respondents pointed to the animality of the Hurricane victims as their link to savagery and cannibalism stating, “You’ve got to be kidding me. If this had happened anywhere but a poor, black city – there would not have been a problem because the people would have sense enough to get out first and if they got caught, help each other, not act like animals,”218 and “It’s his [President Bush] fault the baboons are looting and raping of course . . . the only thing I am angry at Bush for is not pouring soap in the oncoming floodwater to really clean every last baboon out of New Orleans.”219 Referring to cannibals as animals is a common historical trend and one that persists. Referring to the Hurricane victims as animals also takes on a racial dimension, as the respondents specifically point to African-Americans as animals.

Upon reading the responses to Robinson’s original posting, it becomes clear that in order to understand the acts of cannibalism respondents had to point to lack of civilization as the cause. “If the people were acting in a remotely civilized fashion, everyone would be evacuated, fed, clothed, and feeling good right about now. Instead they are gang raping each other, murdering cops, looting big screen tvs (with lack of electricity), and smearing feces on the superdome bathroom walls. Real impressive, my friend [sic].”220 It is through the civilization/savagery binary that cannibalism manifests itself and this binary still provides the primary means through which cannibalism is understood.

Several respondents used the presumed acts of cannibalism as a justification for the elimination/destruction of African Americans saying things such as, “I say shoot them all….if


they will do it [cannibalism] now, they will do it again!!”

Thus for a number of respondents the “savagery” of the survivors is responsible for their plight, “Many of the RESCUE HELICOPTERS were SHOT AT by these savages, Sir. Can’t blame ‘em a bit for turning their attention to other priorities, after that. It’s genetic. Howl ‘RACISM’ all you want, but you cannot change the basic laws of Evolution and Biology [sic].”

Within the thread, there is a subtext of racial/biological determinism. A surprising number of respondents blame biology for the reported cannibal practices of African Americans in New Orleans.

Some of you act as if the looting, “rape gangs,” assaults, firing at Army helicopters and ALL of the other atrocities taking place in NOLA [New Orleans, Louisiana] are a surprise. Whatever the reasons are, and they may be good ones, “ghetto folk” have ALWAYS behaved this way. Did you actually think they wouldn’t take advantage of this situation? I wouldn’t be surprised if 90% of the young black males that are currently in NOLA stayed in NOLA just so they could loot and/or rape . . .

This emphasis on the biological determinism of cannibal identity leads the many of the respondents to use this discussion board as a forum for their racist agenda. What becomes clear from reading the responses to Robinson’s blog posting is that the notion of the cannibal savage is far from removed within modern discourse and that times of crisis provide a moment to witness its continuance.

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A few days after his original posting, Randall Robinson posted a retraction which stated, “The claim in the first sentence in my post was incorrect. I had been told this was happening, but these claims have turned out to be unsubstantiated. I therefore retract them – but stand behind everything else I wrote without reservation.”

This retraction did little to satisfy most respondents, who remained outraged by Robinson’s assertions. Since making his controversial post about New Orleans cannibalism, Robinson made one additional entry on September 5 and has since been silent.

The trope of cannibalism is persistent. The foundations laid by the early explorers and visitors to the Americas have not disappeared. The civilization/savagery binary may not operate as overtly as it once did, but that does not negate its existence. The American frontier no longer exists as was evidenced by the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, however the notions of civilization and savagery have found ways of enduring. In modern America, the distinction between civilization and savagery are often drawn on the lines of race and/or ethnicity especially during moments of conflict. It is still common for accusations of savagery to be directed at enemies in times of war. For instance, in a conversation with Donald Rumsfeld on the television show *The O’Reilly Factory*, Bill O’Reilly refers to Iraqi citizens as savages. Rumsfeld states (referring to Iraqi terrorists), “They're killing — that's right. That's what they do,” to which O’Reilly responds, “They're savages. You know that.”

It is imperative that modern scholars do not ignore the persistence of the civilization/savagery binary for it provides a means of interrogating aspects of culture which would otherwise be fragmented and incomplete. Cannibalism is still the most powerful descriptor of savagery.

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224 Robinson, “New Orleans.”

The moment of encounter between Natives and Europeans and the wars that ensued, represent disruptions of cultural traditions and identity. When identity is threatened, we see the trope of cannibalism emerge as a way to deal with this crisis. The modern scholar must recognize that this pattern has not ended. We still turn to cannibalism as an indicator of savagery. The academy must rid itself of its continued association with civilization and savagery. At this moment, discourse itself is in crisis and is threatened by the totalizing and monolithic discourse of globalization. The trope of cannibalism provides a means of intervening at this critical juncture and it provides a lens for the intersections of theories and disciplines.
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APPENDIX A

A defense of Cannibalism

By B. Beau

Translated from La Revue of February 15, 1909 by Preston William Slosson

May 1914 No 78

American Association for International Conciliation

Sub-station 84 (407 west 117th street)

NYC

(The following curious argument, which first appeared in La Revue of February 15, 1909, over the signature of B. Beau, will remind the reader of certain books and articles now written to prove that war is normal and inevitable and that the hope of international peace is essentially chimerical. The plea of the Caribbean orator in favor of the time-honored institution of cannibalism is forcible and would not be easy to refute on theoretical ground. Nevertheless, it seems, like other earnest and able arguments, to have somehow become invalidated in the course of time.)

Among the papers of a missionary of the eighteenth century we once had the good fortune to discover the following pages. It is a speech that a piai of Carib medicine man addressed to his compatriots in protest against the anti-cannibalistic propaganda that the Christian was making among them. It will doubtless be thought that this piai speaks in a fashion rather academic for a savage. Perhaps he was a relative of Voltaire’s Huron. It is permissible to suppose also that the missionary who has reported for us this harangue had been trained in
belles-lettres and that he has transcribed into the style of a philosopher the rude language of the medicine man. The form, in any case, matters little. What deserves attention is the value of the reasons presented in favor of the cannibalistic custom and the energetic conviction with which this Carib affirms that it can never disappear.

This is the pleas of the Carib piai as it was pronounced about the year 1750 before the warriors of the Oyampi tribe as they gathered in the center of their village:

A stranger is come among us to teach us a new religion. There are among the doctrine which he preaches a great many things which are indifferent to us, but there are also some very dangerous for the tribe. He declares, for example, that cannibalism ought to disappear from the earth and that it is necessary to renounce our custom of eating human flesh.

There have been in all ages individuals to whose stomach this aliment was repugnant. But this is a rare physiological idiosyncrasy. Even those who suffered from it regarded it as an infirmity. This is the first time that an attempt has been made to make a dogma of this pathological distaste.

The propaganda of this stranger might prove fatal. At the last public feast where ten prisoners were immolated, three of our warriors have refused to touch the flesh. That is why I have resolved to demonstrate to you that this doctrine is absurd and that those who permit themselves to be seduced by it will be traitors to their tribe.

I.

In all ages, as far back as the memory of the oldest men can reach, enemies killed in battle have been eaten and prisoners have been fattened into proper condition for killing. When a custom is so ancient it is not dependant upon the will of men. It is not an accident of their
history, but a law of their nature, instituted by the gods themselves. Hearts too tender may deplore it but against natural fatalities it is vain and puerile to wish to fight.

The necessity of this law will, besides, be clearly apparent to every unprejudiced mind. Suppose, for instance, that the tribes, refusing to eat one another, engaged to live in peace, each upon its own territory. What would happen? All those whom our incessant wars cause to disappear would continue to live; the number of those having children would be incomparably greater than at present; the leisure afforded by the abandonment of warlike pursuits would incline still further the hearts of men to the pleasures of love. Because of all this the population would increase to proportions hitherto unknown. However fruitful might be our soil, however industrious might be our women, the country would soon become incapable of supporting all its inhabitants.

What then could be done? Expel from the tribe a part of its members? Who should choose those condemned to exile? Would they accept the decision of the tribe? Rather than risk the adventure of emigration to unknown lands where they would doubtless fall a victim to enemies or wild beasts, would they not sooner proceed to the last extremities? Civil war would break out in all parts of the country at once. Foreign war is a hundred times more preferable.

Would they sacrifice the old people and a certain number of children in order to preserve the food supply for the adults? We are told that formerly this custom existed in certain tribes one of our poets speaking of his ancestors, has said:

They cheerfully murder and afterwards eat

Their infants malformed and their grandsires effete.
But how choose those who are to be immolated? It is impossible to find a just principle by which to make such a choice. The caprice of judges and chiefs would have free scope; the opportunities of injustice would be multiplied and with them the germs of civil discord.

There are doubtless certain clear cases where it would be easy to decide that a child is sickly and would always be for the tribe a useless mouth and an unworthy member. But many doubtful cases would be determined by corrupt influences; tender-hearted parents might purchase with money the indulgence of the judges for a malformed child, while others through egotism or love of comfort would bring their robust children to sacrificial knife.

And how about the aged? Would there be established a legal age for death? That would be unjust; some men although old in years may still be young from the standpoint of intellectual and physical value. Could the judges be left to determine in any particular case the moment when old age had arrived? Beware of arbitrariness and corruption, fomenters of discord. Theoretically the best solution would be to leave to the aged themselves the duty of determining the hour of their sacrifice. This solution would, perhaps have been possible formerly when love of the tribe was more fervent. But these heroic times are past. Egoism has grown in our hearts ad it would be in vain to hope to see the men of to-day offer themselves upon the altar of the tribe.

Let us add that if such a solution were reached joy would henceforward be lacking to our feasts. There are many stomachs that find the flesh of old people too tough and that of children too insipid. If this last consideration appears materialistic, there are those among us to whom it will certainly not be indifferent.

In a word, those who protest against the custom of eating our enemies are blind if they do not see that the success of their doctrine would unchain civil war and condemn the members of the same tribe to eat one another.
II.

I think I have demonstrated that cannibalism is a necessity. But I will not confine myself to that. I assert that it is a beneficent necessity which must be accepted with a tranquil heart and revered as instituted by the gods’ themselves. It is this indeed which corrects in the most equitable fashion possible, all the evils which are engendered by peace and superstitious respect for human flesh.

It is because we wish to eat the flesh of our enemies that every spring our warriors go forth to war. If we renounced this custom, wars would become infinitely rarer and the virile virtues would perish. It is in view of imminent and certain conflict that we cultivate in our souls courage and subtlety and in our bodies strength, endurance and agility.

On the other hand, these incessant combats accomplish among us every year that elimination of the feeble which the law would never be able satisfactorily to achieve. Upon the field of battle there are no intrigues, no base bargains. He whom infirmity or age renders inferior to his adversary fall, struck down by him; his death is the proof that he does not deserve to live. There return from the combat only the strongest and most robust, that is, those who are truly worthy to live and perpetuate themselves.

Who cannot see all the advantages which result from this beneficent selection? This pitiless elimination of old and feeble men keeps the population within suitable limits. There is always then an abundant food supply for all members of the tribe without the warriors being condemned to servile tasks. Those who are dead enjoy the peace of the great sleep; those who see the light enjoy life in prosperity.
III.

With our neighbors these reasons would be sufficient; they are barbarous and without culture. We Oyampis are not solely concerned with material well being. True civilization recognizes the value of the Good and the Beautiful. Now from this point of view also cannibalism is beneficial.

Whence comes the beauty of our warriors and our children? Why is it that in our war dances all eyes are entranced with robustness, agility and grace of body? It is because, every year, war eliminates the feeble. This it is which has made and conserves the beauty of our race. It is like a watchful surgeon who ceaselessly labors to relieve the body of all that deforms or enfeebles it.

If we lost our taste for the flesh of he vanquished, wars would become rare; the sick, infirm, ad aged would continued to live in the pullulating population. The race would soon become ugly and the day would arrive when fine specimens of humanity might easily be numbered among us.

Think, besides, of the immense mass of affliction which would then burden mankind. All handicapped individuals preferring a long and painful agony from maladies and privations to a liberating death! They talk of the cruelty of incessant war, but really it is merciful and good. It permits life only to those whom it is a joy; and, when it deprives them of it, it is not slowly with refined torture, it is at a single stroke in the intoxication of battle giving them the supreme joy of the deadly blow. Is it in the name of pity that they wish to destroy our cannibals customs? Woe to those who experience this sort of pity! It blinds them. They do not see that far from diminishing the evils of mankind, their cowardly sensitiveness’ would multiply them infinitely.
Which are, in short, the tribes best fitted to survive? If in any tribe the warriors allow themselves to forget the virile virtues and lapse into indolence and cowardice, if corruption and injustice incite them against their chiefs or against one another, is it not just that they should contribute to the support of a better tribe where all the virtues are practiced that they have forgotten? It is the right and duty of the strongest, most intelligent and best disciplined of the tribes to nourish themselves upon the inferior tribes. It is only in this way that men have continually grown in strength, in beauty, and in virtue.

I conclude: it is the liking for human flesh, the cause of wars, which keeps men up to the mark. It allows life only the most valiant and enduring. It can be regarded therefore as the mainspring of human progress.

IV.

For completeness’ sake I ought to mention another idea, although its absurdity is quite evident. We are told: “It is war which exercises this salutary function of elimination and education. It is not necessary for the purpose that the victors should feed upon the flesh of the vanquished. Why not allow the corpses to decay instead of eating them? The horrible thing is not war itself; it is the abominable custom of making food of human flesh.”

This, I confess, is incomprehensible to men. To believe that after having endured the fatigues of battle the victorious warriors would renounce the immediate benefit of the victory is to have completely lost the sense of reality and of life. Here is revealed most clearly the intellectual feebleness of the adversaries of cannibalism and the puerility of their doctrine.
Why should we wage war if we lose the taste for carnage and human feasts? In order to get corn and meat? But that is only an advantage of conquest that our feasts do not interfere with. To believe that men who can have more will content themselves with less is mere folly.

Besides, it often very difficult, even after a victory, to get possession of the herds and crops. The enemy will have hidden his wealth in inaccessible retreats. The bodies of the dead and wounded, on the contrary, are and immediate and certain prey. What sensible man has ever advised abandoning the prey that is in hand for an uncertain booty of inferior quality?

But what reasons can be given, if, as is admitted, war is good, for the proscription of feasts of human flesh? Killing off the wounded spares them prolonged sufferings. Do the bodies of the dead experience any further suffering by serving as a feast to the victor? Is it preferable to rot in the earth or to become the food of crows? There is, on the contrary, for the fallen warrior a supreme consolation in the thought that his flesh will never meet the hideous fate of animal carrion but will sere in all its strength and beauty, still palpitating with the ardor of the conflict, for the nourishment of men.

There is more to add. How can war be carried on if there is no means of restoring the strength after a battle? Must warriors be condemned to bear upon their backs the provisions for their families? This is an indignity to which they would not submit. All great military leaders have said that war ought to support war, that the warrior ought to live upon the enemy. The most direct and assured application of this maxim is to eat the vanquished. So the battle itself prepares for the warriors the feast which will restore their strength. The valiant never need fear famine. They receive at once in the form of abundant food supply the reward of the blows that they have given.
It is, therefore, absurd to pretend to preserve war while proscribing cannibalism, for this is at once the principal cause, the necessary condition and the real justification of it.

V.

I must add that those who preach such a doctrine are not merely perverse minds susceptible to deception, they are – whether they realize it or not – traitors to their tribe and deserve punishment.

The essential difference between a compatriot and an enemy is that it is a right and often a duty to eat the latter. To suppress this difference is to enfeeble the bond which united the tribe. It will be still further enfeebled if we are made to believe that the day will come when one can go among strangers without risk of being eaten by them. If this doctrine spreads it will, therefore, be at the expense of the love that is due to the tribe.

It will also be at the expense of its power. Who cannot see that in a war we would be in a position of inferiority in comparison with our adversaries if while they remain cannibals we have renounced this manly, ancient and profitable custom? Enfeebled even by victories we would become, sooner or later, their prey.

This is indeed the final result of an absurd doctrine. It is always fatal in the end to those who adopt it. Ignorance of reality sooner or later brings its own punishment. Even desiring to renounce, under the pretext of humanity and pity, the custom of our ancestors would bring destruction upon us. Our women, our children, we ourselves, would contribute to the feasts of neighboring tribes.

Repudiate them, Oyampis, these new ideas. Anti-cannibalism is a doctrine essentially chimerical. Men have always eaten one another; the will continued to do so in the future as they
have in the past. And the best way to avoid being eaten ourselves is to enfeeble neighboring tribes as often as possible by liberal bloodletting.

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When the medicine man had finished, the warriors shouted their approval. The missionary, on account of, this reaction in favor of the ideas he had combated, feared that he might be made to contribute to a feast of reconciliation, so he took flight. It was to his prudence doubtless that we owe the advantage of having read the argument of the cannibal.

Besides, could he have made a decisive reply?

Nevertheless, the Caribs themselves no longer eat one another.