

**Kelly L. Watson**

*Insatiable Appetites: Imperial Encounters with Cannibals in the North Atlantic World.*  
New York: New York University Press, 2015. Pp. 288. Hb, \$40.

In this engaging book based on a 2010 doctoral dissertation, Kelly L. Watson documents the ubiquity of cannibalism as a discursive trope in the literature of North American encounters from 1492 to 1763. The word “cannibal” itself is etymologically derived from “Carib,” a name given to the fearsome raiders said to prey on the Arawaks encountered by Columbus. Watson mostly brackets controversial questions about whether or not the indigenous American peoples actually ate human flesh, emphasizing that since the earliest circulated reports of the New World, the power of anthropophagy to define a savage Other has shaped European efforts to categorize and dominate the peoples of the Americas.

Watson’s signal contribution to our understanding of the imperial trope of cannibalism is to trace its links to ideas about sexuality and gender. Theorists of imperialism specializing in nineteenth-century encounters in Africa have prioritized race in their efforts to understand the meaning of discourses of cannibalism. However, in early modern America the discourse of race was not yet firmly in place. Consequently, rather than linking anthropophagy with racial definition, as became the norm later, Watson observes that her sources were more likely to associate cannibalism with unbridled sexuality and unfamiliar gender relations. These associations functioned differently in different imperial contexts, and exploring how they work in Spanish, French, and English imperial writing provides the framework for the book.

A first chapter helpfully surveys the long history of ideas about man-eating in the Western intellectual tradition, reaching back to writers like Herodotus and Pliny the Elder. Ancient sources tended to locate anthropophagy in cultures living on the fringes of the known world, notably the Scythians. Over centuries, these sources contributed to medieval wonder tales, which envisioned a world populated by a range of part human, part animal creatures. The chapter also discusses the charges of cannibalism and incest levelled at early Christians, which served to castigate a religion that undermined many Roman social norms. Chapter Two discusses the writings and images generated by Columbus, Vespucci, and their contemporaries about the people of the Antilles. As Watson notes, the sources do not tell a consistent tale, but a general consensus differentiated gentle Arawaks from vicious, man-eating Caribs and targeted the latter for destruction and enslavement. European writers seemed especially distressed by Carib women’s ostensible participation in the slaughter and consumption of outsider men, who were sometimes castrated

and fattened beforehand; a clearer evocation of threatened European masculinity is hard to imagine. Chapter Three discusses how assumptions about the cannibalistic tendencies of Indians were translated to Mexico and the very different circumstances of the Aztec and the Maya, highly developed urban civilizations that could not be considered savage in the terms applied to Caribs. There, anthropophagy was associated with battlefield rituals and temple practices, firmly in the control of men. Rather than differentiating between groups who did and did not eat human flesh, cannibalism became part of a complex of cultural disorders, many of them sexual, that justified Spaniards' sexual and violent exploitation of native bodies.

Chapter Four turns northward, examining the more than 130 mentions of cannibalism spread throughout the Jesuit *Relations* written from Canada in the seventeenth century. The cannibalism associated primarily with Iroquois practices of war and captivity is an occasion to juxtapose Jesuit and Iroquois ideas about masculinity. Jesuit missionaries, unlike earlier writers, did not make the anthropophagy itself the *sine qua non* of savagery; any human in extreme conditions might fall victim to this urge. For example, the missionaries note with pity that their hosts the Huron were occasionally reduced to corpse-eating by hunger (and they do not say what they themselves ate in these circumstances). It was the exceptional cruelty of Iroquois ritual torture of captives, rather than its dénouement in the eating of human flesh, that signalled depravity and demonic influence. At the same time, Watson notes, both Iroquois and Jesuit cultures embraced physical suffering as an opportunity to demonstrate a specifically masculine, spiritual strength. Stories about the torture and cannibalism of Jesuit missionaries like Jean de Brébeuf stress how Jesuits measured up as both men and Christian martyrs, turning their deaths into opportunities for conversion.

Chapter Five examines the sparser mentions of cannibalism in the English imperial context, notable in particular because Europeans participated. The difficulties of the Jamestown colony in 1609–10, for example, led to tales of men curing their wives like hams. Protestant captivity narratives from the eighteenth century envisioned cannibalism as one of the temptations of going native, from which captives were sometimes redeemed by divine providence. English discourses of cannibalism, Watson suggests, associated it with landscape, a frontier that would yield to English husbandry and masculine virtue.

In any book that embraces a long timeframe and diverse national and linguistic contexts, specialists will note things to quibble about. Watson read several of her sources in translation; she explains the methods she used to check translations in the introduction. The greatest complaint a reader is likely to

have, however, is that Watson's comparative framework raises more interesting questions for research than a short book is able to answer.

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DOI 10.1163/22141332-00303008-13