

Excerpt from:

WHAT IT

MEANS TO BE

HUMAN

By

Joanna

Bourke

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Eating People

The anxieties expressed in the last chapter about the meaning of eating dead animals were part of a broader problem: the difficulty of distinguishing between the dismembered flesh of certain animals and that of humans. In William Shaw Rae's 'The Black Demons of Hayti', animal husbandry and cannibalism were presented as identical practices. Stephen and Alan (two 'long-pigs') and Evan (the 'little white goat without de horns') were being fattened up for slaughter. 'Does the English farmer starve his turkeys before Christmas?', Alan whimpered and, immediately afterwards, the chief cannibal greeted the captives with the words, 'aha, my birds!' No distinction was made between the ingestion of the flesh of pigs, poultry, goats or people. This was a serious dilemma for anyone attempting to produce clear and decisive definitions for concepts such as 'human', 'humanity' and the 'humane'.

Comparative Gastronomy

In the first section of the previous chapter, I presented evidence about the staggering consumption of animal flesh in Anglo-American societies, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. If consuming the muscle and tissue, blood and bone of animals could nourish entire societies, could the same be said about the nutritional value of consuming *human* flesh? In fact, the notion that human flesh could be physically sustaining was simply assumed in debates about 'survival cannibalism'. In extreme circumstances, and faced with no alternative food source, it was widely accepted that eating other people

would prolong the lives of survivors. There are innumerable examples of this practice, often prefaced by the comment that the eating of fellow humans was only undertaken 'after consultation and prayer'.¹ As vegan Amos Bronson Alcott (philosopher and father of Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*) told Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was waxing lyrical about the horrors of cannibalism while carving a roast: 'But Mr Emerson, if we are to eat meat at all, why should we not eat the best?'²

Prior to the 1970s, however, the nutritional value of anthropophagy (Greek for 'man' and 'to eat') was assumed but only rarely explicitly investigated. One exception was the work of Frederick Gowland Hopkins, eminent biochemist and discoverer of vitamins. In 1909 he informed members of the Royal Institution that the cannibals get 'precisely the quality and proportion of the foodstuff needed by the human body by taking them directly from that organism'.

[By] consuming his own kind he eats exactly the right stuff. The nearer species are allied . . . the less difference is there between the chemical constituents of the tissues of individuals, and therefore the less work thrown on the processes of digestion and conversion, and therefore ape must be more nourishing to man than is beef or mutton.

Following this logic, the 'most efficient food of man' had to be other 'men'.³

Hopkins's forthright statement was unusual, but the reluctance to discuss the nutritional value of cannibalism changed in the 1970s. The key commentators were anthropologists, caught up in impassioned debates about whether cannibalism had even existed, let alone whether it was healthful. Andrew Vayda, for instance, pondered the nutritional value of human-on-human feasting. In traditional societies where 'protein intake' was 'marginal', Vayda speculated, the 'consumption of the flesh of sacrificial animals' would be important. Meat would help sick or injured people reverse the 'negative nitrogen balance' crucial for the 'healing of wounds and the production of antibodies'. If people did not have 'ready access to such animals as cattle or pigs as sacrificial items and sources of high-quality proteins', why wouldn't 'the consumption of human flesh . . . function in the same or similar way'?⁴ Vayda's focus was on 'primitive' societies. In modern societies, the question of whether human flesh would even reach the 'necessary and appropriate standards' for ingestion by people faced a different hurdle.

As another anthropologist worried, might not 'the ingestion of pesticides, radioactive minerals, therapeutic (and other) drugs, food additives, and so on' mean that human flesh harvested in industrialized societies would be unhealthy anyway?⁵

The nutritional value of human flesh was an intriguing question but, again, experts wondered whether it was the most *efficient* source of energy. This was what concerned academics at the University of Michigan, who concluded that, even if other foods were available, a group of sixty people would need to slaughter one fifty-kilogram man every week in order for cannibalism to be nutritionally worthwhile.⁶ Ironically, this research was carried out at a centre devoted to 'Human Growth and Development'.

Before the 1970s were over, one of the academics from the University of Michigan was showing signs of having been infected by a kind of dietician mania. Stanley Garn's article, 'The Noneconomic Nature of Eating People' (1979), set out to make the strongest possible case against the economic value of cannibalism. With chilling objectivity, Garn asked readers to consider 'the energy cost of catching and returning a captive for immediate festive consumption'. Assume that the 'search-and-capture team' comprised ten men over four days. That alone would require an 'energy cost' of 160,000 kilocalories, not including the cost of rations given to the captive and the 'caloric cost of training and maintaining a search-and-capture team between forays'. Then, the captive would need to be fattened up — 'for more succulent appearance and improved caloric yield'. If the captive was tranquil for the entire hundred days of 'fattening', this would incur 200,000 kilocalories to maintain his weight and an additional 300,000 to properly fatten him. The additional energy cost of guards and cooks, as well as building and maintaining 'public-viewing fattening pens', should not be forgotten. In the end, then, a fifty-kilogram captive might yield '80,000 kilocalories if butchered immediately, or 120,000 kilocalories (at most) if scientifically fattened'. Even these estimates ignored 'inefficiencies in butchering, shrinkage in cooking, and losses in distribution', and so a cannibalistic community would actually 'incur a caloric debt of substantial proportions'. Briefly put, 'people-capturing and people-eating' was 'necessarily an uneconomic enterprise'. Given that it required a 'large and continually renewable' source of humans and incurred a prohibitively high cost in terms of energy, cannibalism was only practicable if practised 'for ceremonial and gustatory pleasure, but (like truffle-hunting) scarcely for caloric

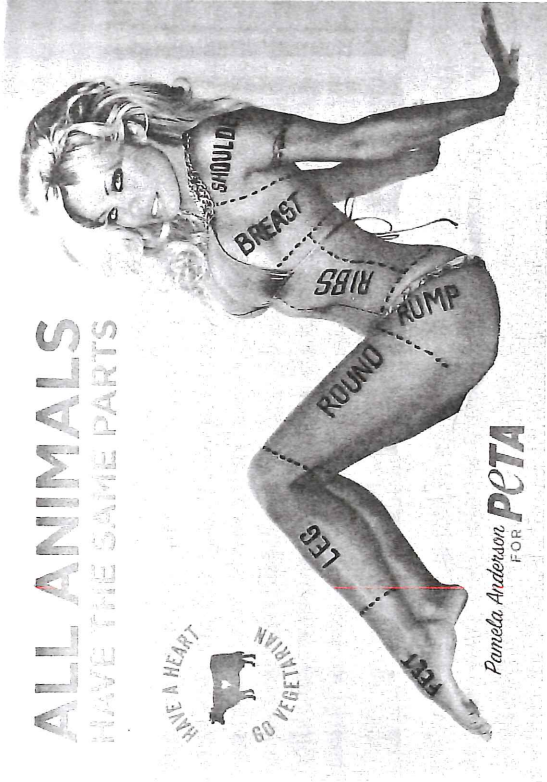


Figure 1. Pamela Anderson for the PETA campaign, 'All Animals Have the Same Parts'. The article beneath this poster begins with the words 'Voluptuous vegetarian Pamela Anderson is proving that all animals have the same parts'. Browsers are encouraged to 'Click here to get your own copy of Pamela's sexy ad!'

Eamonn McCormack/WireImage

profit'.⁷ In Garn's anthropophagic accountancy, those aspects of cannibalism that were ceremonial and orally pleasurable were presented as more convincing reasons for eating other people than the more prosaic arguments typically banded about by 'survival cannibals'. 'Eating Well' required sacrificial rituals, not simply a knife, pot and fire.

Collapsing the difference between human and non-human flesh was not simply a witty (and, it sometimes seems, obsessive) exercise for anthropologists. It was also a popular recruitment strategy for vegetarians. Food reformers throughout the centuries were fond of citing Diogenes' comment that 'we might as well eat the flesh of men, as the flesh of other animals'.⁸ In the late twentieth century, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) transformed this statement into dramatic images that equated women's bodies with cuts of animal meat. They even co-opted an image that had originally been created by feminists protesting against the objectification of women in the Miss Universe contest. PETA's advertisement showed a woman with

the different cuts of meat clearly delineated on her naked back: chuck, shoulder, rib, loin, rump and round. The caption read: 'All Animals Have the Same Parts' (see Figure 1). PETA's poster was, in fact, complicit in objectifying women as nothing more (or less) than 'my birds!' or passive objects to be consumed by male carnivores. Their poster was not a radical critique of the phallocentrism of society: rather, it exploited the phallogocentric gaze in order to draw attention to another form of exploitation, that of non-human female animals.

Setting aside, for the moment, the presumed gender of consumable flesh (women as docile cows, cute piglets and sexy chicks), according to such approaches *all* meat-eating was cannibalism. Human tissue, muscle and bone were simply different 'cuts of meat', a theme that had been exploited in every century. As John Oswald put it in 1791, 'The corpse of a man differs in nothing from the corpse of any other animal.'¹⁰ Proselytizing food reformers reported Damascene conversions arising from being struck by the similarities between gorging on animal and human muscle. Thus, in his 1921 reflections on English culture, the indefatigable reformer Henry S. Salt admitted that he regularly questioned friends about why they ate meat and was astonished by the zeal with which they 'sought to parry my awkward importunities'. Salt observed that their responses were evasive, reminding him of 'the quibbling explanations which travellers have received from cannibals when they inquired too closely into certain dietetic observations'. His conclusion? 'As far as diet was concerned', Salt lamented, 'we differed in degree only from the savages whom we deemed so debased'. In that time-honoured fashion of denigrating other peoples, he titled these reflections *Seventy Years Among Savages* (1921). (See Figure 2).

Like Ernest Tipper in the last chapter, who used metaphors drawn from the Foreign Office to explain the effects of meat-eating on the human body, Salt was also drawn to the body politic. He believed that

in a commonwealth supposed to respect all sentient life, the carnivore, cannibal, butcher and hunter were throwbacks to earlier times of savagery and despotism. Eaters of animal flesh were like monarchists in a democracy: they should heed the proselytizing of vegetarians and give up their archaic habits, just as missionaries and other bearers of civilization convinced cannibals that their diet was 'something monstrous and abnormal, a dreadful perversion of taste'.¹² 'Civilization' itself could be read through sacrificial practices.

Cannibalism and 'Race'

It was no coincidence that Salt drew on metaphors of statecraft — monarchies and commonwealths — when making comparisons between the ingestion of human and animal corpses. The consumption of flesh was central to a range of politics that drew distinctions between humans. This was the third assumption made by Alan in 'The Black Demons of Hayti' when he asked the enslaved Haitian, 'What sort of refreshment can you offer? What are these joints cooking before the fire; man-flesh? Eating meat created hierarchies of humans. In the last chapter, I explored hierarchies based upon eating animals while here I turn to hierarchies based on the carnivorous consumption of other people.

As we have just seen, there was, according to Salt, no distinction between kreophagists (eaters of animals) and anthropophagists (eaters of humans): both were cannibals. In 'The Black Demons of Hayti', Mona made a similar point when she proclaimed that 'God's curse lies heavily on the Black Republic' because, she believed, the voodoo religion made the ingestion of humans possible. God, who created 'man' to rule over the 'beasts', would forsake any nation that did not hold humanity above the animal. Practices of carnivorous sacrifice and ingestion defined who was within or without the polity.

For those inclined to chew on the bone, accusations of cannibalism generated excited discussions. Travellers, traders, missionaries, anthropologists and other emissaries of the West accused practically every group outside their own of cannibalism. In 1933 John Houston Craige famously dubbed Haitians 'woolly-headed cannibals'.¹³ Indeed, the trope of cannibalism was made into a universal symbol of 'the primitive', originating at the birth of humanity yet capable of being hurled at any number of denigrated societies in the present.

Accusation of cannibalism as a way of differentiating the civilized from the bestial has a long history. 'Cannibal' first appeared in the English

language in 1553, in writings about Christopher Columbus. The word was derived from the Arawak 'caniba', a corruption of 'cariba' (meaning 'bold'). It was a term the Caribbean Islanders of the Lesser Antilles used to describe themselves, only becoming a synonym of barbarity when used by their peace-loving neighbours, the Arawak. Anthropophagy dismembered the human from her or his human 'family'. Instead of eating being an act of communion with fellow humans — in Derrida's words, 'eating well' meant offering 'infinite hospitality'¹⁴ — cannibalism set the victim outside that communion. It also set the *consumer* of human flesh outside the fellowship, causing 'civilized' people to instinctively 'recoil with loathing from the cannibal — a creature human only in form'.¹⁵

The viciousness of these accounts was practically unbounded. In fact, the authors frequently claimed that the cannibals themselves recognized their own inferiority: they feasted on white Europeans or Americans in order to take on their superior traits. Thus, the young white Evan in 'The Black Demons of Hayti' was highly prized, in contrast to the 'black fellow . . . very old, an' wery tough' who was being roasted on the fire near the start of that story. It was a theme that recurred in the virulently racist *Black Bagdad* [sic] (1933), a memoir by John Houston Craige, an American captain in the US Marine Corps. Craige had served a three-year term in Haiti, much of it in the mountain village of Hinche, eighty miles from Port au Prince. Craige believed that some Haitians were cannibals. One US Marine, Craige alleged, had crashed his plane in the mountains. Initially the locals regarded the Marine as a god because 'they thought the planes were big birds trained by the *blancs*, and that the whites who rode them were all-powerful *bocours*, a species of god'. But the local *Papallon* convinced them that the Marine was

not a god . . . He is a fool, like the young *blancs* that straggle from the marine patrols on the trails. He is valuable meat. I am going to eat him. He may not be a wise *blanc* nor a brave one, but his organs have the mystic properties of the organs of *blancs*. If we eat his heart, we will have the white man's courage in battle.²³

In this memoir, the Haitians were both naive — believing that the American occupiers were gods — and conscious of their own inferiority. The only way to repel the *blanc* invaders was to consume them, magically transferring qualities that the *noir* lacked.

Cannibalism was an accusation intended to deny certain humans entry into full humanity. In the examples given so far, it was used by economically dominant and militarily superior Westerners to denigrate people they enslaved and exploited.

What these Westerners omitted to mention was that *they* were the ones responsible for consuming the bodies of other peoples. In 'The Black Demons of Hayti' the bodies of the enslaved were literally (as well as symbolically) consumed by their masters. Alan Malcolm, son of the white planter, asked the slave Yam Pete, 'What can I eat of you to refresh me?' William Shaw Rae's excited narrative about Haitian cannibalism effectively masked the physical, moral and economic cannibalism of the plantation owners.

The repugnant consumption of human blood was not simply a prerogative of white slave owners in places like Haiti, but an integral part of capitalist production. Radical critiques of twentieth-century capitalism were incensed by exploitation within the meat industry – an industry that was portrayed as literally 'consuming' desperate labourers. The best illustration of this can be found in Upton Sinclair's best-selling novel *The Jungle* (1905), which was set in the Chicago Union Stockyards. Because Sinclair had already written about chattel slavery, an editor challenged him to 'do the same thing for wage slavery'. What Sinclair found wandering about the stockyards was profoundly shocking: a 'veritable fortress of oppression', slaughtering animals in the most cruel ways and virtually 'eating' the human operatives.

The novel accused industrialists of cannibalism: workers who fell into vats, or whose body parts were caught in the machinery, were rendered into leaf lard or tinned meat products. He also repeated the accusation that anti-slavery activists had made from the eighteenth century onwards: the entire process was also symbolically cannibalistic.

As a result of the furore over Sinclair's book, the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act was passed through Congress. Although Sinclair had set out to transform the lives of the grossly exploited workers, the result was nothing more than controls over the adulteration and labelling of food and drugs. Sinclair's dream that the newly formed working men's unions would enable the exploited workers to 'look out for themselves' more effectively never eventuated. Americans were reassured that the animals they ate were hygienically killed, but the labouring men were disposable; they could be consumed, and at virtually no cost. As Sinclair complained, 'I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.'³² It was a point that has been cinematically exploited ever since, as in *White Zombie* (a film about a sugar-cane plantation in Haiti) and, most notoriously, in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and its many imitations (see Figure 5).

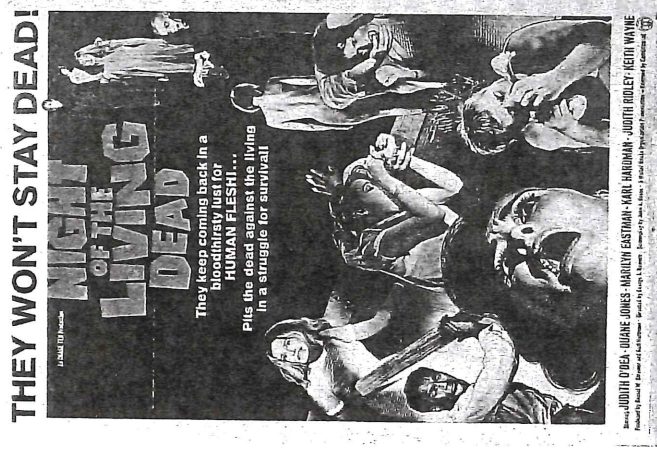


Figure 5. Film poster for *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968. The film, directed by George A. Romero, featured zombies, cannibalism and graphic violence within a Pennsylvania community. Duane Jones, who later became executive director of the Black Theater Alliance, played its hero, Ben. Getty Images

Bringing the Cannibal Home

White Zombie and *Night of the Living Dead* were unusual in that the cannibals were white- as well as brown-skinned. Outside of the slavery debates of the late eighteenth century and in extreme examples of survival, there has been great resistance to any suggestion that cannibalism existed amongst Europeans. In an 1866 talk to the Anthropological Society of London, Richard Stephen Charnock admitted that it was 'unpalatable to Europeans' to be reminded that 'the inhabitants of Europe were at one time quite as savage as those who have practised, or who still practise this crime'. Absolutely unpalatable! exclaimed respondents to his talk. After all, Charnock's many critics asserted, human flesh simply did not 'agree with' civilized stomachs and 'even' Fiji-islanders generally felt ill after eating it.³³ The only occasion on

which cannibalism could be admitted was in the context of disasters of unprecedented magnitude: in such circumstances, it was even possible (reluctantly, and with much debate and soul-searching) to admit Sir John Franklin, Britain's greatest Arctic explorer and national hero, into the company of cannibals.

Of course, the rejection of cannibalism within Europe was dependent upon a highly specific definition of 'people-eating'. Take the Roman Catholic Eucharist, in which believers hope to become more Christ-like by devouring His body and blood. When believers kneel for the Sacrifice of the Mass, the bread and wine becomes 'His body and blood'. For believers, there is nothing metaphorical about it. The ingestion of the host (from the Latin *hostia*, meaning victim) is, theologically speaking, literal. Yet no kinship with other cannibalistic practices (even symbolic ones, as in Obeahism) is confessed.

The definition excludes many secular rituals as well. In Britain and America, in the past as well as today, it is not uncommon for mothers who have recently given birth to eat the placenta – but who would dare call this most maternal ingestion 'cannibalism'? Keen placentophagists are reminded that the placenta 'should not be more than three days old'. Recipes for roast placenta, placenta cocktail and placenta lasagne are easy to find. Experienced cooks blandly inform potential digesters that a placenta generally weighs about one-sixth of the baby's weight, so if it was too much to consume immediately, it can be dehydrated and stored in gel caps. Mothers are advised to add a spoonful to their cereal or drink when required. This incestuous feasting is credited with the magical properties of warding off post-partum depression and bringing happiness to new mothers. As one mother quipped, 'It is the only piece of meat you can eat that you don't have to kill to do so.'³⁴ (See Figure 6.)

The problem of definitions is even more serious if we turn our gaze to medicine. Blood transfusions, growth hormones (Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease was transmitted, in part, by a growth hormone made from human pituitaries) and organ transplants all involve the taking of other human tissues and flesh inside one's own body: crucially, perhaps, they do not involve mastication. In the future the definition of human-on-human cannibalism might be further complicated by animal-human chimeras. Currently, by injecting human stem cells into sheep, chimeras whose livers are 80 per cent human can be created.³⁵ As a science correspondent for *Reason* magazine asked, 'would eating a liver composed chiefly of human liver cells grown in a sheep be cannibalism?' His answer? 'Yes; don't do it. Save them for transplants.'³⁶

Even if we stick to conventional definitions of cannibalism, however, the practice can be found close to home. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, British and American reports of cannibalism (excluding 'survival cannibals' and the exceptionally rare cannibalistic psychopath, both of which have generated a vast literature)³⁷ took two forms: individual pranks and cruelty associated with the exploitation of the bodies of the poor. In the first instance, reports of cannibalism were linked to hazing practices, usually within medical schools. In a fairly typical example, a physician in the 1860s confessed that a 'horrid practical joke' had been played on a medical student: his fellow students had 'cut a piece [of flesh] from a body in the dissecting-room, and had it fried and served up to him as beef-steak, which he ate, and thought very good'.³⁸ In the same decade, *The Times* and the *Lancet* reported that a lab assistant at St Thomas' Hospital (London) carried out the 'abominable action' of cooking and eating a small piece of human flesh 'out of bravado'. *The Times* was relieved to be able to report that the 'disgusting act' had been carried out by a lower-class assistant, rather than the medical students who were 'gentlemen both by birth and education'.³⁹ Class could be as potent an explanation as 'race'.

From the nineteenth century, however, another form of cannibalism began to 'speak its name': that is, people-eating arose in the context of the political economy of pauperism. In nineteenth-century Britain, paupers could occasionally be heard protesting that their bodies were – literally – being consumed. One such panic occurred in 1829 when a pauper newly admitted to the workhouse of St Paul's, Shadwell (in the Tower Hamlets area of London) complained that the food they were being served contained human as well as animal remains. Why might the other inmates have good reason to think that this was plausible? Shortly before this accusation, Parliament had been debating the Anatomy Bill (passed in 1832), which proposed that the bodies of paupers who had died inside workhouses and whose bodies had not been claimed by their family could be sent to medical schools for dissection. If the wealthy were prepared to dismember paupers' bodies in the study of anatomy, why not suppose they would be willing to use these bodies in other humiliating ways? *The Morning Chronicle* reported that 'many of the paupers' at St Paul's 'became so frightened' by gossip that they were being fed human remains that 'they refused to partake of their food'. The pauper who sparked the panic – described by a magistrate as 'one of the most turbulent paupers in existence' – was eventually sentenced to twenty-one days in a house of correction for making unfounded allegations. Nevertheless, the master of the workhouse was anxious to prove that he was not serving up 'Nattomy Soup', so he brought a bowl of the workhouse broth and its recipe to court.⁴⁰

While deeply shocking to people of the time and leading to major reforms of the workhouse system (which was, after all, the reason journalists and politicians propagated such myths), this panic over cannibalistic workhouse practices was short-lived. A century later, however, a very different panic arose over eating people. This time, the focus was on the exploitation of middle-class girls and women rather than working-class men. In the 1980s and 1990s allegations of cannibalistic practices became linked to satanic rituals. Therapists such as Colin A. Ross, author of *Satanic Ritual Abuse: Principles of Treatment* (1995), professed to have met 'dozens of people who claim to have participated in ritual cannibalism, drinking of human blood, and human and animal sacrifice, and who believe themselves to be demon-possessed'. Because cannibalism is seen as belonging to a 'primitive phase of cultural development', Ross went on, such practices 'pose a major challenge to our usual beliefs about human history and the cultural evolution of our race'.⁵⁸

His concerns were widely shared. Although only about two per cent of adults in North America claimed to have experienced possession by the devil,⁵⁹ stories of satanic abuse often included cannibalistic vignettes. The story of 'Gina', published in Daniel Ryder's *Breaking the Circle of Satanic Ritual Abuse. Recognizing and Recovering from the Hidden Trauma* (1992), was fairly typical of the genre (see Figure 9, a 'patient's' sketch from his book).⁶⁰ Gina's mother was a Sunday-school teacher and mission leader in the local Baptist church in Oklahoma, but Gina's main memories were of being immersed in a satanic cult.

Once again, the flesh of animals and persons were intertwined. Gina recalled that they were fed large quantities of raw and barely cooked meat. 'We ate hamburger meat, eggs, and occasionally steak, which we bought from a store. The rest of the meat was raised at the section house - goat meat, chicken meat, horse meat, and cat meat', she remembered, explaining that 'Satanists believe that eating animal or human flesh gives them more power and domination. Drinking blood is believed to do the same thing.'

Such lurid accounts were standard fare, and closely resemble older stories about the potency of ingesting human body parts. Given that Haiti was the paradigm 'cannibal country', it should come as no surprise that it sometimes made an appearance in these stories.⁶² More commonly, however, the sacrificed person was not a racial 'other'. Indeed, the power of the ritual could be particularly strong precisely because the victim was an intimate companion. As one 'expert' observed, the phallus or fingers of satanic cult members were sometimes eaten, 'an act very effective in restoring potency'.⁶³ Like the older narratives explored earlier in this chapter, infants and children were favoured victims. As the author of *Cults that Kill* (1988) explained,

When you sacrifice someone, for the instant just before they die, they supposedly emit their life energy. That power, Satanists believe, can be harnessed for their use. They believe babies are best because babies are pure . . . When you sacrifice a baby, you get greater power than if you sacrifice an adult.⁶⁴

How can these stories be explained? Some investigators embraced a highly reductive version of psychoanalysis. Thus Lloyd deMause, director of the Institute for Psychohistory and editor of a special issue on the cult abuse of children in the *Journal of Psychohistory* in 1994, claimed that cannibalistic acts were attempts by 'deeply regressed individuals' to 'avoid castration and engulfment fears and reassure themselves of their potency and separateness'. DeMause's psychohistorical explanation was that these cult members were re-enacting 'fetal trauma' [sic]. 'It may seem arbitrary and excessive', he admitted, 'to claim that cultic ritual involves regression all the way back to birth', but

I think this is the only way to make sense out of the specific elements of cult rituals. Cults relive each traumatic moment of birth in their rituals. They put children in cases, boxes and coffins as symbolic wombs. They hang them upside down, the position of fetuses . . . They drink victim's blood as fetuses 'drink' placental blood . . . When did we all ever 'drink' blood? Only in the womb.⁶⁵

In contrast to the cannibalistic scares arising out of exploitative practices within workhouses, anthropophagy in the late twentieth century was internalized - literally, its origin could be traced to the mother's womb. It was only in the 1990s, with the feminist attack on 'recovered memory', that people-eating was politicized and, to coin a rather ugly word, de-literalized. For second-wave feminists, feasting on the bodies of girls and women was symbolic. Patriarchy was the real ogre.

As I discussed in the last Part, Levinas remained a humanist, even if not a traditional one. Sacrifice was still present in his work: Levinas did not 'sacrifice sacrifice' because it was 'not forbidden to make an attempt on life in general, but only on the life of man, of other kin'. In contrast, Derrida wanted to 'link the question of the "who" to the question of "sacrifice"'. Autonomy and authority could only be achieved within a carno-phallogocentric economy that privileged the human (not legitimately edible) over the animal; the man (carnivorous supreme) over the woman.³ Such hierarchies decided who could be eaten – sometimes literally; other times, symbolically.

The underlying tensions, however, have appeared time and again. Even though considerable cultural energy went into abstracting the living animal from the marinated chop, the repressed knowledge of animal life – of sentience – constantly breaks through. Many animals resembled humans; they possessed recognizable traits that might be passed on if taken inside the human body. Fears of miscegenation (especially for those humans anxious to cast the 'human' in a wholly superior moral universe to the 'animal') could make these acts of consumption discomfoting. Becoming a living being depends upon absorbing elements from inside, outside, around. Eating is intimate. It exposes the fluidity of the human subject. It is a Möbius strip turned into a river of blood in the shape of a figure-of-eight. Like it or not, there is violence there.

Conclusion to Part 5: What Does it Mean to Eat Flesh?

In this Part, 'Eating: Carnivorous Consumption', I have explored how people have been ranked as human, lesser human, and pure animal according to their response to the consumption of a variety of flesh. Entire groups could be labelled 'barbaric' by accusing them of cannibalism, but what was depicted as cannibalistic in white European societies was highly selective. When it did include the literal mastication of another person's flesh, the causes were primarily economic (paupers in the nineteenth century) or satanic (infants and young girls in the late twentieth century).

The meaning of animal flesh also turns out to be a sensitive marker of status because the animal becomes human inside the stomach, intestines, pancreas, liver, bone and blood. As the president of a society dedicated to improving abattoirs expressed it in the 1890s, 'the animal substance which to-day may be beef, mutton, or pork, may to-morrow be human substance, part and parcel of man, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh'.¹ The 'executions of ingestion, incorporation, or introjection of the corpse' (as Derrida put it)² constituted the human and set her outside the animal, who could be killed. For Derrida, this 'non-criminal putting to death' of animals exposed the limitations of Levinas's philosophy. For Levinas, the responsibility not to kill ('Thou shalt not kill') was partial: it only referred to 'thy neighbour'. As Derrida pointed out,

The 'Thou shalt not kill' – with all its consequences, which are limitless – has never been understood within the Judeo-Christian tradition, nor apparently by Levinas, as a 'Thou shalt not put to death the living in general'.