

## Book Reviews

### General

*Cannibals: The Discovery and Representation of the Cannibal from Columbus to Jules Verne.* By FRANK LESTRINGANT. Translated by ROSEMARY MORRIS. The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics, vol. 37. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Illustrations. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. vi, 247 pp. Cloth, \$38.00.

*Cannibals* is a translation of *Le Cannibale: grandeur et décadence* (Paris, 1994). The English subtitle suggests what is conveyed by the main title in French: that this is a study of the figure of the cannibal in European thought from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. America appears in the shape of the Caribs, who provide the name *cannibal* courtesy of Columbus; then through the Brazilian Tupinamba, well-known to French writers; and finally in the form of the decadent continent theorized by the more materialist of the *philosophes*, such as Cornélius de Pauw. The book is organized into thirteen chapters in three parts. These move chronologically from the “birth” of the cannibal to the case of Jules Verne, but the last two parts identify one of the author’s major divisions, between the explanation of cannibalism by vengeance (‘In Search of the Honorable Cannibal’) and the explanation by necessity (‘Cannibals by Constraint’). The translation by Rosemary Morris reads well and is mostly accurate (though at one point it makes nonsense of Voltaire by translating *vaincus* as “victorious”).

Lestringant’s knowledge of French colonial material is unrivaled, and he offers an impeccable tracing of the cannibal motif through the writings of Rabelais, Thevet, Léry, and Montaigne and deep into the tangled thickets of religious controversy over the Eucharist. In this early period, aristocratic morality was inclined to excuse “honor cannibalism” (p. 91), with the flesh of the prisoner seen as sign, rather than as food. The materialist position is interestingly dated to Girolamo Cardano’s 1557 *De rerum varietate*, which argued an American need for food, in an early version of the later claim that the New World was seriously deficient in resources. Part three covers the development of this line by Malthus and de Pauw, who are given greater weight than Diderot, whose radical anticolonialism and somewhat heterodox materialism make him less susceptible to Lestringant’s overall thesis.

As a study of the representation of the figure of the cannibal, *Cannibals* is a significant contribution to cultural history, often distilling for a more general readership

Lestringant's extensive scholarly work in this field. However, the superstructure of the book, as laid out in the introduction, makes rather different and distinctly problematical claims. To begin with, Lestringant will have no truck with what he calls the "crazed revisionism" of those who "deny cultural anthropophagy" (p. 6). No substantial arguments are offered in favor of this rejection, although what the author calls a "sufficient answer" is supposedly provided by a quotation from de Pauw to the effect that human beings have amply shown themselves capable of all conceivable forms of vileness. "The Cannibals," we are assured, "did really exist, and have never ceased to speak to us"; the retrieval of their voices is "the aim of the present book" (pp. 6–7).

This is difficult to fathom. "Le Cannibale," a figure sometimes obscured by the translation into the plural "cannibals," but captured by the upper-case *C* in the quotation above, is a stereotype that, as Lestringant ceaselessly shows, owes its metamorphosis to European religious, political, and philosophical developments. There were, and are, Native American groups supposedly referenced by this stereotype, whose voices do need hearing. But they are not heard here, and it is difficult to understand how the author could have imagined them to be.

Ironically, when it comes to historically authenticated cases of cannibalism, as *Cannibals* makes clear, it is Europeans who are eating Europeans: from the family who ate their child during the final weeks of the siege of Sancerre in 1573, an event that traumatized Léry, to the survival cannibalism on the raft of the *Medusa*, memorably sketched by Théodore Géricault and turned into a novel by Jules Verne who, predictably, gives the appetite for human flesh to the crew rather than to the officers and passengers. Equally predictably, it was in fact the officers and passengers who ate the crew.

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*Columbus Then and Now: A Life Reexamined.* By MILES H. DAVIDSON. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. Photograph. Illustration. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xxx, 609 pp. Cloth, \$39.95.

Few historical figures have gathered as many myths about their person as Columbus. Now that the tide of books produced during the 1992 Quincentenary has washed to shore, Miles Davidson provides a useful service by summarizing and critiquing research on this individual. The goal is less to produce a new narrative than to clear away barnacles. Each chapter follows a uniform pattern by exposing the documentary evidence (primarily the narratives of Andrés Bernáldez, Hernando Colón, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdez, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, and the newly recovered letters of the *Libro copiador*) to an intense scrutiny normally decently buried in footnotes. Davidson relies upon his own translations, since virtually every version in print, no matter how recent or scholarly, is held faulty. The author then compares his findings to those of selected American writers (it is not immediately clear why Europeans are neglected). Historians with the most references to be found in the index, in