

Two questions on cannibalism and rap

1. In your study of rap in *Pragmatist aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) you explicitly use the concept of cannibalism to describe rap's aesthetic of appropriation, its sampling of prerecorded music and other sounds. You even refer to the early rappers, on page 203, as "musical cannibals of the urban jungle." What has been the reaction to this characterization of rap?

In the English language, "to cannibalize" not only has the meaning of eating human flesh but more generally denotes the practice of taking parts from one thing to add it to another, as when one strips off various parts of one car to add them to another vehicle. My description of rap's sampling was clearly oriented toward this symbolic meaning of cannibalizing parts to create a new musical whole. None of the African-American readers of the book (or of the rap criticism I also wrote for a local grass-roots rap-fanzine) ever took my use of "cannibalism" in any other way. Never did they accuse me of denigrating rap by associating it with what some would call the primitivism of African cannibal cultures.

I did, however, face this criticism from certain white readers who were deeply concerned with politically correct language. In fact, the copy editors of *Critical Inquiry*, an excellent journal who published an exchange on rap between myself and another critic, insisted that I refrain from using the term "cannibalism" with respect to rap in my new article "Rap remix: pragmatism, postmodernism, and other issues in the House."¹ They argued that its use implies that rap culture and its ethnic sources are primitive and savage, that the term "cannibalism" too powerfully reinforces the identification of black culture with barbarous savagery. While recognizing that I was defending the value of rap's musical cannibalization, they remained adamant that the very use of the term "cannibalism" entailed a negative valuation, a scornful colonialist charge of savage brutality. They insisted that their readers (primarily white Anglophone academics) would be so disturbed and misled by the horrific connotations of cannibalism, that my positive appreciation of rap would be lost, and that I (if not also the journal that published me) could easily be taken as expressing colonialist racist views.

2. What conclusions have you drawn from this reaction? What has cannibalism come to mean to you as a philosopher?

The first conclusion was simply practical. I recognized that the editors knew their American academic readership better than I did, so that if I wanted to communicate my message more effectively to that public, I should avoid the term “cannibalism”. Superficial linguistic circumventions were easy to find. For example, when writing for North American audiences, instead of referring to rap’s cannibalizing of other sounds, I simply wrote that rap “fed” on other sounds (see my later study of rap in *Practicing philosophy: pragmatism and the philosophical life* (New York: Routledge, 1997). This, of course, is a very perfunctory response, a merely cosmetic solution to the real problem with respect to cannibalism: our blind, shallow, and primitively visceral reaction to it, which expresses all the savage primitiveness that we project on cannibalism itself.

So beyond the project of policing my language for politically correct North American readers, I began to see that philosophy could be useful in reminding people of the varieties of the meanings of cannibalism. Even in the literal act of eating human flesh, there are different possible meanings. As we learn from Diogenes Laertius, the Stoics Zeno and Chrysippus both advocated the eating of corpses under “the stress of circumstances,” i.e., when there was nothing else available to eat. Montaigne’s essay on cannibalism points to another meaning of the practice: “to betoken an extreme revenge” on a defeated enemy by “roasting and eating him.”

But one can easily imagine another meaning for the ingesting of human flesh: not the mere nutritional use of a human corpse nor the revenge on an enemy but the symbolic affirmation of the human by the act of feasting on it. Do we not demonstrate our appreciative desire for human beings whom we love by nibbling on their ears, sucking on their nipples, tongues, etc.? Some of us further seek to prove the higher measure of our love by an act of full ingestion (of course, not of whole body parts, an act that would wound the lover, but at least of body fluids). Swallowing here is a loving act of full acceptance and happy surrender rather than the aggressive defiance of revenge.

I sometimes wonder whether the ritual of the Eucharist does not express the same loving ingestion of the divine body of Christ? Might cannibalism, then, also be feared for its threat to the worship (and eating) of the higher than human? If we revere the human body, why should prefer to bury our corpses to feed the lowly worms and maggots rather than honoring them as nourishment for fellow human forms? Montaigne long ago realized that the concept of cannibalism raises a great deal of provocative questions deserving more enlightened and imaginative thought. But our stubborn tradition of responding to cannibalism with an unthinking visceral shudder of condemnatory repulsion seems to remain as blindly primitive as the cannibalism it perceives.

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1. *Critical Inquiry*, n. 22 (1995), pp. 150–158