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Cannibals and Orchids

Cannibalism and the Sensory Imagination of Papua New Guinea

ILARIA VANNI

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SYDNEY

—PROLOGUE

Over the Christmas lunch table my father-in-law related events that happened in the 1960s, when he worked for the Australian Government in the process of decolonisation in Papua New Guinea. My father-in-law was in charge of overseeing land rights claims in the Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain. One day a man submitted a claim for an uncharacteristically large piece of land. My father-in-law investigated the nature of and reasons for the claim, and was told this story:

In the time before the Germans, the Gazelle Peninsula used to be scattered with house tambaran, men's houses, each of them marking the possession of a plot of land. Many things happened in the men's houses, one of which consisted of fighting. These fights were provoked and involved two high-ranking men. It lasted until one of the contenders died. The victor then would follow a precise ritual: the body of his opponent would be cut and eaten, the victor eating the largest amount. He would then take a stroll to meet the dead man's wife, and upon meeting her he would say: 'I haven't

seen your husband in a while', and would follow the sentence with a loud belch. The wife would then understand she was a widow, and her late husband's possessions, including land, would become the property of the victor. 'In these ways' the man explained, 'my ancestors acquired much land'.

When the man had finished his story my father-in-law noted conversationally: 'your ancestors must have been very good fighters', to which the man replied with a smile: 'and very good eaters too'.

—MAKING SENSE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA¹

In the vast body of literature on the South Pacific we find almost two centuries of representations that alternate the register of the picturesque, the Noble Savage, the Golden Age, the cannibal and the primitive, as Bernard Smith expounds in his *European Visions and the South Pacific*. Early explorers, on the other hand, represented Papua New Guinea almost exclusively as a land of an uncompromising otherness.² This was translated in the tales of the monstrous, the horrific, the sublime and the marvellous that flourish in writings about Papua New Guinea. Australian journalist Gavin Souter collected early trail-breakers' imaginative descriptions of Papua New Guinea oddities in his book *New Guinea: The Last Unknown*. In his catalogue we find an often incomprehensible flora, little ponies in yellow and white, living fossils in the form of rhinoceros-sized marsupials, the smallest parrot in the world, a 'tree-climbing crocodile', the tallest trees, the highest grass, the biggest apes, the largest daisies, and kings with shields of solid gold.³

Perhaps the most enduring trait used to mark the otherness of Papua New Guinea is cannibalism. I will not try to dispute the existence or non-existence of cannibalistic practices here, nor the veracity of my father-in-law's narration. Rather I will consider this cannibal narrative as rhetorical device, as an allegory of the experience of sensory overload and displacement in the Papua New Guinea jungle. Accordingly, this article presents a close sensory analysis of the book *Cannibals and Orchids*, mapping out how the encounter with the landscape is translated as disarray of the senses. This article engages with anthropological literature on the trope of cannibalism, but does not pretend to be a comprehensive review of all the existing literature on cannibalism and colonial discourse in Papua New Guinea.

The explorers' or colonisers' or later settlers' inability to translate, contain and make sense of Papua New Guinea according to a Western sensorium produced tales of excess. Accounts of cannibalism were articulated both by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as my father-in-law's tale illustrates. Both groups responded to specific tactical needs. 'Cannibalistic discourse was a weapon, one might say, employed by all the parties,' Obeyesekere has argued writing about Maori, 'compounded by the ludic and the serious: the ludic since they [Maori] seem on occasion at least, to enjoy the discomfiture of the Europeans; and serious, because it was a weapon to terrify them in a context of unequal power'.⁴

I will focus on the iconic value of cannibalism in representations of Papua New Guinea by reading closely one particular text, *Cannibals and Orchids*, written in 1941 by the American author Leona Miller.⁵ My interest in *Cannibals and Orchids* lies in Miller's ability to construct the Papua New Guinea through the depiction of the sensory disarray she experienced in her encounter with the otherness of the jungle and of Indigenous people. Cannibalism becomes a descriptor, often humorous, of her experience in Papua New Guinea: of being absorbed, digested and finally spat out of the country.

A quick look at library catalogues under Papua New Guinea reveals a flurry of holdings of publications between the 1910s and the 1940s with titles such as *Among the Head Hunters in New Guinea*, *The Isle of Vanishing Men: A Narrative of Adventure in Cannibal-land*, *Unexplored New Guinea: A Record of the Travels, Adventures and Experiences of a Resident Magistrate amongst the Head Hunting Savages and Cannibals of the Unexplored Interior of New Guinea*, *Mountains, Gold and Cannibals*, *Head-hunters Black White and Brown*, *Naturalist in Cannibal Land*, *New Guinea Head-Hunt* and *Cannibal Caravan*.⁶ It seems that the topic of cannibalism in the writings about Papua New Guinea was a literary fad, peppering the genre of adventure and exploration travel. At the same time it reiterated the trope of tropical forests imagined as sites of savagery. Michael Taussig, writing a sensory depiction of another forest, as will be later analysed, made a similar point in relation to narratives of the Colombian 'succulent jungle' of the Caquetá and the Putumayo.⁷

In the specific case of Papua New Guinea, head-hunting and cannibalism were interchangeable, and it was widely assumed that heads were taken for brain consumption. These tales of cannibal Papua New Guinea are exemplary of

storytelling and make use of precise rhetorical devices. First person accounts and autobiography, for instance, are used to present the story as lived experience and in turn to create a sense of shared history with the reader. 'The storyteller,' Benjamin argues, 'takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale'.⁸ As 'narratives of the self' these tales reveal much about the subjectivity of the writer, constructed in opposition to the 'other', the savage, the cannibal.⁹ They also seduce the reader by offering them a 'true' account, thus 'tapping our own predilections for the fantastic through the various devices they employ, especially the power of eyewitness narrative couched in the language of verisimilitude'.¹⁰

Cannibals and Orchids conforms to the genre described above. It is a 'true' spatial story, told from the perspective of someone who experienced the events narrated. The reader is invited to share this experience through the descriptions of the author's own sense of displacement in front of the environment's sensorial abundance and excess. The jungle, flora, fauna, rivers become all active characters in Miller's narrative and are depicted as an all consuming, 'voracious' organism.

My choice of words here is not casual: Miller's prose is highly pictorial and impressionistic. Such language evokes the density of sensorial displacement. It is useful here to consider Mary Louise Pratt's work, moving it from Victorian Africa to late 1930s Papua New Guinea. Pratt, analysing the rhetoric of discovery in the writings of Victorian explorers in Africa, calls attention to three rhetorical conventions: the density of meaning given to the landscape, the aestheticisation of landscape and the relation of mastery between the seer and the seen.¹¹ In reference to the first convention, Pratt analyses the linguistic structure of landscape descriptions, noting the number of adjectival modifiers and nominal colour expressions (like emerald green, snow white) meant to translate the African landscape into British experiences. Similarly, the landscape is aestheticised and ordered according to the conventions of paintings, evoking the pleasure of sight. Lastly the relation of the explorer-seer is one of mastery over a landscape read, evaluated and possessed from a vantage point of view and through European lenses.

Sight was, according to Pratt, the sense through which the colonial landscape was read and ordered in a masculine discourse of discovery not available to women.¹² Similarly, painting was the intertextual medium that gave Victorian

explorers the vocabulary to read the landscape as background, middle ground, foreground and symmetries, making sight the only sense to understand and mediate the experience.¹³ While these explorers, predominantly male, write from mountain tops that allow them to watch the landscape from above and from a distance, Miller writes, literally, in the thick of things. What happens if we move Pratt's analysis to Miller's text? In *Cannibals and Orchids* the three rhetorical strategies identified by Pratt are present, but scrambled.

A complex intersensoriality, as defined by Howes in terms of 'the multidirectional interaction of the senses and of sensory ideologies, whether considered in relation to a society, an individual or a work', pervades this book.¹⁴ The language used to describe the jungle is rich in visual effects scattered throughout the book as adjectives that try to translate the experience into something known to Western audiences: 'pure wax white', 'orange-yellow', 'slate grey' 'green canopy'. The visual blends with the auditory: 'the blasting screech', 'the unholy clamour'; the olfactory: 'odor of a tomb', 'grisly effluvium'; the tactile: slacks that lose their softness and turn 'into sandpaper' against the author's skin; the gustatory, symbolised by Leona and her party's canned food as opposed to the portions of kangaroo thrown 'hair, dirt, and all' in the fire by Indigenous women.¹⁵

The result of this thickly described intersensoriality is a sensory overload that places the author in the middle of things, erasing the distance and the vantage point of the colonial and male explorer. Taking as a starting point the mirror themes of emplacement as 'sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment' and displacement as 'the feeling that one is homeless, disconnected from one's physical and social environment' we can read *Cannibals and Orchids* as the progressive displacement of the author in the heart of darkness of the Papua New Guinea jungle.¹⁶

—STORYTELLING

Leona Jay was a society girl who, craving adventure, decided to organise an expedition in the late 1930s in Dutch New Guinea. Charles Miller was a motion picture cameraman in Los Angeles. He was born in Dutch New Guinea, where his father had moved as captain of the Dutch East Indian Army to put an end to head hunting. His claim to fame was the establishment of an off-shore prison for Javanese

criminals in Merauke, on the border between present-day West Papua and Papua New Guinea. Charles was sent to high school to Holland and then tried an array of jobs, returning regularly to Dutch New Guinea to see his father. Here he 'learnt the jungle' and he also took lots of pictures of it, as 'The boy to whom the green depths of the jungle had beckoned as a toddler, continued to dream of the wilds of his youth'.¹⁷ Charles was employed to lead Leona's expedition, which also gave him the unprecedented chance to shoot a film to be titled *A Day in the Life of a Cannibal*, with the objective of recording the everyday life of cannibals.¹⁸ Charles promptly fell in love with Leona and the couple married in Java. *Cannibal and Orchids* (1941) is a travelogue of their honeymoon up the Merauke River and in the jungle a la *Heart of Darkness* and has a specular text in Charles's own *Cannibal Caravan* (1939).

The date of the journey is not revealed, but it must have happened in the late 1930s. At that time Dutch New Guinea had been explored by Europeans, although only a very few white people lived in the interior, mainly running plantations. Some ex-Dutch army officers remained in the area, and one of them, Gustave Schultz, retired Captain of the Dutch Colonial Army, acts in the book as the guide, the one who by virtue of a long stay has acquired local knowledge, if not positively gone native. The book opens with a dedication to Charles 'Cannibal' Miller. As the sobriquet implies, Charles Miller liked to fashion himself as a sort of Papua New Guinean Tarzan, a 'white native', and he liked his new wife, and expedition financial backer, to believe it as well. The 1930s in the United States was the era when jungle stories were at the height of their success, as exemplified by the popularity of Tarzan books and films. 'Cannibal' conjured up images of such jungle lore.¹⁹ The sobriquet also played with notions of boundary trespassing, alluding to a white man gone primitive. It was an effective marketing tool, moving the product from the fiction to the lived adventure genre, for Charles's own book *Cannibal Caravan*, for the movie he and Leona intended to make, and for Leona's book.

Throughout Leona's narrative Charles postures at playing it rough, and shows off his knowledge, acquired almost by birthright, of the jungle, the Indigenous people and their customs. He is a rather taciturn character, and when he speaks he is given the voice of a cowboy in a western, another popular genre in Hollywood in the 1930s. One night he reassures his wife: 'It's all right kid. It isn't us they are figuring on eating. They have been hearing drum talk ahead, and what the drums have been

saying isn't jazz'.²⁰ On their arrival in Merauke, Charles is identified as belonging to the place and its people. Leona is told 'the word began seeping in the jungle that korepatura, the little white boy, who had grown up there to become a warrior and blood-brother in the Imo was back'.²¹

But Leona the socialite was not to be easily impressed by the town, or by the brothers: 'Oh, they were beauties, these brothers of my husband. Anyone of them could have modelled for a nightmare without makeup, and they all wore make up' and preferred to sit in a veranda where she 'drank gin splits with a controleur. He was white and didn't have a plug in his nose'.²² The choice of sitting on the veranda with a gin split is emblematic of Leona's attitude throughout her narrative: she is constantly part of the action, gazing at bodies or at the flora, filming, or being consumed by the jungle, but at the same time she is removed from it.

As well as Charles 'Cannibal' and Leona, the narrating voice, other characters play specific roles assigned to them according to class and race, often as clusters of unidentified people. These categories are fluctuating signifiers, and they are redefined in the encounter with the jungle other. There is Achmed, Leona's personal assistant, part of an elite group of five Malay servants; there is a group of convicts from the Merauke chain-gang as porters; and a contingent of Indigenous people, Kyas-Kyas, from a village close to Merauke, who are referred to as 'the boys', 'our giants', 'our warriors,' and who thus act as characters suspended, yet shifting in, between the civilised and the primitive according to different locations and encounters. And then there are the women accompanying 'the boys', the cannibals, the head hunters and the pigmies, but they are not given any individuality; rather they are inscribed in the landscape as simply ciphers of the primitive. The main character in the book, however, is neither Leona nor Charles, but the succulent and rather bulimic jungle, which functions in the chronotopic sense identified by Mikhail Bakhtin.

According to Bakhtin, the chronotope or 'time-space' designates 'the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'.²³ Chronotopes make certain kind of events possible; they are 'the ground essential for the representability of events ... the chronotope is the place where knots of narratives are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them (chronotopes) belongs the meaning that shapes narrative'.²⁴

In what kind of place, then, are the knots of *Cannibals and Orchids* tied and untied? What is the meaning of the chronotope in this story, and what kind of shapes is it giving meaning to? Indeed, *Cannibals and Orchids*, although presented as a travelogue and belonging to the genre of the 'true account', does not happen in the geographical and historical specificity of the Merauke River, Dutch New Guinea, late 1930s. *Cannibals and Orchids* is a lavishly constructed chronotope of 'the primitive'. Within its borders modernity is erased, geography and history collapse in a non-specific time before time that finds its parallel in a dehumanised space marked only by the whims of nature. The jungle, 'a term popularly used to describe the locale of the primitive', is a 'natural' space, untouched by the passing of time and stuck sometime '100.000.000 years ago'.²⁵

Naturalness and being out of time are evoked through the deployment of a thick sensorium, as in the examples given later in this article. The chronotope is constructed in Leona's narrative in line with these protocols, and the signs of encounters between Indigenous people and modernity are only hinted at, a mirror here, a steel blade there, a tin thrown into the vegetation, to avoid as much as possible the interruption of the ethnographic present. This narrative is one of fascination with difference, safely located outside the limits of Western culture and historical processes. This place, once it has been cut off from historical time, can harbour all sorts of monstrous and frightening things. Papua New Guinea, we read at the beginning of the book is a 'forgotten island' left to itself to produce an endless catalogue of aberrations.²⁶

—BOTANISING IN THE JUNGLE

After the creation of the island by the hand of an angry demon throwing rocks in the sea, Papua New Guinea starts to distinguish itself from neighbouring islands:

As the aeons passed, the other islands comprising the Dutch East Indies began digesting the culture brought in by travellers from Asia. The New Guineans, however, were satisfied just digesting the travellers. Thus the Stone Age for countless centuries has been safe in their hands. But it is about the only thing that is.²⁷

The chronotope is established: it is an anachronistic country suspended in time, and it is held there because of cannibalism. This suspended state breeds the weird, the

prehistoric, the atavistic, the abject, all that is 'inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity'.²⁸ Senses are overwhelmed in the locale of the primitive and become confused. This is literally noted in Leona's narrative:

Time was buried here, and didn't want his vault disturbed. We were proceeding along an eerie trail, deep down in a green twilight of high noon. The air had a spicy pungency that would have been invigorating were it not masking a heavy underlying odor of decay. Each breath delighted the nostrils as it passed, and cloyed the lungs. Subtle poison masquerading as sandalwood and attar of roses.²⁹

Here we came upon another survivor of the Mesozoic Period, a creature who had no place outside a museum'.³⁰

Papua New Guinea thus becomes what McClintock has termed an 'anachronistic space', where:

geographical differences across space is figured as historical difference across time. The stubborn and threatening heterogeneity of the colonies was contained and disciplined not as socially or geographically different from Europe and thus equally valid, but as temporally different and thus irrevocably superannuated by history.³¹

Cannibalism is one of the deviations inhabiting this anachronistic space. Conflated and confused with head-hunting, cannibalism becomes a recurrent motif, and it is used to mock the city girl's expectations of the Papua New Guinea jungle. She describes the first dawn on the river, and the local fauna waking up:

And then it came—a blasting screech as though the uncoiled hinges of hell had been burst asunder. A convulsive shudder of fright snapped my spine rigid and started my teeth vibrating. Never in my life had my ears been assaulted by so unholy a clamor. Only a whole tribe of head hunters in the last stages of blood-thirsty hysteria could produce it.³²

Michael Taussig has analysed the cluster of discourses and fears around cannibalism in terms of colonial semantic, as the allegory of colonisation itself, as a 'consumption of otherness [that] was not so much an event as a process from the void erupting at the moment of death to the reconstituting of oneself, the consumer, with still warm otherness. In this manner colonization was itself effected'.³³ In Taussig's words, allegations of cannibalism not only served as metaphors of the fear

of being consumed by otherness, uncertainty and the unknown, but also to 'flesh out the repertoire of violence in colonial imagination'.³⁴ If the general colonial allegory still functions in a reading of *Cannibal and Orchids* as fears of becoming consumed by otherness, cannibalism is in Miller's travelogue also the rhetorical device that allows a narrative development.

In the jungle, we read, there are, alas, no cannibals : 'Charles returned from his survey of the campsite to announce casually that he hadn't seen any sign of cannibals. As if to mock his words, the distant rhythm of a drum rolled down the river to set my nerves on edge'.³⁵ Rather, the country itself becomes the cannibal. From the arrival in Merauke things are clear:

Our steam-launch, battery of cameras, cans of film, canned foods and dehydrated vegetables, tradestore gifts and general junk were leisurely unloaded while a thousand sharks rolled hungrily on white bellies. They were our reception party, ivory-toothed symbols of New Guinea Voraciousness.³⁶

Similar descriptions reiterate the trope of tropical forests imagined as sites of savagery. Taussig has illustrated such tropes in relation to narratives of the Colombian 'succulent jungle' of the Caquetá and the Putumayo.³⁷ According to Taussig in these narratives 'the image of stark opposition and of otherness in the primeval jungle comes forth as the colonially intensified metaphor for the great space of terror and cruelty'.³⁸ In a similar way the jungle in Miller's novel becomes the site of confused fears about otherness, while embodying the contradictions of the colonial presence in Papua New Guinea. Covered with descriptors and stretching across a dense sensorium, Miller's jungle is represented as juicy, rich, dripping with material and semantic substance, a rhetorical strategy with its own history aimed at creating 'density of meaning', as identified by Mary Louise Pratt in explorers' landscape descriptions in nineteenth-century Africa.³⁹

In *Cannibal and Orchids* the jungle is described as an evil, voracious organism, constantly devouring itself and those who venture into its bowels: 'I looked doubtfully at the green wall. The carriers picked up their loads and started in. The jungle swallowed them without opening its mouth'.⁴⁰ Throughout the book, Leona is variously consumed by the jungle: eaten, bitten, sucked, chewed, cut, bled. In the 'Hell's Museum' of this anachronistic space, ants eat humans, rats eat wild boars,

hawks and crows eat rats.⁴¹ Mosquitoes: 'struck pay veins with each shaft they sank', while on seeing bats Leona is ironically consoled, thinking that 'those were ordinary vampire bats such as can be found in most tropical jungles. Such being the case, the worst they could do was drain my blood and leave me a waxen corpse by morning'.⁴²

Or:

I find the little worm-like leech, slate grey in colour and about half an inch long, going to work on the soft skin just beneath my knee. His little vacuum cup is already firmly attached. In the center of the vacuum area his lance almost painlessly slices through the most profitable blood vessels. Watching him swell up gives me something to do. By concentrating intensely on the area at which he is at work I imagine I can feel the pull as he sucks blood.⁴³

In the form of a carnivorous lily the jungle also offers a metaphor for the attraction/repulsion to the primitive, the tangle of fears and desires consuming Leona during her honeymoon. A similar dynamic of attraction and repulsion, of 'something rejected which one does not part' has been described by Kristeva as the process of abjection.⁴⁴

According to Kristeva the identity making of a social being is centred on the elimination of certain elements, thought by society to be impure (blood, excrements, bodily fluids, masturbation, incest, certain foods and so on). These elements, however, cannot be fully rejected and constantly threaten the subject's identity. The abject as 'a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness' acts as a boundary-making process, protecting the subject from disruption and loss of identity.⁴⁵ In Papua New Guinea, Leona is standing in what Kristeva calls 'the place where meaning collapses' having entered one of 'those fragile states where man [*sic*] strays on the territories of the animal'.⁴⁶ As such the abject is both fascinating and repellent.

In *Cannibals and Orchids* the jungle becomes a site of abjection, where, if caught off guard, Western men and women can get lost or lose their identity, their corporeal boundaries and become contaminated. Leona recounts how literally she loses her senses when the smell (or according to the description, stench) of a flower clings to her skin. Her prose mimics the sensory overload that leads to this state of displacement:

In the shape the blossom resembles a giant cone, with one long, tongue-like petal that folds over the bowl of the blossom whenever some unsuspecting insect enters in search for honey. The blossom is a pure wax white on the outside: the candle like center is an orange-yellow, turning to a poisonous brown at the base. Running the length of this centre is a hairy fuzz, beaded with crystal clear drops of venom. Its odor is that of a tomb. I was fascinated by it even when it repelled me. It seemed to personify the whole jungle – so beautiful, and yet so damn deadly. I wanted to crush it with my foot, but I couldn't bring myself to it. I left, and its grisly effluvium followed me, clinging to my clothes until I felt polluted all over.⁴⁷

—COOKING

The whole book could thus be read as an attempt to maintain the boundaries of the author's identity intact against the surging uncanniness of the other. Eating habits, literally the raw and the cooked, in 'cannibal land' become one of the privileged modes by which Leona attempts to demarcate clearly the self and the other, the civilized from the primitive. Whereas the relationship between the Kyas-Kyas and the landscape is one of emplacement, hinting at wholeness (the purported characteristic of the primitive to be close to nature, if not at one with it), the jungle continues to consume Leona while Leona consumes cups of tea (while longing for gin splits) and canned food. Eating and drinking habits become thus a signal of belonging and taste is a mark of civilization. Indigenous people are marked out as other through their perceived lack of eating rituals, such as designated eating time, and lack of cooking skills:

The natives recognise no particular meal time. They eat as they go along—a few beetles here, some choice fruit from this tree, a coconut there, a wide selection of grubs from under a log, a substantial bite of dried meat which is hanging from their upper armbands, or carried in their baskets; or a mouth-filling chew of a betel nut—anything to keep their jaws busy and their bellies quiet.⁴⁸

Cooking techniques are observed and reported with the usual mixture of horror and irony that characterises much of Leona's prose:

I decided to fill my note book on housekeeping habits of the native women. Certainly I would never be in a better spot to jot down a few culinary hints hot off the griddle ... The preparation of food is a perpetual chore because there are no regular meal times. When they get hungry they eat ... Sweet potatoes, palm tips, wild egg plant, and taro augment the vegetable diet from time to time ... the cooking process consists on throwing the vegetables into the fire and fishing them out with sakers (cooking sticks) when they turn black. Papaya, breadfruit, mangoes, wild melons, cucumbers, red hot peppers and sugar cane are eaten raw and usually on the spot ... As a rule meats are cooked much like vegetables. Upon the return of a hunting party with fresh game the women fall upon the carcasses with bamboo knives and sharp shells, hacking away until everything has been divided ... if it happens to be a kangaroo, the portions are thrown, hair, dirt and all, into the fire. They usually are regarded as cooked when the hair and dirt have burned off ... The only time the recipe is varied is when the meal is to consist of suckling pig or human meat. Then the meat is carefully wrapped in green banana leaves and the bundle is encased in spicy kajoe poeti (eucalyptus) bark. Several hours are spent in cooking ... not until the steam of the green banana leaves and the oil of the kajoe poeti bark has penetrated to the bone the meat is considered cooked.⁴⁹

—THE NARRATING EYE

The sort of scene described above would have made Leona and Charles' day if they had shot it on film. To the joys and pitfalls of filming is dedicated a whole chapter, 'Jungle Exposures'. Here we follow Charles and Leona while they attempt to capture on film the everyday events of the life of a cannibal. I have not so far being able to locate a copy of this film.

Narratives of captivity and exposure of the black body, such as those generated for over a century by and around circuses, freak shows and international exhibitions find a parallel with the black bodies captured on film. Likewise early film, which was also interested in the primitive and the exotic, replaced physical 'imprisonment with visual objectification'.⁵⁰ In *Cannibal and Orchids* the process of filming is revealed as

a technique to tell a story rather than as an instrument to collect data: far from claiming ethnographical documentary evidence, Leona insists on the theatrical, staged and designed quality of film-making. Wanting to shoot daily activities and wanting to start with people getting up, for instance, she notes down the problems she and Charles have to face:

First the cannibals get up too early in the morning for purpose of good photography. Light is seldom good in the deep jungle until after 9.00am. Still we had to show them getting up ... Now it might sound easy to get a head hunter and his multitudinous family of babies, aunts, dogs and pigs in a hut, but if you think you can get them to simulate sleep you have a lot of illusions.⁵¹

This performative character, whereby people literally act themselves for the camera, has been described by Catherine Russell in terms of the shift that took place with the advent of early cinema that regarded culture as a form of representation, 'in which people participate with different degrees of complicity'.⁵² In this complicity, or lack of it, we might find forms of resistance in Leona's text. Pigmies are asked to show some farming techniques, in order to shoot an ethnographic piece on agriculture. Accordingly they go to the farming ground, where they sit on their heels next to the plants.⁵³ Elsewhere the side of a hut and the roof are removed to allow filming inside, and a large family is overfed until it falls asleep on the spot, thus enabling the filming of the awakening in a 'real' setting. After a couple of hours:

Charles squinted intently through the finder. One man up. The camera began to grind. Two more yawning and stretching. This was good stuff. And then just when the whole group was beginning to move the biggest warrior in the bunch decided to obey that impulse. And of course he would be facing the camera when he did. Charles stopped the camera with a curse ... His action reminded the others of their needs, so they wasted no time in seeking relief. With a snort Charles started the camera again. If his official friends wanted a day in the life of the cannibal, they might as well have the real thing. He shot the works.⁵⁴

The staged character of filmmaking is further emphasised when Leona laments the poor quality of footage because natives, we learn, perform in a hurry because they are afraid of the lens of the camera, thinking it is an eye of an angry spirit.⁵⁵

They are not quite off the mark, as the lens coincides here with the narrating eye, Leona's exploring, curious, scopophilic gaze. Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn posit the surveyed body as the central site of investigation in Pacific colonial history. 'The body of the black captive', we read in the introduction to their *Body Trade*, 'fascinated its white captors because it signified otherness as a mystery—something to be conquered and captured, its "primitiveness" transformed into a more civilised, known, identifiable form'.⁵⁶

A similar dynamic is at play in *Cannibals and Orchids*, where although there are no bodies in captivity, bodies are continuously captured—on film—by the narrating I/eye. Leona's fascination with the black body is part of the exercise in boundary making between the self and what is rejected in the identity formation process, and corresponds also to that 'narrative of the self' identified by Obeyesekere as constitutive of cannibalistic tales. As a reject in the formative aspects of modern industrial imperialism, the cannibal 'inhabits the edges of modernity'.⁵⁷

Leona could not have appreciated the sophisticated sensorium described much later in the work of anthropologists who write about Papua New Guinea from the point of view of a sensory exploration, such as Steven Feld and David Howes.⁵⁸ In Leona's writing and from the point of view of her sensory ideology, the encounter with otherness is inscribed in the portrayal of a sensorium she cannot comprehend. Similarly, the body of the cannibal is fashioned with all the signifiers of the abject, as belonging to a different sensorium, one where the senses have not been domesticated. The cannibal body smells, it is naked, it is hideously inscribed with scars, it is dirty. The different relation between body and senses, especially smell, is the marker of difference. Waking up after the first night Leona describes the scene:

The natives were stumbling to their feet, rubbing their eyes with grimy fists. Their bathroom was where they happened to be at the moment, and they had no pants to clutch, no belts to find and no slippers to put on. They were ready for the new day ... I sat up and combed my hair. The citronella oil had given it a new curl. Achmed brought me boiled water and a mirror. A dash of cold water followed by a soapy wash cloth helped the mosquito bumps a little. Then behind the canvas screen for a quick rinse and a change of clothes. I stepped out a new woman.⁵⁹

Unlike Leona and Charles' bodies, which even in the jungle and even during their honeymoon are presented as non-sexed, the cannibal body is constructed as producing excess. Cannibals, we read, 'sleep all piled up one on top of the other' and missionaries cannot teach them to sleep 'straight'.⁶⁰ Sex is promiscuous and violent. After one head-hunting episode: 'the natives hold the feast of wemanuwe, the man-eat-man feast, the wildest cannibalistic orgy on the face of the earth. Dancing, feasting, drinking, and then comes rape on a vast, inhuman scale. When it is over, the happy, newly married couples take their aching heads and ravished bodies to their huts and prepare to take up housekeeping'.⁶¹

—FASHIONING THE CANNIBAL

Clothes are similarly fetishised in Leona's narrative as clear border markers. The paddlers in Leona's canoe are given lap-laps to wear, and in virtue of the dishcloth they wear their status among all the paddlers changes.⁶² Pigmies on the other hand seem to encapsulate all that is abject in the cannibal male body:

In one respect however, they distinguished themselves above all the other races, and that was in their fashion ... What they lacked in size they had to make up in other ways, and being earthy, primitive people whose problems were limited to eating, drinking and sex, they had little choice. Food and drink play a minor part in fashions the world over, but sex!—And these boys got right down to the fundamentals. I have previously mentioned the calabashes growing outside of the village—inedible, hard things some ten or fifteen inches long, and about two inches in diameter. Well, each one of these constituted a suit of clothes. As an article of wearing apparel a calabash is a startling thing. One end is cut off, the contents are scooped out, and the shell is left to harden into a non breakable case. It is then suspended from the waist by a length of rattan and worn in place of the fig leaf so popular in certain forms of statuary. A five foot pigmy clattering around in a fifteen-inch calabash is a masculine vanity carried to the ninth degree.⁶³

Similarly the jungle as site of regression starts to unravel Leona's body and sense of fashion. Here and there the jungle rips her clothes off, cuts her body, stains her, makes her uncomfortable in her own skin. Her clothes acquire a life of their own.

'My pongee shirt', she writes of her first day going up river, 'began a chafing march away from my soft slacks. They, in turn, began to lose their softness until at last it seemed they had seams of sandpaper. My socks wrinkled own into my shoes, and something told me that either my feet were swelling or my shoes shrinking'.⁶⁴

Drifting dangerously in the liminality and ambiguity of abjection, that 'place where meaning collapses', Leona can only put in place a *cordon sanitaire* between herself and the other.⁶⁵ This takes the form of soap, through which she domesticates Indigenous people. The first body contact in the book is thus described. Touch, the sense associated with intimacy, gives a new layer of repulsion to Leona's experience of Papua New Guinea:

I experienced a revulsion of sentiment. However, having started a rescue mission, I had to go through with it. Calling loudly for water, I began scraping away its [a boy found crying in a hut] protective covering of filth as a preliminary to a bath, using the stiff edge of a palm frond as a scraper. I was almost down to the baby when Achmed arrived with a canvas bucket of water. I proceeded scrubbing the baby without further ceremony. At about the third wash I discovered my prize was a boy. He was doing big things in the way of howling at this point, but I persisted until he was clean. To my surprise his skin was as soft and clear as if he had been scrubbed three times a day and dunked in baby oil at hourly intervals'.⁶⁶

Seen by Indigenous people as magic powder in virtue of its bubble producing capacity, soap becomes one of those entangled objects that illustrate and metonymise the colonial encounter. Soap has magic qualities for Leona as well, as it is used in moment of distress, when the boundaries between civilised and primitive start to get blurry, and the ambiguity of the abject begins to dominate.⁶⁷

—HEAD HUNTING, ALMOST

The blurring of boundaries is always reflected in the ability of the jungle to 'contaminate' and absorb people into its never-ending eating cycle. This sets the scene for the tales of cannibalism described in the book, despite the fact that cannibalism does not quite happen in view of the narrator. One night 'the boys' from Merauke revert to the blood-brotherhood head-hunting type. Hearing the drums rolling somewhere in the depth of the jungle, they steal knives and disappear for

three days, to come back with a crop of heads, which Charles disposes off before the brains are eaten:

The rest of the boys were crowding around, irresistibly attracted by the reek of blood and the sight of such an abundance of trophies. Hero worship and envy gleamed in their eyes. It was evident that a celebration was breeding if swatting flies had filled the crew with a yearn for something more stimulating. Such as, for instance, a feast in which the brains from a score of heads would provide the sauce.⁶⁸

Leona's description of the scene is uncharacteristically flat, probably because Charles protects her 'from the seamy side of head hunter land'.⁶⁹ Further on in the thick of the plot another head hunt takes place, and this time the whole crew and all the young men of the Dogoel village in which they are staying leave for a hunt. Charles is leading the expedition. Or at least this is what he tells Leona, for once removed from the thick of things and kept in a hut and told never to leave it. Charles makes sure to scare Leona into obedience. At the same time his boastful speeches serve to build up suspense for the reader and to administer pieces of anthropological knowledge:

No other way out. Those boys are men-hungry. They are going on a head hunt come hell or high water. Anything I could say I would just add our heads to the pile ... We've got to initiate the eligible bachelors into the Imo so they can take part in the karawarie or head hunt. Otherwise they can't claim their brides when they get back.⁷⁰

Thus scared Leona spends, as she is told, three days inside her tent, while Charles is out head hunting, only to discover when finally she ventures out that the village is simply going about its daily business. Finally Charles and the men come back, and Charles reveals that he has been made chief. Three days and nights of celebrations follow, but Leona of course does not participate. All her descriptions here are suddenly vague and Charles is made the undisputable king of the hunt. I would like to argue that these moments correspond to plot requirement, are located in the adventure genre and are the most intensely fictionalised of the tale.

As Obeyesekere has demonstrated, descriptions of cannibalism are often constructed along lines of verisimilitude, mixing pieces of anthropological truth, such as human sacrifices or the ritual taking of heads, with 'the fantasy found the

world over that the alien, the demon, the “other” is going to eat us’.⁷¹ Constructing scenes of cannibalism as an eyewitness account is a further strategy Obeyesekere identifies for lending an aura of truth to the narration of events. In his study of Dillon’s Fijian cannibal adventures, for example, Obeyesekere follows the changes in the linguistic register of the account to stress the moments where ‘truth’ becomes verisimilitude. But where Dillon seems to narrate the fictionalised parts with what Obeyesekere might call ‘seeming exactitude, in *Cannibals and Orchids* the narrator describes people, flora and fauna with a verbose profusion of details, to become suddenly abstract when it comes to the return of the head hunters scenes.⁷² The only thing we are told is that the Kyas-Kyas have gone primitive and on a head-hunting rampage, the spoils of which are described merely as ‘a pile of heads’.⁷³ Leona is here lost for words. In other chapters she spends a good page describing close ups of a tree or a flower, but in this chapter she zooms out and removes herself from any closeness to her topic. The pile of heads remains quite simply a pile of heads without any further specification. In the narrative of the second head hunt and consequent feast she limits herself to note that: ‘The next three days and nights were on the grisly side. I stayed in the tent while the village went to hell’.⁷⁴ The vagueness of language and scarcity of descriptors clashes with Leona’s characteristically elaborate observations and interrupts the flow of her narrative, leaving the reader wondering if Leona had witnessed the scene, if she was reporting a story, if the sight was too gruesome even for her prose or if she is tapping into the fantasy of the head-hunting other.

Although cannibalism was invented as narrative of the self, as Obeyesekere points out, one can never describe cannibalistic practices.⁷⁵ Rather, the cannibal trope illustrates the ‘cannibalistic complex’, the European and here American obsession born out of colonial ideologies that require as their basis the fantasy of the other as head hunter and cannibal.⁷⁶ Ironically, in *Cannibals and Orchids* cannibalism does not take place. It remains an organising theme to tell the story of the author’s progressive loss of senses and increasing sense of displacement in the face of otherness. Embodied in the sensory thickness of the prose and mirrored in the semantic density of the jungle, cannibalism is present in its absence through the book as the rhetorical trope to push Leona’s boat up the river of her narrative.

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—NOTES

- ¹ I am using Papua New Guinea and Dutch New Guinea throughout the article. Leona Miller uses Papua New Guinea interchangeably with Dutch East Indies, Dutch New Guinea and New Guinea.
- ² Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989 (1960).
- ³ Gavin Souter, *New Guinea: The Last Unknown*, Taplinger Publishing, New York, 1963, pp. 8–15.
- ⁴ Gananath Obeyesekere, “‘British Cannibals’: Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer”, *Critical Inquiry*, 18, Summer 1992, p. 646.
- ⁵ Leona Miller, *Cannibals and Orchids*, New York, Sheridan House, 1941.
- ⁶ See W.J. Aherne, ‘Among the Head Hunters of New Guinea’, *Mid Pacific Magazine*, July 1918, pp. 87–91; W.F. Alder, *The Isle of Vanishing Men: A Narrative of Adventure in Cannibal-land*, London, Leonard Parsons, 1922; Wilfred Beaver, *Unexplored New Guinea: A Record of the Travels Adventures and Experiences of a Resident Magistrate amongst the Head Hunting Savages and Cannibals of the Unexplored Interior of New Guinea*, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1920; Doris R. Booth, *Mountains, Gold and Cannibals*, Cornstalk, Sydney, 1929; Alfred Cort Haddon, *Head-hunters Black, White and Brown*, Methuen, London, 1901; Albert S. Meek, *Naturalist in Cannibal Land*, T.F. Unwin, London, 1913; Caroline Mytinger, *New Guinea Head-Hunt*, Macmillan, New York, 1946; Charles ‘Cannibal’ Miller, *Cannibal Caravan*, Lee Furman Inc Publishers, New York, 1939.
- ⁷ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 77.
- ⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller. Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov’, *Illuminations*, London, Fontana Press 1992 (1936), p. 87.
- ⁹ Gananath Obeyesekere, ‘Narratives of the Self: Chevalier Peter Dillon’s Fijian Cannibal Adventures’, in Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn (eds), *Body Trade, Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Routledge, New York and Pluto Press, Sydney, 2001, pp. 69–111.
- ¹⁰ Obeyesekere, ‘Narratives of the Self’, p. 70.
- ¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, ‘From the Victorian Nyanza to the Sheraton San Salvador’, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, pp. 204–5.
- ¹² Pratt, p. 215.
- ¹³ Pratt, p. 204.
- ¹⁴ David Howes, *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*, Berg, New York, 2005, p. 9.
- ¹⁵ L. Miller, 1941.
- ¹⁶ Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, pp. 7–8.
- ¹⁷ C. Miller, 1939, n.p.
- ¹⁸ L. Miller, 1941.

- ¹⁹ Mariana Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals Modern Minds*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 42.
- ²⁰ L. Miller, p. 164.
- ²¹ L. Miller, p. 24.
- ²² L. Miller, pp. 24–5.
- ²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. 84.
- ²⁴ Bakhtin, p. 250.
- ²⁵ Torgovnick, p. 22 and L. Miller, pp. 229–52.
- ²⁶ L. Miller, p. 15.
- ²⁷ L. Miller, p. 15.
- ²⁸ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 40.
- ²⁹ L. Miller, pp. 139–40.
- ³⁰ L. Miller, p. 301.
- ³¹ McClintock, p. 40.
- ³² L. Miller, p. 46.
- ³³ Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, p. 105.
- ³⁴ Taussig, p. 105.
- ³⁵ L. Miller, pp. 40–1.
- ³⁶ L. Miller, p. 44.
- ³⁷ Taussig, p. 77.
- ³⁸ Taussig, p. 75.
- ³⁹ Pratt, p. 204.
- ⁴⁰ L. Miller, p. 102.
- ⁴¹ L. Miller, pp. 297–308.
- ⁴² L. Miller, p. 44.
- ⁴³ L. Miller, p. 61.
- ⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 4.
- ⁴⁵ Kristeva, pp. 4, 9.
- ⁴⁶ Kristeva, pp. 2, 12.
- ⁴⁷ L. Miller, p. 55.
- ⁴⁸ L. Miller, p. 105.
- ⁴⁹ L. Miller, pp. 269–71.
- ⁵⁰ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1999, p. 52.

- ⁵¹ L. Miller, pp. 185–6.
- ⁵² Russell, p. 99.
- ⁵³ L. Miller, p. 184.
- ⁵⁴ L. Miller, pp. 186–9.
- ⁵⁵ L. Miller, p.190.
- ⁵⁶ Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn, *Body Trade, Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Routledge, New York and Pluto Press, Sydney, 2001, p. xiii.
- ⁵⁷ McClintock, p. 72.
- ⁵⁸ See Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1982, 2nd ed. 1990; 'Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea', in Steven Feld and Keith Basso, *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 1996, pp. 91–135; 'Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments', in David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2005, pp. 179–91 and David Howes, 'Melanesian Sensory Formations', in David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2003, pp. 59–174.
- ⁵⁹ L. Miller, pp. 48–9.
- ⁶⁰ L. Miller, pp. 26–7.
- ⁶¹ L. Miller, pp. 226–7.
- ⁶² L. Miller, p. 55.
- ⁶³ L. Miller, pp. 154–6.
- ⁶⁴ L. Miller, p. 59–60.
- ⁶⁵ Kristeva, p. 2.
- ⁶⁶ L. Miller, pp. 151–2.
- ⁶⁷ L. Miller, pp. 152, 295.
- ⁶⁸ L. Miller, p. 172.
- ⁶⁹ L. Miller, p. 172.
- ⁷⁰ L. Miller, p. 256.
- ⁷¹ Obeyesekere, 'Narratives of the Self', pp. 69–70.
- ⁷² Obeyesekere, 'Narratives of the Self', p. 76.
- ⁷³ L. Miller, p. 173.
- ⁷⁴ L. Miller, 277.
- ⁷⁵ Obeyesekere, 'Narratives of the Self', p. 69.
- ⁷⁶ See for instance Robert Dixon, 'Cannibalising Indigenous Texts: Headhunting and Fantasy in Ion L. Idriess's Coral Seas Adventures', in Barbara Creed and Hoorn Jeanette (eds), *Body Trade, Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Routledge, New York and Pluto Press, Sydney, pp. 112–25.