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“Divine Hunger”: Contextualizing Cannibalism in Slavenka Drakulić’s *The Taste of a Man*

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“Divine Hunger”:
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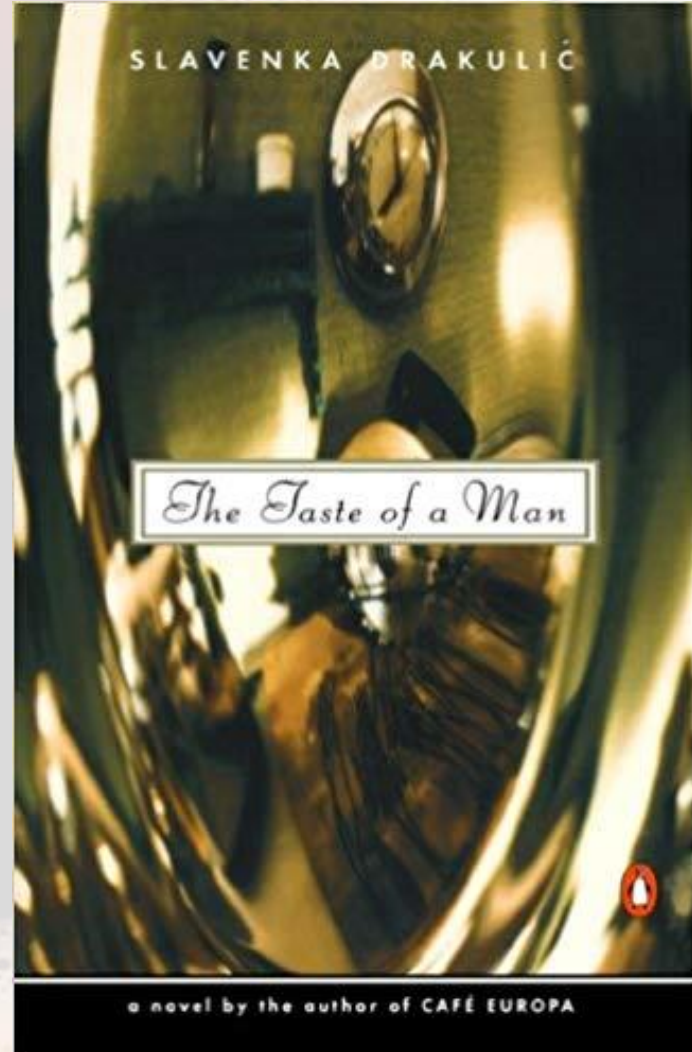
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Homage and thanks

- 1997 Central European University course on performance of gender identity in the context of war
- UHON 390 “Love Stinks!”
- Thanks to my “Love Stinks!” students



Bożanska glad/The Taste of a Man (1995)

- Tereza, a Polish graduate student in English and a poet, and José, a Brazilian anthropologist, have a brief, passionate love affair while both are on research fellowships in New York City.
- José is researching cannibalism and the Catholic Church.
- Eating and sex are Tereza and José's primary occupations during their three months together.
- Four days before returning to Poland, Tereza kills, dismembers, and eats José.

Božanska glad/The Taste of a Man (1995)

- The first-person narration begins with Tereza cleaning her Greenwich Village apartment.
- Gradually the reader realizes she has killed and eaten her lover.
- The plot continually circles back through Tereza's earlier life, the relationship, murder, dismemberment, eating, and disposal of the corpse as she cleans.
- The story ends with her disposing of José's decomposing head at Kennedy Airport as she heads back to Poland.

Tereza as cannibal

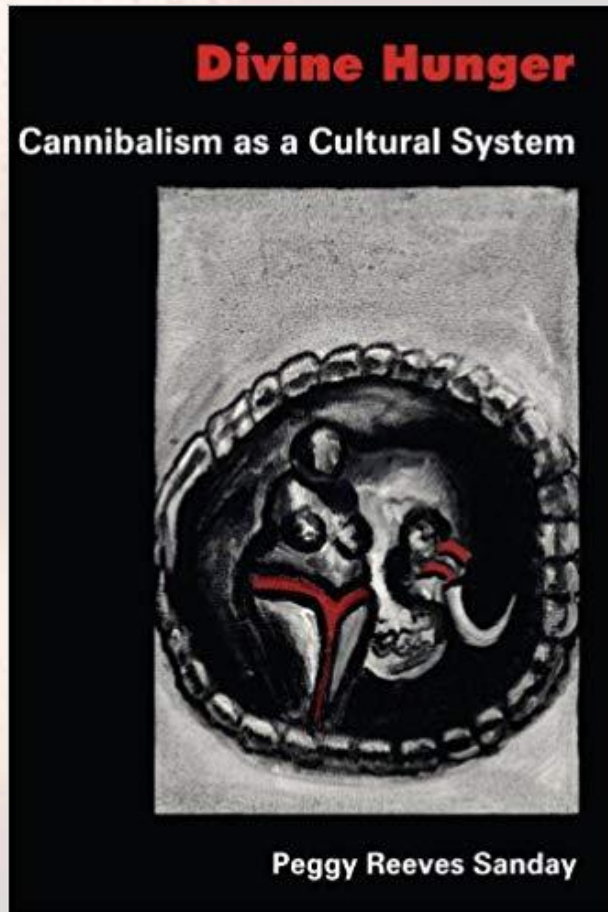
Categories of cannibalism

- Exocannibalism
 - Eating outsiders
 - Gaining control over the other/situation/fear
- Endocannibalism
 - Eating group members
 - Binding the living to the dead regenerative,
- Survival cannibalism

Why does she do it? Is she...?

- evil
- insane
- exercising agency
- narcissistic or selfish
- reversing years of sexual abuse
- enacting European hegemony over José's colonized body
- engaging in Darwinian survival of the fittest

Tereza and *Divine Hunger*



Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Social System*

- Cannibalism and ontology
 - Why do some cultures develop systems of thought in which the eating of flesh is important, while others do not?
 - Cultures that engage in cannibalism share a **physical, body-oriented view of the origins of existence**. The **vital essences of life and social renewal** are symbolized by **bodily fluids, food and eating**.

Tereza's ontology: Why has she become a cannibal?

Autoethnography: The “why” of Tereza

- Seeks to **describe and systematically analyze personal experience** in order to understand **cultural experience**.
- Uses the practices of **autobiography** and **ethnography**.
- Recognizes that **stories are complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena** that teach morals and ethics, introduce unique ways of thinking and feeling, and **help people make sense of themselves and others**.
- Focuses on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research **grounded in subjective, personal experience** that **sensitize** readers to **issues of identity, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation** that deepen our capacity to **empathize with people who are different from us.**”

Autoethnography: The “why” of Tereza

Autoethnography focuses on **epiphanies or critical events** that stem from, or are made possible by, **being part of a culture** and/or by **possessing a particular cultural identity**.

“What do people think of when they talk about their lives?...My life crumbles into a series of pictures, unconnected scenes which come to mind only occasionally and at random. **But there are key events**, the acts of chance or fate, which later enable me to construct a logical whole of my life. **One such moment was meeting José. The other was my decision to see our love through to the very end**” (105).

Because Tereza is a humanities scholar, her epiphanies involve both critical events and critical texts.

Critical incidents: Tereza's untold stories

- Tereza is taught to **“pray and play the piano”** to please her parents.
- Her mother dominates the family via **Catholicism, food, and order** until her death of cancer.
- Her father brings **predatory male students** into her home.
- She experiences the first episode of **serial sexual abuse, contextualized by eating**, while on a family vacation at age 6.
- She endures **physical and sexual abuse by male friends/lovers** during childhood and adolescence.
- She becomes fascinated with **blood and butchery** at a pig slaughter in rural Poland.
- Tereza tries to make sense of her experiences.
 - She associates **sex, eating, and death**.
 - Her **Catholic context** reinforces the relationship between **eating and sacramentalism**.
 - The **Central European culture of silence** ensures that her stories remain untold.

“Increasingly, I reverted to the past. It was like being attacked by it. Forgotten images would suddenly flash through my mind, inundating me with memories, like lava, as if every step in executing the plan was connected to some scene from my childhood or suppressed emotion” (162).

Critical texts: Told stories

- Clarice Lispector, *An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Pleasures*
- Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger: Cannibalism as a Cultural System*
- George Herbert, "Love III"
- Pedro Algorte's letter
- Piers Paul Read, *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*
- José's research notes on cannibalism and the Catholic Church

These texts support her view that cannibalism is a **sacramental expression of love and unification.**

Love (III)

George Herbert, 1593 - 1633

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
Love said, "You shall be he."

"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.

Linguistic and social isolation

- The often-noted **inadequacy of language** is compounded by Tereza and José's not having a common language.
- They use their **bodies and food** to communicate.
- Tereza's interpretation of her situation occurs in **linguistic and social isolation**, with only her understanding of her ontology and culture as resources.
- Tereza **interprets José's behavior** in support of her desires.
- Tereza lacks the **"stock of knowledge"** that could correct/counteract her interpretation and actions.

"Fate did exist, but it was not outside us. Fate, my fate, lay in my character, in certain unchangeable traits of my personality. The same was true of José...In the final analysis, I was really just a kind of facilitator" (166).

Tereza's behavior is contextually logical.

- Recognizing Tereza's narrative as autoethnography gets at the **"why"** of her cannibalism.
- Examining Tereza's conduct through a cultural lens enables readers to comprehend her seemingly deviant behavior as both **culturally appropriate and meaningful**, given her **understanding of her experiences, context, and cultural identity**.
- Why is such an analysis helpful?
 - **Culture is rich, multifaceted, and multilayered**, with space for the interplay of context, sense making, and action for individuals and groups.
 - A cultural lens allows us to **better understand** individuals in terms of **their context, understandings, and choices**.
 - Our understanding of Tereza's situation arises **out of her story** rather than being **imposed from outside** her experience and context.
 - Looking through a complex cultural lens allows us to **honor people's uniqueness** and their **personal stories**.
 - A cultural lens exposes us to forms of representation that **deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us**.