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Criticism

Volume 63
Issue 1 *The Future(s) of Early Modern Women Writers (Double Issue)*

Article 17

2021

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Recommended Citation

Tigner, Amy L. (2021) "Sugar, Spice, and Cannibalism," *Criticism*: Vol. 63 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol63/iss1/17

SUGAR, SPICE, AND CANNIBALISM
Amy L. Tigner

A review of *Tasting Difference: Food, Race, and Cultural Encounters in Early Modern Literature* by Gitanjali G. Shahani. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. 222. $39.95 cloth.

Bringing a fresh perspective to the fields of early modern literature and of food studies, Gitanjali G. Shahani's *Tasting Difference: Food, Race, and Cultural Encounters in Early Modern Literature* serves up a complex narrative about the consumption of cultural and racial otherness through the acquisition of global foods. Perhaps one of the most revelatory points that Shahani emphasizes is that the vast majority of early modern English (and European) overseas voyages and imperial ventures were undertaken in the distinct pursuit of foreign foodstuffs, especially spices, sugar, chocolate, and coffee. Looking at travel narratives, literary representations, household manuals, ballads, and broadsides, Shahani shows how the acquisition and eating of foreign foods constitutes the consumption of the racialized other, both metaphorically and in some cases literally. Beginning from the early modern period, Shahani lays bare how these patterns, desires, and landscapes of culinary contact zones continue to the present. In essence, how and what we eat has a long and often unconscious history that stems from an ugly colonial past and fear of the other that too frequently persist into the present.

While previous colonial and postcolonial scholarship has focused on what the eye sees, that is, the gaze, Shahani's book innovatively turns to the mouth, that is, what we taste. After all, we all experience

Criticism Winter-Spring 2021, Vol. 63, Nos. 1-2, pp. 181–184. ISSN 0011-1589.
doi: 10.13110/criticism.63.1-2.0181
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the world most directly through the mouth, and Shahani contends that the alimentary contact with worlds previously unknown was highly visceral and therefore what drove desire for long distance travel, trade, and eventual plantation. Throughout the book, Shahani reveals the myriad ways in which English and European contact, both at home and abroad, was a sensory experience and constituted the incorporation of otherness. The book proceeds first through specific commodities: spices, sugar, and coffee make up the subjects of the first three chapters. Then the book moves to the more conceptual, upping the stakes to talk about what Shahani calls "bizarre foods," and finally ending with a chapter on cannibalism.

Undoubtedly, the oldest European trade in foreign foodstuffs is spices from the East, what Shahani calls (using Salman Rushdie's term), "the hot stuff": peppercorns, along with nutmeg, mace, and cloves. The narrative of the spice trade is likely one with which most readers are somewhat familiar, but Shahani turns our attention to the English response, that of fear and desire, to the infiltration of these exotic commodities into native foods and medicines. Considering dramatic texts by Middleton and Shakespeare alongside household manuals such as culinary and medicinal recipe books, Shahani deftly unveils how English appetites for and anxieties about spices came to emblematize racialized foreign bodies. Shahani explicates how women in the domestic space of the kitchen are the drivers of the culinary trade, naturalizing foreign spices into English dishes.

Turning to sugar, Shahani begins this chapter with an adroit reading of Kara Walker's sculptural installation, "A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby," whose centerpiece is a sphynx-like depiction of a naked African woman made entirely of sugar and displayed in Brooklyn's abandoned Domino Sugar factory in 2014. Shahani's critique of this artwork and the viewers alike reminds us that that long history of enslavement for sweetness continues to reverberate in contemporary race relations. Shahani exposes how sugar and sweetness came to pervade both England's linguistic and culinary landscapes as the seventeenth century progressed. Such sweetness was literally soaked in blood; examining both fictionalized and historical accounts of Caribbean sugar plantations, Shahani shows how these narratives equate the eating of sugar with the cannibalistic act of consuming of the bodies of slaves.

In her chapter on coffee, Shahani begins by listing the multiple contemporary foodstuffs that are named "Othello": Othello teas, Othello coffees, Othello cakes, Othello chocolates. Then she elucidates why we

still find Othello such a tasty treat. She writes, "To consume Othello tea or coffee or chocolate is to consume the entire discourse of his exotic role in the play—his thrilling traveler's tales, his dangerous yet alluring blackness, his tragic grandeur—all in one delectable serving" (81). Moving to Shakespeare's play and the history of coffee's introduction into England, she thus embarks on a fascinating discussion that pairs the Othello plot and the coffee plot, both of which invoked both a gustatory attraction to exoticism and a sensory repulsion from racial and religious contamination.

Marking a turn from foreign commodities in the English home to taste experiences in the unknown world, Shahani discusses the phenomenon of "bizarre foods" in the fourth chapter. Here, she analyzes the negative taste experiences, a kind of cultural indigestion, that the early modern English record in their travel narratives. Her interest, she tells us, is "the dialectic of disgust and desire as it unfolds in the tension between disgust and wonder" in foreign settings (114). Disgust most readily is registered in the mouth, and food, as an experiential marker of sameness and difference becomes the nadir of that disgust. Shahani's exploration into the aesthetic of the culinary grotesque is both fascinating and repulsive, as the modern reader experiences the same disgust as the historical narrator.

The book up to this point examines the various ways in which early moderns (and perhaps we, their modern counterparts) consume the racialized other through the eating of exotic foodstuffs. Though this consumption of otherness is metaphorical, Shahani shows that the human cost (such as the consumed bodies of slaves in the sugar plantations) is nonetheless unmistakable and considerable. Shahani's final chapter, however, shifts spectacularly to the literal consumption of others: cannibalism. Shahani unspools how historical tales of "the Starving Time" at Jamestown and fictional imaginings of shipwreck and starvation in early modern plays depict the desperate, though also incredulous, move of eating of human flesh. These narratives in turn signify the cannibalism of English colonialism more broadly. My only slight criticism of this generally excellent book is a wish for a closer consideration in this chapter of the gender issues involved in the acts of cannibalism, as most often it is young women in the narratives who become the victims of anthropophagy. With that exception, Shahani provides an incredibly insightful colonial reading of these victims and their meaning, ending the book on a high note. Overall, Shahani's book is brilliant and should be considered a must-read for early modern and food scholars, or really anyone interested in a historical understanding of global foods.

Professor of English at the University of Texas, Arlington, Amy L. Tigner has most recently written with Allison Carruth Literature and Food Studies *(Routledge, 2018) and co-edited with David B. Goldstein* Culinary Shakespeare *(Duquesne University Press, 2017).*