ABSTRACT

Consumers of popular culture have a taste for cannibalism. American writers have produced stories about cannibalism for hundreds of years, but only within the last generation, I argue, have cannibal narratives — many of which are created by women — adopted stronger themes of gender and sexuality.

This thesis focuses on the female cannibal as a figure whose monstrosity is tied to women's sexuality. The first half of my project explores works that employ cannibalistic horrors to critique the racialized, gendered, and sexualized configurations of human consumption under capitalism, such as Chelsea G. Summers' novel *A Certain Hunger* (2020), Mimi Cave's film *Fresh* (2022), Monika Kim's novel *The Eyes Are the Best Part* (2024), and Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017). The second half of my project explores works in which cannibalism allegorizes the all-consuming nature of lesbian desire, awakening, and existence in a heteronormative world, such as Karyn Kusama's film *Jennifer's Body* (2009), Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson's streaming series *Yellowjackets* (2021–), and Luca Guadagnino's film *Bones and All* (2022). By analyzing these feminist and queer cannibal narratives, I show how cannibalism functions as both a form of resistance and a model of oppression in twenty-first century American literature, film, and television.

All-Consuming Desires:

Feminist and Queer Usages of Cannibalism in Twenty-First Century Texts

Emily Tarinelli

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INTRODUCTION

"I Ate His Liver with Some Fava Beans and a Nice Chianti": Cannibalism in American Popular Culture

American popular culture has long had a taste for cannibalism. In her 2012 book *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, Jennifer Brown writes that between the 1970s and mid-2000s, American and European popular culture "made numerous references to cannibalism" across music, film, literature, and television (1). The most noteworthy of these works is Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991),[1] which follows young FBI student Clarice Starling as she enlists the help of the incarcerated Dr. Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter to locate the notorious serial killer known as "Buffalo Bill." Despite only having sixteen minutes of screen time, Hannibal the Cannibal continues to dominate American minds today. Lecter's character inspired several spin-offs in his name, including the critically acclaimed NBC television series *Hannibal* (created by Bryan Fuller, 2013–2015) and a number of prequel and sequel films. He ranked number one in an American Film Institute survey from 2003 identifying the top fifty cinematic villains of all time; and Donald Trump repeatedly — and puzzlingly — praised "the late great Hannibal Lecter" throughout his 2024 presidential campaign. Delivered with

[1] Other prominent cannibal narratives from between 1970 and the mid 2000s include Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter novels — *Red Dragon, The Silence of the Lambs, Hannibal,* and *Hannibal Rising* — published between 1981 and 2006; Piers Paul Read's 1974 book *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors,* detailing the true story of the Uruguayan rugby team that crashed in the Andes mountains and resorted to eating their deceased to survive, and its corresponding 1993 film adaptation (dir. Frank Marshall); Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road,* presenting a father and a son who must survive a post-apocalyptic society without falling into the hands of cannibals, and its 2009 film adaptation (dir. John Hillcoat) starring Viggo Mortenson; and Bret Easton Ellis' 1991 book *American Psycho,* a dark comedy horror novel satirizing consumer culture with a protagonist who commits, among other crimes, acts of cannibalism, along with its 2000 film adaptation starring Christian Bale (dir. Mary Harron).

infamously eerie composure, the cannibal's most iconic quote — "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti" — is, according to *The Independent,* "one of the most quoted lines in film history." The persistence of Lecter shows how, in Brown's words, "cannibalism in our culture is not simply indicative of our obsession with it, but also highlights the sheer pleasure we take in it, hearing about it, contemplating it, fantasizing about it" (2).

Consumers of American popular culture continue to gorge on cannibal narratives, which have persisted in the years since the 2000s (where Brown's study ends) and even spiked in the last five. In this thesis, I argue that beginning in 2009 with the release of *Jennifer's Body* (dir. Karyn Kusama), cannibal narratives began to adopt stronger themes of gender and sexuality, particularly as it relates to womanhood and queerness — and, often, queer womanhood. Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* (2013–2015) has undoubtedly received the most academic treatment, with scholars such as Leila Taylor, Jacquelin Elliot, MaryKate Messimer, Jeff Casey, Sean Donovan, and others analyzing themes on *Hannibal's* cannibalism, such as its aesthetic purpose, its role as a site of homoerotic friendship, and its queer subversion of detective fiction. There also exists some scholarship surrounding *Jennifer's Body,* though it is nowhere near as much as *Hannibal.*[2] There is little scholarship about the more recent works that came out during and after 2020 — such as Chelsea G. Summers' novel *A Certain Hunger* (2020), Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson's television series *Yellowjackets* (2021–), or Mimi Cave's film *Fresh* (2022), among others — although they prompted valuable journalistic commentary.[3] The prominence of feminist and

[2] Scholars such as Mairéad Casey, Alba Alonso Palombi, and Victoria Santamaría Ibor primarily interrogate the extent to which the film can be considered a feminist subversion of heteropatriarchy given that, in some authors' views, it relies on parodying misogynistic tropes.

[3] Some of these writers include Tyler Foggatt ("'Yellowjackets, and the Problem of Women Eating One Another" in *The New Yorker*), Alex Beggs ("A Taste for Cannibalism?" in *The New York Times*), Tejal Rao ("From 'The Menu' to 'Fresh,' Movies Are Exploring the Horrors of Rich-People Food" in *The New York Times*), and James Hibberd ("Why Cannibalism Is Suddenly Trendy on Screen" in *The Hollywood Reporter*), as well as authors themselves, such as Summers ("The Defining Cultural Trope of 2022? Cannibalism" in *Vogue*) and Carmen Maria Machado ("Hollywood's Gruesome, Lurid Obsession with People Eating People" in *Bon Appetit*).

queer cannibal narratives in popular culture[4] warrants a scholarly study of this contemporary cultural appetite in the academic sphere — a study that this project provides.

The United States is not the only country to witness a rise in feminist and queer cannibal narratives. The French horror film *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016) follows a sheltered young woman's initiation into veterinary school, where she develops cannibalistic cravings while embracing her sexuality for the first time. Argentine author Agustina Bazterrica's literary horror novel *Tender Is the Flesh,* originally published in Spanish in 2017 and translated into English in 2020, presents a post-apocalyptic society in which people breed humans as animals for slaughter in meat processing plants. British writer Lucy Rose's gothic, fantastical, queer coming-of-age novel *The Lamb,* published in February 2025, follows an abusive mother and her daughter who feast on weary travelers that stumble upon their cottage in the woods. These works show that the pop cultural phenomenon of feminist and queer cannibal narratives spans nations.

In this project, I will focus on American cannibal narratives across literature, film, and television produced between 2009 and 2024, and argue that they use cannibalism to explore women's sexuality under a consumptive, metaphorically cannibalistic American culture of human exploitation: one that is rooted in white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. In the sections of this introduction that follow, I will first present definitions, contexts, and histories surrounding cannibalism. Second, I will discuss literary and film scholarship about cannibalism, focusing on the scholarship of Maggie Kilgour and her theoretical framework about the cannibalistic implications of sexuality. Third, I will examine how Barbara Creed's model of the "monstrous-feminine," as well as the figure of the lesbian vampire, illuminate my understanding

[4] The trope also extends to music: Nelly Furtado's "Maneater" (2006), Kesha's "Cannibal" (2010), chloe moriondo's "I Eat Boys" (2021), Rezz and Dove Cameron's "Taste of You" (2021), Dove Cameron's "Breakfast" (2022), and Billie Eilish's "LUNCH" (2024) all contain imagery of women eating men — and in Eilish's case, women — as a form of sexual empowerment.

of cannibalism and female sexuality in media today. Fourth, I outline my chapters. Fifth, I discuss the limitations of this project.

What Is Cannibalism?
Cannibalism, Colonialism, and Consumption

The term "cannibalism" is deceptively difficult to define. The Oxford English Dictionary defines cannibalism as "the practice of eating the flesh of one's own kind,"[5] but this definition raises a set of its own questions. What counts as "flesh"? What counts as "one's own kind"? In the context of human cannibalism, what counts as "human"? Are vampires and zombies cannibals, or are they just cannibal-adjacent? Does drinking blood count as cannibalism? What about breastfeeding? Does a mere bite constitute cannibalism, or is the aggressor required to swallow?

For the purposes of my study, I define cannibalism as "the practice of humans eating humans." In other words, cannibalism requires the consumption of solid human flesh by a human as opposed to a creature of folklore or fantasy. I define flesh as organs, not blood (but the organs may certainly be bloody). The flesh must not only be taken into the mouth, but removed from the body, chewed (or at least, the flesh must be chewable), and swallowed. Actions that approach cannibalism but do not quite reach it — such as taking flesh into the mouth without swallowing or removing it from the original body — I will grant as cannibalistic, but not full-fledged cannibalism.

Cannibalism, as both a term and as a concept, is rooted in colonial history. It is well documented by scholars[6] that the term "cannibal" entered Western lexicon when Columbus came to the Americas and, upon mishearing the name of the Indigenous Carib tribe, bastardized their

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[5] "Cannibalism, N." Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1324299621.

[6] Azariadis, Dhammi. "From Demonized Other to Idealized Other: Cannibalism in Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale.*" *The French Review,* vol. 94, no. 4, 2021, pp. 129–140; and Berglund, Jeff. *Cannibal Fictions: American Explorations of Colonialism, Race, Gender, and Sexuality.* The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

name to “Canib,” and eventually to *canibale.* During this period, white, European colonizers were simultaneously ascribing the label of “anthropophagy” — the term meaning “man-eating” at the time — to Indigenous tribes. By Othering Indigenous communities through accusations of anthropophagy, European colonizers sought to justify imperial expansion, Indigenous exploitation, and genocide. However, the vast majority of scholars agree with William Arens, who posits in his 1979 book *The Man-Eating Myth* that the allegations of anthropophagy among Indigenous populations were a racist lie used to sanction the West’s settler-colonial project. Most documentation of cannibalism, Arens argues, is prejudiced, unreliable hearsay from white colonizers rather than actual observation:

> Excluding survival conditions, I have been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society. Rumors, suspicions, fears and accusations abound, but no satisfactory first-hand accounts. (21)

As Arens shows, there is no evidence to support that anthropophagy was customary among Indigenous communities in the Americas. Regardless, the lie persisted. With the invention of the myth ascribing cannibalism to Indigeneity, the term *canibale* became synonymous with anthropophagy, making way for the word “cannibalism” to emerge in the English language (Berglund 3).

As scholars have shown, the cannibals involved in colonization were, in reality, the colonizers, not the colonized. As Dhammi Azariadis writes in her 2021 article “From Demonized Other to Idealized Other: Cannibalism in Maryse Condé’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale*”:

> In the literal sense, the colonized are identified as cannibals, and the colonizers use the trope of cannibalism to justify the violence they inflict on them. In its metaphorical sense, however, it is the colonizer who becomes the cannibal in his attempt to dehumanize the colonized. (132)

Indeed, many colonized peoples believed that white colonizers were cannibals themselves.[7] Unlike the false accusations made by European settlers, in some documented cases these fears became reality. As Vincent Woodard shows in *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture,* throughout the transatlantic slave trade, white enslavers literally and metaphorically cannibalized African American people:

> Within plantation culture, this culture of consumption took the form of whites literally flaying and smoking African American flesh and overt references in slave narratives to masters literally and metaphorically consuming their slaves. (12)

While in many instances, colonizers *literally* cannibalized the peoples they oppressed, scholars indicate they also occupied a position as *symbolic* cannibals. For instance, in *The Apocalypse of Settler-Colonialism,* Gerald Horne uses cannibalistic imagery to describe the enslavement of Black and Indigenous people during Europe's settler-colonial project in the Americas. Some of his phrases to describe colonizers include "the seemingly vast appetite overseas for the enslaved" (20) and the "voracious appetite for enslaved African labor" (24). While Horne's book is not about cannibalism, his use of cannibalistic language to describe the highly racialized, capitalistic, and exploitative process by which European colonizers turned humans into commodities exposes that colonialism is metaphorically cannibalistic. As a product of capitalism, it relies on the consumption of humans by humans in order to thrive.

I have now repeatedly highlighted the term "consumption" alongside cannibalism. Cannibalism, of course, is a form of consumption; in one sense of the word, "to consume" means, in my words, "to eat or ingest material into one's body as food." However, consumption also denotes the capitalistic process of turning goods, resources, and even people into

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[7] Vincent Woodard writes in his book *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture* that, during the transatlantic slave trade, "groups such as the Igbo, Bakongo, Fanti, and Guinea all thought of European interlopers as cannibals" (10), and Azariadis states that during the Middle Passage, many Africans believed their white enslavers were "fattening them up" to be eaten upon their arrival in the Americas (131).

commodities (objects that have use and are able to be sold). Both cannibalism and capitalism necessitate the consumption of humans by humans in order to exist. Yet, if the term "consumption" possesses two primary definitions, to which do I refer when I say "consume" throughout this project?

At times, I use the word "consume" to describe only the process of eating. At other times, I use it to describe only the capitalistic process by which humans are turned into commodities. Frequently, however, I use it to describe both processes simultaneously. In many of the works I study, the symbolic nature of cannibalism as a stand-in metaphor for capitalist processes necessitates my use of "consume" in both symbolic and literal terms. For instance, if I were to summarize *Fresh* (dir. Mimi Cave, 2022), a film I analyze in Chapter One, by saying, "Steve consumes women as a form of sexual domination," I mean that Steve *literally* consumes women — he cannibalizes them — *and* consumes them — in a more theoretical sense — as commodities which he then sells to an underground community of ultra-wealthy white men. In some instances, I specify which definition of "consume" I mean; in others, I specify that I mean both; but often, its double meanings are so tangled up in each other that I elect not to split them apart from each other, hoping to keep the fullness of its meaning intact. In these instances, I leave the significance of the term up to readers to digest.

Theorizing Cannibalism

Cannibalism is, at its core, a paradox. Symbolically, cannibalism is as much about constructing difference as it is about *de*constructing it. Throughout history, the ascription of the label of cannibal to historically marginalized groups has been used to uphold a strict division between a civilized Self ("us") and a savage Other ("them"). Yet, as much as the cannibal is Othered, dehumanized, and cast against the outskirts of "civilized" society, the cannibal is defined by their

humanity; the "Other" is, in actuality, the same as "us," and by extension, "we" are the same as "them." One cannot marginalize someone as a "cannibal" without being forced to acknowledge their shared humanity because the cannibal is, necessarily, human. As much as the cannibal constructs and enforces boundaries of difference, it paradoxically troubles and even collapses them.

Literary scholarship about cannibalism owes much to Maggie Kilgour, who pioneered this deconstructionist approach to cannibalism in her influential 1990 book *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation.* Kilgour examines cannibalism as it appears in Western literature spanning the centuries from Homer to Milton, arguing that the concept of incorporation (the act of taking an external body into the inside of another one, such as through eating), which is fundamental to cannibalism, "depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside" while simultaneously "dissolving the structure it appears to produce" (4). Kilgour attributes strategies of incorporation to systems of Othering such as imperialism, colonialism, racism, and misogyny, which all seek to eliminate the threat of the outside Other to the inside Self by subsuming the outside "into the center until there is no category of alien outsideness left to threaten the inner stability" (5). In other words, the civilized "us" must assimilate the savage "them" through incorporative means in order to ensure its dominance. These strategies, Kilgour argues, are metaphorically cannibalistic.

The publication of Kilgour's book sparked an array of academic interest in representations of cannibalism in literature, most of which concerns cannibalism's relevance to postcolonial themes. In addition to Jennifer Brown's *Cannibalism in Literature and Film,* Kristen Guest's academic anthology, *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity,* examines the alignment of cannibalism and colonialism in texts whose geographical

locations and time periods range from Ancient Greece to the Elizabethan period to the twentieth century. Contributors to Guest's anthology, including Minaz Jooma, Brian Greenspan, and Marlene Goldman, highlight "the various roles cannibalism plays in responding to 'colonizing' projects" and "emerging consumer culture" (6–7). Jooma, for instance, interprets cannibalism in Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe* to be "linked to the mercantilism that underpins the colonial enterprise." Jooma asserts that "in this context cannibalism focuses the relationship between consumption and power" and "represents the fear of being consumed" under an "emerging consumer culture" (Guest 7).[8]

In addition, Jeff Berglund's *Cannibal Fictions: American Explorations of Colonialism, Race, Gender, and Sexuality* analyzes nineteenth and twentieth century texts featuring cannibalism for their treatment and critiques of racial, gender, and sexual identity under the shadow of colonialism in the Americas. Woodard, in *The Delectable Negro,* analyzes the works of eighteenth and nineteenth century African American writers who documented real-life instances of racially motivated cannibalism, as well as used cannibalistic metaphors to describe the all-consuming, often homoerotic hunger of white people towards Black people, which was fueled by racism, capitalism, and imperialism. These scholars and others provide crucial insights into cannibalism in literature and film up until the mid-2000s.

Drawing on all of these scholars, I focus particularly on Kilgour, who makes sexuality central. While Kilgour has, like these scholars, discussed the relationship between cannibalism and colonialism, she has also theorized a direct relationship between cannibalism and sexuality. For Kilgour, the notion of incorporation that is fundamental to cannibalism is particularly

[8] In addition to Jooma, Greenspan and Goldman examine twentieth century texts that "self-consciously pair consumerism and cannibalism" (Guest 7). In Greenspan's analysis of the New Zealand novel *Symmes Hole* by Ian Wedde, Greenspan argues that Wedde's employment of the cannibal "challenge[s] a passive, 'easily devoured,' consumer culture" to expose the fears of the colonizer (Guest 7). Alternatively, Goldman draws upon the Wendigo, a cannibal figure in Cree and Ojibwe mythology, to "explore the relationship between colonial past and consumerized present" in Margaret Atwood's short story anthology *Wilderness Tips* (Guest 7).

resonant with notions of "sexual intercourse," which Kilgour asserts is "often represented as a kind of eating" (7). The act of eating itself, Kilgour posits, necessitates both desire for food and aggression in consuming it (biting, chewing, swallowing, digesting, excreting). These traits, desire and aggression, also constitute sex. Kilgour quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, who states in *Summa Theologica,* "Lovers would wish for two to become one; but since this would result in the physical destruction of one or both they seek the union that befits them" (qtd. in Kilgour 7). In Kilgour's reading of Aquinas, sexual incorporation "is a substitute for total identification that is the real object of desire" (Kilgour 7). In other words, sex is the closest two lovers can get to becoming totally incorporated into each other without cannibalizing and thus destroying each other. Therefore, sex eliminates the desire for cannibalism (or the desire to "become one" with the other) by virtue of symbolic sexual incorporation instead.

However, while Kilgour puts forth this notion, she also challenges it. Freud, she suggests, would claim that sexual intercourse would *not* satisfy the desire for two to become one. Instead, sex would disappoint lovers "in its failure to recapture the perfect symbiotic union of the oral stage" (7). The inability of sex to achieve a complete act of incorporation, Kilgour says, may intensify desire to the point where it stokes cannibalistic aggression instead:

> Kissing and eating are obviously both oral activities, and at an extreme level of intensity the erotic and aggressive sides of incorporation cannot be differentiated, so that it becomes difficult to tell at what point the desire for consummation turns into the desire for consumption. (8)

As I will show throughout this thesis, the blurring between the "desire for consummation" and the "desire for consumption" is a prominent theme in twenty-first century American cannibal narratives that is even acknowledged by critics outside the academic sphere. In a 2023 article published in *The New Yorker* analyzing cannibalism in recent film and television, Tyler Foggatt writes that most contemporary cannibal content is "chock-full of

moments when what looks like an erotic impulse turns out to be a cannibalistic one, along with scenes where they're essentially one and the same." Kilgour's notion about how the "desire for consummation" often blurs with the "desire for consumption" is essentially the same as Foggatt's notion that the "erotic impulse" eventually becomes a "cannibalistic one." This demonstrates that both academics and critics alike recognize an inherent tie between cannibalism and sexuality in American literature, film, and television.

In her *New Yorker* article, Foggatt highlights many works within the horror genre that position women's sexuality in relation to cannibalism. While, in these works, the linkage between women's sexuality and cannibalism serves to critique heteropatriarchal systems of oppression, it also infuses women's sexuality with a particular monstrosity. This raises questions about the representation of women as figures of terror throughout history. How does monstrosity manifest in the female cannibal?

The Cannibal and the Monstrous-Feminine

Women's sexuality has long been the subject of horror. As Barbara Creed writes in the introduction to *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1). Throughout history, much of what has made women shocking, terrifying, and horrific has been fears of female sexuality. As Creed highlights, "As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, [the monstrous-feminine] is defined in terms of her sexuality" (3). It is not just a woman's gender that makes her monstrous; it is her capacity for sexual desire and sexual power.

While Creed makes multiple references to cannibalism, she pays strikingly little attention to the female cannibal as a monstrous figure. Yet, at the same time, cannibalism seems to be

central to her arguments. Creed opens her book by discussing the *vagina dentata* or the "toothed vagina," a myth that "generally states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened — usually by a hero figure — before intercourse can take place" (2). The fear of the *vagina dentata,* Creed posits, stems from castration anxiety: it was feared that, through heterosexual intercourse, the woman would employ her toothed vagina to bite off the man's penis upon entering her. In my view, the cannibalistic implication of the *vagina dentata* is clear. The *vagina dentata* not only represents cultural fears around female sexuality, but attributes female sexuality to cannibalistic monstrosity.

While Creed does not explicitly state that the *vagina dentata* is cannibalistic, she references cannibalism immediately following her discussion of the *vagina dentata* in an analysis of gendered monsters. Creed posits that many monsters, like witches, are traditionally gendered as female. Some female monsters — such as the siren, who lures sailors to their death at sea through magical, seductive singing, and the vampire, who "sucks the blood of helpless, often willing, victims and transforms them into her own kind" — are highly sexualized figures (2). Crucially, these gendered monsters each consume aspects of the human body. The vampire drinks blood; the siren eats her victims; and the witch is, significantly, accused of "cannibalism." In Creed's words:

> During the European witch trials of recent history [the witch] was accused of the most hideous crimes: cannibalism, murder, castration of male victims, and the advent of natural disasters such as storms, fires and the plague. (2)

Creed mentions cannibalism a few more times throughout the book, but her glossing of cannibalism primarily relates to her arguments about monstrous motherhood rather than monstrous female sexuality. The one time Creed mentions cannibalism in relation to sexuality is

in her analysis of the lesbian vampire in *The Hunger* (dir. Tony Scott, 1983), where she briefly mentions cannibalism as being associated with vampirism (67). While I have established that I do not view the vampire as a cannibal, Creed's association of cannibalism with vampirism is nonetheless useful to my exploration of cannibalism and queer women's sexuality in horror.

Historical vampires and contemporary cannibals share many traits, such as their status as consumers of humans and figures of wealth.[9] However, the similarity that most pertains to my analyses is their shared lesbian monstrosity. Of course, not all cannibals in modern American media are queer women, but many of them are: works such as *Jennifer's Body, Yellowjackets,* and *Bones and All* all contain queer, female cannibals. While there is very little academic writing on queer, female cannibals,[10] many scholars — Creed included — have analyzed queer, female vampires.[11] Given the immense prominence of the lesbian vampire figure in both Western horror texts and academic circles, I suggest that the queer, female cannibal has the greatest affinity with

[9] Like the cannibal, the vampire's monstrosity stems from, in large part, its status as a consuming monster. In addition, the vampire is often an aristocratic figure of wealth, decadence, and sophistication, like Count Dracula of Bram Stoker's 1897 gothic horror novel *Dracula* or, more recently, Count Orlok of Robert Eggers' 2024 gothic horror film *Nosferatu*, a remake of the silent German expressionist horror film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1922). Many modern cannibals, such as Hannibal Lecter in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* (2013–2015) and Dorothy Daniels in Chelsea G. Summers' *A Certain Hunger,* mirror the history of the vampire as an elite figure. Their status as cannibals is often associated with having refined, gastronomic tastes: Hannibal, with his iconic quote "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti," and Dorothy, a renowned food critic and writer who echoes him: "I cooked Giovanni's liver in the Tuscan way […], spread it on crostini, and relished it with a good Chianti and a kiss of irony" (Summers 81).

[10] In their article "Taboo Acts, Queer Allegories: Cannibalism, Incest, and Queerness as Transgression in Genre Film," Payton McCarty-Simas performs a queer analysis of the French film *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016) about its female protagonist. Scholars who analyze *Jennifer's Body,* including Mairéad Casey, Alba Alonso Palombi, and Victoria Santamaría Ibor, discuss the queer relationship between Jennifer and Needy but do not connect it to Jennifer's cannibalism. Louise Flockhart glazes over the potential for a lesbian relationship in the South Korean film *301, 302* (dir. Park Chul-soo, 1995).

[11] Some of these scholars include Paulina Palmer, who examines the lesbian vampire in J. Sheridan le Fanu's 1872 novel *Carmilla* and in Jewelle Gomez's 1992 novel *The Gilda Stories*; Gina Wisker, who examines lesbian vampires across a variety of works, including Pam Keesey's 1993 collection of short stories *Daughters of Darkness,* Katherine Forrest's 2013 short story "O Captain, My Captain"; and Barbara Creed, who examines the lesbian vampire in the 1970 film *The Vampire Lovers* (dir. Roy Ward Baker), which was adapted from *Carmilla,* and the 1983 film *The Hunger* (dir. Tony Scott).

the lesbian vampire, whose monstrosity — like the cannibal — stems from its status as a consuming monster.

The most notable lesbian vampire is Carmilla, the alluring vampire from J. Sheridan le Fanu's 1872 gothic horror novel *Carmilla,* who charms and seduces Laura, a nineteen-year-old woman, while consuming her blood in her sleep.[12] The titular character is hardly lesbian-*coded*; the language she uses to express her desire for Laura is far too explicit to be rendered as ambiguous as "code." Carmilla consistently uses incorporative language to express her affections to Laura, which suggests that Carmilla desires to completely incorporate her into herself. "You and I are one forever," Carmilla tells Laura in one instance (37).[13] Carmilla's desire for incorporation with Laura shifts from the symbolic to the literal when she begins feeding on Laura's blood, showing that Carmilla uses methods of consumption (drinking blood) to enact this desire. As I will show in the chapters that follow, many twenty-first century cannibal narratives feature notions of romantic and erotic incorporation similar to *Carmilla*.

While Creed analyzes vampires — along with werewolves, gorgons, zombies, sirens, and other consuming creatures — in relation to the monstrous-feminine, the absence of the cannibal in her analysis is glaring. With the recent surge in feminist and queer cannibal media, it is crucial to understand the ties between cannibalism and women's sexuality; only then can we understand the relationship between women and horror today.

Outline of Chapters

My project focuses on the female cannibal as a figure whose monstrosity is tied to women's sexuality. My scope is limited to feminist and queer usages of cannibalism in American

[12] The cultural impact of *Carmilla* is undeniable. *Carmilla* went on to inspire Stoker's *Dracula,* along with an array of more recent remakes and reimaginings like *The Vampire Lovers, The Hunger,* the 2024 novel *An Education in Malice* by S.T. Gibson, and the 2024 novel *Hungerstone* by Kat Dunn, among many others.

[13] If Carmilla's sentiment is not explicitly romantic enough, her declaration of love to Laura certainly is: she whispers to her in one scene, "I have been in love with no one, and never shall … unless it should be with you" (54).

literature, film, and television from 2009 to 2024. I approach this subject from two distinct yet intersecting angles. First, Chapters One and Two analyze feminist cannibal narratives, in which instances of cannibalism across gender boundaries — such as men eating women or women eating men — reflect, critique, and subvert a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and capitalist sexual economy that empowers white men to literally and figuratively consume women as a form of sexual domination. Second, Chapters Three and Four analyze queer, female cannibal narratives, in which female characters' cannibalism functions as a metaphor for their all-consuming queer desires and examines the horrors of queer, female existence in a heteropatriarchal world.

In Chapter One, I open my project with an analysis of films that reflect cannibalistic systems of consumption as they exist in society today. My analysis centers on Mimi Cave's *Fresh* (2022), a film in which rich, white men abduct, dismember, sell, and cannibalize women, and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), a film that does not feature literal cannibalism but rather showcases what I argue to be metaphorical cannibalism in its story about a young, Black man who is abducted by his white girlfriend and her family in order to host the brain of a white person in his body.[14] I employ feminist theory and Black feminist theory to examine how the films' literal and metaphorical cannibalism builds upon complex histories of racialized and gendered consumption and human exploitation. *Fresh* and *Get Out's* real and figurative cannibalism literalize the ways in which women and Black people, respectively, have been and continue to be consumed by the white oppressor.

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[14] As I will discuss in the "Limitations" section of this introduction, there are virtually no mainstream Black cannibal narratives in which cannibalism is at the heart of the story. I chose to include *Get Out* in this project because it is a well-known Black horror film that addresses white supremacist, capitalist consumption across racial boundaries through a surgical scheme that I argue to be *figurative* cannibalism. While *Get Out's* figurative cannibalism sets it apart from the other works I study — where literal cannibalism is at the forefront of the narrative — to not include a well-known Black horror narrative in this project would be an incomplete depiction of the American systems of exploitative consumption I seek to analyze through literature, film, and television.

While both of these films present configurations of consumption as they exist in the real world, other contemporary works subvert this narrative by flipping the position of who is "cannibal" and who is "cannibalized." In Chapter Two, I examine two novels, *A Certain Hunger* by Chelsea G. Summers (2020) and *The Eyes Are the Best Part* by Monika Kim (2024), in which cannibalism functions not as a *reflection* of gendered and racialized consumption, but as a *reversal.* Instead of white men consuming women or white people consuming people of color, women are given the opportunity to be cannibalistic consumers instead. *A Certain Hunger* follows food critic and sex enthusiast Dorothy Daniels, a white woman, as she hunts down, murders, and devours her ex-boyfriends, while *The Eyes Are the Best Part* follows Ji-won, a Korean American college student who develops a cannibalistic craving for white, male eyeballs after her mother begins dating a racist white man. Situating my analyses in feminist theory and Asian American feminist theory, I show how Dorothy's cannibalism functions as a subversion of a gendered configuration of sexual consumption, and how Ji-won's cannibalism reverses a narrative of racial and misogynistic fetishism by consuming the eyes of white men, eliminating the means by which they would voyeuristically consume her. Both novels flip the narrative of racialized and gendered sexual consumption by positioning women as cannibals and challenging who gets to eat whom.

Beginning in Chapter Three, I turn to works that portray cannibalism not as an allegory for racialized and gendered sexual consumption under capitalism, but as a metaphor for the all-consuming nature of lesbian desire, awakening, and existence in a heteronormative world. In Chapter Three, I put forth the model of the "Teen Queer Cannibal Girl," a mainstream trope I identify in queer, twenty-first century film and television, to examine cannibalism and lesbian desire as they appear in two American film and television productions: *Bones and All* (dir. Luca

Guadagnino, 2022) and *Yellowjackets* (created by Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, 2021–).[15] As I write in Chapter Three, the Teen Queer Cannibal Girl often, but not always, closets herself in the heteronormative world and represses her burgeoning desires. She confuses homoerotic desire with cannibalistic hunger, and satiates her queer sexual awakenings with fleshly meals of her beloved. Grounding my analysis in queer theory, I show how *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets* portray cannibalism as a homoerotic act that facilitates the existence of both affirmed and repressed lesbian desire. Because the queer girls of *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets* continue to be compelled towards cannibalism regardless of whether or not they embrace their identities, I argue that cannibalism serves to exemplify how queer existence — especially among teenage girls — will always come to the fore, no matter the attempts to stifle it.

In Chapter Four, I examine cannibalism and bisexuality in *Jennifer's Body* (dir. Karyn Kusama, 2009), which follows the titular Jennifer, a queer high school It-Girl, who becomes cursed with the cannibalistic tendencies of a succubus and feasts on boys for both survival and sexual pleasure. I argue that cannibalism in the film serves as a means of violently articulating Jennifer's queer desires for her best friend, Needy. Whereas Chapter Three examines how homoerotic cannibalism facilitates queer desire, in Chapter Four I argue that it is through *hetero*erotic cannibalism — Jennifer's eating of boys, not girls, in scenes with sexual overtones — that Jennifer articulates her desire for Needy. Jennifer's cannibalism, I suggest, functions as a particular form of bisexual resistance that collapses the boundaries between the heteroerotic and the homoerotic, obliterating the heteronormative systems that define their existence.

Limitations

[15] I also briefly examine the French film *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016), because a scholarly article on *Raw* is crucial to my analysis of *Bones and All.*

While I have sought to incorporate a wide variety of texts and creators throughout this project, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. As a project that analyzes racialized and gendered configurations of sexual consumption in American popular culture and how they build upon complex histories of exploitation in the United States, the most glaring absences in my analyses are Black feminist cannibal narratives and transgender and genderqueer cannibal narratives. While I have searched for both transgender and Black cannibal narratives, my findings yielded little results. The absence of mainstream Black cannibal narratives is particularly striking given that, according to Mark H. Harris and Robin R. Means Coleman in their 2023 book, *The Black Guy Dies First: Black Horror Cinema from Fodder to Oscar,* the twenty-first century has witnessed a "renaissance" of Black horror:

> Black horror is living its best life. The genre is experiencing a renaissance. Black image-makers are growing the genre, introducing imaginative FUBU narratives while inviting us all along for the ride. The output of Black horror on the big, small, and streaming screens is increasing exponentially, with more releases in the year 2020 — during a pandemic — than in the entire decade of the 1980s. Production companies like Jordan Peele's Monkeypaw and Shudder are working to keep pace to quench our horror hunger. (303)

With the renaissance of Black horror cinema coinciding with a renaissance of cannibal narratives, the absence of mainstream Black cannibal narratives is surprising.

I did find one low-budget Black horror film, *Urban Cannibal Massacre* (dir. Maurice Thomas, 2013), that prominently features cannibalism across racial boundaries. The film follows a family of Black entrepreneurs, the Jones, who run a cannibalistic enterprise in which they abduct, dismember, sell, and cannibalize white people. While the Jones' cannibalism is, according to a review by Mark H. Harris,[16] "implied to be racial in nature," the film's execution of the cannibalism carries little thematic strength and is not framed in a way that provides

[16] Harris is the co-author with Robin R. Means Coleman of *The Black Guy Dies First: Black Horror Cinema from Fodder to Oscars,* published in 2023.

adequate social commentary. I agree with Harris that "through most of the film, [the] reasoning [for cannibalism] isn't so pointed, religious, or sociopolitical: they're just a crazy-ass family killing and eating people" (Harris).

I found two short stories published in *midnight & indigo,* an anthology of speculative short stories by Black women writers, that contain mentions of cannibalism but do not focus on it. "Hunger" by Michelle Renee Lane follows a Black man fighting in the Vietnam War who, at the end of the short story, realizes he has been murdering and cannibalizing children in his sleep. Because his cannibalism is only revealed at the very end of the short story, there is little cannibalism content that pertains to my analyses throughout the main narrative. The other short story, "Second Soprano" by Lyndsey Ellis, follows a young girl whose aunt is accused of tormenting her town with cannibalism, among other heinous allegations. However, readers never witness the cannibalism happen, and the character's allegations of cannibalism are insinuated to be false. While there are cannibalistic elements in each of these short stories, their cannibalism is ultimately not prominent enough in the narratives to fall within the scope of this project.

Conclusion

Cannibalism and women's sexuality are the heart of this project. Through my study of various American cannibal narratives produced between 2009 and 2024, I will examine themes about the repression, fear, and power of female sexuality in a heteropatriarchal world; women's heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality; and women's resistance to heteronormative frameworks. In the chapters that follow, we will see how cannibalism functions across gender, race, and sexuality as both a form of resistance and a model of oppression in twenty-first century American literature, film, and television.

CHAPTER ONE:

"WHERE THE MARKET IS": ALLEGORICAL CANNIBALISM IN *FRESH* AND *GET OUT*

Introduction

In the first chapter of *Capital Volume 1,* Karl Marx argues that the commodity — an object defined by its usefulness and exchange-value — is the most fundamental component of our capitalist world. He defines a commodity as "an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference" (125). Whether consciously or not, Marx is engaged in a discourse of hunger; after all, how else might one encapsulate, in one word, needs that arise "from the stomach"? Commodities, for Marx, hold the capacity to satisfy both need-based and pleasure-based hungers — hungers that stem from the survivalist "stomach," and hungers that stem from the desiring "imagination." When aspects of humanity, then, are commodified for the masses to satisfy both need-based and pleasure-based hungers, capitalism, I argue, takes on an inherently cannibalistic meaning. When humans are commodified on the basis of race, gender, and sexuality — as they have been throughout history — they are, to some extent, cannibalized.

In this chapter, I analyze two American films that use literal or metaphorical cannibalism to allegorize the consumption of humans under racial and heteropatriarchal capitalism. Mimi Cave's *Fresh* (2022) follows Noa, a young white woman who is abducted by a white man who cuts up the flesh of women to be sold to an elite group of cannibals. Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

(2017) follows Chris, a young Black man who discovers that his white girlfriend and her family kidnap Black people in order to transplant white people's brains, and therefore entire identities, into their bodies. While *Fresh* centers on white men's (and occasionally women's) consumption of women across many racial backgrounds, *Get Out* focuses its critique on white men and women's consumption of Black men and women. In this sense, each film uses themes of cannibalism to highlight a different configuration of consumption across race and gender under white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism.[17]

First, I will explore how cannibalism allegorizes and critiques white, male consumption of women in *Fresh,* grounding my analysis in feminist theory. Second, I will analyze *Get Out* for its presentation and critique of the metaphorically cannibalistic consumption of Black people by white people, situating my analysis in historical and scholarly contexts provided by Vincent Woodard and bell hooks. Third, I will return to *Fresh* to analyze the role of race, and particularly of white women, in the cannibalistic market it presents. Through their use of literal and metaphorical cannibalism and their presentation of racialized and gendered configurations of consumption, *Fresh* and *Get Out* critique a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist culture that empowers white people to consume women and people of color as objects for fetishistic pleasure.

"Women Just Taste Better": White, Male Consumption of Women in *Fresh*

The dark comedy horror film *Fresh* follows Noa (Daisy Edgar-Jones), a young, white woman with a frustratingly unsuccessful dating life. No matter how many men she swipes on her phone, dating apps don't yield any results more than "dick pics" and discourteous first dates. Noa is left

[17] To examine various intersecting modes of oppression, I use the phrase "white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism," which mirrors bell hooks' use of the phrase "white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" in her article "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance."

with little hope of finding a respectable man until she encounters Steve (Sebastian Stan), a white man who claims to be a plastic surgeon, in a meet-cute at the grocery store. They exchange phone numbers, and after a few successful dates, Noa finally thinks she has found the one. Steve suggests they take a weekend trip to a secret destination, and Noa agrees. Upon arriving at their getaway — a wealthy, fortified house in the woods — Steve drugs Noa and locks her in a basement cell. When she wakes up, Steve informs her that he is not a plastic surgeon, but a butcher who kidnaps, dismembers, consumes, and sells the flesh of women to a select group of white, upper-class, gastronomic men who delight in feasting on female "meat."

Desperate to survive, Noa learns she has one piece of leverage over Steve: he is still attracted to her. Using Steve's desire to her advantage, Noa leans into the persona of a hard-to-get woman and feigns an interest in the taste of human meat. As a result, Steve invites her upstairs for an exquisite, home-cooked dinner of female flesh. Noa eats the meal and pretends to like it, seizing on the opportunity to analyze her surroundings and gain Steve's trust. During her second cannibal "date" upstairs, Noa entices Steve into having sex with her, and, eventually, bites (but does not eat) his penis in a cannibalistic reversal of power. With Steve doubled over in pain, she eventually escapes with Mollie (Jonica T. Gibbs) and Penny (Andrea Bang) — the former, her best friend and the latter, another woman in captivity, both of whom Steve abducted for their flesh — and shoots Steve dead in the woods outside. Unbeknownst to Noa, Ann (Charlotte Le Bon), Steve's wife, appears and attempts to strangle her, but Mollie comes to her rescue and beats her dead with a shovel. The film ends with Noa and Mollie, collapsed against the trunk of a tree, as they process what happened and breathlessly express their gratitude and love for their friendship. The film received generally favorable reviews from

critics, who praised its balance of dark humor and horror elements and the chemistry between Edgar-Jones and Stan.

Cannibalism in *Fresh* is an extension of a capitalistic industry in which women are sexually consumed by upper-class white men. After Steve brings Noa upstairs for their cannibalistic dinner date, he confirms that women are his only victims, highlighting the gendered configurations of the market. The two are seated across from each other at Steve's dinner table in dim, intimate lighting, and refined violin music plays lightly in the background. Despite Noa's flirtations, her foot shakes under the table in fear. As he prepares pasta and a human meatball for her, Noa asks Steve about how many people are in his community of cannibals:

> **STEVE:** Not many. The one percent of the one percent. You know, there's nothing these people can't afford, right? They want the one thing that no one else has or can get. And that's where I come in. I can get it for them. I made a name for myself.
>
> **NOA:** Is it only women that you eat?
>
> **STEVE:** Yeah.
>
> **NOA:** Why?
>
> **STEVE:** That's where the market is. Plus, women just taste better.

Fig. 1.1. Noa eats a human meatball (*Fresh*).

After Noa has a bite of the meatball, she is psychologically flung into a vision of meat and men. In a quick series of shots propelled by the sound of an ever-increasing heartbeat, Noa imagines “the one percent of the one percent” — faceless white men — as they eat, lick, and

swallow ground woman-meat from exquisite plates. When she returns to reality, she keeps her face composed (1:12:55-1:17:49).

Fig. 1.2. Noa hallucinates a white man eating ground female flesh (*Fresh*).

Steve's reference to the cannibal community as "the one percent of the one percent" alludes to his industry's entrenchment in capitalism; his elite clients can only be understood as billionaires, who live at the top of capitalism's food chain. In "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," Gayle Rubin defines capitalism as "a set of social relations — forms of property, and so forth — in which production takes the form of turning money, things, and people into capital" (Rubin 161). Capital, she adds, "is a quantity of goods or money which, when exchanged for labor, reproduces and augments itself by extracting unpaid labor, or surplus value, from labor and into itself" (Rubin 161). Historically valued for reproductive purposes and their ability to satisfy white, male sexual pleasure, women — or specifically, women's *bodies* — have occupied each of these roles as "money," "things," and "capital."[18] Steve's admission that

[18] Tarinelli, Emily. "To what extent do the alternative worlds depicted in science fiction on the course explore different forms of gendered identity?" ENLI-10391: Reading Science Fiction, 15 April 2024.

he and his clients only eat women because women are "where the market is" and "just taste better" establishes a darkly humorous tone that satirically critiques the capitalist society which positions women to be commodified and consumed for white, male pleasure.

In a 2010 article, Sabala and Meena Gopal demonstrate how women's bodies are forced to participate in a capitalist culture that systemically operates to gratify white, male pleasure:

> The consumption of the body for male pleasure forms the basis of the market manipulation of women's bodies. Whether it is the wife at home or the sex worker, women dancing in bars or women depicted in serials and films, the objectification of women's bodies for the male gaze has been a part of the body agenda. In an era of globalisation, the images around us of 'ideal' feminine beauty and the pressure to emulate these ideals operate as reflections of patriarchy and capitalism, largely through the use of diets and consumer products designed to 'enhance' our faces, hair and bodies. If today social disciplining cannot produce gendered bodies, the knife can — cosmetic surgery is now a big business — bodies are literally carved to the shape prescribed by gender symbolism. (44)

As Sabala and Gopal illustrate, the intense capitalist emphasis on maximizing "feminine beauty" — such as through media objectification, diets, cosmetics, and even surgery — functions as a means of reinforcing gender roles expected to satisfy male sexual enjoyment. Women are expected to be active participants in this system, taking part in these beauty regimes to better market themselves as commodities to desiring white men. *Fresh* literalizes this system by presenting this systemic consumption of women as cannibalism. Steve's statement that women are "where the market is" echoes Sabala and Gopal's argument that the consumption of female bodies "forms the basis of [their] market manipulation," and the dismemberment necessitated by Steve's cannibalism provides a dramatized allegory of how women's bodies "are literally carved to shape prescribed by gender symbolism."

As Sabala and Gopal argue, the maximization of "feminine beauty" for white, male consumption means that their sexual pleasure is prioritized over women's sexual pleasure, so much so that women are entirely "marketed" to men as sexualized consumer goods through

"globalized" images like "serials and films." This gendered prioritization of sexual pleasure is evidenced in *Fresh* and dramatized through its cannibalism plot, which persistently denies Noa the ability to be "hungry" for men the way white men are "hungry" for women. From the outset of the film, Noa is constantly famished. In the very first scene, Noa sits in her car before a first date at a restaurant, swiping through dating app profiles while mustering the willpower to get out of her car, have dinner with another prospect, and hopefully have a good time. The scene features a close-up of Noa's teeth as she inspects them in the rearview mirror, before telling Mollie over the phone, "I'm really fuckin' hungry" (1:11-2:15). Her declaration of hunger can be interpreted in two ways: first, Noa is literally hungry for food, and second, Noa is hungry for a successful dating experience. A few scenes later, Noa bites into a carrot in an extreme close-up of her mouth while swiping through men's profiles on a dating app (7:29-8:33), further juxtaposing her hunger with her desire for a partner. Afterwards, she rummages through her empty fridge, only to sigh in disappointment that there is nothing to eat; the film once again denies her the ability to satiate her hunger. From the beginning, the film presents Noa's desire to find a partner and her appetite in tandem, establishing a connection between her hunger for sustenance and her hunger for a man. Just as the film denies her food, so too does it deny her a suitable partner. In this way, the film's white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism withholds Noa from sexually consuming men as white men sexually consume, and literally cannibalize, women.

As cannibals, white men are positioned as the ultimate consumers, while Noa, as a white woman, is aligned more with food than personhood. In fact, before Steve identifies her as marketable flesh, Noa appears to be more closely aligned with vegetables, not meat. The early view of Noa rummaging around her mostly empty refrigerator is shot from inside the fridge, framing her among the scarce food inside its white walls. Notably, the shot lacks meat and

contains some alternatives to animal-based products, suggesting that Noa is either vegan or vegetarian. She fiddles with a carton of almond milk, pushes aside a tub of cream cheese, and stares at the condiment shelf before sighing in disappointment and closing the door. With the shot framed as if she herself is in the fridge, Noa is identified alongside the fruit and dairy products, aligning the food with femininity; therefore, the shot places Noa, as a woman, in the same hierarchical rank as produce. Yet, at the same time, Noa is also the only "meat" in the frame, perhaps suggesting that, while Noa does not associate herself with meat, to white, male consumers like Steve, she is inevitably only a hunk of flesh to be eaten.

Noa's alignment with produce reflects a history of gendered dietary hierarchies discussed by Carol Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat.* Adams shows that, for centuries in the white, Western world, meat-eating has been associated with male power while vegetable-eating has been associated with feminine passivity. She recalls viewing early modern paintings in the British Library that exemplified her claim:

> A painting of Henry VIII eating a steak and kidney pie greeted my gaze. On either side of the consuming Henry were portraits of his six wives and other women. However, they were not eating steak and kidney pie, nor anything else made of meat. Catherine of Aragon held an apple in her hands. The Countess of Mar had a turnip, Anne Boleyn — red, grapes, Anne of Cleaves — a pear, Jane Seymour — blue grapes, Catherine Howard — a carrot, Catherine Parr — a cabbage. (26)

For Adams, the painting serves as a prime example of how "people with power have always eaten meat." Adams suggests that under a white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy, those people are white men. Women, however, are "more likely to eat what are considered to be second-class foods in a patriarchal culture: vegetables, fruits, and grains rather than meat" (26). Because "vegetables and other nonmeat foods are viewed as women's food," produce becomes "undesirable to men" (27).

Yet, despite Noa's alignment with produce as a woman, she *is* desirable to men. While she is incapable of claiming power through meat-eating, white men claim power by transforming her into meat and eating *her*. Dissatisfied with her dinner options, the very next scene finds Noa at the supermarket, traversing the store until she reaches the produce aisle — another means by which Noa is aligned with fruits and vegetables. It is here that she meets Steve, with whom she exchanges flirtations and phone numbers. As the shot cuts to a wider frame, a large sign hanging from the ceiling reading "FRESH MEATS" becomes visible in the background. Because of the angle of the camera, Noa appears to be standing right underneath it (8:46-11:34). The sign functions not only as an overt piece of foreshadowing, but also as a critique of the sexual consumption of women by white men. Coupled with Steve's intentions to abduct, dismember, sell, and cannibalize her, Noa's position under the sign essentially places her on the supermarket shelf; *she* is an item of food, and even further, *the* item of food that Steve is shopping for. Whereas Steve, as a white man, is a source of power, Noa is a source of protein.

Fig. 1.3. Noa stands underneath a sign reading "FRESH MEATS" after she meets Steve (*Fresh*).

The distinction between consumer and consumed, eater and eaten continues to be highly gendered throughout the film. Following Noa's awakening in captivity, viewers witness Steve transform a female leg into tightly-packaged meat patties. The scene capitalizes on the dark humor it employs throughout the entire film, and opens with a bang: the upbeat, synth 1980s song "Obsession" by Animotion thunders to life as Steve jogs into his kitchen and slides to a stop. He confidently lifts up a freezer door, where a light-skinned, female leg rests within. He extracts the leg with both hands and, with both eyes closed and mouth slightly open, twirls slowly to the beat of the music. He lifts the leg high above his head, then drops it to the cutting board, bouncing with the rhythm.

Fig. 1.4. Steve prepares a leg (*Fresh*).

The film's dark humor continues as Steve washes his hands, swings a towel around to the beat, and places a photo of a woman, captioned "MELISSA DUNTON," against a pepper shaker. As the camera pans from the photo to the leg, we presume that the leg once belonged to her. In a

close-up, Steve carefully slices off a sliver of meat; he brandishes a meat mallet in the air, then hammers the slice into a patty in time with the song.

Fig 1.5. Steve continues preparing a leg (*Fresh*).

Steve packages the meat in air-tight plastic; a brief time jump occurs, and he tosses it into a pile of them on the counter. He jogs toward a line of boxes with the patties in slow motion, then, leaning fully into dark comedy, tosses them one by one into each as if throwing a basketball (the

last, he saves for a slam dunk). With the music still blaring, the shot cuts to Steve sitting at a polished, dark brown table, images of women spread out before him. He holds up a blue lace bra to his own pectorals, before the camera cuts to an overhead shot of one of the boxes. He places the bra atop a sparkly clothing item inside it, then garnishes it with a lock of straight, dark hair as a finishing touch. Seated at the table again, he seals each photo in an envelope; returning to the overhead shot, he places it in the box with the name "MELISSA" inscribed across it. In the following shot, he tapes the boxes sealed, then stacks them by his entrance; in the next, he seats himself on his counter and takes a swig from his glass of wine, sweaty and exhausted, as if to say, *all in a day's work.*

If for Adams meat-eating represents white, male power, then this scene demonstrates that cannibalism in *Fresh* represents the ultimate dominance of white men over women. Indeed, Adams acknowledges that "cannibalism in fairy tales is generally a male activity, as Jack, after climbing his beanstalk, quickly learned. Folktales of all nations depict giants as male and 'fond of eating human flesh'" (27). In this scene, Steve literally cuts up and breaks down women into pieces of meat alongside their personal belongings, to be then sold to and consumed by ultra-wealthy white men. To people like Steve, women are nothing more than body parts — slabs of meat. The fact that he sends his clients sexualized accessories in addition to bits of their bodies — like lace bras, locks of hair, and profile photos — indicates that the practice is about more than buying meat; it is a fetish that involves entirely dominating a woman and her legacy, or perhaps only the "parts" of womanhood that matter to them: those parts associated with the erotic, with supplying pleasure. The tone's alignment with dark humor rather than traditional horror suggests that this scene is satirical, serving to critique the sexual consumption of women by white men.

I have highlighted the whiteness of *Fresh's* cannibal men, and discussed *Fresh's* critique of the gendered sexual consumption of women; so what about its treatment of simultaneously and undeniably *racialized* sexual consumption? My analysis, until now, has largely worked within the limitations of the film, in that it does not explicitly address racialized sexual consumption across genders. In order to visualize the role of cannibalism across racial boundaries, I will now turn to Jordan Peele's *Get Out.*

"Black Is in Fashion": White Consumption of Black People in *Get Out*

Get Out follows Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya), a young Black man who accompanies his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage (Allison Williams), to her family estate to meet her parents. When they arrive, Chris is discomfited by awkward conversations with Rose's family (her father, Dean, a neurosurgeon; her mother, Missy, a psychiatrist; and her brother, Jeremy), which are riddled with racist microaggressions, and the Armitages' employment of Black servants, Walter and Georgina, who themselves behave in strange and uncanny ways. He is even further unsettled when Missy unconsensually hypnotizes him, psychologically thrusting him into a limbo-like abyss she calls the Sunken Place. Chris awakens in his bed as if nothing had happened, but remains unnerved and suspicious.

At the Armitages' yearly soiree, Chris witnesses even more uncanny occurrences. He and Rose decide to pack up and leave. Chris soon realizes that Rose is not on his side; in reality, she lured him to her family estate so that Dean could perform a surgical brain transplantation on him, swapping most of his brain with the brain of the highest white bidder who would live out their fantasy of perceived biological superiority in the body of a Black person. We learn that Walter and Georgina, the Black servants who carry eerie demeanors, no longer possess their own identities but host the Armitages' white grandparents in their bodies instead, and that this

sinister, underground society of white consumers is known as the Order of the Coagula. Chris is taken into captivity, but eventually gets out, killing Dean, Missy, and Jeremy. He attempts to kill Rose in the driveway, but cannot go through with it. A police car flashes ahead, but it is revealed to be Rod, a TSA agent and Chris' best friend. The two drive off together, leaving Rose dying on the ground.

Get Out was a critical success, praised for the strong social critiques embedded in its effective horror narrative. The film is an icon of contemporary Black horror cinema, and contributed to a whole new wave of Black horror exploring Black trauma, identity, and anti-Black racism in the United States.[19]

Fig. 1.6. Chris enters the Sunken Place (*Get Out*).

While there is no direct plot of cannibalism in *Get Out,* there are references to it. In one scene, Rod exclaims that "Jeffrey Dahmer was eatin' the shit" out of Black people after Chris calls him to share his suspicion that Missy had hypnotized him (50:00–51:43). Dahmer, a white

[19] Other twenty-first century Black horror works include Peele's film *Us* (2019), Misha Green's television series *Lovecraft Country* (2020), Little Marvin's TV series *Them* (2021), Janine Naber and Donald Glover's TV series *Swarm* (2023), and Zoë Kravitz's film *Blink Twice* (2024), among others.

American serial killer, murdered seventeen men and boys — most of whom were Black, Asian, Latino, and poor — between 1978 and 1991. Dahmer's murders involved cannibalism, dismemberment, and necrophilia. After being sentenced to prison for life in 1992, he was killed by a fellow inmate in 1994 (Jenkins). *Get Out's* reference to Dahmer establishes racially motivated cannibalism as a prominent, symbolic theme throughout the rest of the film.

In critiquing how individuals perpetuate racism and fetishize Black bodies, *Get Out* builds from a centuries-old history white consumption of Black people, one that is riddled with documented instances of cannibalism. *Get Out* further establishes these themes by gesturing to the transatlantic slave trade, which is the most obvious and harrowing historical example of white people's consumption of Black people — both metaphorically and literally. The film's most explicit nod to the slave trade occurs when Dean auctions off Chris to the highest white bidder; one cannot help but perceive the scene's grave echoing of American slave auctions (59:25–1:00:16).

Fig. 1.7. Dean auctions off Chris *(Get Out*).

While the slave trade itself might be viewed as metaphorically cannibalistic — it required the transformation of Black people into consumable commodities for white people, a figuratively cannibalistic practice — the slave trade also has links to actual cannibalism. In *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture,* Vincent Woodard shows that during the height of US enslavement, cannibalism as a concept was already an established fear among both white, European colonizers and the African peoples they enslaved. Europeans generally believed that African peoples all across the continent were a "cannibalistic race," a belief they used to justify their colonial projects and racist domination. Alternatively, white, male colonizers' erotic interests in African men — which African people attributed to hunger — led peoples of Western and Central Africa to fear that Europeans were cannibals (11–12, 16).

In some well-known cases, these fears became realized. Woodard cites the case of Nat Turner, the Black carpenter and preacher who led an uprising of both enslaved and free Black people in Southampton, Virginia. He states that local Black community members "left oral records of whites who tried to coerce them into consuming Nat Turner's boiled-down flesh and entrails. Black persons also implied that nineteenth-century whites might have consumed the revolutionary as a medicinal substance" (6). Furthermore, Woodard states that, in Equiano's autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano,* Equiano describes how a Black man was accused of being "connected with a white woman who was a common prostitute" and that, as punishment, the overseer staked him to the ground, cut off pieces of his ears, and presumably fed them to him. Woodard explains that it was "common practice in the Caribbean to not only cut off the ears of slaves but to also broil them and make the slaves eat the broiled pieces as punishment" (45–46). Woodard's book shows clear evidence that under US

enslavement, white enslavers both metaphorically and literally cannibalized Black people and forced Black people to auto-cannibalize themselves.

In *Get Out,* we witness a metaphorical cannibalization of Black people by white people through the Armitages' Coagula scheme, in which Dean Armitage transplants a white brain into a Black body in order to capitalize on perceived physical advantages that come with being Black. While the Coagula procedure does not involve the act of eating that is so crucial to cannibalism, it *does* require the incorporation of one body into another, which Maggie Kilgour argues to be a fundamentally cannibalistic trait: two bodies become one. When Jim Hudson describes the transplantation process to Chris, who awakens in captivity and finds himself tied to a chair, his explanation is riddled with cannibalistic metaphors involving the consolidation of two identities into one. He also highlights the inherently racialized nature of this incorporation, stating that Black people are the only people whom the white Order of the Coagula members target. Hudson explains (1:22:19–1:25:31):

> **HUDSON:** [Phase Three is] the transplantation. Well, partial, actually. The piece of your brain connected to your nervous system needs to stay put, keeping those intricate connections intact. So you won't be gone, not completely. A sliver of you will still be in there, somewhere. Limited consciousness. You will be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger, an audience. You'll live in—
>
> **CHRIS:** The Sunken Place.
>
> **HUDSON:** Yep. That's — that's what [Missy] calls it. Now, I'll control the motor functions, so I'll be—
>
> **CHRIS:** Me. You'll be me.
>
> **HUDSON:** Good. Good. You got it quick. Good on ya.
>
> **CHRIS:** Why us, huh? Why Black people?
>
> **HUDSON:** *[laughs]* Who knows? Some people want a change, some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler.

Here, the scene cuts back to people from the auction, feeling up Chris to see if he might suit their desires. One white man pipes up, "Black is in fashion!" The shot cuts back to Hudson.

> **HUDSON:** But don't — please don't lump me in with that. You know, I could give a shit what color you are. What I want is deeper. I want your eye, man. I want those things you see through.

The Coagula's process of collapsing two identities into one bears an uncanny resemblance to cannibalism. As Jeff Berglund argues in *Cannibal Fictions: American Explorations of Colonialism, Race, Gender, and Sexuality,* the consumption of one person by another "collapses identity boundaries: *You* become *Me, I* become *You-Me*" (8). This language is precisely the language used by Chris to describe the Coagula procedure ("You'll be me"), positioning the transplantation of the white brain into the Black body as a cannibalistic union.

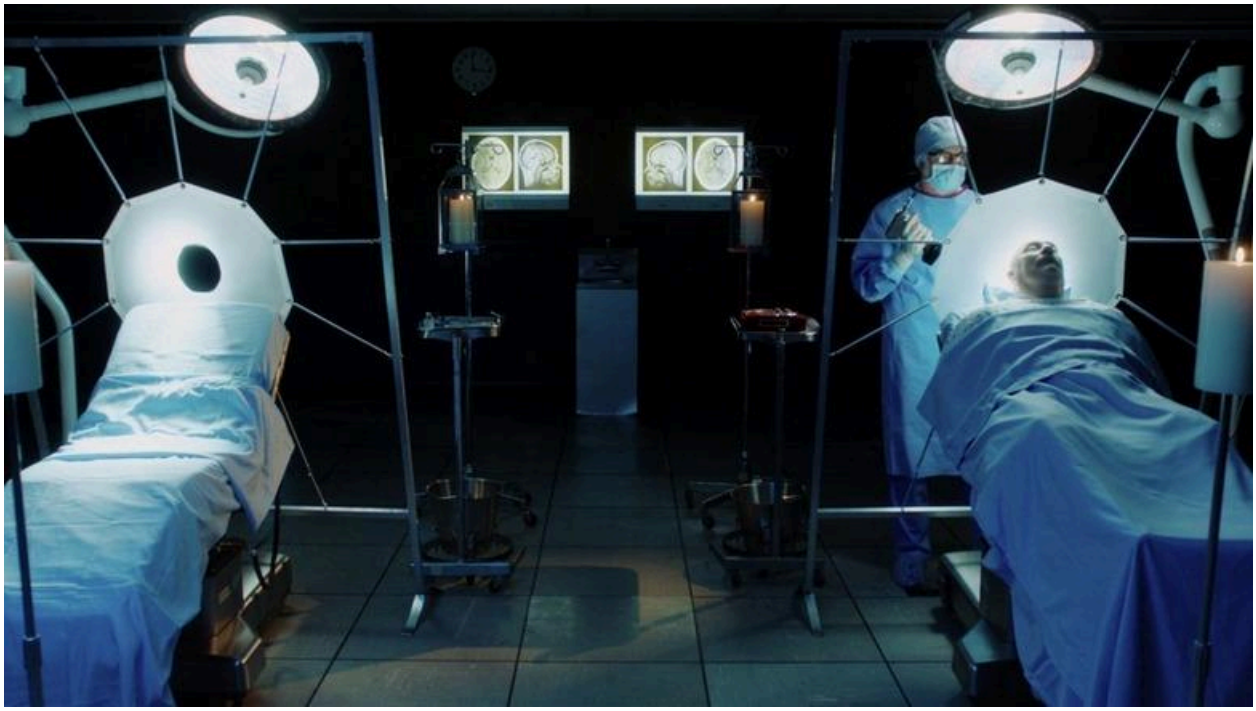

Fig. 1.8. Dean performs the Coagula procedure on Hudson while Jeremy fetches Chris (*Get Out*).

Hudson's desire to cannibalistically "become" a Black person resembles what bell hooks terms to be white "consumer cannibalism" in "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In the essay, hooks describes how white supremacist perceptions of racial difference fuel a white

person's desire to sexually "make contact with those bodies deemed Other," doing so under "the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group" (25). hooks states that this process reflects a shift in white supremacist thinking "where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other" (25). She identifies this "commodification of difference" as a tenet of "consumer cannibalism," which she states is a process that "not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (31). hooks' "consumer cannibalism," like Kilgour and Berglund's, necessitates the incorporation of two bodies into one, and is established through particularly fetishistic desires to sexually incorporate the "Other" into themselves.

The Coagula reflects hooks' model of consumer cannibalism. When Chris asks Hudson "Why Black people?", Hudson states that white people want to be "stronger," "faster," and "cooler." Hudson and the entire Order of the Coagula believe that having their identities transferred into a Black person's body will allow them to take advantage of allegedly superior biological traits belonging to Black people. As hooks schematizes, this assumption drives forward their desire to transplant their brains into Black people's bodies and "make contact with those bodies deemed Other." The Coagula, then, embodies the white desire to "become the Other" by approaching consumer cannibalism in a more literal, bodily form. Instead of white people attempting to cannibalistically become the Other through sex, the Coagula enables white people to make even closer contact by condensing their identities into one body — the Black person's body.

Get Out also echoes hooks' argument that white sexual desire is aligned with symbolic cannibalistic desire. By positioning Rose, Chris' white girlfriend, as an interlocutor between sexual desire and cannibalistic desire, the film not only critiques the role of white women in perpetuating racism but also identifies white women as oppressive sexual consumers — or metaphorical cannibals — of Black people. There is a long history of racism behind the relationship between white women, Black men, and allegations of sexual consumption that, as I showed in my analysis of Woodard, involve literal cannibalism. As Tananarive Due highlights in her essay "*Get Out* and the Black Horror Aesthetic," white womanhood was historically weaponized to falsely accuse Black men of rape.[20] These false accusations were used to justify lynchings and, as Woodard shows, autocannibalistic punishments that included forcing Black men to eat their own ears.

As his girlfriend, Rose's enactment of sexual desire for Chris leads to his attempted symbolic cannibalization through the Coagula procedure, meaning that Rose's unique position as interlocutor ties together both the sexual and cannibalistic aspects of hooks' essay. Rose's role in the Order of the Coagula is to lure Black men — and occasionally women — to the Armitages' home by entering romantic relationships with them and bringing them home for her father to operate on. Rose had told Chris that he was the first Black man she had ever dated, but upon finding a stash of photos in her closet featuring her and several other Black men (and one woman: Georgina, the Armitages' servant who hosts Rose's white grandmother), Chris realizes this is a lie (1:05:36–1:06:43).

[20] Due writes, "Whether it was fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, the Rosewood Massacre in 1923, the Tulsa Massacre of 1921, or the Exonerated Five (depicted in Ava DuVernay's *When They See Us)* in 1989, the accusation of rape or sexual advances is the defining racist narrative about Black men and white women" (10).

Fig 1.9. Chris discovers Rose's photos (*Get Out*).

Rose only enters relationships with Black people in order to draw them into the clutches of her family's Coagula scheme, which I have established to be a figuratively cannibalistically procedure. Therefore, Rose provides the sexual aspect to hooks' notion of consumer cannibalism that the Coagula scheme does not. By sexually consuming Chris, Rose grooms him for preparation to be cannibalized by a white person through the Coagula procedure.

In addition, Rose sexually consumes Black men through her gaze. In one scene, Rose conducts an image search for Black men on her computer. In the images that appear, Black men are shirtless, athletic, and toned; several of them are basketball athletes, either performing a slam dunk or posing for the camera. Rose sits cross-legged on her bed with perfect posture and a grave expression as she stares intently at the photos; her gaze enables her to sexually consume them for her own pleasure (1:32:24–1:33:07). By objectifying Black men for her own sexual pleasure, Rose turns Black men into items for her own visual consumption, reflecting a metaphorical process of visually cannibalizing Black men for her own gratification. The inclusion of this scene shows how Rose's sexual consumption of Black men is central to the Armitages' metaphorical cannibalism of Black people through their Coagula scheme.

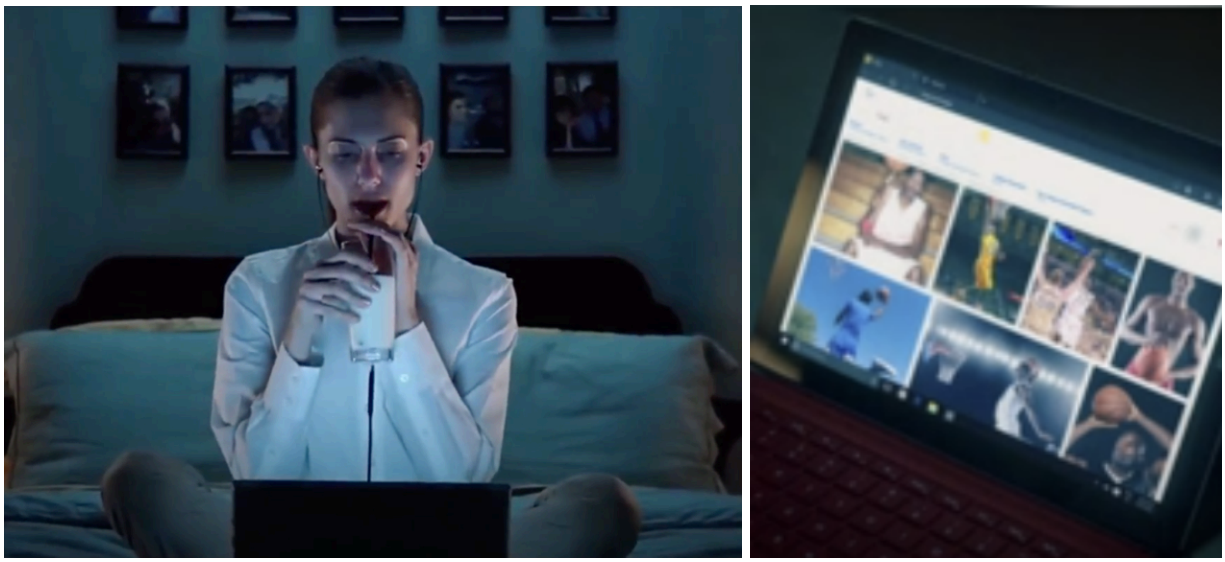

Fig. 1.10. Rose fetishizes Black men through an image search (*Get Out*).

By analyzing *Get Out* in conversation with bell hooks "Eating the Other," I have highlighted the ways in which *Get Out* employs symbolically cannibalistic horrors — first through its Coagula scheme, and second through its strategic positioning of Rose as a sexual consumer. *Get Out's* metaphorical instances of cannibalism allegorize and critique a system of racial capitalism in which Black people are consumed by white people. Many of these critiques, I argue, are implicitly present in Mimi Cave's *Fresh.* I now return to *Fresh* to examine the role of race in Steve's cannibalization of women.

"Good Teamwork Today": Cannibalism and White Womanhood in *Fresh*

In a review online, Calvin Cleary states that *Fresh* "flirts with the imagery of white supremacy (thin blue line flags, for example) but refuses to explore the issues with any depth." Despite the film's lack of overt attention to race, some critics have hailed *Fresh* as a "woman's version of *Get Out*" (Monroe and Russell). Raven Monroe and Tom Russell write in an online review that *Fresh* and *Get Out* both examine the commodification of bodies — whether women's buttocks or

Black people's brains — and end in an escape that requires the protagonists to kill their oppressors:

> Steve, like the Armitages in *Get Out,* commodifies the women's bodies in *Fresh,* literally removing Noa's butt — a highly desired part of a woman's body — to sell as meat. Like Chris, Noa and the other women have to literally kill their oppressors in order to escape with their lives. (Monroe and Russell)

While I agree with Cleary that *Fresh* fails to explicitly interrogate racialized sexual consumption, I argue that there is an implicit critique of race in its gendered configuration of cannibalism.

Fresh portrays, but does not address, cannibalism across racial boundaries. Notably, both Steve and his clients are ultra-wealthy white men, which suggests that the film understands that the consequences of men's sexual consumption of women does not map neatly across races. As I discussed previously, historically, Black men's alleged sexual consumption of female bodies had severely different consequences than white men's; white people, including white women, used the Black male gaze as the false justification for lynchings in the US and for autocannibalistic punishment. The film's cannibals are all white men, while the women whom Steve abducts belong to a number of different racial backgrounds: of the three we meet in the film, Noa is white, Mollie is Black, and Penny is played by a Korean Canadian woman. *Fresh's* juxtaposition of all-white, male cannibals against cannibalized women of many racial identities suggests that *Fresh* understands white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy as a system that empowers white men to consume all women, regardless of race. However, its critique of the system's impact on the *actual* women being cannibalized is limited to a white woman's perspective. bell hooks argues in her essay "Eating the Other" that racial difference is a crucial factor that drives white sexual appetites, male and female, for people of color. With hooks' argument in mind, *Fresh* remains colorblind to the racialized nature of Mollie and Penny's status as commodities in Steve's market. As far as what is revealed in the film, the depiction of Mollie's attempted

cannibalization as a Black woman and Penny's as a Korean woman are treated the same as Noa's as a white woman; there is no acknowledgment about how Mollie's Blackness or Penny's Koreanness might influence white men's appetites for them.

While *Fresh* fails to examine the struggles of women of color under this system, it does, at times, prod at critiquing *whiteness* — specifically, the role of white womanhood in perpetuating cannibalistic systems of exploitation. This subtle critique comes across through a minor yet complex character: Ann, Steve's white wife, who possesses a role loosely similar to Rose in *Get Out.* While it is unclear if Ann is also a cannibal, she is an active participant in Steve's cannibalistic market. When Mollie begins to look into Noa's disappearance, her investigations lead her to Steve's real home — not the fortress in the woods but a house in a suburban, affluent neighborhood. There, she meets Ann, who claims to know nothing about Noa's whereabouts. Steve returns home while they are talking, and Mollie calls Noa's phone. It rings in Steve's pocket, exposing him as the kidnapper. Strikingly, it is Ann who takes down Mollie, not Steve: she knocks her out with a blow to her head, allowing Steve to abduct her for cannibalization (1:00:21–1:05:33). This moment provides an example of the privilege of white women to participate as consumers under a system that disempowers women across all races, especially women of color.

While Ann perpetuates cannibalistic systems of oppression, the film also positions her as a victim of the very system she upholds. By fluctuating between Ann as perpetrator and Ann as victim, the film becomes critical of white womanhood and demonstrates that women's weaponization of whiteness can never truly liberate them from the cannibalizing structures of white patriarchy. The film exemplifies this critique in a scene in which Ann is presumably revealed to have once been a victim of Steve's cannibalism scheme herself. The scene takes

place in the bathroom, where Ann struggles to undress herself in preparation for a shower. As Ann sits down to take off her jeans, the frame transitions to an overhead shot looking down on her legs, where she is revealed to have a prosthetic limb. Based on the amount of cannibalism and dismemberment present in the film, we assume that Ann was once a victim of Steve's sinister pursuits, who somehow — like Noa — ascended the ranks in order to avoid being eaten. Ann twists off the prosthetic, then struggles, naked, to hop into the shower and maintain her balance, all while somber music plays in the background.

Fig. 1.11. Ann is revealed to have a prosthetic leg (*Fresh*).

With Ann's nudity, her struggle to prepare for her shower, and the melancholy music that plays in the background, the scene attempts to elicit sympathy for her by positioning her as a vulnerable victim as well as a perpetrator. Here, she is a woman who used her white privilege to save herself from being eaten, at the expense of other women. This is not the first time a white woman used her privilege to avoid cannibalization in the film; Noa, too, capitalizes on Steve's attraction to her and even consumes female flesh herself in order to prove herself trustworthy to Steve. Yet, even though Ann (and, to an extent, Noa) avoided being cannibalized by becoming an

agent of racialized and gendered sexual consumption, this shower scene shows that Ann *still* suffers at the hands of white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy. By including this scene, the film exposes the futility of white women's attempts to liberate themselves from patriarchal consumption, including literal cannibalism, by weaponizing their whiteness.

Any sympathy that is elicited on Ann's behalf is completely dissolved when she tries to take over Steve's cannibal pursuits following his death. Upon finding Steve's corpse in the woods, Ann tells her assistant — who appears to be an Indigenous man — to "get his body on ice," implying that she is going to take over his business of cannibalizing and selling people, starting with the supply of his own flesh (1:45:58-1:46:39). This turn back to Ann as a problematic character rather than a sympathetic character illustrates how the film calls attention to the role that white women play in perpetuating the consumption of other women under a white supremacist patriarchy. Indeed, as Mollie hisses at Ann before pummeling her to death with a shovel: "Bitches like you are the fucking problem" (1:48:16).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Mimi Cave's *Fresh* and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* use literal and metaphorical cannibalism to critique a centuries-old history of white supremacist, capitalistic, heteropatriarchal human exploitation. Cave's film uses cannibalism — specifically, Steve's strategic abduction, cannibalization, and selling of women and their flesh — to literalize the sexual consumption of women by white men. While *Fresh* falls short in deeply examining the inherent racialized aspects of gendered sexual consumption, such as those identified by hooks, it nonetheless implicitly critiques the privilege of white women to become cannibalistic consumers and perpetuate consumptive systems of oppression. In turn, numerous scholars have shown the various ways in which white people have consumed — and continue to consume — Black

people: capitalistically, sexually, and literally. By framing the Coagula procedure as a cannibalistic horror, Peele builds upon this history in *Get Out* to critique racialized configurations of consumption enabled by white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems.

Both of these films build upon complex histories of racialized and gendered sexual consumption. Their contemporary settings and focus on individual acts of racism and misogyny speak to the timeliness of these cannibalistic narratives today. *Get Out* and *Fresh* remind us that even now, "Black is in fashion" to the white consumer, and women continue to "just taste better" on the white, male palate. While white men and women attempt, in hooks' words, to "get a bit of the Other," today — and always — those who are eaten and hungry bite back.

CHAPTER TWO:

SERVING MEN:
FEMINIST CANNIBAL REVERSALS IN *A CERTAIN HUNGER* AND *THE EYES ARE THE BEST PART*

Introduction

In Chapter One, I showed how two contemporary American films, *Fresh* (dir. Mimi Cave, 2022) and *Get Out* (dir. Jordan Peele, 2017), use cannibalistic horror to critique the consumptive nature of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist American culture. Whereas both of these films present exploitative systems of consumption as they exist in the real world, other contemporary works subvert this narrative, flipping the position of who is "cannibal" and who is "cannibalized." These contemporary reversals, I argue, center on gendered configurations of consumption, giving women the opportunities to be eaters of white men instead of the other way around.

Today, the image of women eating men as a form of pleasure or sexual empowerment is central to female writers. In an article published in *Vogue* in 2022, Chelsea G. Summers — author of the feminist cannibal novel *A Certain Hunger,* which I analyze in this chapter — breaks down the prominence of cannibalism as a literary, film, and television trope before and throughout 2022. She specifically highlights the recent rise in "unapologetically, viscerally female" cannibal narratives, pointing to the Hollywood film *Jennifer's Body* (dir. Karyn Kusama, 2009), French film *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016), and American television series *Yellowjackets* (Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, 2021–). Summers writes that this "woman-forward cannibal trend," which is dominated by female authors and filmmakers, paved

the way for the 2022 releases of Hollywood films *Fresh* and *Bones and All* (dir. Luca Guadagnino), a dramatic horror-romance. The prominence of this trend raises the question: why are all the women eating men? Even further, why is their eating of men presented as a kind of sexual desire for them, and as feminist sexual empowerment more broadly?

As I showed in Chapter One, cannibalism is an apt metaphor for exploring how humans are consumed under capitalism. Summers also makes this argument, claiming that people are now experiencing a cultural reckoning with the failures of "late-stage capitalism"; she argues that constant engagement with "grind-core hustle culture often feels like we're being devoured one bite at a time" (5). For Summers, the cannibalistic nature of capitalism, a system that must constantly "devour" and reproduce itself in order to thrive, resonates deeply with how our capitalist society treats femininity. Summers attributes the similarity between "grind-core hustle culture" and capitalistic femininity to the recent rise in feminist cannibal narratives:

> Cannibalism feels ripe for a feminist makeover because so much about femininity centers on consumption — what we can eat, how much we can eat, how to present yourself as appealing, and how those questions are inextricably intertwined.
>
> Women's bodies have been a site of horror, doubly so if your female body happens to be trans, disabled, BIPOC, or old. … Horror belongs to women because we understand, on a gut-punch level, how it feels to be viewed as a monster — as well as how it feels to be reduced to body parts, to breasts and thighs, to butts and bellies. (Summers, "Defining Cultural Trope")

In this chapter, I build on Summers' argument that "so much about femininity centers on consumption" by analyzing reversals of gendered and racialized cannibalism as it appears in two feminist cannibal texts, each written by American women authors: Summers' own 2020 novel *A Certain Hunger,* and Monika Kim's 2024 novel *The Eyes Are the Best Part. A Certain Hunger* follows food critic and sex enthusiast Dorothy Daniels as she hunts down, murders and devours her ex-boyfriends. *The Eyes Are the Best Part* follows Korean American college freshman

Ji-won as she develops a cannibalistic hunger for blue eyeballs after her mother begins dating a racist white man.

Both novels use cannibalism to critique the consumption of women. By cannibalizing white men, Dorothy and Ji-won become empowered as consumers. Yet, the extent to which cannibalism in either novel subverts systems of sexual consumption depends on which systems, precisely, they critique. Whereas *A Certain Hunger's* cannibalism is more concerned with the consumption and commodification of women under capitalism, cannibalism in *The Eyes Are the Best Part* focuses more on critiquing racial fetishism and the sexual objectification of women — specifically, Asian American women. In other words, Dorothy's cannibalism critiques women's commodification under capitalism, while Ji-won's cannibalism critiques women's sexual objectification under racial fetishism.

In this chapter, I will examine the extent to which cannibalism critiques and subverts racialized and gendered configurations of sexual consumption in *A Certain Hunger* and *The Eyes Are the Best Part*. First, I analyze *A Certain Hunger* and show how Dorothy flips a white woman's narrative of capitalist heteropatriarchy on its head. I suggest that Dorothy fits into the model of what Louise Flockhart terms a "postfeminist female cannibal," whose status as a consuming subject both subverts and reifies capitalist, heteropatriarchal standards. Second, I examine the role of Ji-won's cannibalism in *The Eyes Are the Best Part,* which functions as a subversion of racial fetishism and sexual objectification as it relates to Asian American women. I employ the scholarship of Asian American feminist scholars Leslie Bow and Anne Cheng in my analysis. Through their use of cannibalism, Summers and Kim present feminist reversals of a heteropatriarchal and, in Kim's case, white supremacist culture that empowers white men to sexually commodify and objectify women.

A Certain Hunger:
Cannibalism as a Critique of Capitalism and Commodification

A Certain Hunger is a satirical horror novel that follows Dorothy Daniels, a fifty-two-year-old food writer and serial killer who has been imprisoned for the murder and cannibalization of several men. From behind bars, Dorothy tells the story of her life leading up to imprisonment, largely focusing on food and sex. She details her teenage and young adult years, in which she embraced her intense sexual awakenings while navigating a misogynistic world that constantly reduced her to sex object; her rise to a successful career as a renowned food writer and critic; and the men she dated, had sex with, broke up with, and eventually, hunted down and cannibalized.

In *A Certain Hunger,* cannibalism abounds at every turn. It is a cornucopia stuffed with flesh-eating, which is always portrayed using dark humor. In 2000, Dorothy slams into Giovanni with a car and kills him before extracting his liver and eating it with a "good Chianti" (undoubtedly a nod to Hannibal Lecter's iconic line, "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti").[21] In 2008, she drugs Andrew and floods his house with carbon monoxide, murdering him; she carefully takes his buttocks and crafts herself a rump roast. In 2009, she murders Gil on a boat by feeding him figs, which he is allergic to, resulting in anaphylactic shock; she wrangles out his tongue and sautées it. In 2011, she slits Marco's throat after performing oral sex on him, and imitates a kosher butchery on his corpse before removing his stomach and pectorals to make a roast brisket. In 2013, she recklessly executes her final murder, Casimir, but refrains from eating him. Throughout the novel, she obsessively questions her decision to kill him; it was this murder, impulsive and uncalculated unlike the rest of them, that got her caught and jailed.

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[21] Besides gesturing to Lecter's famous quote, Dorothy resembles Lecter in other ways. For example, Dorothy's status as a renowned food writer and critic reflects Lecter's elitist sophistication. Like Lecter, Dorothy is also imprisoned throughout most of the present narrative.

With so much cannibalism content, ranging from Dorothy's accounts of consuming men to her philosophical musings about the topic, one could take several approaches to examining its significance: for example, one could analyze cannibalism as a collapse of identity, as a parody of foodie culture, as an act of love, or as a metaphor for women's sexuality. As much as these critiques and allegories are intertwined, it is impossible to dissect them all in one chapter. My analysis focuses on the extent to which cannibalism functions as a subversive act against white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism when the consumed gets to eat the consumer. I will focus on the ways in which Dorothy assumes power through cannibalism, touching on each of these themes while recognizing that each could be explored with greater depth and specificity.

Early in the novel, Dorothy expresses how heteropatriarchal, capitalistic systems immensely impacted her perceptions of womanhood in her adolescent years. Reflecting on life as a teenager, she recalls:

> I have reasons to feel forever grateful to my fake teenage girlfriends, for aside from teaching me about junk food, they taught me how to be feminine. Snuggled in their blossoming Love's Baby Soft-scented bosoms, I learned how to approximate a female — how to talk, how to walk, how to dance, how to flip your hair. How to part your lips as for a kiss but not for a bite of food. How to end your declarative sentences in a question. How to twitch your hips as you left a room. Why you laugh when you feel like screaming. Over trays of Bonnie Bell Lip Smackers and mountains of cooling fries, I learned that being female is as prefab, thoughtless, soulless, and abjectly capitalist as a Big Mac. It's not important that it's real. It's only important that it's tasty. (34–35)

For Dorothy, womanhood is a commodity that she and other women such as her "fake teenage girlfriends" have been socialized to market to mass populations of male consumers. In the passage, Dorothy describes her white womanhood using several allusions to food. In particular, she compares her womanhood to a Big Mac — an item that is not only consumed through the act of eating, but that is also economically consumed through mass production. Dorothy's comparison of her womanhood to a Big Mac shows that she understands womanhood as a

mass-produced commodity as well, which illustrates how she understands womanhood in relation to capitalistic consumption. In addition, Dorothy's use of bland, manufactured language like "prefab," "thoughtless," and "soulless" to describe womanhood, along with her assertion that womanhood does not need to be "real," portrays femininity almost as a kind of artificial junk food — a term that Dorothy explicitly references. The fact that Dorothy had to *learn* how to "approximate a female" further suggests that for Dorothy, womanhood is not only an expression of gender, but a learned performance designed for the purpose of marketing herself to desiring men.

While the passage functions as a scathing critique of how femininity is commodified for white men, Dorothy deeply prizes her femininity and sex appeal, and even delights in the fact that men want to consume her. As she states early in the novel, "I rather enjoyed being objectified. I like it when men look at me as if they want to devour me" (64). Even though Dorothy recognizes her own consumption under heteropatriarchal capitalism, she surprisingly takes pleasure in it. Yet, while she deeply values her femininity and sexual desirability, she nonetheless fears losing herself through marriage and romance with men. Dorothy decides to pursue her former partners and cannibalize them after turning down a wedding proposal from a man named Alex, whom she genuinely loved. Despite her feelings, Dorothy could only imagine "a life where I would always, ever, be Alex-me because to be the calculating, howling void I was before I met Alex was not an option. I could not be both alone-me and Alex-me" (242). For Dorothy, marriage is a capitalist institution that would lead to her own metaphorical cannibalization by Alex. As I stated in Chapter One, in *Cannibal Fictions* Jeff Berglund states that the consumption of one person by another necessarily "collapses identity boundaries: *You* become *Me, I* become *You-Me*" (8). Dorothy's language of becoming "Alex-me" through

marriage resembles Berglund's language of becoming "*You-Me*" through cannibalism, demonstrating Dorothy's understanding of marriage as cannibalistic. Therefore, while Dorothy prizes her femininity and sex appeal, she fears being cannibalized through the capitalist, heterosexual institution of marriage, which historically benefited the husband and repressed the wife.

It is through cannibalism that Dorothy is able to reconcile the impossible paradox of embracing her femininity and sex appeal while avoiding sexual incorporation into men. After rejecting Alex, Dorothy resolves to seek out her ex-boyfriends, whom she eventually cannibalizes, and concludes, "I like being by myself, you see. I just didn't want to be alone. And now I never will be" (243). By cannibalizing men, she instead incorporates them into her, rather than the other way around; the dark humor present in each of these descriptions situates cannibalism as a satirical critique of the consumption and commodification of women under capitalist institutions like marriage. Ultimately, Dorothy's cannibalism resolves a capitalist, heteropatriarchal paradox: by eating men under erotic circumstances, Dorothy simultaneously embraces her commodified femininity while objectifying men as a literal, cannibalistic consumer. She uses the parts of her that are consumed in order to become a consumer herself.

Because Dorothy's cannibalism settles this paradox, Dorothy fits into Louise Flockhart's study of the postfeminist female cannibal, which she discusses in "Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era." In the article, Flockhart analyzes three films — South Korean film *301/302* (dir. Park Chul-soo, 1995), American film *The Woman* (dir. Lucky McKee, 2011), and French film *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016) — to situate the rise of the international female cannibal within an increasingly "postfeminist" cultural era. While Flockhart herself does not clearly define "postfeminism," she seems to understand it as a contemporary mode of thinking about

gender in a patriarchal world that acknowledges both the successes of feminism and its drawbacks (68). The drawbacks discussed by Flockhart largely relate to the relationship between capitalistic consumption and white, middle class women — like Dorothy in *A Certain Hunger*. Flockhart shows that some middle-class women feel disillusioned about the results of feminism: while liberal feminist advocacy empowered women to be workers, consumers, and participants in capitalistic society, there are still several unresolved issues such as the gender wage gap that motivate certain middle-class women to revert back to "traditional feminine roles in the face of harsh capitalist conditions" (68). Others, however, see this return to traditional feminine roles as a feminist success: for some women (that is, white, middle-class women, or women who have the privilege to do so), it is a "success" that they need not work or be subjected to these "harsh capitalist conditions" (68–69).

Flockhart suggests that understanding *consumption* enables us to visualize the ambivalences and contradictions of postfeminism. In writing that "consumption is so key to postfeminist culture because it is through consumption that subjectivity is expressed" (69), Flockhart reads subjecthood as tied to the consumer and objecthood as tied to the consumed; therefore, in order to be subjects and not objects in the postfeminist era, women must act as consumers themselves. For Flockhart, the female cannibal is an apt figure for understanding the complicated position of the white female consumer-subject in the postfeminist era because cannibals simultaneously "show how individual women can access power through femininity and consumption," as well as "demonstrate the continuation of patriarchy, institutional misogyny and the limits of postfeminist empowerment" (71). Dorothy fits into Flockhart's model of the postfeminist female cannibal. While she assumes power as a female cannibal who consumes the white men who would otherwise consume her, her reliance on heteropatriarchal standards —

such as by marketing herself to white men using her feminine sex appeal — nonetheless shows that patriarchy still exists. Therefore, while Dorothy may have been able to climb the ranks of capitalist heteropatriarchy individually, her cannibalistic subversion does little to dismantle the actual system.

As a cannibal, Dorothy simultaneously accesses power through femininity and consumption while demonstrating the continuation of patriarchy. In one notable critique of gender roles, Dorothy says, "We like to forget that men imprisoned women in the house and expected gratitude in return" (226–227). Here, Dorothy criticizes the traditional role of the housewife in which women were responsible for cooking meals and maintaining the home. By cooking and devouring white men, Dorothy ironically embraces her "place in the kitchen" and uses it to reverse the gendered configurations of sexual consumption. Recalling her preparation of Andrew's "rump roast," Dorothy states:

> I took Andrew's rump roast home. I skinned it, trussed it, rubbed it with olive oil, red wine, thyme, lemon, garlic, and salt, and let it sit for a few hours. Then I seared it and popped it in the oven to roast until lovely and brown without a bloody cherry red within. I made a delicious Bordeaux reduction sauce, and I served the roast with crisped tiny Yukon Gold potatoes, caramelized shallots, and sautéed asparagus. The meat was quite tasty, chewier than beef, certainly, but with an earthy thrum, a kind of truffled bass note, and the piquancy that comes only from the deepest flavor of nostalgia. I felt content. (106)

By using the diction of fancy food writing to describe how she prepares Andrew's rump roast, Dorothy's dark humor shines in this passage, positioning her cannibalism as a satirical critique of the ways in which white men consume and commodify women. As a renowned food writer and critic, Dorothy transforms traditional femininity into a position of consumer power; she capitalizes on her femininity in order to become a consumer of white men. Dorothy's cannibalization of Andrew is just one of many examples in which she narrates her preparation and consumption of white, male meat with profound detail. Here, Andrew is no longer Andrew:

he is two buttocks, two slabs of meat, a rump roast, an "it." As Summers wrote in her *Vogue* essay, women know all too well "how it feels to be reduced to body parts, to breasts and thighs, to butts and bellies." Here, Dorothy reduces Andrew into nothing more than a consumable body part — a piece of meat — in the same way white men do to women under a white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy. She has embraced her role in the kitchen, and dined exquisitely.

Dorothy's sophisticated language and careful attention to detail satirically parodies lavish, fancy food writing, which elevates the position of the "housewife in the kitchen" to the elite food critic. This is a particularly powerful form of satirical critique, given that the food critic has historically been constructed as male. Dorothy thus returns to a "traditional feminine role" in the kitchen, not as the housewife but as the refined, gastronomic aesthete — an act that paradoxically enables her to become a consumer and claim subjecthood, while reducing the man she eats to a consumed object. This reflects the first tenet of Flockhart's postfeminist cannibal: that the female cannibal shows "how individual women can access power through femininity and consumption" (71).

However, the fact that Dorothy *must* access subjecthood through femininity and consumption demonstrates Flockhart's second tenet of the postfeminist female cannibal: that gaining individual power as a feminine consumer necessitates "the continuation of patriarchy [and] institutional misogyny." As she has throughout her whole life, Dorothy flaunts her sex appeal as a means of luring in her victims. With Marco's murder, for example, she slits his throat immediately after she performs oral sex on him. For Dorothy, sex has always been about cannibalism; as I discussed, even though she loves sex, she nonetheless fears being romantically and maritally incorporated into men. Dorothy discusses the linkage between sex and cannibalism shortly before she murders Andrew:

> When we have sex, we ravish our lovers, nibble their ears, lick their vulvas, or swallow their cocks. Gleeful, we banquet on flesh … You may not admit it aloud, but I know you will read this book and wonder how your lover would taste sautéed with shallots and mushrooms and deglazed with a little red wine. You read, and you wonder, and you know the answer would be *delicious.* (100–101)

By using ingestive language to describe the ways in which lovers "ravish," "nibble," "lick," and "swallow" each other during sex, Dorothy uses dark humor to call attention to the linguistic overlap between the language of sex and the language of eating — a trait that Maggie Kilgour identifies in *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation.* According to Kilgour, "sexual intercourse" is "often represented as a kind of eating … As Theodor Reik notes, 'A lover can well say to his sweetheart that he would like to eat her up and thus express his tender desire for incorporation'" (7). Coupled with Dorothy's alignment of femininity with food, the passage demonstrates that Dorothy visualizes women's sexual consumption under capitalism as cannibalistic. That Dorothy must constantly offer herself as a consumable food item to white men in order to sexually and cannibalistically consume them in return illustrates how, even though Dorothy succeeds in elevating herself to subjecthood through cannibalism, she nonetheless relies on heteropatriarchal ideals surrounding female desirability in order to come to such a position. In this way, Dorothy is a prime example of Flockhart's postfeminist female cannibal who at once achieves power as subject through femininity and consumption, all while confirming the continuation of patriarchy.

A Certain Hunger uses cannibalism to critique the ways in which women are consumed and commodified by white men under capitalism. However, the novel falls short in adequately addressing the role of race in this consumptive system. There is virtually no mention of race, ethnicity, or nationality in *A Certain Hunger,* other than the fact that Giovanni and Marco are Italian, and Marco is a Jewish man. With the cover of the novel featuring a white woman

squeezing a human heart and the vagueness of race in the novel, I presume the characters to be white. Therefore, the novel's critique of male consumption of women must be understood as specifically a critique of white, male consumption of *white* women.

The absence of racial recognition in *A Certain Hunger* is surprising, considering that Summers states in her *Vogue* essay that the intersectionality of factors like gender identity, ability, race, and age all impact women's consumption under capitalism: she writes, "Women's bodies have been a site of horror, doubly so if your female body happens to be trans, disabled, BIPOC, or old." Flockhart, too, does little to address nonwhite experiences under consumptive systems, as well as nonwhite experiences in becoming consumers, which is striking since she analyzes a South Korean film. Recognizing the unquestioned centrality of whiteness in *A Certain Hunger* and Flockhart's article, I will now examine an alternative representation of the female cannibal in a Korean American novel, whose protagonist's eating of white, male eyeballs explicitly critiques consumption across both race and gender.

The Eyes Are the Best Part: **Cannibalism as a Critique of Racial Fetishism and Sexual Objectification**

The Eyes Are the Best Part follows Ji-won, an eighteen-year-old Korean American college freshman who lives with her mother and fifteen-year-old sister, Ji-hyun. Life at home has been difficult ever since Ji-won's father left their family for another woman, leaving her mother grief-stricken and the two sisters leaning on each other for support. On top of that, Ji-won's grades have plummeted, and her only two friends are Geoffrey, a young white man whose performative beliefs in feminist causes turn out to actually just be racism and misogyny (upon realizing this, Ji-won swiftly abandons his friendship), and Alexis, a young Black woman who stirs feelings in Ji-won she can't quite understand and never fully articulates.

After her mother begins dating George, a vulgar white man who sports fetishistic racism under the self-proclaimed guise of "cultural appreciation," something carnal awakens inside Ji-won: an appetite for blue human eyeballs — specifically, George's. Ji-won's problems deepen when she realizes Geoffrey has been stalking her. As George further inserts himself into their household and uproots the two sisters' lives, Ji-won finds she can't resist the temptation. She stumbles upon dead white men with electric blue eyes, carves out their eyeballs, and eats them; at other times, she takes it upon herself to murder them just for the delicacy. Finally, she plots George's murder. Despite a rocky execution of her plan which lands her in the hospital, she succeeds in killing George and evading identification as the killer, framing Geoffrey for the crime and happily nibbling away at George's eyeballs.

While *A Certain Hunger* uses cannibalism to critique the commodification of women under capitalism, *The Eyes Are the Best Part* uses cannibalism to critique the sexual objectification of Asian American women through racial fetishism, a form of racialized and gendered sexual consumption. Many scholars in Asian American Studies have analyzed racial fetishism. In *Orientalism,* Edward Said critiques the ways in which Western cultures, perceiving themselves to be the "civilized" world (my quotations), constructed Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, which they geographically labeled "the Orient," as the "uncivilized" Other. Said's conceptual framework of Orientalism interrogates the "systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (3). As described by Shehla Burney in an analysis of Said's *Orientalism,* this process was empowered by the West's constructions of Asian cultures as various recurring fetishistic stereotypes, including

portrayals of "the Orient as weak, as feminized, as exotic, mysterious, sensual, and sexual, as something to be desired and to be possessed" (34).

Scholars in Asian American Studies who discuss the racist motif of Asian hypersexuality include Leslie Bow and Anne Cheng. In *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy*, Bow examines the ways in which contemporary American visual media abstracts race and reduces Asian Americans to "object substitutes," such as "Asianized anthropomorphic kitchen timers, cartoon pandas, feminized robots, and lifelike dolls" (2). Bow attributes this fetishistic enthrallment to "racist love," a concept that understands "attraction *as the very form* of anti-Asian bias" and describes how "Asian difference in the United States incites a specific desiring structure, one characterized by equivocation" (5). Bow argues that "expressed attraction has become a potent form of anti-Asian bias," which camouflages racist hate through alleged "declarations of 'loving' Oriental food, culture, or women" (7).

Anne Cheng examines how Asian women are particularly sexualized in *Ornamentalism,* where she provides a framework for Asian feminism that examines the embodied experiences of Asian women under systems of racial fetishism. She offers up the conceptual figure of "the yellow woman" to consider how, in its Western construction, Asian femininity instantiates "the deeper, stranger, more intricate, and more ineffable (con)fusion between thingness and personness" (14). She puts forth "the yellow woman" not as "the real but rather as a conceptual category and a critical agent, with the clear understanding that the origin of this term derives from a racist framework that is indifferent to ethnic and national specificities and to diasporic realities" (24). Cheng's "yellow woman" is both "abstract and material, embodied and disembodied"; she is an "object-person" whose "survival is secured through crushing objecthood" (1).

Bow and Cheng are crucial to my analysis of *The Eyes Are the Best Part:* Bow, with her understanding of "attraction as *the very form* of anti-Asian bias" and argument that Asian difference the United States "incites a specific desiring structure"; and Cheng, with her conceptual figure of the Asian female "object-person" who is "persistently sexualized" (4) and whose femininity is produced "out of the fusion between 'thingliness' and 'personness'" (18). These scholars both examine racial fetishism as it relates to Asian American women and people as a whole. In the novel, I argue, Ji-won's acts of cannibalism spin the narrative of racial fetishism on its head, with a particular focus on white, male consumption of Asian American women. In response to the white men who fetishize her, her mother, her sister, and other Asian women characters, Ji-won consumes the parts of white men's bodies — eyes — that facilitate their ability to visually and scopophilically consume them. In doing so, she satiates an erotic — or rather, subversively fetishistic — desire that speaks back against racial fetishism.

From the beginning of the novel, white men's fetishization of Asian women appears as casual, unabashed racism. While standing in line at a coffee shop, Ji-won overhears a group of white men speak crudely about a woman named Sharon, who is Asian:

> "I hooked up with Sharon last night…" Backward Cap says, smirking. He's pale and pink-cheeked with a deep dimple in his chin.
>
> "Dude! Nice!"
>
> "She's hot, but she's got no tits…." the tall freckled one replies.
>
> "Yeah, but she more than makes up for it in bed. Does whatever you want and begs for more. Everything they say about Asian chicks? Totally true."
>
> "You know what they say. Once you go Asian, you never go Caucasian," the freckled one says. They burst into laughter, and I stumble backward, desperate to disappear. My face is read and prickly. (33)

This conversation is a blatant demonstration of what bell hooks describes as a fetishistic, white fascination with "getting a bit of the Other" (23), and of the sexualization of Asian women that Bow and Cheng analyze in their books. The men speak about Sharon as though she is nothing

more than a sex object, casually rating her attractiveness and sexual performance. The mention of her Asian racial identity at the conclusion of their conversation explicitly ties Sharon's race to the men's perceptions of her. Their statement that "everything they say about Asian chicks" is "totally true" implies that Sharon's attractiveness and sexual performance directly result from, or perhaps are enhanced by, her Asian identity. This reflects Bow's understanding of "attraction *as the very form of* anti-Asian bias," and resembles Cheng's conceptualization of the Asian female "object-person" whose personhood is highly sexualized and imbued with "thingliness."

Instances in which white men exhibit "attraction *as the very form of* Anti-Asian bias" and construct Asian women as "object-people" continue steadily throughout the novel, and George is a dominant perpetrator. Because George gains pleasure in looking at Ji-won, Ji-hyun, and other Asian women throughout the narrative, the novel positions his gaze as an act of sexual consumption. Only a few weeks after they meet, George takes it upon himself to essentially move into their apartment, "taking up the spaces where [Ji-won's] father used to be: the empty spot at the dining table, the right side of the couch" (68). During this invasion, Ji-won states that his gaze rarely leaves her or her sister: "George's piercing eyes are on Ji-hyun and me constantly. Watching us. Judging us. Peeling us back, layer by layer. There's a hunger in his gaze, as though we are his prey" (68). Here, Kim establishes a connection between fetishization, eyes, and hunger. The passage emphasizes George's *gaze* above all else: his eyes are "piercing" and constantly "watching," "judging," and "peeling" back Ji-won and J-hyun. His "hunger" lives not in his stomach but in his "gaze"; his eyes, therefore, function the same as a mouth would, consuming a desired object — or in this case, objectified Korean American women — in front of him. While gazing at something is not the same as eating something, Kilgour classifies the act of looking as an act of consumption:

> All of our senses make contact with the world outside of our own bodies and so may be as imagined as introducing it into ourselves. We 'take things in' with our eyes and absorb sounds through our ears; both seeing and hearing are therefore often considered to be more refined versions of taste. (9)

Based on Kilgour's argument that the act of seeing is a means of making contact with the outside world and incorporating it "into ourselves," I view George's gaze as an act of consumption. As many feminist film scholars, starting with Laura Mulvey, have argued, the male gaze has been used to cut apart, objectify, and fetishize female bodies for male viewing pleasure, and George's gaze illustrates just that. His eyes are the vehicle through which he fetishizes and consumes Asian women throughout the novel — crushing, as Cheng writes, their personhood through objecthood.

As George inserts himself further and further into Ji-won's family, he repeatedly sexualizes Asian women, both within and outside their household. In all of these instances of sexualization, George's gaze is crucial; the very act of looking enables him to act on his fetishistic impulses. For example, while eating out at a Chinese restaurant, Ji-won narrates that "George is happy because our waitress is a young Asian woman named Emily, whom he gawks at with reckless abandon. After our meal arrives, George cranes his neck looking for her" (76). Earlier, upon first meeting George, Ji-won witnesses "his eyes straying down my neck, to the softness of my chest" (56). Even further, Ji-won later overhears George on the phone, speaking crudely about Ji-hyun: "Let me tell you — the younger one's got an ass. Always bouncing around in tiny shorts, too, the little slut" (168–169). In all of these instances, George's eyes enable him to voyeuristically look at Ji-won, Ji-hyun, and other Asian women throughout the novel, sexually consuming them for his own visual pleasure. Once again, to echo Bow, his attraction to all of these women forms the very basis of his anti-Asian bias; recalling Cheng, his objectification of their bodies highlights their constructed "thingliness."

Given George's overt and repeated sexualization of Asian women through his gaze, I interpret Ji-won's eating of blue eyeballs to be a subversion of racial fetishism towards Asian American women. Immediately after George looks down her shirt, Ji-won states, "For the first time, I notice that his eyes are blue: a pale, icy blue that reminds me of the Niagara Falls" (56). The image of pale, icy blue eyes — an image associated with both whiteness and Americanness, given the stereotypicality of the white-skinned, blond-haired, blue-eyed person and the reference to Niagara Falls, a US icon — continue to haunt Ji-won throughout the novel. Directly following this scene, she has a nightmare in which she is trapped inside a claustrophobic box, its walls completely dotted with eyes. To escape, she plucks them off the walls and eats them, "until my stomach is full and aching, until the wall is bare" (58). Eventually, the space grows bigger, and she finds herself in her parents' old bedroom. On the floor is a plate, and atop it lies a bright blue, human eyeball. Ji-won recalls:

> The blue is so familiar; I can't stop staring. It might be the most mesmerizing thing I've ever seen. This time, I feel no terror. It's hunger that propels me. Desire. My hand darts out and snatches the eye from the plate, and before I can think, I shove the entire thing into my mouth. The cartilage is thick and tough. I bite down until it pops, bursting open, its salty liquid oozing down my throat. It's so *good.* There's a hint of sweetness, a lemony tang, almost like a cherry tomato. I swallow the last drop and watch as the house grows bigger. (59)

The fact that Ji-won's nightmare occurs immediately after the scene in which George looks down her shirt indicates that the dream — and thus, its content — is a direct response to the incident. The familiarity of the blue eye color suggests that the eyes she dreams of are his. Ji-won responds to George's voyeurism by consuming an eye that resembles his own — the very eyes that turn reduce her to an "object-person" for his own sexual enjoyment. Just as George's gaze enables him to sexually consume Ji-won's body, the language behind Ji-won's hunger is tinged with sexual connotations. For example, when Ji-won states "It's hunger that propels me. Desire,"

the placement of "desire" after "hunger" not only indicates that desire and hunger are akin to each other as forms of wanting, but also places a sexual element onto the concept of hunger itself. The careful description of how the eye feels and tastes in her mouth is so detailed, it is nearly intimate; words like "thick," "tough," "pops," "bursting open," and "salty liquid oozing down my throat" could all feasibly fit into a sex scene.

When Ji-won begins to eat eyeballs for real, the sexual language continues to permeate her narration. Upon discovering an injured man on the ground near her friend Alexis' apartment, Ji-won initially begins to help him; but after he opens his eyes and Ji-won realizes they are blue, her demeanor immediately changes. Hunger takes over her narration:

> In spite of the smell, I'm so hungry that I can hardly stand it. I run my fingers along his cheek. I press my thumb into his bruise and listen to him hiss in pain. His eyes are closed again, but I want to see. I touch his eyelashes. They're soft. Delicate. Underneath his skin, I can feel the firmness of his eyeball, imagine the ripeness of his juicy, tender flesh. My mouth waters. I lift his eyelid and stretch it back as far as it can go, watching the glistening pink underside.
>
> *I want it. I need it.*
>
> I press my tongue against the white of his sclera. It's salty. His tears. His sweat. I can taste it all.
>
> I grab the knife from my bag. My mind is empty except for a blind desire to eat. To devour. I press the blade through his flesh and watch as blood trickles out onto his face. It's so bright against his pale skin. So beautiful. I push down forcefully to break through the cartilage, and as I do, the man howls. (188)

With its close attention to even the smallest movements, such as running her fingers along his cheek, pressing her thumb into his bruise, and touching his eyelashes, the passage unfolds at a slow, gradual pace; it almost reads as foreplay. Like the previous passage, much of the language used to describe the eyeball might also be applied to descriptions of physical sensations during a sex scene. If it were a penis, not eyeballs, described in the sentence "I can feel the firmness of his eyeball, imagine the ripeness of his juicy, tender flesh"; or similarly the prepuce instead of the

eyelid in the sentence "I lift his eyelid and stretch it back as far as it can go, watching the glistening pink underside," both descriptions would be entirely legible as a sex scene.

The pressing of Ji-won's tongue to the man's sclera could further be read as a sex act, in part because of the act of licking and in part because of the specificity of the term "sclera"; like a camera in cinematography, readers are given an intimate "close-up" of a body part not typically seen or acknowledged in a highly tense, intimate setting. Ji-won's "blind desire to eat" again links hunger and sexual desire as forms of wanting. She closes in again on the blood that trickles down his face, and as she pierces his eye with her knife — a sexually charged penetration — the man responds vocally by howling. What might be considered pleasure in a sex scene is pain in this moment instead.

As Ji-won consumes the man's eyeball after carving it out of its socket, the erotic language continues:

> I bite into the cartilage. It splits open in my mouth, the blood shooting down the back of my throat. I'm whimpering like a dog, but I can't help it. The combination of adrenaline and the taste — *oh god, the taste* — sends waves of pleasure radiating through my body. I am in ecstasy. I choke down the first one, chewing noisily, before shoving the second into my mouth. I suck the blood and fluids and juices out of it, feeling it deflate in my mouth, before swallowing. Wiping my hands clean on my jeans, I stumble out onto the sidewalk, back into the light. (190)

If the painfully slow acquisition of the eyeball resembles foreplay in the previous passage, then the fruition of Ji-won's consumption in this one is undoubtedly orgasmic. The explosive quality of eating the eyeball — "It splits open in my mouth, the blooding shooting down the back of my throat" — represents an abrupt change of pace from the previous passage; Ji-won's hunger, or desire, has at last been satiated, resulting in "adrenaline," "waves of pleasure radiating through [her] body," and "ecstasy," all orgasmic terms. The manner through which Ji-won consumes the eyeball — through choking, sucking, and swallowing — all possess connotations that could

relate to oral sex. The "blood and fluids and juices" coming out of the eyeball, which itself proceeds to "deflate" in Ji-won's mouth, could be interpreted as akin to ejaculation. Overall, the erotic language in this passage that sexualizes male genitalia is blatant; it is impossible to ignore. In this passage and the previous one, the sexual language contributes to establishing Ji-won's cannibalism as a subversive response to the sexual commodification of Asian women by white men. Just as the white men in her life persistently sexualize her and the women around her, she resists by acting on a fetish for eyeballs, consuming them under sexually charged circumstances that allow her to take away white men's ability to visually and sexually consume her.

This idea is further strengthened by the fact that at times, Ji-won fantasizes about George as she consumes other white men's eyeballs. Before consuming her first pair of eyeballs, which belongs to a man she finds dead on the street, her thoughts immediately turn to George as she stares at the man's bright blue eyes: "Seeing him, I'm inundated with memories: George, fast asleep on the couch. George, staring at me across the table. George, his fingers slick with saliva, squeezing a freshly cleaned fish eye. George smiling. George and his blue eyes" (161). Later in the novel, after she murders a drunk man to acquire his eyes, she hallucinates and sees him as George; then as Geoffrey; and lastly as one of the boys from the coffee shop, who sexualizes Sharon. When Ji-won finally eats the eyeball, she recalls, "I moan," grounding the act within the realm of the sexual (220–221). All of these men have, throughout the novel, fetishized Ji-won or another Asian woman and, as Bow describes, expressed their anti-Asian bias through attraction. Because Ji-won fantasizes about the various men who sexualize her while eating other men's eyeballs, her cannibalism becomes further ingrained as a reversal of the ways in which they sexually consume her. It is to be expected, then, that when Ji-won at last murders George at the conclusion of the novel and devours his eyeballs, "it's heaven" (273).

With the novel's critique of racial fetishism and the sexual objectification of Asian American women, Ji-won's cannibalism not only reverses a narrative of sexual consumption through Ji-won's position as an eater of white men's eyeballs; it also completely eliminates the system by which white men consume her through their gaze. In this sense, Ji-won's cannibalism proves to be an effective form of resistance against white supremacist, heteropatriarchal consumption.

Conclusion

A Certain Hunger and *The Eyes Are the Best Part* both offer feminist critiques of racialized and gendered sexual consumption, challenging who gets to eat whom. In *A Certain Hunger,* Dorothy strategically manipulates her femininity to reverse a gendered configuration of sexual consumption, cannibalizing white men who would otherwise devour her. While Dorothy reverses the heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems that empower men to consume and commodify women, she nonetheless works within the system. Despite the fact that Dorothy individually empowers herself to act as a consumer, I am reminded of an argument about female consumer-subjects from Flockhart, who states that there is danger in suggesting that "power lies with the individual despite any systematic oppression based on identities such as gender, class or race" (70). This means that even if a woman achieves subjecthood by empowering herself as a consumer, she is nonetheless participating in a capitalist society that continues to exploit and consume other people, which challenges the extent to which Dorothy, as a female cannibal, subverts capitalist systems. Dorothy's glorification of consumption through cannibalism prevents her from fully challenging capitalism or patriarchy at its core.

I agree with Flockhart to a certain extent. In my reading of *A Certain Hunger*, it is not Dorothy's individual *choice* to embrace traditional femininity that undercuts the subversiveness

of *A Certain Hunger*; rather, it is the *necessity* of her feminine sex appeal to acquiring power through cannibalism that exposes the heteropatriarchal structures still intact. Because Dorothy *must* act according to heteropatriarchal values in order to empower herself as a cannibal consumer-subject, she does not *really* dismantle the system, which challenges the subversiveness of the novel. Yet, while the system is not destroyed, the fact that Dorothy's cannibalism *exposes* heteropatriarchal structures does, to an extent, lead me to read the text as subversive. Through flipping the narrative, Summers makes visible the systemic consumption of women and provides a scathing feminist critique of the heteropatriarchal, capitalist ideologies that drive it forward. This, in itself, is subversive.

The Eyes Are the Best Part is similar to *A Certain Hunger* in many ways, but I read its subversion of gendered, consumptive systems as more effective. While Dorothy's cannibalism flips a narrative of *capitalistic* consumption, reversing but not dismantling the very system *A Certain Hunger* critiques, Ji-won's cannibalism completely stops the racist system by which Asian American women are sexually objectified. The novel presents white men's overt racial fetishism and scopophilia of Asian American women as a sexually consumptive practice. By eating white men's eyeballs — the vehicles through which white people, and in the novel's case, white men, enact their voyeuristic consumption — Ji-won not only flips the narrative of sexual consumption, but makes it *impossible* for white men to sexually consume her through their gaze. In this sense, the cannibalism in *The Eyes Are the Best Part* presents a more successful resistance to patriarchy and consumption than the cannibalism in *A Certain Hunger. A Certain Hunger* does not aim to put an end to consumptive systems, but *The Eyes Are the Best Part* certainly does.

A Certain Hunger and *The Eyes Are the Best Part* each provide a sharp, feminist critique of racialized and gendered sexual consumption by flipping the narrative of who is "cannibal" and

who is “cannibalized.” I will now turn to works in which cannibalism challenges not only frameworks of gender, but frameworks of both gender and sexuality. This will enable us to see how cannibalism might be represented in other subversive ways, challenging what sexual liberation could look like for women beyond the heteronormative structures we know.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE TEEN QUEER CANNIBAL GIRL: CANNIBALISM AND LESBIAN EXISTENCE IN *BONES AND ALL* AND *YELLOWJACKETS*

Introduction

As I have shown in Chapters One and Two, twenty-first century writers and filmmakers have critiqued human exploitation using metaphors of cannibalism and consumption. Specifically, the works I analyzed explore the commodification of women (*Fresh,* dir. Mimi Cave, 2022 and *A Certain Hunger* by Chelsea G. Summers, 2020), anti-Black racism and white people's systemic consumption of Black people (*Get Out,* dir. Jordan Peele, 2017), and racial fetishism and the sexual objectification of Asian American women (*The Eyes Are the Best Part* by Monika Kim, 2024). By using cannibalism as a feminist and anti-racist allegory, these writers and filmmakers interrogate the racialized and gendered configurations of sexual consumption, and examine how a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist American culture empowers both white men to consume women, and white people, men and women included, to consume people of color.

I turn now to filmmakers who employ cannibalistic themes as a metaphor for queer desire. One mainstream example is Bryan Fuller's television series *Hannibal* (2013–2015), a loose reimagining of Thomas Harris' novel *Red Dragon* — the prequel to Harris' novel *The Silence of the Lambs,* which was later adapted into a film of the same name by Jonathan Demme. While Fuller's series is not a direct prequel to *The Silence of the Lambs* as a novel nor as a film, it includes a number of the same characters, most importantly Hannibal Lecter. The series follows criminal profiler Will Graham, an FBI forensics instructor summoned to the field for his

ability to hyper-empathize with psychopathic serial killers. By imagining himself performing the murders, Graham gains insight into the killers' motives and identities — but not without psychological harm. To ensure he does not place himself or others in danger, FBI agent Jack Crawford orders him to work with the psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter — who, unbeknownst to the FBI, is the main serial killer they are searching for. Over the course of its three-season run, the show primarily focuses on the complex relationship between Graham and Lecter, who showrunner Bryan Fuller (who is queer himself) confirmed were "in love" in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*. While Graham and Lecter never become official lovers in the series, the show depicts the relationship between Graham and Lecter as deeply romantic: throughout the series, Graham and Lecter share many intimate, private meals,[22] engage in moments of violence (both with and against each other) that are shot in sensuous ways,[23] and harbor an entranced fascination with each other.[24] Critics and scholars highlight how the homoeroticism of their friendship is made evident through various scenes that eroticize eating. Leila Taylor, for example, argues that "Will and Hannibal's most emotionally intimate exchanges happen during acts of cannibalism" (57). Numerous others including Jacquelin Elliott, MaryKate Messimer, Jeff Casey, and Sean Donovan agree that Hannibal and Will's friendship is deeply romantic, and

[22] Taylor cites one scene in which Hannibal and Will share an intimate French meal of ortolan. She writes of the scene: "There is a close-up of Will's face as he hesitantly inserts the bird in his mouth with its beak pointed suggestively upward while Hannibal watches him with gratuitous pleasure before swallowing his bird. The camera exchanges close-up views of the pair chewing slowly with half-lidded eyes and languorous swallows with a sensuality that is more sexual than most filmic depictions of actual sex" (46).

[23] In Season 2, Episode 13, "Mizumono," Lecter stabs Graham after a moment of betrayal, and seems genuinely heartbroken to do so. Mournful music plays in the background as Graham collapses into Lecter's arms, who catches him in a romantic embrace, with one hand cupping the back of Graham's head and the other holding his back (35:21–37:11). In Season 3, Episode 13, "The Wrath of the Lamb" — the final episode of the series — Lecter and Graham team up to defeat the serial killer known as the Red Dragon alongside a cliff; in a series of slow-motion, romanticized movements, Graham and Lecter take him down together. "This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us," Lecter tells him when the deed is done, highlighting the intimacy of their killing. Graham embraces him, and as the music swells, he plunges the two of them over the cliff to an ambiguous end (38:25–41:21).

[24] In Season 3, Episode 12, "The Number of the Beast Is 666…", Will asks psychiatrist Bedelia Du Maurier, "Is Hannibal in love with me?" Bedelia replies, "Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you and find nourishment at the very sight of you? Yes. But do you ache for him?" Will, uncertain, does not answer (2:51–3:28).

maintain that eating and cannibalism are primary outlets for Hannibal and Will's homoerotic desire to come to fruition.

As the scholarship on *Hannibal* suggests, there has been considerable attention to the relationship between cannibalism and male queerness in American literature and film. However, there is a glaring shortage of scholarly work exploring the relationship between cannibalism and *female* queerness. This is striking, considering that most, if not all, female cannibals on the American screen today are queer. In addition, these queer, female cannibals all appear to be teenagers.

In this chapter, I explore cannibalism and lesbian desire as they appear in two recent American film and television productions: *Bones and All* (dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2022)[25] and *Yellowjackets* (created by Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, 2021–). In addition to *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets*, I will briefly consider one French film, *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducounau, 2016), because a scholarly article on *Raw* is crucial to my analysis of *Bones and All.* Both *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets* contain a focus on queerness particularly as it relates to teenage girls. In these productions, cannibalism appears to represent the coming-of-age of young, queer girls navigating the viciousness of girlhood and self discovery under heteropatriarchal systems for the very first time. Whereas the cannibalism of *Hannibal,* which features an adult, queer man, is decadent, refined, and sophisticated with its gourmet, expertly cooked dishes, the cannibalism of *Bones*

[25] Here I need to address the label of "American" that I have attached to Guadagnino's *Bones and All.* While Luca Guadagnino is an Italian filmmaker, his three most recent films — *Bones and All* (2022), *Challengers* (2024), and *Queer* (2024) can comfortably be described as American films. Throughout his career, Guadagnino has consistently worked with American production companies, and he has frequently cast American actors in leading roles, such as Timothée Chalamet in *Bones and All* and *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), Dakota Johnson in *Suspiria* (2018), Zendaya and Mike Faist in *Challengers* (2024), and Drew Starkey in *Queer* (2024). *Bones and All, Challengers,* and *Queer* all take place in the United States, and *Bones and All* is adapted from a 2015 young adult novel written by American writer Camille DeAngelis. Because of Guadagnino's established work with American cinema, along with *Bones and All's* undeniable Americanness through its production, actors, setting, and plotline (it takes place on a road-trip across the Midwest), I analyze *Bones and All* as an American film.

and All and *Yellowjackets* are brutal, bloody, and bestial, with the flesh often bitten off straight from the bone. These two productions offer prime examples of what I term the Teen Queer Cannibal Girl: a figure who often, but not always, closets herself in the heteronormative world and represses her burgeoning desires. The Teen Queer Cannibal Girl confuses homoerotic desire with cannibalistic hunger, and stokes her queer sexual awakenings with fleshly meals of her beloved.

While I attribute the scope of this paper to two American productions from 2021 and 2022 with interests in young, queer, female existence, their creators do not necessarily identify as queer women. Guadagnino is an openly queer man who creates films with overtly queer themes, and Lyle and Nickerson are a married couple who have not publicly stated whether they identify as queer or not.[26] However, just because the authors do not outwardly identify as queer women does not make the lesbian themes of their works any less valid. I reject the notion that the creators must come out as queer — both in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity — in order to make queer themes in their works worthy of analysis.

In both *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets*, lesbian desire becomes so all-consuming for teenage girls that it eventually erupts in homoerotic, cannibalistic acts: they eat, attempt to eat, or mimic eating the girls they desire. Cannibalism, then, becomes the means by which queer girls articulate their lesbian desires; it sanctions their identities as queer people, while casting a shadow of monstrosity over their existence — an echo of the ostracism queer people face in the real world.

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[26] Lyle and Nickerson are an apparently heterosexual couple, but I am *very* reluctant to use this phrasing, as I believe it to be problematic to assume a person's heterosexuality, and by extension gender identity, based on cisheteronormative standards. I do not want to ascribe a sexual orientation or gender identity to people who have not explicitly spoken about how they identify, or even speculate on how they might personally identify; for these reasons, I do not specify any sexual orientation or gender identity for Lyle and Nickerson in the text above.

To develop this argument, I will first define the term "lesbian," which I frequently use throughout this chapter, and clarify the intentions behind my use of it. Second, I will present scholarly context that grounds cannibalism and violence as historically related to queerness and eroticism in the American Gothic genre. Third, I will discuss the ways in which cannibalism is used as an allegory for queer coming-of-age in *Bones and All,* particularly as it relates to its young woman protagonist, whose queer sexual awakening erupts in a cannibalistic act. Fourth, I will discuss how *Yellowjackets* juxtaposes repressed lesbian desire with affirmed lesbian desire, each of which eventually lead to cannibalism. By crafting narratives in which lesbian desire results in homoerotic cannibalism and in which cannibalism frames adolescent, lesbian existence, Guadagnino, Lyle, and Nickerson explore the all-consuming nature of teen lesbian awakening and critique a heteropatriarchal society that vilifies queer existence among teenage girls navigating life and love for the first time.

A Note on the Term "Lesbian"

In this chapter, I use the term "lesbian" to describe romantic and erotic relationships between women. Today, the word "lesbian" is widely understood to denote women who are sexually or romantically attracted to other women *and* who are not attracted to men, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Many young people have extended the term's applicability to anyone who does not identify as a man, meaning that nonbinary individuals, not just women, are included under its wing; for example, two nonbinary people in a relationship with each other might consider themselves lesbians, if they felt that to be the right term for them.

For the purpose of my analysis throughout this thesis, I use "lesbian" as an umbrella term to refer to any queer sexual orientation among the female characters I analyze, regardless of whether or not they also possess the capacity to be attracted to men. For instance, Maren, one of

the main characters of Guadagnino's *Bones and All,* demonstrates both queer-coded desire towards a female friend as well as heterosexual desire towards Lee, her male co-protagonist. I personally view Maren as a bisexual character, but sometimes refer to her queer identity or desires as "lesbian" in order to simultaneously highlight her interlocking identities as both queer and female. In short, while some of the female characters I analyze would not be identified as lesbians outside of my analysis due to their capacity to be romantically or sexually attracted to men, I nonetheless describe them as "lesbians" for the sake of examining their queerness *particularly* as girls.

Contextualizing Cannibalism and Queerness in American Gothic

Ardel Haefele-Thomas argues in *American Gothic* that historically, the American Gothic genre has been "used as a mode to make the queer monstrous," often associating queerness with mental illness and violence (116). In regards to cannibal narratives, this can especially be seen in Thomas Harris' novel *The Silence of the Lambs* and Jonathan Demme's corresponding 1991 film adaptation.[27] However, many contemporary creators have used the Gothic not to articulate an inherent monstrosity of queerness, but to "explore the social layers of cultural 'difference' that divide all of us" (116). Today, queer American Gothic often ties queerness to cannibalism, a form of violence. In doing so, stories that employ these conventions — such as *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets* — reclaim the conventions of the genre that originally vilified queer existence.

The presence of cannibalism in popular culture today reflects not only the link between queerness and the Gothic, but also a specific tradition of queer cannibal imagery. Caleb Crain has

[27] Both feature a controversial portrayal of a genderqueer character, Buffalo Bill, who stitches together the skins of women in order to present himself as a woman in a "woman suit." The film feebly attempts to avoid controversy by distancing Bill from being identified as "transsexual" (Clarice Starling states at one point that "there's no correlation in the literature between transsexualism and violence"), but the film cannot escape its problematic depiction of a character that many viewers would nonetheless identify as transgender.

shown that Herman Melville was a significant early American writer to put cannibalism[28] and homosexuality[29] into conversation with each other in literature. In works such as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), *White Jacket* (1850), and *Moby-Dick* (1851), "the discovery of cannibalism in Melville resembles the discovery of homosexuality in Gothic novels. An irresistible curiosity impels the hero. He is attracted to something repulsive; he is not in control of his own actions" (32). This "double bind of attraction and repulsion," Crain states, mirrors Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of "homosexual panic," which Crain cleverly parodies with the phrase "cannibalistic panic" (Crain 33).

Sedgwick defines homosexual panic as a phenomenon in which a person experiences attraction to another person of the same sex and, unable to understand or articulate this attraction, intellectualizes their attraction as revulsion due to the heteronormative "social pressure of homophobic blackmail" (Sedgwick 89). In several Gothic works, the repression of queer desire often results not only in revulsion, but in violence; this trope can be seen in works by Shirley Jackson, Edgar Allan Poe, and others.[30] When homosexual panic manifests in the context of cannibalism, it can be considered cannibalistic panic (Crain 33).

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[28] Cannibalism was a popular topic of discussion during Melville's time because it was frequently reported in the news as having occurred among sailors at sea. According to Crain, instances of cannibalism took place on "the *Nautilus* (1807), the *Essex* (1820), the *George* (1822), the *Francis Mary* (1826), the *Granicus* (1828), the *Dalusia* (1833), the *Lucy* (1834), the *Francis Spaight* (1835), the *Elizabeth Rashleigh* (1835), the *Brig Caledonia* (1836), the *Home* (1836), the *Hannah* (1836), and the *Earl Moira* (1838)" (27).

[29] As Crain, notes, in the nineteenth century, the term "homosexuality" did not yet exist; sexual relations between men were described as "friendship" or sodomy" (26). According to Crain, the word did not emerge in the English language until 1892 (26).

[30] Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House,* published in 1959, provides several examples of lesbian panic between its two main female characters, Eleanor and Theo. Often, Eleanor expresses an infatuation with Theo that verges on attraction, but never registers her feelings as desire. Instead, she often expresses that she wants to kill Theo and engage in violent acts with her, highlighting the translation of repressed lesbian desire into aggressive outbursts in Gothic fiction. In terms of male homosexual panic, Edgar Allan Poe's short stories "William Wilson" and "The Cask of Amontillado" each present a relationship between two men involving a profound obsession with the other that leads to violent outcomes. In "William Wilson," Wilson fatally stabs his *doppelgänger,* and in "The Cask of Amontillado," Montresor buries Fortunato alive in a catacomb.

In the nineteenth century, both cannibalism and homosexuality were understood as "unspeakable" violations of the human body (Crain 28), an inherently Gothic trait. As Paulina Palmer argues in *Lesbian Gothic,* "Gothic and 'queer' share a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities" (Palmer 8). Given that both cannibalism and homosexuality were conceptualized as deeply transgressive, it makes sense that Melville might draw connections between the two in his literature, a connection that continues to exist in cannibal narratives today. In Crain's words, "Cannibalism and homosexuality violate the distinctions between identity and desire; between self and other; between what we want, what we want to be, and what we are. This is why they are appealing; this is why the nineteenth-century American man is horrified to discover that they appeal to him" (34). Cannibalism requires a transgressive collapse of boundaries in that one human incorporates another human into themself; two become one, and the boundary that once separated them no longer exists. I understand this concept as not only deeply transgressive, but highly romantic and erotic; the notion that two people may become one is matrimonial in nature, and can easily be extended to queer sexuality.

Here, like Crain, I will take a crucial moment to emphasize that there is absolutely no correlation between cannibalism and homosexuality. Queer individuals are not cannibals and are as unlikely as anyone else to eat human flesh. What I do intend to echo from Crain, however, is that nineteenth century perceptions of cannibalism were strikingly similar to nineteenth century perceptions of homosexuality. Melville, according to Crain, was among the earliest writers to notice the similarity in societal understandings of cannibalism and homosexuality, and put the two into conversation with each other in his literature (32).

Crain's scholarship is a grounding source in showing the historical relationship between cannibalism and homosexuality through the lens of nineteenth-century American literature, and

remains relevant today in that many queer cannibal narratives continue to bridge themes of queerness with themes of cannibalistic aggression. However, his article is lacking in one crucial area. Crain focuses on male homosexuality; instances of queered cannibalism in his article, then, are inherently gendered as male. When and where does cannibalism begin to be identified as a lesbian act, or as an act of *female* queerness? It is here that I intend to expand his scholarship and assess where the relationship between female homosexuality and cannibalism emerges.

As far as I have been able to identify, the overt and explicitly queer female cannibal emerged in mainstream popular culture in 2009 with the release of *Jennifer's Body* (dir. Karyn Kusama), which I analyze in Chapter Four. *Jennifer's Body,* I argue, marks the beginning of cannibalism's linkage to what Palmer terms "lesbian Gothic": a subgenre that "centres on female sexual orientation and its cultural and political ramifications" (3) and explores, "from a lesbian viewpoint, erotic female relations and their transgressive dimension" (4). After *Jennifer's Body,* the lesbian cannibal — that is, the cannibal who is queer and female — does not return to the American screen until 2021 with the introduction of *Yellowjackets,* and subsequently in 2022 with *Bones and All.* In *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets,* cannibalism invokes lesbian Gothic, centering "on female sexual orientation and its cultural and political ramifications," and explores, "from a lesbian viewpoint, erotic female relations and their transgressive dimension" (4). The fact that the female cannibals who dominate American film and television are lesbian teenagers leads me to read their status as cannibals as an allegory for coming-of-age as queer women in an unaccepting world. Recalling Crain, their "discovery of cannibalism" resembles the discovery of their burgeoning desires. This phenomenon demands scholarly attention. In these narratives, the characters' identities as queer, teenage girls are central to both their identities as cannibals as well as their performances of cannibalism.

"Wanting Things You Shouldn't Want":
Cannibalism as Repressed Female Queerness in *Bones and All*

Bones and All follows two teenagers, Maren and Lee, who have been cast into the outskirts of society due to their identities as "Eaters" — people who, much like the vampire who cannot live without blood, must consume human flesh in order to live. The two teens fall in love as they learn to accept and embrace themselves for who they are while embarking on a road trip across the Midwest in search of Maren's mother, who left her and her father when she was young. Along the way, Maren acquires a stalker named Sully, an Eater who pursues her throughout the film. By the end, she has established a normal life with Lee in Michigan, but Sully enters their home, pins Maren down on a bed, and holds a knife to her throat. Lee and Maren fight him off, but not without Sully stabbing Lee. Lee begs Maren to eat him as a final act of love, "bones and all," and, devastated, she does.

While the film's primary romance occurs between a man and a woman, Guadagnino's cannibalism functions as an allegory for queer experiences. When at eighteen years old, Maren begins to act on her cannibalistic desires, her father abandons her, leaving her with nothing but an audio recording in which he tells her everything he knows about her unsavory impulses. "I don't know what's going to happen to you or what should happen to you. I wake up nights sick to death, wondering and hoping. Hoping that whatever troubles you is over, and that if there is a God in Heaven, that you're just a regular girl, with regular problems and regular pain, and that you stop wanting things you shouldn't want, Maren," he tells her, under the premise of parental "love" (1:04:23-1:04:44). His rejection of Maren is strongly reminiscent of the familial estrangement many queer individuals experience after coming out to their families.

As I stated in this project's introduction, Tyler Foggatt writes that *Bones and All* contains several moments in which an "erotic impulse" transforms into a "cannibalistic impulse" (5).

Foggatt's observation echoes Maggie Kilgour's understanding of sexuality as cannibalistic. According to Kilgour, during sex, "the erotic and the aggressive sides of incorporation" are nearly indistinguishable, to the extent that "it becomes difficult to tell at what point the desire for consummation turns into the desire for consumption" (8). Indeed, Kilgour notes that "In French, to consume and to consummate are the same word" (7).

In *Bones and All,* the erotic impulse is certainly confused with the cannibalistic impulse, to the extent that "the erotic and aggressive sides" of cannibalism "cannot be differentiated." This confusion occurs when Maren eats a female friend's finger at a sleepover with two other girls near the start of the film. The scene carries an electric, homoerotic tension: Maren and her friend lie next to each other on their backs under a table, turning their faces towards the other as they speak. The camera rests upon their faces in a close-up overhead shot. The warm, low lighting makes for an even more intimate scene. As one of their friends applies "cinnamon glaze" nail polish to the potential love interest's finger, an intense look of desire clouds Maren's gaze. Entranced, she leans closer and closer to her friend, and her breathing becomes increasingly husky. Maren sensually smells her friend's body and eventually takes her hand, examining her fingers. With the proximity of the camera and golden lighting, one could assume that Maren is about to kiss her friend's fingertips; but instead, she closes her mouth around her ring finger, biting it off with her eyes closed in ecstasy. As the other girls pull Maren by her legs out from under the table, the camera remains close on Maren's head as she tips her head back, eyes still closed, and sighs in gratification through parted lips. She clings to her screaming friend's tights-adorned leg, her grasp sliding down her leg as the other girls pull her away (5:56-7:30). In Foggatt's words, the "erotic impulse" has turned out to be a cannibalistic one: a scene that could have led to a sensual kiss between the two girls instead led to an outburst of cannibalism.

Fig. 3.1. Maren eats her friend's finger (*Bones and All*).

The concept of confusing the erotic with the cannibalistic — of mistaking sexual desire for fleshly hunger — has a history in queer cannibal narratives. Here, Crain's notion of "cannibalistic panic" is particularly relevant. In "discovering cannibalism," Maren has also discovered her lesbian desires. An "irresistible curiosity" compels her; she is "attracted to something repulsive"; she is "not in control" of her actions (Crain 32). The fact that Maren is unable to conceptualize her queer desire for what it is and attributes it to a cannibalistic appetite resembles Sedgwick's theory of "homosexual panic," parodied in Crain's cannibalistic panic. Maren's confusion of lesbian desire with fleshly hunger reflects this queer repression: Maren does not even register her queer identity, resulting in eruptions of cannibalism. The consequences of her repressed queerness align with the definition of homosexual panic. Recalling that Eaters like Maren *must* eat human flesh in order to survive, I understand Maren's cannibalism not only as a *consequence* of her repressed lesbian existence, but *as* her lesbian existence. Like her queer identity, her status as a cannibal is an innate, unchangeable part of her, one that she will need to learn to accept and embrace.

Maren's sensual eating of her friend's finger further establishes her identity as a queer woman. Payton McCarty-Simas highlights the lesbian connotations surrounding the finger in their queer analysis of *Raw* (dir. Julia Ducournau, 2016), a French film about a young woman whose sexual awakening coincides with a cannibalistic one. The film follows Justine, a staunch vegetarian joining her older sister Alexia at veterinarian school. After being forced to eat a raw rabbit kidney as part of a hazing incident, Justine develops a cannibalistic hunger and is forced to come to terms with her new, unsavory desires — all while pursuing her roommate, Adrien, the man she develops feelings for. McCarty-Simas primarily argues that *Raw* is not only a film that ties cannibalism to a young woman's sexual awakening, but also a film in which cannibalism is used to explore the repressed queerness of Justine through its use of tropes similar to other queer genre films.[31] McCarty-Simas makes compelling arguments about *Raw* as a potentially queer film, ultimately suggesting that because all heterosexual relationships presented in the film (Justine-Adrien, Alexia-Adrien) end in violence, the only "suitable" romance left is the one between the two cannibal sisters, Justine and Alexia, resulting in a bond linking queerness (two women) and incest (two sisters) as forms of transgressive desire.[32]

While *Raw's* protagonist, Justine, is not an explicitly queer character, a scene in which her sister gives her a bikini wax is shot like an oral sex scene, with Justine's legs propped up and the camera angled between them, closing in on her sister's face as she works the wax. In an

[31] While McCarty-Simas's arguments about *Raw* individually are persuasive, their arguments about Raw's queer elements fall short in their comparative aspect. McCarty-Simas does not provide sufficient evidence from the films to which they compare moments from *Raw,* making many of their claims about *Raw's* use of queer genre film tropes feel unsupported.

[32] I want to push back slightly against this argument, as Justine and Alexia's relationship still contains violent elements. It would be misleading to say that their relationship is the only "suitable" romance on the basis that all other romantic possibilities end in violence, given that violence is deeply — and cannibalistically — present in their own relationship. One of the final scenes of *Raw* itself is, indeed, an aggressive physical altercation between the two sisters, in which they end up biting and bloodying each others' arms and faces (1:18:39-1:20:05).

accident involving scissors, her sister's finger is cut off and Justine eats it. McCarty-Simas argues that Justine's consumption of the finger, an important tool in providing pleasure in lesbian sex, may gesture towards Justine's potential identity as a queer woman.

In a film like *Bones and All* where queerness is already an overt theme, Maren's consumption of her friend's finger makes the film's lesbian themes even more apparent, nodding towards a particularly queer *female* experience. From here, however, the film's exploration of Maren's lesbian identity grows more implicit, if only because the central romance is a heterosexual one between Maren and Lee. The fact that Maren and Lee are in a heterosexual relationship should not be misconstrued as an argument that Maren and Lee themselves are not queer (I view them both as bisexual). Maren has her moment of queer desire with the girl from the slumber party, and Lee has his moment of queer desire with a man he seduces at a carnival and later eats. While the finger scene may be the only moment that explicitly nods towards Maren's lesbian identity, Lee's queer scene — in which he seduces the man at the carnival — may further nod to Maren's identity as a queer woman and as an Eater, albeit less explicitly.

In the scene, Lee and the carnival man sneak off into a cornfield to have sex. Little does the carnival man know that Lee has only seduced him in order to kill and eventually consume him. As Lee and the man have sex, Maren waits in their truck for the deed to be finished. Before the murder happens, however, something draws Maren outside of the vehicle. She sneaks through the field and, hidden within the cornstalks, observes Lee as he masturbates the man. The camera rests on a close-up of Maren as she watches them, appearing fascinated, hungry, curious and aroused all at once (1:06:14-1:08:27). Her expression could, perhaps, be interpreted as an attraction to Lee performing a sex act, given that she has an established romantic relationship with him. Her expression could also be read as having gained a fetishistic pleasure out of

observing two queer men having sex with each other. I would like to put these two interpretations aside and apply an idea that McCarty-Simas discussed in their queering of *Raw* to *Bones and All:* the idea that Maren's scopophilic pleasure may reaffirm her own queerness as a lesbian woman, rather than solely indicate an attraction to Lee or a fetish.

In *Raw,* Justine, a presumably straight woman, develops a sexual and cannibalistic hunger for Adrien, Justine's roommate and the film's only explicitly gay character. McCarty-Simas states that Justine's pursuit of Adrien led many viewers to interpret the film as a metaphor for how straight women "consume" and fetishize gay men for their own sexual pleasure. However, McCarty-Simas posits that there are other interactions with Adrien in which Justine's attraction to him is aligned with her own identity as a woman. For instance, McCarty-Simas notes that when Justine meets Adrien for the first time and expresses incredulousness that she has been assigned a man as a roommate instead of a woman, Adrien tells her, "Well, they gave you a f**. Same thing to them" (6:50). McCarty-Simas argues that Adrien's assertion that a gay man and a woman are "the same thing" enables Adrien to "feminiz[e] and alig[n] himself to her" (6), establishing a level of affinity between the two that could manifest in the form of shared queerness. McCarty-Simas reads Justine's infatuation with Adrien not as an attraction to him but as an attraction to the idea of homosexuality through a shared queer identity (6).

I would like to apply McCarty-Simas's interpretation to Maren's scopophilic pleasure as she views Lee having sex in the cornfield. After the camera cuts from Maren's gaze to Lee having sex with the man, their backs facing her, Lee slits the man's throat moments before he orgasms. As the man's groans of pleasure morph into screams of pain, the camera cuts back to Maren's face, who releases a small gasp and parts her lip. The camera cuts again to a close up of the carnival man's torso lying face-up on the ground, his breaths coming out in gags and gurgles

with blood splattered across his mouth and neck. Lee, breathing heavily, leans down and sinks his teeth into the man's pectoral, a far more sinister act of penetration than the one typically expected during sex. What was about to be an orgasm has effectively transformed into an act of cannibalism, positioning cannibalism as the climactic act of the sexual encounter. Lee vigorously and repeatedly pulls off the man's skin with his teeth, biting and chewing the flesh once it is exposed. The camera cuts back to Maren, chin tilted up and eyes cast down upon the scene. She releases another shaky gasp, which catches Lee's attention. He beckons her forth, then resumes eating the man's chest; eyes locked onto the feast, Maren pushes her way through the cornstalks and approaches Lee and the body. The camera cuts to the next scene, and both of the lovers' faces are smeared with blood as they drive away in their truck. Maren wipes her chin with a white cloth (1:06:14-1:08:27).

Fig. 3.2. Maren gazes at Lee as he has sex with the man from the carnival (*Bones and All*).

In voyeuristically observing Lee have sex with another man, Maren is, I argue, sexually aroused by her own identification with the queer intimacy in front of her, in the same vein as McCarty-Simas's reading of Justine. When Lee finally kills the man and begins to eat him with

Maren, the climax of her arousal is reached: her queerness is articulated through her cannibalistic impulse as she joins Lee in devouring him.

Ultimately, cannibalism in *Bones and All* functions as an allegory for queerness for both men and women, but I see a particular emphasis, in Maren's plot, on female queerness. The themes of particularly female queerness are more strongly depicted in Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson's *Yellowjackets* (2021–), whose queer relationships all occur between girls — and whose lesbian desires, I argue, are tethered to cannibalism.

"That's Not What You're Hungry For": Lesbian Desire as Cannibalism in *Yellowjackets*

Yellowjackets follows a high school girls' soccer team, their assistant coach, and their head coach's two sons after their plane to the national championship crashes in the Canadian Rockies. As winter approaches, the girls must survive unforgiving natural circumstances, strange and haunted happenings, and, most horrifically, each other. From the outset of Season 1, Episode 1, "Pilot," viewers know that cannibalism looms ahead: the episode contains several brief flash-forwards in which the team ritualistically hunts, kills, cooks, and eats one of their own in the woods. As the series jumps back and forth between the past (depicting the team's survival in the wilderness) and the present (depicting the adult lives of those who survived), the knowledge that the girls eventually cannibalized each other hangs over the viewer as they wait for the feast to begin.

Yellowjackets currently has three seasons, with ten episodes in Season 1, nine episodes in Season 2, and ten episodes in Season 3, which aired on February 14, 2025. Given the timeline of this project, I will focus only on Seasons 1 and 2. In Season 2, several episodes show cannibalism as an act of survival, a power struggle, and, as I will argue, a manifestation of lesbian desire. In addition, I will focus only on the plot in the wilderness and not the storyline

that occurs in the present day. Until brief moments in Season 3, cannibalism only makes its appearance in the past; therefore, the present plot is not useful to my arguments and will not be referenced throughout my analysis.[33]

Foggatt argues that *Yellowjackets* is "a study of female friendship" situated against a backdrop of cannibalism (Foggatt). As the girls' relationships to each other both deepen and deteriorate in the wilderness, Foggatt writes, "cannibalism appears to be emerging as an element of a society run by an increasingly feral group of women; the participants are not just hungry for sustenance but generally power-hungry, with the social hierarchy constantly rearranged as certain members prove themselves to be more capable of survival than others" (Foggatt).

At the heart of *Yellowjackets'* exploration of female friendship and the thorniness of girlhood lies its study of young, female queerness, with cannibalism at its center. The series juxtaposes the repression of queerness among teenage girls with the embrace of it: the homoerotic, codependent friendship between Jackie and her nerdy best friend, Shauna, and the devoted lesbian relationship between headstrong leader Taissa and persistent survivor Van. While in most instances *Yellowjackets,* like *Bones and All,* positions cannibalism as a violent outburst resulting from the repression of lesbian queerness, *Yellowjackets* goes one step further and simultaneously attaches cannibalism to the embracing of lesbian queerness.

Like *Bones and All, Yellowjackets* blurs the line between the "erotic impulse" and the "cannibalistic impulse" (Foggatt). The blending of the erotic and cannibalistic impulses first emerges in Season 1, Episode 9, "Doomcoming," in which the team hosts a makeshift soiree that ends in the attempted rape and murder of Travis, the deceased assistant coach's eldest son. After Misty, the quirky team manager who just wants to be liked by the team, drugs everyone's tea

[33] In addition, there is a major cannibalism scene at the end of Season 2 in which the Yellowjackets eat Javi, one of the coach's sons. The cannibalism in this scene does not apply to my arguments about instances of particularly homoerotic cannibalism throughout the series, so I do not analyze it in this project.

with psychedelic mushrooms, the girls' attention suddenly latches onto Travis. Deeply drugged, they seat him in a chair and begin to kiss, caress, and bite him as a group. As they descend on him, Travis imagines them with sharpened teeth and extremely dilated pupils; they animalistically rip off his shirt with their teeth in close-ups on their faces, and their grunts of pleasure could easily be confused with grunts of primal hunger. As he squirms out of their grasp and runs away, the girls hallucinate him as a stag and pursue him with the intent of hunting and devouring him (43:02–44:27). Since the girls are ravenous with winter approaching, the scene is tinged with hunger. Travis, fortunately, survives the traumatic event.

Season 2 fleshes out this theme of blending the erotic impulse with the cannibalistic impulse, this time in conversation with lesbian desire. In the very first episode, "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," Taissa sleeps next to her girlfriend, Van, and wakes up possessed by a mysterious entity. She looks at Van's slumbering face, a sexual hunger in her intense gaze, and leans in to smell her. She begins trailing her face with kisses, finally landing on her lips, and as the kiss deepens and Van stirs, Taissa bites her lip — hard enough to wake her up and, in her shriek of pain, shake Taissa out of her trance (50:53-51:30). Here, cannibalism functions as a metaphor for the all-consuming, unignorable sense of sexual desire between young, queer girls in love. Taissa, though possessed, cannot resist kissing Van in what eventually becomes a cannibalistic act of aggression through the biting of her lip. What would have happened if she continued biting, tearing it off entirely, as Justine does in one moment of *Raw*? Should she have swallowed, it might have proven to be an ultimate act of love: performing an act in which, by consuming another, they remain part of you forever. In this instance, lesbian desire between Taissa and Van is represented with a cannibalistic charge. To echo Kilgour, eroticism and aggression in this scene are so tangled up in each other that they are undifferentiable, and it rings

true that it is difficult to discern at what point Taissa's "desire for consummation turns into the desire for consumption" (8).

Fig. 3.3. Taissa, possessed, bites Van's lip (*Yellowjackets*).

While Taissa does not go so far as to cross the threshold from consummation to consumption, Shauna does not hold back. Her intimate friendship with Jackie is so parasitic that it is, in a way, symbolically cannibalistic. As Foggatt notes, Jackie dominates their friendship; Shauna's "wants and interests are cannibalized by her more popular friend," who "sought to remake Shauna in her own image" (3). Indeed, Shauna later hallucinates Jackie saying, "You know, Jeff only had sex with you because I made you into someone else" (S2E2 6:54). In an explosive argument in the final episode of Season 1, Shauna yells at Jackie, "You know, you never even asked me if I wanted to go to Rutgers? You just assumed I'd go wherever you wanted. You tell me what to wear, what to do, who to hook up with — I don't even like soccer!" (33:50–34:12). Shauna's emotional confrontation with Jackie reveals the extent to which she

feels her identity has been totally sculpted by and assimilated into Jackie, representing a metaphorical cannibalization of her very self by her overbearing best friend.

This argument takes place after Jackie confronts Shauna about how Shauna had been sleeping with her boyfriend, Jeff, before the plane crash — something Jackie learned only after secretly reading Shauna's diary in the wilderness. Jackie's discovery caused an unspoken rift in their relationship that Shauna did not understand until this very confrontation. After the argument shatters their friendship, Jackie storms out of the cabin and opts to sleep outside. In a tragic turn of events at the conclusion of Season 1, it snows and Jackie freezes, leaving Shauna to discover her.

Season 2 picks up in the aftermath of Jackie's death. Grief-stricken, Shauna props up Jackie's frozen corpse and hallucinates conversations with her, in which Jackie probes her to open up about what happened between her and Jeff — and why she enacted such a betrayal. The haunting by Shauna of Jackie invokes another trope in the lesbian Gothic. According to Palmer:

> The haunting of one woman by another, either literally or figuratively, is a key topic in Female Gothic. … Critics interpret the spectral visitor in different ways, assigning her to the role of the heroine's mother, *doppelgänger,* rival, or lover. Whichever reading the motif receives, it is particularly well suited to lesbian recasting. (10)

As Foggatt argues, it is crucial to remember that during these sequences, all of Shauna's conversations with Jackie are of her own creation. It isn't *really* Jackie speaking; it is Shauna projecting her own thoughts into Jackie's imagined, reanimated figure. Therefore, the sequences in which Shauna converses with "Jackie" should not be read as reliable conversations with Jackie but as Shauna herself processing the nature of her relationship to her overbearing friend. Because Jackie's haunting fits into the Gothic trope of the lesbian specter, I argue the nature of that relationship is queer.

Foggatt claims that "the potentially romantic nature of Shauna's devotion was further complicated by the fact that she was sleeping with Jackie's boyfriend." However, I believe that Shauna's betrayal further *strengthens* the notion that she desires Jackie, rather than complicates it. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the image of the triangle to "schematize erotic relations" between two individuals who compete for a third person — typically, two men competing for the same woman. Sedgwick cites René Girard's scholarship about the erotic triangle, stating:

> What is most interesting for our purposes in his study is its insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many sense equivalent. (21)

This theory applies to the triangulation of desire between Shauna, Jackie, and Jeff, with one small change: Shauna and Jackie are not "competing" for Jeff, so much as Shauna is attempting to articulate her desire for Jackie *through* Jeff. In this case, homoerotic relations between girls and women might be better understood not as an erotic triangle, but as an erotic chain, especially when one party, in this case Jackie, does not seem to reciprocate the romantic feelings. The girls are not erotically connected by the thread of rivalry as they each compete for Jeff; they are connected through Shauna's strategic positioning of Jeff as intermediary, facilitating the expression of her desire for Jackie.

Shauna's hallucinated conversations with Jackie illustrate her attempts to articulate her complicated and repressed attachment to her — one that eventually erupts in a cannibalistic act. During Shauna's first vision, she confesses to Jackie that she was the one to first kiss Jeff, not the other way around. Dismayed, "Jackie" asks her why; Shauna claims she doesn't know. "Jackie" responds by pressuring her: "Yes, you do. Go on, say it. Say it, Shauna. I want to hear you say it" (S2E1 20:15-21:51). Shauna continues to deny her until finally pushing her over, resulting in her

ear breaking off her head. Panicking, she plops the ear in her pocket. As Foggatt states, it is crucial to remember that all of Shauna's conversations with Jackie are created by Shauna herself. "Jackie's" insistence that Shauna *does* know why she slept with Jeff means that Shauna herself knows, too; her denial to herself indicates her inability to express what that "why" is, hinting at her own internalized repression of what is likely her desire to not sleep with Jeff, but to sleep with Jeff as a means of symbolically sleeping with Jackie. This sentiment is further supported when, at the episode's conclusion, Shauna takes the ear out of her pocket and holds it in front of her, nearly at eye level. Her face is captured in a close-up, indicating a sense of intimacy. Her eyes are locked onto the ear, and her lips are just barely parted; it is almost as if she is preparing for a kiss. Her mouth flexes, as if she wants to say something; but instead of words coming out, she closes her eyes and shoves the ear inside her mouth (S2E1 57:11-57:22).

Fig. 3.4. Shauna eats Jackie's ear (*Yellowjackets*).

The screen cuts to black, and the episode ends. As with Maren, Shauna's "discovery of cannibalism," to borrow Crain's words, resembles the discovery of her queerness in a moment of

"cannibalistic panic": the repression of Shauna's queerness results in cannibalism, an act of aggression. Yet, instead of violence exploding outwards, it has instead pointed inwards; Jackie has finally been assimilated into Shauna. Whereas Jackie metaphorically cannibalized Shauna's "wants and interests" in life, Shauna *literally* cannibalizes Jackie in death, reversing the hierarchical power dynamic that was deeply embedded within their friendship.

In the aftermath of eating Jackie's ear, Shauna's hallucinations intensify. In Season 2, Episode 2, "Edible Complex," she continues to hallucinate conversations with Jackie that further explore the truth behind why she slept with Jeff. In these conversations, several romantic gestures, tropes, and language make an appearance: most notably, the notion of "incorporation," itself a symbolically cannibalistic concept. When highlighting the erotic implications of cannibalism, Kilgour asserts that cannibalism and sexual intercourse share the necessity of incorporation, suggesting that both seek to make two bodies one (7). Sex is arguably as close as two individuals can get to one another apart from becoming totally incorporated into each other, and Kilgour notes that according to Freud, the dissatisfaction of being unable to fully do so stokes the cannibalistic impulse for total incorporation even more (7–8).

Themes of incorporation dominate *Yellowjackets'* exploration of lesbian, teenage sexual awakening, and cannibalism serves to eventually literalize Shauna's erotic desire to be one with Jackie. In Season 2, Episode 2, Shauna speaks to "Jackie" while applying blush to her cheeks: an intimate act that requires her to gently touch her face. As she does so, "Jackie" tells her mockingly, "You only had sex with [Jeff] so you could imagine being me" (7:00). Vexed, Shauna tells her to "shut up" before gently collecting Jackie's chin in her fingers and brushing lipstick against her mouth. These gestures are inherently lesbian, blending the erotic (conversations of sex) with girlhood (giving each other makeovers). They are also metaphorically cannibalistic: the

conversation is riddled with the language of incorporation ("Imagine being me," Jackie tells Shauna), which doubles as both erotic and cannibalistic. I share Foggatt's theory that Shauna, unable to understand, recognize, or express her own potentially queer desire, attributes her emotions to the desire to *be* Jackie — rather than the desire to be *with* Jackie (Foggatt).

These two concepts — desiring to be Jackie and desiring to be with Jackie — represent a confusion between lesbian desire and female identification that are articulated through cannibalistic means. When one consumes another, to what extent is she her? To what extent is she *with* her? While identifying with a person is not the same as desiring a person, the incorporative quality of each makes them similar enough that what might be romantic attraction could easily be confused with a wish to be *like* someone instead. This method of queer repression is not uncommon in Gothic works; consider Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson," in which the titular main character meets his *doppelgänger* and experiences a fascination with him so intense that it can only be described as homoerotic. Confusing queer desire with identification is an established trope in Gothic horror, and it is likely that Shauna falls prey to it in *Yellowjackets.* To be Jackie, or to be *with* Jackie — that is the question.

Shauna and "Jackie's" conversation, previously grounded in the erotic, quickly dips into the cannibalistic, where sexual appetites become confused with carnal hunger. As Shauna applies her makeup, "Jackie" lowers her voice, a knowing amusement in her eyes, and seductively tells her, "It's time to be honest, Shauna… you're hungry." Shauna snaps that a teammate is making dinner, to which Jackie responds aggressively, "That's not what you're hungry for." Here, Jackie insinuates that Shauna is hungry not for dinner, but for *Jackie,* aligning lesbian desire with cannibalistic hunger. Enticingly, Jackie reveals her forearm and begins to cut through it with a knife; Shauna panics, only to realize that she is the one holding the blade — a stark reminder that

the scene is entirely constructed by Shauna's own mind (S2E2 7:05-7:45). Here, what was previously a prodding at Shauna's true feelings towards Jackie has morphed into something else entirely. The effortlessly fluid shift from the erotic to the cannibalistic resonates with Sedgwick's homosexual panic, and by extension, Crain's cannibalistic panic. Shauna's repressed queer desires have surfaced through imaginative acts of aggression, gesturing towards Shauna's own internal identity crisis in terms of her attachment to Jackie.

Later in the episode, Shauna's teammates decide that Shauna's conversations with Jackie's corpse have gotten out of hand, and that it is time to give Jackie a proper farewell. Because the frozen ground makes it impossible to have a burial, they choose to cremate Jackie instead. Before the pyre is lit, Shauna eulogizes, "Jackie, I'll never have another friend like you. I don't even know where you end and I begin. I'm sorry, and I love you" (46:21). Once again, Shauna uses incorporative language to describe her friendship with Jackie; in doing so, she admits that she cannot identify where the boundaries end and begin between the two of them. Shauna's language, too, doubles as both romantic and metaphorically cannibalistic. The latter later comes to fruition when a mysterious force knocks snow onto Jackie's burning body, leaving her perfectly cooked for the girls to discover — and devour.

Given Shauna's established history of hallucinations throughout the past two episodes, the scene in which the team eats Jackie can be read as being from Shauna's perspective, and, ultimately, as her final outburst of aggression resulting from the repression of her queer desires. Indeed, as the scent of Jackie's cooked flesh wafts into the cabin and draws everyone outside, it is Shauna who breaks the fast, whispering as she hungrily stares at Jackie's corpse, "She wants us to." From there, the scene flashes back and forth between reality and an imagined Roman Bacchanalia feast, where the team, dressed in ancient Roman garb and golden laurel crowns, sits

around a table bedecked with roast meat, fresh fruits, candles, and chalices. In reality, Shauna cuts into Jackie's flesh; in her imagination, she pops a strawberry into her mouth. The flashes of the montage quicken, rapidly alternating between nearly indistinguishable shots of exquisite dining and vicious gnawing. The girls press food into each others' mouths; there is a flash of Taissa and Van kissing at the Bacchanalia; and the camera hones in on extreme close-ups of their faces, catching blood and wine trickling down their chins. As they feast on Jackie, the girls grunt ravenously, a sound that becomes harder and harder to hear as the music crescendoes (S2E2 56:19-59:00).

Fig. 3.5. The Yellowjackets eat Jackie (*Yellowjackets*).

In *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability,* Patricia White argues that in Gothic horror films, the erasure of lesbian desire through its confusion with female identification results in spectral hauntings and frightening happenings. White states, "The impossibility of lesbianism's coming into view, the lack of terms with which to grasp it, results in the textual dispersion of terrifying and unexpected disturbances" (75). Here, we witness Shauna's "impossible lesbianism" come into view in a "terrifying and unexpected" disturbance: cannibalism. The buildup of the sequence, from the quickening of the editing to the crescendo of the music — as well as Shauna's own internal buildup of repressed desire — can be read as orgasmic, as a hunger that has at long last been satisfied. Shauna's repression of her queerness is reconciled through her cannibalization of Jackie, which functions as a metaphorical, climactic sexual incorporation after so long a time spent nibbling at the possibility for queer existence and refusing to swallow.

In both Taissa and Van's relationship, where two women embrace their queerness, and Shauna and Jackie's relationship, where Shauna struggles to identify and accept her true desires, each homoerotic impulse resolves in the cannibalistic impulse. The fact that both the celebration and repression of queerness each end in some degree of cannibalism, whether a mere appetite through the biting of a lip or complete satiation through full-on consumption, suggests that the unstoppable outpouring of queer desire, whether affirmed or repressed, is inevitable. *Yellowjackets'* use of cannibalism, then, not only enables its exploration of the "all-consuming" nature of female friendship, but also provides a compelling commentary on the certainty of lesbian existence within it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have placed lesbian desire in scholarly conversations about cannibal narratives, which have often fallen short in addressing queerness among women. Given that most, if not all, female cannibals of significance on the American screen are queer, the absence of scholarly treatment on lesbian cannibals is striking. My analysis has shown that the contemporary female cannibal on the American screen is a queer, teenage girl, who navigates the thorniness of girlhood, female friendship, and the all-consuming nature of queer sexual awakening. The queer, teenage cannibal girl who closets herself and represses her blossoming desires — like Maren from *Bones and All* and Shauna from *Yellowjackets* — confuses homoerotic desire with cannibalistic hunger, and stokes her queer sexual awakenings with fleshly meals. Yet, even the queer, teenage cannibal girls who outwardly embrace and affirm their desires — like Taissa and Van from *Yellowjackets* — continue to be drawn to cannibalism. The fact that all roads lead to cannibalism, no matter the girl's closeted status, suggests that queerness, especially among teen girls, will never stay repressed; it will, in one way or another, eventually come out.

The linkage between queerness and cannibalism in contemporary horror media remains true to the Gothic tradition of representing queerness as a monstrosity, or as an action or identity to be ostracized, vilified, and reviled by a heteropatriarchal society. For queer women, this culture is doubly oppressive through gendered hierarchies and institutional heterosexuality. For queer girls who are just beginning to navigate these systems as they grow into women, this culture is especially vicious. *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets* exemplify the ferocity of the queer, female coming-of-age narrative through cannibalism, representing the harshness of heteropatriarchal systems as they act on young, queer girls.

Thus, if feminist and queer cannibal scholarship intends to be truly liberatory, it *must* address not only queerness, but *female* queerness — or, rather, queerness as it applies to women

and individuals who are not men. Indeed, as Adrienne Rich first acknowledged in her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," feminists must acknowledge "lesbian existence as a reality and as a source of knowledge and power available to women," and deal with "the institution of heterosexuality itself as a beachhead of male dominance" (13). Queer scholarship, and feminist scholarship in general, needs to address queer women. If scholars truly want to "eat the patriarchy," they should expand their palates to lesbian cannibal narratives.

CHAPTER FOUR:

"BOTH WAYS": CANNIBALISM AND BISEXUAL RESISTANCE IN *JENNIFER'S BODY*

Introduction

Jennifer's Body (dir. Karyn Kusama, 2009) is a darkly comic horror film that follows Jennifer Check (Megan Fox), a high school Queen Bee who, after a sacrificial ritual gone wrong, becomes cursed with the tendencies of a man-eating succubus, hell-bent on devouring the boys at her high school. It's up to Needy Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried), Jennifer's dorky best friend, to keep Jennifer at bay and end the bloodbath.

Like the works I explored in Chapter One*, Jennifer's Body* critiques a capitalist, heteropatriarchal culture that, among other racialized and gendered configurations, empowers white men to sexually consume women and their bodies for their own gain. Like Dorothy in *A Certain Hunger* and Ji-won in *The Eyes Are the Best Part,* Jennifer subverts this narrative by cannibalizing men who would otherwise consume her. However, *Jennifer's Body* differs from *A Certain Hunger* and *The Eyes Are the Best Part* in that the film is explicitly, and prominently, queer. As I illustrated in Chapter Three, queerness and cannibalism are similarly entangled in Luca Guadagnino's *Bones and All* (2022) and Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson's *Yellowjackets* (2021–), which each contain moments where same-sex cannibalism facilitates queer desire — or vice versa. However, *Jennifer's Body* diverges from these narratives, I argue, in that it is *hetero*erotic cannibalism — Jennifer's eating of boys, not girls, in sexually charged sequences — that primarily facilitates her queer desire for Needy. Thus, in a way, *Jennifer's Body* exists at the

juncture between my previous two chapters: in the film, I argue, cannibalism serves to both subvert a misogynistic sexual economy *and* articulate queer desire, making it impossible to separate one from the other.

Upon its release in 2009, *Jennifer's Body* was a massive commercial failure likely due to sexism in the film industry and extreme mismarketing.[34] Over a decade after its release, however, *Jennifer's Body* is generally hailed for its feminist and queer themes. The film has garnered a cult following in fan spaces, as well as a sizable body of cultural criticism. Tyler Foggatt for *The New Yorker* calls the film a "girlboss revenge fantasy," and Chelsea G. Summers describes it as an exploration of "self-discovery, sexual awakening, repressed teen girl rage, and the inherent thorniness of female friendship in a patriarchal world."

In addition, the film has received a small amount of academic analysis. Scholars both laud the film's feminism and interrogate it, given that it feeds into male sexual fantasies. For example, in her article "'I Eat Boys': Monstrous Femininity in *Jennifer's Body,*" Victoria Santamaría Ibor argues that "the film's specific use of the conventions of the horror genre regarding gender roles is both a feminist denunciation of a patriarchal system and a perpetuation of the same clichés the film wants to subvert" (147). This exposes "the limitations of parody, and, on the other, the apparently unescapable link between female subject positions and objectification" (163).[35]

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[34] According to *Buzzfeed, Jennifer's Body* earned $16 million in the US on a $16 million budget, meaning domestically, it profited virtually nothing. Rather than marketing the film to Cody and Kusama's intended audience of young women based on its themes of female empowerment, 20th Century Fox catered the film to straight, white, young men based on Megan Fox's sex appeal. Because of the disconnect between the film's intentions and the studio's marketing strategy, the film flopped at the box office. After all, not only does Megan Fox fail to take off her clothes; she literally "rip[s] a guy's intestines out and eat[s] them," Kusama told *Buzzfeed.* Straight, white, young men were certainly dished up something other than what they were promised, and in flooded the sexist reviews.

[35] In addition to Ibor, other scholars who have critiqued *Jennifer's Body* include Máiréad Casey, who argues that *Jennifer's Body* fails to adequately produce a feminist narrative due to alleged reliance on conservative, heteropatriarchal values, and Alba Alonso Palombi, who argues that *Jennifer's Body* showcases a progressive evolution of the *femme fatale* that highlights not the horrors of women's sexuality, but rather the horrors of how

The most insightful approach to *Jennifer's Body* is by Carmen Maria Machado, a well-known writer of contemporary queer Gothic fiction. Machado has an ongoing interest in cannibalism: in 2020, she published the short story "There and Back Again" in *Nightmare Magazine,* which features moments of cannibalism tinged with the (bi)sexual — that is, a character seduces both men and women before eating them. She also published an analysis of cannibal narratives in twenty-first century literature and film in her essay, "Hollywood's Gruesome, Lurid Obsession with People Eating People." Finally, in an essay responding to *Jennifer's Body,* which was published in the anthology *It Came From the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror,* Machado argues:

> One of the most interesting things about this film, one of the things that brings me back to it over and over again, is that it is not a film about lesbians, per se; it is not a generically queer perspective on [women-loving women] relationships. Instead, its energy is exceptionally specific: what it means to experience parallel sexualities with your best friend as you punch through the last vestiges of childhood; and, significantly, the central body of water that is bisexuality. (28)

My understanding of *Jennifer's Body* most closely aligns with Machado's, and it is from her reflections on the film that I build my analysis. Through its strategic manipulation of male sexual fantasies through Jennifer's cannibalism, *Jennifer's Body* not only subverts heteropatriarchal cultures but also resists it through queerness — particularly bisexual queerness.

Machado suggests that the division between heterosexuality and homosexuality is, itself, a heteronormative framework that often results in bisexual ostracism. Machado criticizes how many critics of *Jennifer's Body* view the film's queerness as "queerbaiting," "gay for titillation," or "performatively lesbian" (25–26), which aligns with biphobic rhetoric claiming that bisexual people are "not queer enough" (my quotations). Machado writes:

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women's sexuality "has been horribly abused for the benefit of the male gaze, and how the women – who have been represented as monsters – are actually victims trying to survive the aftermath of their violation" (12).

> I am sympathetic to the desire to name and shame queerbaiting — it is, after all, an attempt to protect queerness from dilution, from interlopers, from accusations of unseriousness — but every piece of present-day me bristles against it. Who established these terms? Why is it always bisexuals who seem to fall afoul of these rules? It always struck me as odd to think of public queerness in heterosexual terms, even for ostensibly progressive reasons. (30)

When Machado writes about "think[ing] of public queerness in heterosexual terms," I interpret her to mean that societal understandings of queerness are rooted in binary categories that privilege heteronormative thinking and result in bisexual ostracism. Under this mode of thought, a woman, for example, is either heterosexual (attracted only to men) or homosexual (attracted only to women). Heterosexuality, being the dominant sexual orientation, is therefore "normative"; homosexuality, then, is Other, nonnormative, *queer*.

The very notion of bisexuality, however, defies heteronormative thinking by collapsing the division between what is normative and what is not. Regarding the nature of bisexuality, Machado states:

> Bisexuality is slippery; it can appear to be other things, it can disguise itself in ways monosexuality can't, reveal itself against all knowledge and expectations. … And like homosexuality, but unlike heterosexuality, bisexuality is temporally unmoored, unfixed from the sexual activity or desire of the current moment; a true teleological orientation. (30)

The ability to experience both heterosexual attraction and homosexual attraction makes bisexuality, in Machado's words, "unmoored" and "unfixed" from the heteronormative apparatus that only has the structural capacity to recognize one or the other. Bisexuality, then, enables one to "slip" into both heteroerotic and homoerotic spaces and dissolve the boundary between normative and nonnormative sexuality. By possessing the capacity to, in Jennifer's words, "go both ways," bisexuality not only resists and destabilizes the heteronormative apparatus; it effectively delegitimizes it.

Even though *Jennifer's Body* precedes all the other works I analyze, I am analyzing it last. I do so because its treatment of cannibalism is, in many ways, the most radical, and represents a culmination of the arguments I have made in preceding chapters. In this chapter, I take as my starting point Machado's understanding of *Jennifer's Body* as "uniquely bisexual" and her assertion that "bisexuality itself is inherently resistant to heteronormative frameworks" (32). Building on Machado's framework, I argue that Jennifer's cannibalism takes on bisexual meaning by collapsing the boundaries between the heteroerotic and the homoerotic, eradicating the heteronormative frameworks that dictate their separation. First, I show how the film initially connects Jennifer's cannibalistic hunger to her desire for Needy. Second, I discuss the scholarship of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adrienne Rich, whose discussions of erotic triangulation and compulsory heterosexuality, respectively, provide an additional framework for my argument that Jennifer articulates homoerotic desire for Needy through heteroerotic cannibalism. I then compare various scenes in which Jennifer cannibalizes boys to show that Jennifer gains more pleasure from eating boys who are close in proximity to Needy than those who have no personal ties to her. Lastly, I show how Jennifer's failures to realize her desire for Needy through heteroerotic cannibalism lead her to engage in homoerotic acts of cannibalism as a last resort. Because of the film's unique and particular attention to female bisexuality, I argue that Jennifer's bi-queerness enables her to resist capitalist heteropatriarchy by permeating, collapsing, and bouncing between both heteroerotic and homoerotic spaces through cannibalism.

Cannibalistic Hunger as Queer Desire

Early on in the film, *Jennifer's Body* establishes a connection between Jennifer's cannibalistic hunger and her desire for Needy. Jennifer and Needy's mutual attraction are consistently depicted throughout the story: at the beginning of the film, a classmate calls Needy "lesbi-gay" at school

assembly for beaming at Jennifer as she twirls her color guard flag on the gymnasium floor (6:12), and just a few scenes later at a local band's gig, Jennifer gently takes Needy's hand in her own as she watches the band perform (15:55). After the band kidnaps Jennifer, attempts to ritualistically sacrifice her, and unexpectedly curses her with cannibalistic hunger, it is Needy she first seeks out. She appears in Needy's kitchen and can barely restrain herself from sensually biting Needy's neck in order to satiate her excruciating hunger (24:42–25:07).

Fig. 4.1. Jennifer grazes her lips against Needy's neck, refraining from biting her *(Jennifer's Body)*.

Here we witness a moment in which homoerotic attraction dips into cannibalistic territory. As Jennifer's teeth and lips linger against Needy's neck, it is nearly impossible to discern, in Foggatt's terms, the "erotic impulse" from the "cannibalistic impulse." As I showed in Chapter Three, the confusion of homoerotic desire with cannibalistic hunger is a staple convention of queer, female cannibal narratives, and we see Jennifer reflect that here.

While the film introduces Jennifer's cannibalistic hunger as inherently connected to her desire for Needy, Jennifer does not attempt to eat her again until the very end of the film. Instead, she spends the majority of the film eating boys, in sequences that are, largely, just as erotically charged as this one. Based on the difference in tone and in the proximity of each boy to Needy, I argue Jennifer does not eat boys because she is attracted to them but rather eats them in order to remove them from Needy's inner circle, opening up a place for her at her side. It is Jennifer's heteroerotic cannibalism, I argue, that primarily facilitates her queer desire.

Cannibalism and Conditional Arousal:
Tonal Eroticism and Boys' Proximity to Needy

As I explained in Chapter Three, in *Between Men,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the image of the triangle to "schematize erotic relations" in English literature in which two men compete for the same woman. Sedgwick states that, according to the scholarship of René Girard, "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (21). As I showed in my analysis of *Yellowjackets,* for women, such (homo)erotic entanglements often manifest, in my words, as a "chain" instead of a "triangle": a woman conceptualizes her desire for another woman by pursuing a man of significance to her — perhaps she loves him, perhaps he loves her, or perhaps they love each other.

I now explain this phenomenon by turning to Adrienne Rich. Based on Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," I attribute the schematization of the erotic chain to Rich's assertion that heterosexuality is an institutional, patriarchal system that, by nature, forces women to conform to it: she posits "heterosexuality itself [is] a beachhead of male dominance" and that, in literature and in reality, it is "presumed the 'sexual preference' of 'most women'" (13). A world in which heterosexuality is "presumed" is a world in which queer sexuality, for those who identify as queer, is at the very least inconceivable and at the very most invisible. Bearing this theory in mind, I find it feasible for a woman to be compelled towards heterosexuality, even as — or perhaps *especially* as — she desires another woman.

Such is the case in *Jennifer's Body* with Jennifer's desire for Needy. While Shauna from *Yellowjackets* eventually cannibalizes the girl she desires, throughout most of the film Jennifer takes a different approach. Instead of eating Needy as an articulation of her desire, she eats the boys who surround her. Throughout the film, Jennifer eats or attempts to eat three boys: Jonas,

Colin, and Chip. She lures each boy with romantic and sexual advances in order to isolate them; once alone, she gets as far as kissing them before diverting to eating them. While the sexual nature of Jennifer's cannibalism functions in part to critique rape culture and subvert white men's sexual consumption of women, I argue that it also functions as a means of articulating Jennifer's fantasies of sexual contact with Needy.

While each of the scenes in which Jennifer cannibalizes a boy involve erotic acts, not every scene is shot to *be* erotic. The level of tonal eroticism and the proximity of each boy to Needy, I argue, illuminates the conditions under which Jennifer expresses the most arousal. Given that Jennifer functions as the main character in these scenes, I interpret the scene's tone to reflect the level of Jennifer's arousal. When Jennifer's victim has a relationship of some sort to Needy, the scene's tonal eroticism elevates, reflecting Jennifer's increased pleasure. When Jennifer's victim does not have a connection to Needy, there is no tonal eroticism despite the sexual content, reflecting Jennifer's disinterest. The fact that Jennifer's increased arousal only occurs when she cannibalizes boys close to Needy suggests that her heteroerotic cannibalism functions as a means of articulating her queer desires for her.

When Jennifer eats Jonas, there is little tonal eroticism even though she spends the majority of the scene kissing him. Instead, the tone is awkward and apathetic. Viewers do not even *witness* the cannibalism; only the events that lead up to it. In the scene, Jennifer isolates Jonas before she eats him. She brings Jonas into the woods behind their school's football field, where she proceeds to aggressively kiss him. With the lack of music, the focus on the wet sounds of kissing, and the use of medium shots instead of extreme close-ups, the buildup to Jennifer's cannibalism comes across as awkward rather than titillating. The big, outdoor, woodland setting eliminates any opportunity for real intimacy. As they kiss, squirrels, birds, and other woodland

animals emerge from hiding and watch them; when Jonas notices the strange occurrence, even he is pulled out of the mood.

Fig. 4.2. Jennifer and Jonas stop kissing to observe the animals watching them *(Jennifer's Body)*.

I understand the "awkwardness" of the scene as the complete lack of authentic sexual desire Jennifer feels towards Jonas in the events leading up to her cannibalism. Even when the shots turn to close-ups as Jennifer unzips her sweatshirt and reveals her breasts to Jonas, the viewer sees surprisingly little of her naked torso; when she tears apart Jonas shirt, unzips his jeans, and begins groping his penis through his underwear, her body is largely obscured by Jonas towering form and her own long hair. Laura Mulvey argues in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that mainstream cinema objectifies the female figure for a male gaze, with women's "appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (837). In this scene, even the voyeuristic viewer is denied the ability to be titillated at the sight of Jennifer, which contributes to the scene's non-eroticism despite its sexual content.

Most of all, though, the cannibalism in this scene is not erotic because the viewer does not even see it. The closest viewers get to witnessing Jennifer's cannibalism is just moments before her teeth make contact with Jonas's body. Having lost her patience, Jennifer shoves him against a tree with extreme force, unleashes her demonic canines, unhinges her jaw, and lunges at him.

Fig. 4.3 Jennifer unleashes her canines as she prepares to lunge at Jonas and devour him *(Jennifer's Body)*.

The sight of Jennifer's open mouth and sharp, jagged teeth resembles the image of the *vagina dentata,* a concept Creed discusses in *The Monstrous-Feminine* in which women were thought to have teeth in their vaginas (2). As I noted in the introduction to this project, the *vagina dentata* has historically been invoked to express fears about women's sexual agency and desires, and attaches the concept of female sexuality to cannibalistic monstrosity. Here, Jennifer is clearly being sexual, and clearly about to cannibalize someone; yet, despite her sexual actions, the scene is tonally void of eroticism, and despite her unhinged jaw, the film holds back from showing her devouring him. Instead, the shot cuts to his screams echoing across the school parking lot;

presumably, Jennifer has begun to eat him. In the next shot, Jennifer is gone, and Jonas is found on the forest floor by a schoolteacher, dead and cannibalized. The flesh on his lower torso is torn open with bloodied guts strewn about, and a deer feeds on his remains (31:09–33:58).

Fig. 4.4. Jonas' cannibalized corpse *(Jennifer's Body)*.

The speed with which the scene progresses from apathetic kissing, to brief violence, to skipping the actual cannibalism and cutting straight to Jonas' corpse keeps it from obtaining any erotic tone, which is often slow-paced and gradual. Other scenes in which Jennifer cannibalizes boys, however, do contain these traits.

When Jennifer eats Colin, a friend of Needy's, the scene carries a much stronger erotic charge. At first, Jennifer has no interest in cannibalizing Colin. While walking out of class, Colin asks Jennifer out, and Jennifer harshly turns him down. After Colin walks away in humiliation,

Needy defends him, saying she thinks he is "cool." Immediately, Jennifer changes her mind and invites him to her home for a movie date, where she will inevitably cannibalize him. Here, it is significant that Jennifer only agrees to go out with Colin because Needy expressed admiration for him. The fact that Jennifer goes on to murder and eat him means that she has specifically targeted a boy who is close, in some fashion, to Needy. Here, Jennifer begins the triangulation of her desire for Needy through Colin. According to Sedgwick's logic, Jennifer might be perceived as initiating a competition with Needy for Colin's affection, strengthening their homoerotic bond through rivalry. However, based on my framework of the erotic "chain" rather than "triangle," I argue that Jennifer instead pursues Colin — sexually and cannibalistically — in order to fantasize sexual contact with Needy. Jennifer makes contact with Colin, who has a connection to Needy; therefore, Jennifer symbolically makes contact with Needy *through* Colin.

When Jennifer cannibalizes Colin in the following scene, she does so in Jennifer fashion: she lures him with the promise of sex, and viciously devours him instead. Jennifer instructs him to arrive at an abandoned house, not her own as she suggested. When Colin finds Jennifer in the attic, the room is littered with candles, their flickering lights casting warm glows upon their faces. Compared to her kissing scene with Jonas, Jennifer appears to be more aroused; she does not don the artificial, giggly persona that she did with Jonas, and instead tells him in a low voice, "We can play mommy and daddy." As Jennifer begins to kiss Colin, the scene flips back and forth between shots of the two of them kissing and shots of Needy and her boyfriend, Chip, having sex. As Jennifer breaks Colin's bones and pushes him to the floor, Needy is haunted with visions of Jennifer and the crime scene itself; in other words, while Chip is having sex with Needy, Needy is thinking about Jennifer. Given the back-and-forth ricocheting of the sequence, it is entirely possible that Needy, too, is on Jennifer's mind. Flipping back to Jennifer, viewers

witness the shadow of her figure as she positions herself on top of Colin's horizontal body; then, she sensually bites off pieces of flesh from his throat and, with each swallow, tips her head back in ecstasy (50:43–55:32).

Fig. 4.5. Jennifer eats Colin after seducing him in an erotically charged cannibalism scene (*Jennifer's Body*).

Compared to the scene in which Jennifer cannibalizes Jonas in the middle of the woods, this moment carries an electric sexual charge. Whereas Jennifer kissed and consumed Jonas in the open space of a forest, she cannibalizes Colin in the privacy of an attic, making for a more intimate scene. In addition, the golden candlelight against their skin, coupled with the shadowy darkness surrounding them, heightens both the erotic charge and the frightening tension of the scene. The lighting is in stark contrast to Jonas's cannibalization scene, which is bright, colorful, and entirely non-erotic. In addition, in this scene we see the erotic chain become realized: with the scene constantly flipping back and forth between Needy having sex with Chip and Jennifer cannibalizing Colin, Jennifer is, on a psychological level, making contact with Needy through Colin in her own imagination. This adds to the eroticism of the scene: not only is the cannibalism itself framed as sexual, but it is juxtaposed alongside actual sex that enables Jennifer to fantasize

about Needy. In this sense, Jennifer's heteroerotic cannibalism allows her to imagine herself making sexual contact with her best friend.

I attribute the difference in tone between the cannibalization of Jonas and Colin to Needy's relationship with each of the characters. Needy has no connection to Jonas; therefore, eating and kissing him gives Jennifer minimal arousal. However, Needy *does* have ties to Colin; he is a fellow student in her creative writing class who produces works she admires, and she comes to his defense when Jennifer degrades him for asking her out. This crucial detail suggests that Colin's proximity to Needy makes him more appetizing to Jennifer, resulting in a more erotic experience for her. In this sense, her enactment of heteroerotic cannibalism facilitates her homoerotic desire for Needy through the framework of the erotic chain; by cannibalizing Colin under sexual circumstances, she is closer to making sexual contact with Needy than she is by cannibalizing Jonas.

Jennifer's attempted cannibalization of Chip, Needy's boyfriend, further suggests that Jennifer expresses queer desire for Needy by sexually cannibalizing boys who are close to her. Like Colin, Jennifer previously had little interest in Chip as a person until he began to get in the way of her proximity to Needy. After Needy realizes that the school's upcoming dance will be an "all-you-can-eat buffet" for Jennifer, she refuses to accompany Chip as his date and encourages him to stay home instead, while Needy monitors Jennifer at the event. Yet, despite Needy's warning, Chip still makes his way to the dance — and is intercepted by Jennifer outside. As she did with Jonas and Colin, Jennifer seduces Chip before she cannibalizes him. She tells Chip that Needy cheated on him, and the two proceed to kiss on the ground. Yet, while it is Chip that Jennifer is kissing, it is Needy who occupies her thoughts. "Say I'm better than Needy," she murmurs against his lips (1:20:31–1:20:46). Once again, the erotic chain is invoked when

Jennifer thinks about Needy in an erotic moment with a boy — one that will soon become cannibalistic.

Jennifer brings Chip to an abandoned pool, where her kissing soon turns to cannibalism. When Needy arrives at the scene, having sensed that Chip was in trouble, she finds Jennifer pinning him against the wall of the pool, devouring chunks of flesh from his neck.

Fig. 4.6. Jennifer hisses at Needy after biting off chunks of Chip's neck *(Jennifer's Body)*.

After she jumps on top of her and sprays her with pepper spray, Jennifer levitates out of the pool and onto the deck, followed by Needy who climbs out with Chip. Needy demands to know why Jennifer chose to pursue and cannibalize Chip (1:22:29–1:26:35):

> **NEEDY:** Why do you need him? Huh? You could have anybody that you want, Jennifer. So, why Chip? Is it just to tick me off? Or is it because you're just really insecure?
>
> **JENNIFER:** I am not insecure, Needy. God, that's a joke. How could I ever be insecure? I was the Snowflake Queen!
>
> **NEEDY:** Yeah, two years ago, when you were socially relevant.
>
> **JENNIFER:** I am still socially relevant.

NEEDY: And when you didn't need laxatives to stay skinny.

JENNIFER: I am going to eat your soul and shit it out, Lesnicki!

NEEDY: I thought you only murdered boys.

JENNIFER: I go both ways.

Because Jennifer primarily cannibalizes boys that are important to Needy, I understand Jennifer's alleged insecurity not as being related to Jennifer's social relevance, as Needy posits, but rather her relevance to *Needy.* While Needy constantly lives in the shadow of Jennifer throughout the film, Jennifer, too, seems to feel that the boys in Needy's life overshadow her own relevance to her best friend. The truth is that Jennifer *cannot* have anybody that she wants, as Needy claims, because she cannot have Needy herself. That is why she pursues boys of significance to Needy, like Chip and Colin: by cannibalizing and eliminating them from the picture, Jennifer can ultimately take Chip's place at Needy's side and be Needy's closest partner, a concept that is deeply homoerotic. In this way, Jennifer's heterosexual relationships with the boys she cannibalizes allows her to articulate and fantasize about her homoerotic desire for Needy. Her statement "I go both ways," now an iconic line at the center of the film's queer following, highlights the ways in which she permeates both heteroerotic and homoerotic spaces; with her threat to eat Needy's soul after only eating boys, the film further infuses cannibalism with bisexual meaning.

Jennifer's Return to Homoerotic Cannibalism

Jennifer's attempted cannibalization of Chip leads him to die of blood loss, shattering her friendship with Needy. Jennifer has now eaten and eliminated every boy who is close to Needy, but her broken friendship prevents her from assuming a proximity to Needy that equaled Chip's. The inability of Jennifer to take Chip's place at Needy's side culminates, ultimately, in a return to

homoerotic cannibalism that I argue is Jennifer's final attempt at making sexual contact with Needy.

In her rage, Needy attacks Jennifer as she lounges in bed, killing her in a homoerotic fight — but not before Jennifer gets a taste of Needy's flesh. Needy jumps through her window and flings herself on top of Jennifer's horizontal body, resembling an earlier scene in which she kissed her, in her bed, in an almost identical position. In the earlier scene, Jennifer promised Needy that "I'm not going to bite you," but here, she breaks her promise: she sinks her teeth deep into Needy's shoulder. Jennifer licks her lips, now coated with Needy's blood, and moans, appearing to gain pleasure from tasting her. In Foggatt's words, the "erotic impulse" has once again transformed into the "cannibalistic impulse," and Jennifer arrives back at homoerotic cannibalism.

Fig. 4.7. Jennifer bites Needy *(Jennifer's Body)*.

Recalling Kilgour's quotation from St. Thomas Aquinas — "Lovers would wish for two to become one; but since this would result in the physical destruction of one or both they seek the union that befits them" (qtd. in Kilgour 7) — I suggest that the failures of Jennifer's heteroerotic cannibalism to manifest her desires for Needy have now forced her to turn to homoerotic cannibalism as a last resort. By eating boys instead of Needy, Jennifer sought to approach a state in which she makes sexual contact with Needy without causing "the physical destruction" of the two of them necessitated by cannibalism. However, because she cannot have Needy romantically or sexually even with the boys out of the picture, she resorts to having her cannibalistically; becoming one with her by eating her is, perhaps to Jennifer, better than nothing at all. As Kilgour writes, "The desire to become one with another slides easily into an act of aggression" (8), and Jennifer's final return to homoerotic cannibalism demonstrates just that. In the end, Jennifer is only able to secure a taste of Needy before Needy fatally stabs her with a boxcutter; even until death, she does whatever it takes to secure her desires for Needy — heteroerotically, homoerotically, and cannibalistically. If a taste is all she can acquire, perhaps, for Jennifer, that is enough.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have employed Machado's framework of bisexuality, Sedgwick's theory of erotic triangulation, and Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality to show how Jennifer's heteroerotic cannibalization of boys enables her to articulate homoerotic desire for Needy. My reading of the overlap between queerness and cannibalism in *Jennifer's Body* expands my arguments from Chapter Three, where I show how homoerotic cannibalism facilitates queer desire and vice versa in *Bones and All* and *Yellowjackets*. In addition, in contrast to much of my analysis in Chapter Three, where cannibalism was often the result of repressed queerness, in

Jennifer's Body cannibalism is a mode of *expressed* queerness. In eating both boys and girls under sexual circumstances, Jennifer's cannibalism takes on an inherently bisexual meaning. In particular, though, it is Jennifer's use of heteroerotic cannibalism in order to express queer desire that positions cannibalism as a subversive act in the film. By using *hetero*erotic cannibalism to facilitate queer desire instead of *homo*erotic cannibalism, Jennifer obliterates the heteronormative framework that divides heterosexuality from homosexuality, using cannibalism as a form of particularly bisexual resistance against heteropatriarchal ideals.

In addition to expanding my argument from Chapter Three, I also build upon my arguments from Chapter Two. There, I argue that Chelsea G. Summers' novel *A Certain Hunger* and Monika Kim's novel *The Eyes Are the Best Part* flip an established narrative of racialized and gendered sexual consumption, positioning women as cannibals instead of as people who are cannibalized. While I argued that Kim's novel is more subversive than Summers' novel due to the fact that its cannibalism stops the apparatus by which women are consumed, *Jennifer's Body* is subversive in a different way. In collapsing the division between "both ways" through her subversive cannibalism, Jennifer exposes the fragility of boundaries, the weakness of heteronormative structures, and the frailty of capitalist, heteropatriarchal systems when faced with a monstrous queer woman.

CONCLUSION:

THE AFTERTASTE OF FEMINIST AND QUEER CANNIBAL NARRATIVES

In this thesis, I have shown how a selection of twenty-first century American literature, film, and television uses cannibalism to explore issues related to gender and sexuality. First, I showed how cannibalism serves as an allegory for gendered and racialized configurations of sexual consumption under a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist American culture. Chapter One focuses on films that present these systems as they exist in our world today. *Fresh* (dir. Mimi Cave, 2022) presents a narrative in which white men literally cannibalize women, representing a sexual economy that empowers white men to capitalistically consume women as commodities. *Get Out* (dir. Jordan Peele, 2017) presents a narrative in which white people overtake the bodies of Black people and subsume their identities into their own, reflecting a fetishistic, racially motivated assimilation of identity that bell hooks calls "consumer cannibalism."

While *Fresh* and *Get Out* each use literal or metaphorical cannibalism to present gendered and racialized configurations of social consumption as they exist in the real world, other works, such as Chelsea G. Summers' 2020 novel *A Certain Hunger* and Monika Kim's 2024 novel *The Eyes Are the Best Part,* reverse this narrative by flipping the position of who is the cannibalistic consumer and who is the item to be consumed. In Chapter Two, I argued that Dorothy, the protagonist of *A Certain Hunger,* simultaneously reverses and reifies a heteropatriarchal system of sexual consumption by employing traditional feminine gender

expectations in order to gain sexual power through cannibalism. While *A Certain Hunger* falls short in adequately addressing the role of race in systems of sexual consumption, *The Eyes Are the Best Part* explicitly critiques consumption across both race and gender from the perspective of a young Korean American woman. Ji-won, the main character, subverts a system of racial fetishism by eating the eyeballs of white men, taking away the means by which they would otherwise scopophilically consume her. When taken together, these two chapters show how cannibalism serves as an apt metaphor for allegorizing and even literalizing oppressive systems of sexual consumption across race and gender, while at the same time functioning as a powerful subversion of them.

In other texts, I argue, cannibalism functions as a metaphor for the all-consuming nature of lesbian desire, identity, and existence in a heteronormative society. In Chapter Three, I identified a trope in twenty-first century American film and television in which female cannibals are all, as far as I can tell, adolescent and queer. I examined this trope — which I call the Teen Queer Cannibal Girl — as it appears in *Bones and All* (dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2022) and *Yellowjackets* (created by Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, 2021–). In these productions, homoerotic cannibalism facilitates burgeoning lesbian desires. At the same time, cannibalism both embodies the vicious realities of queer, female coming-of age in a heteronormative world, and liberates them from a patriarchal culture that would see them dished up for white, male sexual pleasure.

In Chapter Four, I explored themes of cannibalism and bisexual resistance in *Jennifer's Body.* Whereas in Chapter Three lesbian desire becomes realized through homoerotic acts of cannibalism, in *Jennifer's Body,* I argued that it is through *hetero*erotic cannibalism that Jennifer articulates her queer desire for Needy. By strategically killing and cannibalizing boys who are

close to Needy, I argued that Jennifer attempts to position herself as close to Needy as possible without any boys getting in the way of her pursuit. By expressing her queer desires through heteroerotic cannibalism, Jennifer adopts a bisexual mode of resistance to heteropatriarchy that enables her to permeate both heteroerotic and homoerotic spaces. In collapsing the boundaries between the heteroerotic and the homoerotic through cannibalism, Jennifer shatters the heteropatriarchal systems of consumption that govern her existence as a queer woman.

I have now shown the prominence of cannibalism in twenty-first century American literature, film, and television, and I have argued that today, cannibalism has become a dominant means of exploring themes of gender and women's sexuality. While I have analyzed a wealth of texts throughout the writing of this thesis, I have been consistently stumped by what seems like a simple question: *Why now?* Why is cannibalism now being used as a mainstream, foremost metaphor for gendered and racialized configurations of sexual consumption? Why has it simultaneously emerged in a selection of American popular culture as a metaphor for the raw, all-consuming nature of queer desire?

Chelsea G. Summers and Carmen Maria Machado have each sought to address these questions in essays published in *Vogue* and *Bon Appétit,* respectively. For Summers and Machado, cannibalism is so popular in American media today because, despite all its ineffable horror, cannibalism is, ironically, recognizable. As I referenced in Chapter Two, Summers writes:

> As we slog through our post-pandemic present, a time of quiet quitting and low-key unhinged disaffection, cannibalism speaks our language. Late-stage capitalism, most of us are realizing, isn't delivering on its promise, and endless participation in grind-core hustle culture often feels like we're being devoured one bite at a time. Beyond that working-class shared experience, however, cannibalism feels ripe for a feminist makeover because so much about femininity centers on consumption—what we can eat, how much we can eat, how to present yourself as appealing, and how those questions are inextricably intertwined. (Summers, "Defining Cultural Trope")

Like Summers, Machado also cites post-pandemic fatigue as spurring a collective reckoning with capitalism, which in turn drives recent affinities with cannibalism. Referencing cannibal films' increase in viewership, Machado writes:

> Viewers find themselves wandering down a different avenue of horror—one that may feel particularly recognizable at the wake of a pandemic and the brink of a recession, amid today's social, political, and environmental anxieties and inequities, when life already feels unbearably precarious for so many of us. (Machado, "Hollywood's Gruesome, Lurid Obsession")

For both Summers and Machado, it has become increasingly evident in our post-pandemic world that we, the collective, now feel the extent to which capitalist, "grind-core hustle" culture eats away at us — and in Summers' case, at women. Cannibalism, it would seem, is so popular in American media today because people can, on a terrifying, base level, relate to it. After all, unlike other mainstream, consuming monsters like vampires and zombies, we are, like the cannibal, human. We are consumers as much as we are consumed; we are symbolic cannibals as much as we are symbolically cannibalized.

I agree with both Summers and Machado that cannibalism is, after all, familiar; as a soon-to-be college graduate, I certainly relate to feeling like I've been "devoured one bite at a time" (I've definitely been consumed by this thesis!). In terms of cannibalism's emerging allegorical ties to gender and sexuality, I also agree with Summers' argument that "so much of femininity centers on consumption," which again — as a woman myself — makes cannibalism on page and screen all the more recognizable. Even so, I can't help but feel that something is missing from the picture — something crucial to answering the question.

What I've come to think is that my question itself — about why cannibalism is now so popular a feminist and queer image in American media — is misleading. Just because these narratives have *become mainstream* since 2009, does not mean that these narratives did not exist

previously. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, scholars such as Maggie Kilgour, Jeff Berglund, Vincent Woodard, Caleb Crain, and more have shown that writers have used cannibalism to explore white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems of consumption for hundreds of years — not just the last sixteen. It is only now that the *consumers* of American popular culture have developed a taste for these feminist and queer cannibal stories — despite these narratives having existed long before the eruption of modern works like *Jennifer's Body* or *Yellowjackets*. Perhaps the better question, then, is this: what has caused us to not only *produce* cannibal narratives, but to become so ravenous for them now?

What I gather from Summers and Machado, mostly, is that cannibalization is exhausting. How much can one be eaten away at until there is nothing left to devour? Alternatively, how much can one eat before they can eat no longer? In today's age of globalized communication, social media, and instant gratification, I consume — and am consumed by — news about global injustice, rising fascism, and imminent environmental collapse. So much of the terrors we witness in the real world are so instantaneous, so close to us, and yet so removed that perhaps cannibal narratives serve as a wake-up call. Perhaps we have become so desensitized to the consumptive systems of oppression of our time that we require something not only recognizable, but drastically literal.

Or perhaps, in all their interrogations of capitalism, the rise in cannibal narratives is indicative of a rise in the very consumer cultures and cannibalizing structures they set out to critique. Perhaps they are a mirror image of ourselves, showing that we are nonetheless consumer-participants in the very systems they challenge.

So, yes: it may be that feminist and queer cannibal narratives are so popular today because, now more than ever, we recognize what it feels like to be devoured under capitalism —

and feel both affirmed and called to action in having that feeling literalized through cannibalism on page and screen. At the same time, perhaps the popularity of these narratives serves as a reminder that while we recognize being eaten in the books, films, and television series we consume, we are nonetheless cannibals, too — as much as we are cannibalized. Cannibal narratives are mainstream today, plain and simple, because we are hungry for more.

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