

# Matters of the Flesh: A Vegan Literary Studies Perspective on Cannibalism

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## ABSTRACT

Vegan literary studies – a field that has crystallized and grown in recent years – challenges scholars and readers to reevaluate notions of food, eating, and food avoidance as they appear in literary texts. Meat, for instance, has been argued to appear differently, and as more closely attached to the animal from whom it came, when read through vegan literary studies approaches. In addition, several scholars in the field have, albeit often briefly, pointed to how texts can imply confusion about the sources of meat or symbolically conflate the flesh of other animals with that of humans, thus turning meat eating into a transgressive act.

But what can vegan literary studies approaches do to our readings of texts in which the flesh being eaten *is*, unequivocally, human, as well as texts that more explicitly equate meat eating with cannibalism? The philosopher Cora Diamond has (in)famously argued that distinguishing between eating meat and eating people is a way in which we “learn what a human being is,” and – from Melville to Martel, from Shakespeare to Cronenberg – the taboo of cannibalism arguably haunts human existence by making us objects and undermining human subjectivity. Hence, cannibalism is often read simply as an act of dehumanization. However, this paper argues that because vegan studies approaches inherently reject Diamond’s particular way of telling humans from other animals, they open up new perspectives on the taboo of cannibalism as well as on eating other animals.

**Sune Borkfelt** has lectured at Aarhus University, Denmark, since 2007. He is author of *Reading Slaughter: Abattoir Fictions, Space, and Empathy in Late Modernity* (Palgrave, 2022), as well as co-editor (with Matthias Stephan) of *Literary Animal Studies and the Climate Crisis* (Palgrave, 2022) and *Interrogating Boundaries of the Nonhuman: Literature, Climate Change, and Environmental Crises* (Lexington Books, 2022). His research on topics such as nonhuman otherness, the naming of nonhuman animals, postcolonial animals, vegan literary studies, critical animal pedagogies, and the ethics of animal product marketing, has appeared in a variety of journals and edited collections. He is also editor of a 2016 special issue of the journal *Otherness: Essays and Studies* focused on animal alterity.