Trujillo on Cevasco, 'Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast'

Review published on Thursday, February 2, 2023

Carla Cevasco. *Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. xii + 241 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-25134-0.

Reviewed by Anthony Trujillo (Harvard University) **Published on** H-Early-America (February, 2023)
Commissioned by Patrick Luck (Florida Polytechnic University)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58255

Where does the colonial impulse reside in the body? Some might imagine the brain as the most potent colonizing organ. In *Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast*, Carla Cevasco challenges that assumption by moving colonial desire into the gut. In 177 sometimes delicious, sometimes ghastly pages, Cevasco stages the colonial encounter between the English and the French and Indigenous nations of the Northeast (primarily the Haudenosaunee, the Wabanaki Confederacy, and coastal Algonquians) deep in the hunger-panged body.

The book, whose temporal frame begins in the seventeenth century and concludes at the culmination of the Seven Years' War in 1763, is organized thematically with the body of Samuel Kirkland, the Presbyterian missionary to the Oneida and the Tuscarora, serving as the orifice through which Cevasco's study of hunger unfolds (more on this structuring device below). The central problem she seeks to elucidate is "how people defined hunger and how they lived through it." But not all hungering bodies or conceptions of hunger were treated the same, she contends: "In early America, as in our own time, authoritarian power structures saw certain peoples' hunger as more important or real than others" (p. 5). Hunger, for Cevasco, is a geopolitical force.

In chapter 1, Cevasco lays theoretical groundwork offering two new terms that form the basis for her comparative analysis: "hunger cultures" and "hunger knowledges." "Hunger culture is the way that different cultures conceptualize and experience hunger. Hunger knowledge is a subset of hunger culture that encompasses the ways that people respond to and survive hunger" (p. 8). Cevasco argues that the hunger knowledges and cultures of the English, French, and Indigenous nations could, in some surprising instances, bring them nearer to each other than might be expected—as we later see when the author considers the fleshly cravings animating the Catholic Eucharist, the Protestant Lord's Supper, and Haudenosaunee and Wendat ritual cannibalism—and, in other instances, open up vast epistemological distances between nations even when living in close proximity to each other. The two works Cevasco cites in laying out definitions that are important for situating *Violent Appetites* theoretically are William Sewell's "The Concepts of Culture" essay and Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.[1] Indeed, Cevasco sets out to historicize the making and unmaking of colonial and Indigenous bodies by closely following the intimate borderlands contests and exchanges between them.

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Trujillo on Cevasco, 'Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast'*. H-Early-America. 02-02-2023.
https://networks.h-net.org/node/8585/reviews/12295923/trujillo-cevasco-violent-appetites-hunger-early-northeast
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

The second chapter looks closely at the rituals and practices of "feasting and fasting" with an emphasis on the latter and the physical and spiritual authority produced through exercises of intentional deprivation. Fasting was hardly a novel concept for Indigenous peoples, and Cevasco observes that "the invaders wondered: if fasting was one of the fundamental expressions of colonial religious authority, why were Native people so much better at it" (p. 78). In chapter 3, an examination of "disgust," it will come as no surprise that colonists felt as much repulsion to the foods and eating practices of Indigenous nations as they did toward their spiritual practices—a connection Cevasco pointedly makes. What is less familiar is the disgust Indigenous people of the Northeast felt toward colonists. Cevasco tunes into the repulsion Weetamoo—the Wampanoag Saunkskwa who was the powerful counterpart of Metacomet (aka King Philip)—likely felt toward Mary Rowlandson through her insightful close, against-the-grain reading of Rowlandson's captivity narrative. In this, Cevasco pushes further into the interpretive terrain opened up by the pathbreaking gender and sexuality scholarship on this text by Lisa Brooks, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and others.[2] Cevasco makes a well-evidenced argument that disgust, whether read onto the bodies of colonists or Indigenous people, functioned as a discourse that empowered some bodies and disempowered others.

Chapter 4, "Eaten Up: Cannibalism," is particularly harrowing—and provocative. Through a close look at the discourses and rituals of cannibalism—as a ritual practice, as a means of survival, and as a metaphor for colonization—Cevasco presses into the deeper currents shaping hunger knowledges and hunger practices. This is by far Cevasco's most ambitious—and unwieldy—chapter. This is, in part, because the aspects of "cannibalisms" she seeks to bring together under the one analytic are extensive and, in part, because it is a topic for which sources only offer a glimpse of the deeper, embodied meanings of these practices. And yet, as Cevasco notes, the prevalence of the discourses of cannibalism in "early America" demands such a thoroughgoing treatment. One can easily imagine this single chapter becoming the subject of a book-length study. That (hopeful) future study aside, Cevasco does exemplary work in demonstrating the extent to which "cannibalism had a hold on [people's] minds" as well as their bodies (p. 135).

If the earlier chapters orient around themes more central to cultural and religious studies, chapter 5 is a welcome intervention into military history, which necessarily highlights the decisive force Indigenous nations injected into borderlands military campaigns. With a fine-grained reading of the negotiations between Massachusetts and the Wabanaki, Cevasco gives her fullest analysis of the concept she foregrounds in her introduction: reciprocity. Every gesture, demand, and food placed on or taken off the table had significance—and it was often Indigenous nations' ability to compel reciprocity that highlighted their power. In the process of preventing conflict, engaging in war, securing allies (or at least neutrality), and negotiating for peace, Cevasco shows, "the politics of the dinner table became the politics of the negotiating table" (p. 139). When she turns to the Seven Years' War, Cevasco argues that the war was only partly won and lost on the battlefield. Military fortunes could shift dramatically over the more quotidian problem of figuring out what, if anything, was going to be served up for dinner. Delightfully, it is in the military camp that Cevasco argues for the decisive presence of women: "At least some of those who provisioned soldiers would have been women, though they were rarely discussed in official documents" (p. 159).

One of the curious choices Cevasco makes throughout the book is the narrative device of opening each chapter with a vignette that centers—even as it interrogates—the body of the missionary Samuel Kirkland. At times, these vignettes can feel strained in their relation to the content that follows. They

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Trujillo on Cevasco, 'Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast'*. H-Early-America. 02-02-2023.
https://networks.h-net.org/node/8585/reviews/12295923/trujillo-cevasco-violent-appetites-hunger-early-northeast
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

also point to the bodies whose hunger receives the fullest treatment: Anglo colonists. Nevertheless, the prolific Kirkland is certainly emblematic of many who crisscrossed the cultural, territorial, and gastrointestinal borderlands Cevasco so stomach-grippingly elucidates. And his body serves as a focusing optic for a critique of colonial power, as well as an intimate look into its vulnerability. Indeed, positioned at the nexus of borderlands history, American studies, the history of the body, and the history of food—with a forceful concluding essay that brings these hungry histories into a precarious present—*Violent Appetites* is a visceral, existential study of precarity and scarcity and the extreme measures people and nations will take to fend off and survive both.

Notes

[1]. William Sewall, "The Concepts of Culture," in *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 152-74; and Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[2]. Cevasco notes the following works as particularly influential for her reading of Rowlandson's captivity narrative, which, taken together, call attention to the interdisciplinary approach that gives this book a unique critical edge: Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Jordan Alexander Stein, "Mary Rowlandson's Hunger and the Historiography of Sexuality," *American Literature* 81, no. 3 (September 2009): 469-95; and Rachel B. Herrmann, "'Their Filthy Trash': Taste, Eating, and Work in Mary Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 12, nos. 1–2 (May 2015): 45-70.

Citation: Anthony Trujillo. Review of Cevasco, Carla, *Violent Appetites: Hunger in the Early Northeast*. H-Early-America, H-Net Reviews. February, 2023. **URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58255

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.