In 1550, France celebrated its new relationship with the South Atlantic by importing fifty Tupinamba natives to “simulate their battles” and entertain King Henry II and Catherine de Medicis on the eve of the colonial era (Denis 3-4). It was “a truly curious monument for the two countries” (19) because what began as a festival symbolizing international prowess and fascination with the exotic cannibal ritual became an omen for France’s own religious “battles” culminating in the Saint-Barthelemy’s Day Massacre.

Jean de Léry, a member of the Huguenot resistance, made this comparison by using his experience in Brazil to condemn the violence of the French Reformation. In the process of writing *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*, Léry synthesizes the Renaissance method of scientific observation and humanism. Léry subverts his own colonial perspective and sees the humanity of the Tupinamba instead of the contemporary trend to portray them as mythical half-human cannibals waiting to be civilized.

He uses their humanity to criticize his own French culture and experience of religious turmoil. Paolo Carile describes Léry’s ability to “apply this reversal of perspectives which cultivates a respect for others over the self so as to establish a critical distance, a space that can become ironic, by relation of the one’s own self and one’s own culture” (Carile 31). Léry integrates his observations of Tupinamba culture with questions of why and how they compare to his own culture. This culminates in his juxtaposition of cannibalism with the Saint-Barthelemy’s Day Massacre (Jurt 62). Cannibalism as a metaphor for the massacre ironically reflects the schism of the Reformation over transubstantiation and consubstantiation (Léry Voyage 68).

Léry fashions a new ethnographic method through his vocabulary and thematic organization. He also condemns the violence of the French Reformation by comparing his Brazilian and French experiences. From the conception of colonial endeavors to the final published edition, all events and characters involved show the intimacy between the production of this text with the Protestant experience in sixteenth century France. I compare Léry’s text with that of his contemporary, André Thevet [Singularities of the French Antarctic]. I have focused on their discussion of nudity and cannibalism because both concern “the human flesh” and symbolize the crisis of the Eucharist and opposing interpretations of flesh.

A quick briefing on Léry and Thevet and their involvement with the colonial process

Gaspar de Coligny, a Protestant working for the Catholic Crown, funded the French endeavor in Brazil
to establish a refuge for persecuted Protestants on the Island of Dieppe (just off the Brazilian mainland) (Larcarde 82). The colonists united under a banner of tolerance, and the party included twenty-two year old Jean de Léry. The veil of tolerance soon disintegrated with controversy over transubstantiation resulting in the starvation of the Protestants by Nicolas Durand Villegagnon, a Catholic and vice admiral to Coligny (Jurt 55). The Protestants fled to the mainland, where Léry encountered the Tupinamba and observe their culture and in a sense flee his national identity (Léry 55). He was no longer confined to a French identity and thus the French definition of humanity.

Léry compares “the inhumanity that [Villegagnon] uses against these people” to the “treason he used against us, sending us from our outpost to the land of the savages” (85). As Frank Lestringant writes: “There he was rejected and annihilated, now on the exterior, like the Amerindians” (Lestringant Studi 82): as a Protestant, Léry was worth no more than a savage to his people. His transition from Frenchman to savage, this dehumanization, influences Léry to rethink the definition of humanity.

**Reading Léry’s new ethnography**

Léry and Thevet reveal their authorial intentions when they approach nudity. Thevet’s description comes from his colonial quest to civilize (Jurt 58). He emphasizes the inseparability of nudity from bestial anti-Christian behavior:

> without law, religion, without any civility, but living like irrational beasts, ... always nude, men as much as women, and until they come to be converted by Christians will, little by little, shed their brutality, to dress civilly and more humanely (Thivet 134-5).

Thevet asserts that a colonial effort will “clothe” this naked, bestial society (“without law, religion, or any civility”) with a “fashion,” or society fit for humans.¹

Léry, conversely, uses nudity to show that the Tupinamba are actually quite fit humans. He describes their nudity as natural and their bodies as well-formed (Léry 96). He emphasizes their humanity: “Understand, imagine, a naked man, well-proportioned and well formed in his parts.” Asking his readers to “imagine … a man” immediately asks them to imagine a human, as they know one, a European, as opposed to imagining an “irrational beast.” Combined with his attention to detail he constructs a realistic portrait of the Tupinamba people. Léry eventually uses this portrait to make a social critique of his own people.

Léry writes an equally realistic account of cannibalism. Neither romanticizing nor condemning it, he situates “these murders” (221) in the context of Tupinamba warfare ceremony. Léry observes that the Tupinamba ate their prisoners of war “more for vengeance than for taste” (220). Thevet casually describes how they ate the Portuguese: “for without any reasons, the Savages of the country killed [the Portuguese] and ate them as they do to their enemies” (Thivet 111). Before his audience learns about “the Savages,” he affirms the prevalent mythology. Thevet confuses his discourse on cannibalism with other examples of monstrosity around the world, interchanging the word cannibal with savage, black, idolatrous, and beasts. It is difficult to understand which people are the Tupinamba. His inability to render a clearer portrait of who practices cannibalism or how it is practiced merely emphasizes the cruelty of cannibalism, propagating the mythology of somewhere, dark(er) skinned half-humans roasting themselves.

Léry eases his readership into the Tupinamba world. He cushions abstract concepts such as religion and cannibalism between chapters on social culture and language, which allows his European audience to understand the Tupinamba society as equally complex, comparable to Europeans, and more human, and vice versa. This attention to presentation and ability of observation make this text what Joseph Jurt calls the “chef d’œuvre de la littérature ethnographique” (Jurt 53). This new method of ethnography gives him an epistemological framework against which he can contrast his own French culture and the Reformation.

**Reading Léry’s critique of the Reformation**

Léry could have written an anthropological account of the Tupinamba in his Histoire d’un voyage in 1558, upon the return of his voyage. The first publication twenty years later (1578), post-dating the failure of the French colony at Dieppe, Thevet’s two publications Singularitez (1558) and Cosmographie Universelle² (1575), and Léry’s own Histoire memorable de la ville de Sancerre which recorded the famine of Sancerre and Saint-Barthelemy’s Day Massacre (1572). Léry incorporates these events into Histoire d’un voyage and in doing so transcends ethnography and shows the inhumanity of his own culture and the turmoil of the Reformation.

Léry’s Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil, presumably about his voyage, has a remarkable similarity to Histoire memorable de la ville de Sancerre (Larcarde 51). Léry invokes his first publication, in which he spares no details of the grotesque
suffering in the fourth religious war of 1572-73 (Larcaude 52), with the
title of the second.3 Géralde Nakam describes how Léry incorporates
Histoire memorable as way to foil the violence of the Reformation against
the Tupinamba culture:
The voyage to Brazil, the
Sancerrian
crisis of Sancerre, represent
both exile and solidarity.
Since, because of rekindled
polemics, the witness can
no longer be anonymous: he
incarnates, with his own eyes,
the exoticism of the noble
Brazilian and the Sancerrian
tragedy (Nakam, 130).
In Histoire d’un voyage, Léry’s
criticism of the French Reformation
begins with a study of nudity and culminates in a comparison of
cannibalism to the Saint-Barthelemy’s
Day Massacre.
Where Thevet sees nudity
as a physical and mental lack in the
presence of abundant material, Léry
asks why the French wear clothes.
He describes Tupinamba nudity as
free of voyeurism because there is no
“dishonesty to look at nude women”
(Léry 114). In contrast, he argues the
elaborate clothing of French women is sexually excessive (Jurt 61) and
is “without comparison, the cause
of much misconduct than the ordinary
nudity of female savages” (Léry
114). Léry concludes that instead of
wearing clothing “for honesty and
necessity,” the French wear clothes
“for glory and worldliness” (Léry
115). The nudity of the Tupinamba
is not immodest because clothing
hardly signifies modesty in his own
culture. This criticism of French
clothing seems mundane, but it introduces a radical new “reversal of
perspectives” (Carile 31). Léry uses
the Tupinamba culture to question the
norms of his own culture (as opposed
to the traditional “normative” style
of ethnography like Thevet who
evaluates the foreign to his French
standards (Jurt 56)). Léry establishes
this “reversal” early in his text so
when he arrives at more abstract
concepts like cannibalism, his readers
understand, or at least are acquainted
with, his method of comparison.
On cannibalism, Thevet
again compares “their culture” to
“French culture.” Always instilling
a mortal fear of cannibals who “have
difficulty in killing a Christian
and eating him],” Thivet compares
how cannibals eat in French terms:
they eat “like we here eat beef and
mutton” (Thivet 140). Comparing
cannibalism to French cuisine happens
before any discussion on cannibalism
or how it fits into its greater context
of war ritual both isolates and
betriles the cannibal practice to a
choice of diet, rendering it morally
simple, easy to condemn. Léry
intentionally safeguards against this
kind of thinking by contextualizing
cannibalism in the Tupinamba culture
of war and into the greater context of
universal human cruelty.

Léry does this by describing
Tupinamba cannibalism with the
violence of the French Reformation.
He shows that barbarity is universal
human experience by emphasizing the
extent of Protestant suffering and
Catholic hypocrisy. He concludes his
chapter on cannibalism by introducing
this concept of universal cruelty:
To those who will read these
horrible things, exercised
ritually between the barbarous
nations of the land of Brazil,
can come somewhat closer to
understanding such dangers
among us ourselves (Léry
228).
Léry argues that learning about
these cruel practices can make
“those who will read” think about
violence “among” their own culture.
He continues with an example of
cruelty within French civilization by
referencing the famine of Sancerre:
“it would be best to cut the throat
all in one stroke, then to do it so as
to let it languish” (228). In essence,
Protestant suffering was so great that
it seemed painless in comparison.
He implies that the Tupinamba are
in some respects (morally) more
human in killing their enemies rather
than making them suffer. He also
points out the hypocrisy of Catholic
condemnation of cannibalism by
describing Transubstantiation: “they
eat, nevertheless, not grossly, but
instead spiritually, to eat the flesh of
Jesus Christ” (68). In this metaphor
the Catholics become cannibals.
Léry evokes the horror of
Saint-Barthelemy’s Day Massacre
to develop this relationship between
Transubstantiation and cannibalism.
He introduces the massacre:
And without going far from
which France? (I fled from
France) during the bloody
tragedy that began at Paris on
the 24 of August, 1527 (229).
He implicitly asks why condemn
violence abroad when such cruelty
exists at home. He develops his
metaphor of the Catholics as cannibals,
“why is no horror expressed for those
for whom the hearts and other parts
of the body that were eaten by their
furious murderers?” (229) Léry
argues that the Catholics were not
satisfied eradicating the Protestants
but had to make the Protestants
suffer by “eating” their faith and
their hearts. Léry substitutes the verb
to “eat” for murder to postulate why
killing can be condoned in a society
that condemns cannibalism. He
ironically demonstrates the ultimate
equivality between killing someone
and eating someone: the death of the
victim.
However, he defines this
“butchery of the French people” as “more barbarous and cruel than that of the savages” (229), because it concerns French people killing French people (as opposed to Tupinambas killing their prisoners of war). To him, what matters is the pain, suffering and murder of “their parents, neighbors and compatriots” (230), because Saint-Barthelemy’s Day Massacre represents the possibility of localized cruelty and violence. It also sets a precedent, crucial to the time of the developing nation-state, for lines to be drawn within French borders declaring who is and who is not a real Christian, who is and is not part of the nation.  Léry argues there is no universal definition of Christianity just as there is no universal definition of humanity.

Nudity and cannibalism: lessons in tolerance

In Histoire d’un voyage, Léry writes of a world where, naked or not, one is either a cannibal or the victim of cannibalism. Whether one is a nude Tupinamba native, a suffering Protestant or a Catholic supporter of the Reformation in sixteenth century France, cannibalism exists both literally and metaphorically. Léry is able to make this connection because he defines cannibalism in his ethnography of the Tupinamba and then compares it to how the Protestants suffered at the hands of the Catholics. In his long discourse on nudity and cannibalism he attempts to negate the mythology and render the Tupinamba people human. Rendering this image allows his European audience to expand their concept of humanity. He uses Histoire d’un voyage as his looking glass, to reflect the inhumanity of his own society. Léry’s new anthropology, based on a broader concept of humanity, also reflects a shift in religious tolerance that his Protestantism represents, and vice versa (Lestringant, “La Renaissance”). The evolution of anthropology and Christianity in the sixteenth century can simultaneously be characterized by a new impetus for tolerance.

Léry’s new “tolerant” ethnography based on a more liberal understanding of humanity is perhaps an effect of his expulsion from the Catholic colonial project, making him feel more affection and affiliation for the Tupinamba. But his text resonates with the greater philosophical tensions of the Renaissance. Jean Céard describes this new mode of liberal thinking in the politico-religious climate of the Renaissance: “This tension between the honest quest for unity and the surprising face of the admirable variety of the world” (Céard 77).

The sixteenth century has both this “obstinate quest of unity,” symbolized by the use of religion in the process of nation building, and this “admirable variety of the world,” symbolized by the explosion of European discovery. This new and sudden diversity negated one of the fundamental building blocks holding up European society, namely the Christian story of Genesis. Tension between pre-New World and post-New World concepts of human origin called for a reevaluation of the fundamentals holding society together. Lestringant names this discourse “hierarchical thought” against “the dissipated and the disparate” where the former subordinates “diversity to unity” featuring “a center, origin, and unique source,” and the latter is “stuck in the concrete” and “it never goes beyond its own generalizations” (Lestringant “La Renaissance” 75-6). Thévet can be seen as an example of the former because his descriptions of nudity and cannibalism always include a comparison back to French Catholic values, his operational center, his one truth. Léry, on the other-hand, questions French Catholic values in comparison to the Tupinamba, simultaneously validating Tupinamba as part of humanity and debunking the concept of a universal definition of humanity.

Léry professes a similar concept in his Advertissement de l’Auteur in the final publication of Histoire d’un voyage (1611). As Géralde Nakam introduces it, “where the conquistador says ‘more to have than to see’” (Nakam Léry, 44), Léry writes in his last edition, “MORE TO SEE THAN TO HAVE” (Léry voyage 398). The colonizer would rather have everything before he would see or understand what is in his grasp. It does not matter what it is, as long as it is subordinated to the colonizer, his religion or his one “unity.” Léry, on the other hand, says that it is better to know than to have: that it is better to understand the Tupinamba culture then to claim to it, that it is better to accept Protestantism then to eradicate it.

Léry writes his Protestant experience on a canvas of human flesh by using his description of nudity and cannibalism in Brazil as a comparison to the cruelty of his own French culture. His new ethnography comes from a mélange of his own experience as an “other” (being part of a persecuted religious minority): the civility he felt amongst the Tupinamba when expelled from the French colonial project, as compared to the barbarity of his own people during the Reformation. Because of his own experiences he advocates a new religious tolerance that broadens the definition of Christianity. His situational ability to dissociate from his own culture allows him to operate
outside its traditional epistemological framework. His vision, unrestricted by the national colonial agenda, allows him to expand the concept of humanity and thus create a new ethnography founded on principles of tolerance. Léry’s *Histoire d’un voyage* embodies the transitions in Renaissance thought: away from the sub-human cannibal to the human, away from the heretic to the accepted Christian, and away from universal truth to concepts of diversity.

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**Works Cited**


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**Footnotes**

1 To his credit, Thevet later describes a more innocent nudity, “[Ils] viuent touts nuds ainsi qu’ils sortent du ventre de la mere” (Thevet 141), but this initial aggressive attack on Tupinamba nudity and how it relates to their lack of culture defeats the purpose of attempting to make himself appear the “benevolent viewer.”

2 Jean-Claude Morisot suggests that Léry’s publication in 1578 is a direct response to Thevet’s *Cosmographie*
Universelle. In this publication Thevet blamed the failure of French colonial endeavors in Brésil on the Protestants (Morisot XI). Also included in this publication were conversations with natives in Canada, where Thevet supposedly never landed (Schlesinger 5).

3 The last line of his introductory sonet in Histoire memorable summarizes his thesis of universal humanity based on a universal experience of tragedy: “Tout l’univers de hideux en partage” (Léry Sancerre 177).

4 Frank Lestringant points out the irony of a nation that condemns cannibalism yet will “<<vomit>> l’intrus au lieu de l’intégrer” because this practice of expulsion from within is often attributed to “des societes anthropophages” (Lestringant “La Renaissance” 82).

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