Cannibalism, Communion, and Multifaith Sacrifice in the Novel and Film Life of Pi

Michael Thorn

Journal of Religion and Popular Culture, Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2015, pp. 1-15 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rpc/summary/v027/27.1.thorn.html
Cannibalism, Communion, and Multifaith Sacrifice in the Novel and Film Life of Pi

Michael Thorn
York and Ryerson Universities

Abstract: This article argues that Yann Martel’s and Ang Lee’s Life of Pi is a multicultural story of maternal cannibalism that resists discourses of cannibalism that assume only the excess of the Other can eat human flesh. Whereas on one level the main character’s cannibalism is sublimated into a tale about a boy and four animals on a lifeboat, on a deeper level it is about a Hindu mother’s Christian sacrifice that answers her son’s Islamic prayers. Although psychoanalytic theory is used to unlock the maternal cannibalism underlying Pi’s tale, the discourse of oedipal and pre-oedipal desire is rejected as discounting the specificity of Pi’s adult trauma.

Keywords: Life of Pi, cannibalism, communion, the Eucharist, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue, psychoanalysis, psychology, faith, rationality

Interfaith Conflict and the Blind Frenchman: A Film’s Repressed Trauma?

At one point in the novel Life of Pi (2001), sixteen-year-old Pi Patel finds himself and his parents trapped between a Muslim imam, a Christian priest, and a Hindu pandit, each of whom was initially cordial and inviting when he believed Pi was one of his own (Martel 2001, 71–77). However, after the religious leaders discover Pi’s simultaneous practice of all three of their religions, they turn on each other. The imam declares both Hindus and Christians idolaters, claiming also that Hindus are caste-system slave drivers and that Christians are pig-eating cannibals. The priest denounces Hindus for worshipping cows and believing in cartoon strip myths and then denigrates Islam’s Prophet for being little more than an illiterate epileptic. For his part, the pandit accuses Muslims of being uncivilized polygamists and Christians of kneeling before a white colonial God. Through all of this, Pi’s parents, also unaware of their son’s multifaith practice, watch bewildered. This moment of religious multiculturalism turned upside down, while certainly humorous, is also quite aggressive and intolerant. Yet Pi has the last word, reminding everyone, “Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true’” (76). Although what he calls his “introduction to interfaith dialogue” (77) is transformed into the epitome of interfaith bigotry, Pi reminds his three mentors that religion is supposed to be about loving God.

Later, lost on the Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat and blind from near starvation, Pi encounters a blind man in another boat and engages him in an odd conversation about food (267–84). At first Pi dismisses the meeting as a figment of his imagination; but after the man describes his love of beef tongue, tripe, pancreas, and calf’s brains, Pi wonders if he might be conversing with his own carnivorous lifeboat companion, a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker.
After noticing his French accent, however, Pi realizes the man is not a tiger. As part of this journey into what will quickly become a cannibalistic “theatre of the absurd,” Pi tells a parable about a banana that grew and grew until it fell from a tree and was eaten by a person who felt better after eating it. In fact, he tells that parable twice (278, 281–82). But after Pi apologizes for no longer having the banana (because an orangutan distracted him), the man leaps onto Pi’s boat to strangle and eat him. Luckily for Pi, Richard Parker kills the man first. The next day, his sight returned, Pi reluctantly uses strips of the man’s flesh to fish, later eating some of that flesh himself. As Pi apologetically confesses, his suffering was unremitting and his madness was “driven by the extremity of [his] need” (284). As it happens, although the parable Pi tells appears benign, it actually points to another act of cannibalism, one far more traumatizing than the eating of murderous French flesh.

Neither “scene” is visualized in Ang Lee’s film, *Life of Pi* (2012). They appear only in the novel written by internationally raised Canadian Yann Martel. However, I want to suggest that these moments do exist in Lee’s film because they pervade it as its “filmic unconscious.” In spite of Lee removing them, each is so central to understanding Martel’s tale that *Life of Pi* (hereafter referred to as *LoP*) would lose much of its power without their psychic energy. In fact, I argue that in both novel and film these “scenes” point to a repressed but positive multifaith alternative to a colonial discourse of cannibalism, a discourse that assumes only the excess of the Other can eat human flesh (Lindenbaum 2004). The interfaith conflict scene underscores the multicultural hope underlying both novel and film. The blind Frenchman scene reveals the cannibalism that Pi cannot admit, which he must use faith, love, and sublimation to “reverse-transubstantiate” into interfaith communion. In short, in spite of the claim that *LoP* will make you believe in God (viii), Yann Martel’s tale is really a story about why Pi Patel still has faith even though he had no choice but to eat his own mother to live.

**From Multiculturalism to Psychoanalysis**

While the filmed version of *LoP* opens up Martel’s tale to an immersive visuality one could scarcely imagine from a novel once deemed unfilmable (Stevens 2012), it buries the most disturbing and grotesque aspects of its narrative so deep within the film’s oceanic unconscious that even the 3D effects cannot make them visible. Indeed, a number of reviewers have noted that Lee’s film turns away from much of Martel’s darker discourse. They argue that the film “surgically removes any signs of [Pi’s] psychic distress” (De Boever 2013, para. 12), “averts its eyes from the worst” (Cooper 2013, 24), and “sidesteps most of the raw, physically extreme details that made the novel so visceral” (Chang 2012, para. 12). It is interesting, then, that in an effort to be globally, perhaps even multiculturally marketable, the film maintains a cautious discourse on trauma and cannibalism yet buries deep any hint of interfaith intolerance. It is almost as if the film was based on Canadian multicultural policy rather than the Canadian novel by Yann Martel.

As it happens, some claim the novel itself is characterized by Canadian multiculturalism. Michael Keren (2008) argues that *LoP* challenges Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory with a religious inclusivity directly inspired by Canadian policy (44). He claims that *LoP* metaphorically shows that different civilizations can coexist, that violence, while possible, is not immanent, and that Canadian multiculturalism “has intrinsic value” (52). Victoria Cook (2008) argues that Pi’s ability to syncretize rather than hybridize his three faiths follows the spirit of Canadian multiculturalism because Pi’s religions “are not merged into a new, amalgamated concept, but are combined whilst concomitantly retaining their individual characteristics and practices” (121). Although “syncretic” may not be the best
descriptive for Pi’s faith—because it implies Pi blends more than one faith together into a new system, which Cook herself notes is not the case here—she is correct that Pi combines his three religions without sacrificing their individual characteristics. Pi’s faith may not be theologically or ritually systematic but it is certainly not a hybrid. However, Cook also claims that just as Canadian multicultural policy only celebrates diversity so as to regulate it, Pi’s religious differences are only celebrated so they can be commodified and consumed as a form of cultural cannibalism (129).

By making such a claim Cook sets aside any positivity associated with multiculturalism and invokes a political economic manifestation of globalized pre-oedipal desire. That is to say, she uses the psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein to diagnose LoP as suffering from both capitalist overconsumption and oedipal orality. It is hard to see how such an interpretation can be justified. LoP clearly celebrates multiculturalism, but there is little evidence suggesting any concern with capitalist consumption in its themes or plot and, as I will argue later, a diagnosis of any kind of oedipal desire leaves the manifest narrative of the story too far behind. It is true, Florence Stratton (2004) suggests, that the toxic algae island Pi lands on toward the end of his journey “seems to be taking direct aim at consumer capitalism as the most secular and materialist form of human existence” because the meerkats on the island spend “all their days nibbling at the algae” (15); however, that is a huge metaphorical leap that cannot be sustained. As for oedipal orality, even though Pi’s maternal cannibalism could easily be read in oedipal terms, especially given the tensions between Pi and his father, I will argue that such an interpretation both ignores the specificity of Pi’s “adult” trauma and discounts “the better story” both novel and film ask us to believe. And while LoP as a cultural product, whether an international best-selling book or an international blockbuster film, is itself a commodity in a globalized entertainment system organized around the pursuit of profit, I argue that the story’s discourse on multifaith multiculturalism operates on a level that both exceeds the limits of its own real world commodification and escapes the potential reductionism of its own narrative unconscious.

Yes, it could be argued that a psychoanalytic interpretation of LoP suggests Pi’s “better story” is little more than a profound psychological coping mechanism or a complex form of unconscious denial. For example, psychologist Brien K. Ashdown (2013) suggests that Pi’s contrasting accounts of his ordeal, one involving animals and the other humans, demonstrate simple Freudian disavowal: “Pi created the story about the zoo animals as a defense mechanism to protect himself from the psychological trauma of his actual experience” (para. 9). Several scholars in the humanities also see the effects of trauma in Pi’s contrasting stories (Duncan 2008; Scherzinger and Mill 2013); and some, like myself, see that trauma in psychoanalytic terms, specifying projection, displacement, and sublimation as the defense mechanisms at play (Cloete 2007; Mensch 2007). But this does not have to be diminutive. In psychoanalysis defense mechanisms and repression are intertwined, with repression sometimes defined as one of many defense mechanisms and defense mechanisms sometimes defined as specified forms of repression (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998, 1084). The central idea underlying Freud’s repression is rooted in the Oedipus complex because for him it is early childhood trauma that is repressed in the unconscious, usually associated with problems navigating parental love and aggression. According to Freud, oedipal trauma waits to “return” or “repeat” in adulthood as anxiety or neurosis, often diagnosed through dreams, slips of the tongue, and, of course, defense mechanisms (Freud [1920] 1955, 18; Scherzinger and Mill 2013, 54–55). According to the contemporary researchers cited earlier, however, the psychoanalytic mechanisms that are used to repress and navigate trauma more often operate in relation to different kinds of adult trauma, not one specific kind of early
childhood trauma. Thus when Ashdown, Cloete, and Mensch psychoanalyze Pi’s trauma as it is experienced in the narrative, they do not reduce it to oedipal desire. As for whether such a psychoanalytic analysis is still psychologically reductive in spite of avoiding the Oedipus complex, I aim to show in the rest of this article that it is not.

Psychoanalysis does not need to be reductive. It has a powerful mythical logic that can unlock deeper meanings, which is why it is often employed in philosophy and the humanities as a form of textual analysis used to uncover hidden social symbolism rather than psychological truth. Such analyses can be found in work ranging from Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (1972) to Jameson’s The Political Unconscious (1981). However, even though psychoanalysis is no longer afforded the same status in psychology and psychiatry today that it once held (Shorter 1997; Hunt 2007), it is still a discipline of the psyche (Rose 1998). Even when used philosophically or sociologically, it cannot help but reach back to psychology. Furthermore, although some today believe it belongs only “in philosophy or literature rather than in academic psychology” because the approach does not meet the rigorous requirements of scientific rationality (Wade, Tavris, Saucier, and Elias 2009, 23), the empirical validity of psychoanalysis is still debated (Erdelyi 2006 and reviews). I make these points for three reasons. First, a primary theme of LoP is to break down the dichotomy between faith and reason, which I will discuss in the final section of this article. If psychoanalysis is going to be used to unlock a hidden meaning in this story, it needs to be used in light of that theme, which means its current scientific status as a form of psychological rationality needs to be acknowledged. Second, even though I am using psychoanalysis as a form of textual analysis, in doing so in this story I also use it to diagnose the mental state of the character Pi as if he were a living being. In that light it is being used as a form of psychology as well as a form of textual analysis. Third, I argue that using psychoanalysis to understand both LoP as a text and Pi as a character does not require an oedipal analysis. I do so limiting my analysis to Pi’s adult trauma as described and alluded to in the story. One of my justifications for that limitation is precisely because, as stated earlier, in contemporary psychology the defence mechanisms are empirically associated more with adult trauma than with early childhood trauma. As such, to make my argument, I need to acknowledge the contemporary status of the defence mechanisms in psychoanalysis as a form of empirical psychology. Indeed, treating it as both philosophy and psychology, I aim to show how psychoanalytic thought in LoP can link together three different cultural traditions and release the repressed trauma trapped between a better story of allegory and a factual story of horror so as to breathe love and multifaith communion into that trauma. Both film and novel have psychoanalytic depth, as does the character Pi. Through the psychoanalytic mechanisms of projection, displacement, and sublimation, LoP offers a unique solution to multicultural religious conflict that reveals much more than commodified, cannibalistic oedipal desire. It reveals the intrinsic value of a particular kind of religious unification that is rooted in sacrificial love rather than politics, profit, or early childhood desire.

From Psychoanalysis to Maternal Cannibalism
In the first of two stories Pi tells about his ordeal, he shares his lifeboat with four animals—a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a tiger—three of whom perish: the hyena kills and eats the zebra and then kills Orange Juice, the orangutan, but the hyena is killed and eaten by Richard Parker, the tiger. Pi spends the rest of his journey alone with Richard Parker, whom he trains using techniques common to circuses, zoos, and behavioural psychology. After resting for a time on a carnivorous algae island full of meerkats, Pi and Richard Parker
eventually land in Mexico, where Richard Parker disappears into the forest and Pi leaves for Canada (Martel 2001, 107–318). Pi tells his second story because his first is not believed by two Japanese officials charged with investigating the sinking of the ship Pi nearly died on. However, he precedes his second story by accusing the investigators of only wanting something that will not surprise them, something which will confirm what they already know and will not make them think differently: “You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality” (336). Pi then tells a story in which he shares his lifeboat with a wounded Buddhist sailor, a French cook, and his mother (337–45). In that story the cook kills and eats the sailor and then kills Pi’s mother, throwing her body overboard. The cook is subsequently killed and eaten by Pi. After that, Pi remains alone until he reaches the shores of Mexico. If we accept the second story as “the truth,” then psychoanalytically the first story is an allegory of projection and displacement: the zebra is the sailor, the hyena the cook, the orangutan Pi’s mother, and Pi Richard Parker.

As noted earlier, several writers acknowledge a psychoanalytic logic at play in LoP in which allegory operates through displacement and projection as sublimation to mask the trauma of Pi’s cannibalism. However, Scherzinger and Mill (2013) argue that if Pi’s two stories are to be seen as allegorically connected, it is no simple allegory because “there resides a profound and irresolvable ambiguity … [in] the space that arises between [them]” (54). They point to an “unsettling asymmetry suggested by the hyena/cook/Frenchman equation,” thus specifying the blind Frenchman scene repressed by the film as key to unlocking Pi’s trauma. They surmise that the man from that scene is the cook displaced but there are further asymmetries in the island segment, where the question “Who are the meerkats?” has no answer (57). They conclude that “[i]n the allegory, the ‘original’ story is lost (as the moment of Pi’s trauma is lost) and all we have are two stories” (64). James Mensch (2007) similarly specifies the blind Frenchman scene as key to the allegory; however, he is bold enough to conclude that Pi’s trauma is not lost—his cannibalism is plain to see through the defence of projection: “What he cannot accept about himself, he projects on the other. Here, however, the other is not just Richard Parker; it is also the chef of the second story” (141). Rebecca Stratton (2004) takes her analysis furthest into the gap, noting an “inter-story scrambling of the identities of Pi and the cook” (13). She concludes that not only the blind Frenchman, but the cook himself must be “a ‘figment’ … of Pi’s imagination” (14). All these writers treat Pi’s displacement of the cook onto the Frenchman and the projection of his own cannibalism onto both as properly unconscious. That allows them to diagnose repressed cannibalism and promptly end their analyses. But as we know from both the second story and the blind Frenchman scene, Pi is all too aware that both he and the cook engaged in cannibalism. There is nothing unconscious about it; he admits it to the investigators (Martel 2001, 337). To understand what is really displaced, projected, and sublimated in that scene, we must ask: What exists in the gap (in the unconscious) between Pi’s stories that he cannot say? The answer can be found in the novel more easily because the film buries it very deeply indeed, but it exists in both representations as the return of the repressed, in the form of sublimated narrative slips and symbolic disparities.

When Pi describes how the cook killed his mother, he says that her body was thrown overboard. In the novel the details are gruesomely described, whereas in the film Pi trails off without finishing. He relegates the following details to the film’s unconscious (but not his own): after the cook kills Pi’s mother, he throws Pi her head and Pi drops it in the ocean in fear and shock; the cook then drinks her blood and only after that throws her body overboard. The problem is, gruesome details included or not, his story makes little narrative sense. In both the novel and the film the cook is portrayed as a dominant, greedy,
extremely hungry man who wastes nothing. When the sailor dies, the cook takes his time stripping the body of all its flesh before throwing the carcass overboard. In the novel he even greedily swings his arms “in a holy terror of hunger” just for flies (Martel 2001, 337), and in the film he eats a rat when there is still food on the boat. Thus, according to the logic of Pi’s own story, the cook would never have thrown anything overboard, animal or human, dead or alive, without first stripping it of everything edible. Pi cannot say what really happened on that boat but neither can he construct a logical, consistent alternative; at least not in the second story, where he is forced to be literal. In the first story, however, in the animal story, he is able to sublimate what really happened, first via the tale of the blind Frenchman and then via the story of the carnivorous island.

The island stands out as particularly significant because it is not represented in the second story—and yet it cannot be explained without it. As Stratton points out, the “toxic algae island . . . is quite incomprehensible unless read retrospectively, with reference to Pi’s second story” (15). A beautiful vegetative paradise inhabited only by small, furry meerkats through the day, at night it undergoes a chemical reaction and becomes carnivorous, devouring anything alive on the ground or in its pools of water. Pi discovers the island is carnivorous after he finds a complete set of human teeth wrapped in leaves like fruit, evidence of a person the island once devoured. In the novel, the investigators cannot make sense of that. After they determine the allegorical relationship between the humans and the animals, they ask, “what about the island? Who are the meerkats? . . . And those teeth? Whose teeth were those in the tree?” (Martel 2001, 346). The correspondences between zebra and sailor, hyena and cook, orangutan and mother, and tiger and boy are all made explicit; but the island and the teeth, like the blind Frenchman scene, are asymmetrical in Pi’s allegory. Both segments need to be understood psychoanalytically as sublimation, and as radical projections and displacements in the form of pure dream logic. Appearing immediately after Pi admits (in the novel) to cannibalizing the blind Frenchman, the island is the transformed version of the most socially unacceptable part of Pi’s ordeal, the one thing he cannot say or think, even to himself: Pi Patel did not just skin and eat the cook; he ate his mother as well. It is that which is repressed in the gap between Pi’s stories. In order to survive, he had no choice but to commit maternal cannibalism.

There is an image in the film that appears to contradict this interpretation. After Pi discovers the tooth wrapped in leaves, the film cuts to an extreme long shot of the island shaped like a human body; however, it is a non-descript human body, appearing neither male nor female. This image supports the island representing cannibalism in general, but it could be argued the island is the cook projected and displaced. Such a reading would seem consistent with the island appearing in the novel immediately after Pi admits to eating a piece of the Frenchman. But the island cannot just represent the cook, if it does at all. In the novel, Pi describes the island as “Gandhian” (300), thus invoking the religious inclusivity he defended when confronted by his three angry mentors and two bewildered parents. But there is nothing Gandhian about the cook. In both novel and film the cook is described as disgusting, a monster, an animal, and a brute: “His mouth had the discrimination of a garbage heap” (337). The island, however, is described as a vegetative paradise, a Garden of Eden: “brilliantly green, a green so bright and emerald that, next to it, vegetation during the monsoons was drab olive” (285). Pi adds to this, invoking his multi-faith beliefs, “Green is a lovely colour. It is the colour of Islam. It is my favourite colour” (285). He reminds us, in fact, that the Garden of Eden is an interfaith parable common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Also, whereas the cook has monstrous appetites (flies and rats) and the bloody dishes enjoyed by the blind Frenchman (beef tongue, tripe, pancreas, and calf’s brains) disgust Pi,
the island offers delicious vegetarian seaweed for him to eat, connecting it to the Hinduism of his mother. The island is multicultural and vegetative, whereas on the ship before it sank, the cook bullied everyone, even the young Buddhist sailor, into eating meat and gravy. Thus the cook cannot be associated with Gandhian cultural tolerance.

Furthermore, the island is filled with gentle, unaggressive meerkats for Richard Parker to eat, animals that almost willingly offer themselves to the tiger: “they . . . were jumping up and down on the spot, as if crying, ‘My turn! My turn! My turn!’” (298). Although killed and eaten, the meerkats do not represent the cook’s cannibalized flesh. They are Pi’s mother displaced onto Orange Juice, who is then displaced onto them. In the novel, when Orange Juice climbs onto the lifeboat, Pi describes her as “gentle and unaggressive her whole life,” offering herself to him like the meerkats, “her never-ending arms surrounding me” (143). Even when Pi finds the tooth, a symbol of the island’s worst, he explicitly acknowledges it might be a woman’s tooth: “How much time had he—or was it she?—spent here?” (313). In other words, it is not just the meerkats who are his mother, but the whole island, although it is also Pi himself. After realizing the implications of the tooth, Pi says, “Bitterness welled up in me. The radiant promise it offered during the day was replaced in my heart by all the treachery it delivered at night” (313). Here treachery is Pi’s displaced guilt, but not the guilt of having eaten the cook because Pi already admits to that. It is Pi’s shame for having done the unthinkable, for having eaten his own mother; the tooth is the warning that such a meal cannot be sustained. The island as an artistic creation of beauty is double displacement and pure sublimation. In fact, in the first story Pi and Richard Parker are given two big meals: first the flying fish and then the island of algae and meerkats. The cook is displaced onto the fish, not the island; Pi’s mother is displaced onto the island.

But the final and most compelling proof of Pi’s maternal cannibalism lies not in the symbolism of the island, there for all to see in the film as well as the novel, but back in that scene which the film buries so deep in its unconscious. As a doubled example of the return of the repressed, Pi tells his banana parable not once but twice to the blind Frenchman in the other lifeboat: “Once upon a time there was a banana and it grew. It grew until it was large, firm, yellow and fragrant. Then it fell to the ground and someone came upon it and ate it [and afterwards that person felt better]” (278 and 281–82, with the phrase in brackets only appearing in the second version). In both novel and film, Orange Juice floats up to Pi’s lifeboat on a raft of bundled bananas—and, as we know, Orange Juice is Pi’s mother. In other words, once upon a time there was boy who loved his mother, but then she fell to the ground and he came upon her and ate her and afterwards he felt better. He felt better but he had to repress that feeling because it is not culturally acceptable. The book represses it too, burying it beneath symbolism. The film represses it even deeper.

In a traditional psychoanalytic reading it would be very hard to avoid the obvious oedipal conclusion of Pi engaging in maternal cannibalism. I do not deny that such a reading can easily be justified by the text. Furthermore, in the humanities today the Oedipus complex is still afforded considerable legitimacy, both traditional Freudian oedipal desire (Yiju 2008; Williams 2011) and Kleinian pre-oedipal cannibalistic desire (Angel and Sofia 1996; Piatti-Farnell 2010; Vernay 2012). In philosophy as well, even when acknowledged as problematic, the concept is still employed in analysis. Even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2007), who states her preference for having “a second binocular angle of vision farther outside psychoanalysis” that can help resist several damaging oedipal assumptions, acknowledges the analytic usefulness of oedipal thought, especially Kleinian pre-oedipal orality, wherein the infant’s first experience of greed for the breast creates a determining cannibalistic “paranoid/schizoid
position” in the psyche (632). But Sedgwick also notes that as a concept the Oedipus complex is too dualistic, especially in respect to gender difference, and that it places too much primacy on “genital morphology [...] and the determinative nature of childhood experience” (630–31). But how can one hope to escape determinative early childhood experiences, as Sedgwick desires, if one does not consider the possibility that both Freud’s Oedipus complex and Klein’s pre-oedipal oral-sadistic stage may not be meaningful in all circumstances? While it is certainly tempting to imagine especially pre-oedipal cannibalistic greed in LoP given the circumstances of Pi’s trauma, in the logic of Martel’s story the traumatic event Pi defends against occurs as the result of violence and alimentary need from when Pi is nearly an adult. With respect to the ordeal that this story outlines and asks us to engage with, Pi does not repress childhood psychic desire; he represses adult psychic trauma. Therefore it is not possible for oedipal desire to lead us to the “better story” of Pi’s experience. It may very well be that Pi has unresolved oedipal issues in this story; but if that is the case, it has little to do with why he ate his mother or why he constructed an elaborate tale about animals to hide that he ate his mother.

**Reason, Faith, and the Better Story of Communion**

The better story of Pi’s maternal cannibalism represents not early childhood desire but an interfaith form of Christian communion. Understanding that requires first engaging with the problem of reason versus faith. Indeed, breaking down the dichotomy between reason and faith is a key theme in *LoP*. Stratton (2004) argues that Martel builds his “I have a story that will make you believe in God” claim into the novel’s narrative precisely to deconstruct “the modern world’s privileging of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or story” (6). Jeffrey Robins (2011) also argues *LoP*’s religious claim concerns our basic assumptions about faith and rationality. He shows that *LoP* not only challenges the assumptions of the old institutional “monopoly” religion but also those of a new postmodern diversified religion that still imagines a contradiction between religion and science (5). Although I am less interested in Martel’s claim about God than I am in Pi’s continued faith, I note that Stratton’s point is not to reverse the privilege of the reason/faith dichotomy but to eliminate it; because it is through both reason and faith that Pi survives his ordeal. When the Japanese investigators protest that their disbelief is reasonable, Pi protests back, “I applied my reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater” (Martel 2001, 330–31). Interestingly enough, Mensch (2007) locates Pi’s displacements and projections below reason within the unconscious but also above it in the “unspeakable alterity” of the divine. Noting that psychoanalytic mechanisms operate in the same space as belief and faith, he claims that God as “a projection does not disqualify its reality” (146).

Mensch’s claim is provocative and I agree in principle that locating Pi’s psychology both below and above reason makes sense; but I am not convinced that God in *LoP* is a psychoanalytic projection. If Pi’s better story does not discount reason but simply knocks it down a peg, then so it goes with psychoanalysis. As a useful tool it gives us access to the narrative’s metaphoric unconscious and reveals a repressed truth; but it does not tell us what that truth really means. Furthermore, even when relegated to analyzing mythic stories of imagination, psychoanalysis is still a form of rationality. If excessive reason risks “throwing out the universe with the bathwater,” then might excessive “faith” in Freud’s reason risk contaminating the
universe with that same bathwater? Pi’s better story includes reason as well as religion and faith, but ironically it is reason that demands we make sense of the first story psychoanalytically through the second. Perhaps both stories and the gap that arises between them all represent the better story. Stratton, however, claims the better story of “courage, endurance, and survival” (17) contrasts sharply with the second story’s “greed, cruelty, corruption, and futility” (12). Discovering maternal cannibalism in the gap between them does not appear to improve that contrast. But the first story is sublimation; it does not contrast sharply with the second—it realizes its repressed potential. Of course, we could end the analysis there and state that now we understand Martel’s tale—Pi ate his mother and that is his trauma. But to do that would succumb to dry, yeastless factuality and leave us with nothing left to learn. On the other hand, we could follow the psychoanalytic logic implied by maternal cannibalism and reduce the whole story to a representation of the Oedipus complex; except that would contaminate the universe with old bathwater from early childhood. The multicultural, multi-faith perspective that Martel and Lee ask us to assume points us to an alternative reading of Pi’s cannibalism; one that may also expand our understanding of the multiculturalism operating throughout both novel and film.

LoP is “an explicit, unabashedly religious” story (Bolton 2013, 1). Although many critics and commentators complain that “God seems to disappear for the majority of the [tale]” (Ruparell 2004, 1), both Bolton and Ruparell are correct to contradict such claims. Rebecca Duncan (2008), for example, is one who claims Pi’s time on the lifeboat “features very little religious or spiritual insight” (177) and is mostly about “[e]xistential themes of suffering and despair” with Pi’s few references to God representing “mockery and negation” (177). But Duncan misses the point when she highlights the existential nature of the lifeboat segment as being uninformed by Pi’s religious backstory. The Bible, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Vedas, and the Qur’an also resound with existential themes of suffering and despair. Consider God’s tests of faith in the book of Job. Consider Christ’s crucifixion. Consider Arjuna’s despair on the battlefield. Consider the Prophet’s anguish in the desert. Consider also that, like Job, Pi’s faith does not disappear underneath the weight of his intense suffering. In the novel, Pi wakes to great existential angst but soothes himself with faith: “I felt like the sage Markandeya, who fell out of Vishnu’s mouth while Vishnu was sleeping and so beheld the entire universe, everything there is…. I saw my suffering for what it was, finite and insignificant…. I mumbled words of Muslim prayer and went back to sleep” (Martel 2001, 196). In the film he has frequent visions filled with Hindu-inspired imagery (including a cosmic vision of his mother), and in the most violent of storms he raises his arms in the shape of Christ’s cross and submits himself to the will of Allah. Not only is LoP thoroughly religious, it is thoroughly multi-religious. Although the film buries the novel’s representation of religious intolerance in its unconscious, both depictions demonstrate that different civilizations can co-exist, that religious violence is not immanent, and that religious beliefs do not have to be melted together to live side by side nor do they have to oppose reason.

Regardless of the film’s inability to acknowledge interfaith conflict lest it threaten worldwide ticket and DVD sales, LoP, novel and film, offers a multiculturally marketable solution to interfaith conflict in the form of interfaith communion. The maternal cannibalism that cannot be acknowledged but still unconsciously structures the whole tale is itself a multi-cultural religious act that is perfectly reasonable under the circumstances. Anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum (2004) argues that because “those we once called exotic live among us,” we are at a turning point in the discourse of cannibalism (490–91). She claims the discourse of cannibalism is slowly starting to change from one that defends the rational West against the exotic, primitive, and savage Other to one that is beginning to acknowledge
cannibal practices among ourselves (425). However, she worries that its continued use as a metaphor of our own consumption may be slowing the process. For Lindenbaum, the best way to eliminate the stigma of savagery and primitivism still evoked by cannibalism is to “forgo our attachment to [the consumption] metaphor . . . and reflect on the reality of cannibal activities among ourselves as well as others” (493). She suggests the consecrated communion of the Catholic Eucharist may be just such a practice to consider (485–86). But, as noted earlier, Cook concludes that LoP commodifies and consumes its celebration of multicultural difference as a form of cultural cannibalism, and Stratton (2004) also suggests that Pi’s cannibalistic island may represent excessive consumer capitalism (15). Analyses I cited earlier (Angel and Sofia 1996; Piatti-Farnell 2010; and Vernay 2012)—that use Kleinian psychoanalysis to diagnose pre-oedipal orality as a metaphor for capitalism—also see cannibalism as excessive consumption. Following Lindenbaum, those writers all fall into the discourse of colonialism. So too does Louise Noble (2012) in an essay about what she calls “incest” cannibalism in South Park (wherein the character Cartman tricks another boy into eating his own parents). She outlines a long history of representations in which cannibalism almost always “functions as a metaphor for a society whose appetites are out of control and whose moral framework is disintegrating” (145). Incest cannibalism, she says, occurs as the worst of the worst, “as the bloody climax of escalating acts of revenge” (145). Ironically, however, she also references the Eucharist in her analysis, noting its role as a “complex form of corporeal consumption” (157).

Against Cook and Stratton I do not argue that either Martel’s novel or Lee’s film uses cannibalism as a metaphor of economic consumption; and against Noble I argue that so-called incest cannibalism in LoP is not the worst of the worst nor is it used to maintain the stigma of the Other’s savagery and primitivism. Yes, Pi characterizes the cannibalism of the cook as brutal and savage, but through projection, displacement, and sublimation Pi contrasts the cook’s cannibalism with his own. And while Pi literally consumes his mother, his cannibalism is in no way “the bloody climax of escalating acts of revenge” nor is it Kleinian pre-oedipal, oral-sadistic cannibalism representing capitalism. As difficult as Pi’s actions are for even him to psychologically assimilate, they are reasonable under the circumstances. That is why Martel can use Pi’s last resort for survival as soil in which to plant a beautiful tale of not just courage, endurance, and survival, but also sacrifice, love, and hope, showing us precisely how cannibalism is not just the discourse of the Other. In some cases it can also be religious communion.

Although the question of the “real presence” of Christ has been debated for centuries and not all Christians accept the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation—in which the substance of communal bread and wine literally changes into the body and blood of Christ (McGrath 1997, 509–14)—there is a general understanding that Christian communion is “highly sublimated” (Test 2011, 100). That is to say, even when thought of as entirely symbolic, the ritualized eating of the body and blood of Christ to achieve union with God cannot really escape the concept of cannibalism. In From Communion to Cannibalism (1990), Maggie Kilgour states bluntly that the metaphor of the host reveals “a potential for cannibalism in the sacrament of the Eucharist” (15). However, Geoffrey Shullenberger (2010) argues, “the resemblance of cannibal to Christian does not figure primarily as a source of anxiety within the Christian hermeneutics . . . but as a basis for reinforcing crucial doctrinal commitments in the face of a potentially bewildering alterity” (93). Yet on the Internet today it is not hard to find numerous articles and blogs defending the Eucharist against charges of literal cannibalism (Staples 2010; Foley 2011; Yougrids 2014). Indeed, spiteful accusations that Catholic communion is cannibalistic date back to the Roman Empire and
proliferated especially during the early days of the Protestant Reformation (Shullenberger 2010; Test 2011). Even Jesuit Father José de Acosta’s sixteenth-century account of Aztec and Inca cannibalism recognizes profound similarities between their sacrificial rituals and his (Shullenberger 2010; Test 2011). What is interesting is that in LoP, in both novel and film (especially in the film), Pi’s maternal cannibalism is sublimated so deeply, under so many layers of projection and displacement, that it nearly disappears. However, much like when communion is just “a memorial of the suffering of Christ” that metaphorically points to his sacrifice (McGrath 1997, 514), Pi’s story of cannibalism operates as a memorial of his mother’s suffering that metaphorically points to her sacrifice: a Hindu mother’s Christian sacrifice offered in answer to her son’s Islamic prayers. By offering her body and blood so that Pi may eat and live, his mother gives herself as a communion host to her son. The twist is that Pi reverse-transubstantiates her flesh and blood into symbols and metaphors rather than the other way around.

Although communion is visually absent in the film, it is referenced twice in the novel: once when the Muslim imam accuses the priest of being a cannibial and once when Pi adjusts himself to life at sea with a tiger: “I practiced religious rituals that I adapted to the circumstances—solitary Masses without priests or consecrated Communion hosts, darshans without murtis, and pujas with turtle meat for Prasad, acts of devotion to Allah not knowing where Mecca was” (231). His communion hosts may not have been consecrated by a priest, but they were offered in sacrificial love. In Christian theology, Christ offered his body and his blood in communion out of love. By dying to protect him, Pi’s Hindu mother does the same. And although the symbolism of the sacrifice is Christian first, the communion with God that it represents is multifaith. The Muslim who teaches Pi to pray is a Sufi mystic who seeks “fana, union with God, and his relationship with God was personal and loving” (67). The Hinduism through which the universe makes sense to Pi offers “the gentle pull of relationship” (53) in part through Prasad, “that sugary offering to God that comes back to us as a sanctified treat” (52). In the novel, the adult Pi living in Toronto still practices all three of his religions; in the film, the adult Pi in Montreal still practices all three faiths and he teaches a course on Jewish mysticism at the university. Even his name, Pi, the irrational and “secular” number 3.14, situates him in communion within an infinite universe where God exists beyond the reason/faith dichotomy.

Conclusion

The novel LoP initially had a rough start because of an unfortunate release date of September 11, 2001; but following a marketing campaign that claimed the book would “make you believe in God,” and after winning multiple awards, Martel’s tale did become an international best-seller (Stratton 2004; De Boever 2013). The coincidence of the novel’s publication occurring on September 11 combined with the reality of the film being released after a decade’s worth of increased global religious tension creates a context in which the multiculturalism and interfaith communion celebrated in this story become all the more appealing. Part of the reason the interfaith conflict scene is so easily removed from the film yet still pervades its unconscious is precisely because of how prevalent religious conflict is in the world today. The brutal, verbally violent assaults Pi’s three wise men unleash on each other in their attempts to convert Pi solely to their own faiths underlies both novel and film, but they also pave the way for LoP to offer a unique solution to religious intolerance. Interfaith communion does not hybridize different notions of religious relationship; it reveals them to
already be the same thing: love. The horror of Pi's ordeal does not discount that love, even when expressed in a brutally absurd and violent scene wherein the cannibalisation of a murderous carnivore is used to mask the unremitting suffering and madness of having to eat one's own mother. There are very good psychological reasons why Pi cannot fully acknowledge the sacrifice his mother made for him, but that neither discounts her sacrifice nor the multifaith symbolism surrounding it. It also does not mean that Pi's cannibalism represents the colonial discourse of the Other. Under the circumstances, Pi could not have done otherwise; and understood as a form of communion, Pi's horror is easily sublimated into a story about a boy, four animals, and a vegetative island. Pi may never be able to literally understand his Hindu mother's Christian sacrifice offered in answer to his own Islamic prayers, but he does not need to understand her sacrifice literally. In both novel and film he cannot understand the horror of Christ's sacrifice either: "What a downright weird story. What peculiar psychology. I asked for another story, one that I might find more satisfying" (59); but he receives the same explanation repeatedly: "Love. That was Father Martin's answer" (60). So it goes with Pi's mother. So it goes with Pi's multicultural faith. Love.

Notes

1. From a commercial point of view, perhaps averting the film's eyes from its own repressed trauma was necessary. Doing so may have even increased its global success. The risks for the film were huge and not everyone was convinced it would succeed. There were corporate concerns because it "centers on an Indian boy . . . , stars an unknown [Indian] actor and deals with issues ranging from spirituality and death to cannibalism" (Miller 2013, para. 3–4; see also Pomerantz 2012). Yet despite the risks of trying to market "the most expensive arthouse movie ever made" (Grant 2013, 19), by May 2013 the film had generated gross worldwide revenues of $612 million (Boxoffice 2012). Even the film's so-called ethnic slant, to quote Fox UK executive Cameron Saunders (Grant 2013, 19), is now considered one of its financial strengths. Indeed, it was primarily the picture's overseas revenues (over 80% of ticket sales) that secured the film's commercial prosperity. With its Taiwanese director, Indian star, international crew, and dialogue in multiple languages, LoP is truly "a global movie event" (Gutierrez 2013, 19), one that may even speak "to an ever-growing, global multicultural view of religious harmony that is slowly gaining momentum in the West" (Bolton 2013, 1).

2. Projection is defined as attributing "internal fantasies to the external world" (Rychlak 1981, 61) or "seeing one's own traits in other people" (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998, 1090). That suggests Pi might project the traits of himself and his lifeboat companions onto animals to alleviate guilt. Displacement is defined as directing "a motive that cannot be gratified in one form . . . into a new channel" (Atkinson et al. 1993, 609) or as "altering the target of an impulse" (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998, 1090). Unable to cope with his killing of the cook, it could be argued Pi transforms murder into an animal instinct and directs that toward an imagined threatening hyena. Sublimation involves "expressing an instinct in a sphere or manner that shows no relation to its original aim" (Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998, 1103) wherein "unacceptable wishes . . . are [are] harnessed for productive or creative ends" (Kim, Zeppenfeld, and Cohen 2013, 2).

3. In the medical science of psychiatry, where Freud dominated for decades, psychoanalysis has fallen from grace and has all but been replaced by neurobiology (Shorter 1997; Burns 2006). In psychology, Freud never dominated, but was once afforded at least the same status as behaviourist B.F. Skinner (Hunt 2007). However, even though defence mechanisms and a generalized form of repression are still debated and tested in experimental psychology (see Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer 1998; Domino, Short, Evans, and Romano 2002; Kim, Zeppenfeld, and Cohen 2013), in psychology in general both psychoanalysis and strict behaviourism have been usurped by the "cognitive revolution" (Nairne et al. 2001, 22–23; Erdelyi 2006, 505).
4. Cloete (2007) does not discuss the blind Frenchman scene in her analysis, but she notes the importance of displacement and sublimation in the way the name Richard Parker operates. She provides a literary/historical account of the name, which includes a 1938 Edgar Allen Poe story wherein a Richard Parker is cannibalized on a lifeboat and two historical lifeboat incidents, one in 1846 and one in 1870, with the second also resulting in a cannibalized Richard Parker (330; see also Martel 2003; Stratton 2004, 11; and Ketterer 2009, 84).

5. Pi and the meerkats escape digestion by climbing into the trees and Richard Parker escapes by returning to the lifeboat.

6. Interestingly enough, the second binocular angle of vision Sedgwick uses to distance herself from the pre-oedipal implications of her own cannibalistic reading of Klein is Buddhism, via the concepts of samsara—the cycle of life, death, and rebirth—and karma—the moral residue created by one’s actions. Both concepts actually derive from Hinduism, but in each tradition they point to a potential escape from suffering through spiritual enlightenment: nirvana in Buddhism and moksha in Hinduism. What Sedgwick appreciates in this second binocular view is that until enlightenment is reached, karma and samsara are ongoing in the lifecycle, thus breaking the primacy of determinative early childhood experiences.

7. I know a few who think the underwater cosmic image of Pi’s mother is actually an image of his girlfriend, a minor character in the film nowhere to be found in the novel. It is not an image of Pi’s girlfriend. Look again.

References


