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Cannibal Nation: The Donner Party and the Crisis of Manifest Destiny

In the midst of America's great expansionist movement, a group of pre-Gold Rush, pre-California statehood pioneers, headed by George Donner, Jacob Donner, and James F. Reed, were snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the border between California and Nevada. The Donner-Reed Party soon ran out of food, and they were reduced potentially to murder and cannibalization in order to survive in this infamous tragedy. I want to examine the importance this tragedy had on American society and American writers like Mark Twain and Sarah Winnemucca in *Roughing It* and *Life Among the Piutes*, respectively. In their interpretations of the story, both authors showed that the United States, while consuming other nations in what Eric Sundquist ironically calls "organic laws of growth," had the potential to consume itself. For this reason, this particular gothic narrative became one of the key myths of westward migration.

Maggie Kilgour describes the cannibalistic nature of imperialism: "[I]n order to maintain a situation of centripetal control, what is outside must be subsumed and drawn into the center until there is no category of alien outsiders left to threaten the inner stability." This holds true for much American writing of this "outsideness" in the course of expansion. However, these interpretations of the Donner Party show how tenuous "centripetal control" can ever be; eventually in imperialism, the center will itself become alien.