

ENGL 420: Literature of the Middle Passage  
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Carina del Valle Schorske

Within You, Without You: Cannibalism and Consciousness in the Transatlantic World

by Carina del Valle Schorske

*"These muscles," he says, "this flesh and these veins are your own, poor fools that you are. You do not recognize that the substance of your ancestors' limbs is still contained in them. Savor them well; you will find in them the taste of your own flesh."* —Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cannibals"

*I*

There is no shortage of savagery in the realities of colonialism and slavery. Even without the body of narratives that detail the daily suffering of the people involved, the bare and public facts of these systems provide more than enough fodder for nightmare. And so one would think that the horrors of colonialism and slavery are beyond invention—in fact, that they resist it. As Gabriel García Márquez says of those living in the wake of social trauma, "all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude."<sup>1</sup> And yet, over centuries of Atlantic encounters echoes a rumor only rarely justified: that the Other—whether African, Indian, or European—is a cannibal. To call this rumor an invention, despite the fact that we know anthropophagy has occurred in the New World under a range of circumstances, is to acknowledge the fact that cries of "cannibal" have far outnumbered direct confrontations with the practice. Only the vaguest whiff of it sends the imaginative appetite into overdrive.

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1 Márquez, Gabriel García. Nobel Lecture, 1982.

We cannot begin to speculate about the particularities of how and why this story proliferates within the literature of transatlantic violence without first acknowledging its universal power as divine mystery and taboo. Although cultural attitudes towards the consumption of human flesh certainly vary over time and space, at no point and in no society are they neutral or casual. Cannibalism has enjoyed canonical status in many of the world's great mythical and religious traditions. In Classical mythology, Kronos, upon hearing a prophecy that he would be overthrown by his own son, devours all of his children but one—Zeus—who punishes his father's crime by castrating (not cannibalizing) him and assuming his throne.<sup>2</sup> Cannibalism appears as a prominent theme in Slavic, Hindu, and Aboriginal myth. Although at first glance characters like the Russian Baba Yaga, a man-eating witch, seem childish, they often serve a double purpose as demon and sage; Baba Yaga's cannibalism is both symptom and cause of her unique wisdom. Among those cultures that actually practice cannibalism, such as the Wari tribe of the Amazon, the ritual consumption of their own dead has a “socially integrative dimension” in which the spirit of the dead enters and animates the living.<sup>3</sup> Exocannibalism, in which members of one community consume the dead of their enemies, usually in war, is not so different in its conceptualization of the ritual. Again, cannibalism emerges as a radical measure against loss; energy is converted and recycled rather than cast aside.

It does not require much hermeneutic arm-twisting to conceive of the Christian communion as another form of cannibalism with similar spiritual implications:

*26 And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.*

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2 Zika, Charles. “Fashioning New Worlds from Old Fathers: Reflections on Saturn, Amerindians, and Witches in a Sixteenth-Century Print” in *Exorcising Our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*. p. 420. Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2003.

3 [http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/criminal\\_mind/psychology/cannibalism/2.html](http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/criminal_mind/psychology/cannibalism/2.html)

*27 And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;*

*28 For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.<sup>4</sup>*

Whether or not the Eucharist is taken to be the literal body of Christ or its symbol, the good Christian must appreciate the extent of Christ's physical sacrifice, must experience it as a strengthening of his own physical self, in order to experience the divinity of the sacrament. It is the transgression of cannibalism, the radical debt of using the body of another to empower one's own, that lends communion its poignancy.

If cannibalism, as practice and metaphor, harnesses and transmits such enormous spiritual power, then how does it come to represent, in the Atlantic world, “the ultimate in human depravity”<sup>5</sup>? Must the ancient meanings of cannibalism be repressed in order to account for the simple horror of being eaten, or do they inform one another? When the threat or rumor of cannibalism arises amid other sorts of violence and between people deeply invested in preserving their difference, then the grace of assimilating one's body to the body of another appears as supreme violation. The obsession with cannibalism in the Atlantic world betrays the fact that the colonial project is not animated by anxieties of difference, but by anxieties of sameness.

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1492 commemorates a crisis of Christian identity. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sign the Alhambra treaty, expelling all Moors and Jews from Spain unless they convert to Roman Catholicism. Months later, Christopher Columbus lands on the shores of an island no European has ever known. Much has been made of this historical coincidence, and rightly so—Columbus

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4 Matthew 26:26-26:28, *The King James Bible*

5 Arens, William. *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy*, page 95

himself believes that his evangelical project depends upon the simultaneous exclusionary move back home. Christianness—not just Christianity—needs to be consolidated, restricted, and defined in order for it to range out over the globe without the danger of assimilating to the cultures it seeks to convert. The xenophobic zeal of this moment in history pushes against the seductions of the Other in a multicultural world, which Spain had become during the Moorish Middle Ages (to the great benefit of literature, art, and science).<sup>6</sup> Determined not to be swallowed whole, Christian evangelists and colonizers are sharply attuned to—and on guard against—both similarity and assimilation:

What exercised these writers most, and led them to the distinctions they made, was an initial perception that the rites they and their predecessors encountered in the New World were indeed strikingly similar to Christian ones. This is something that we might plausibly attribute to their incapacity to make sense of them in any other way—a product of European “recognitions” when confronted by definitionally non-European practices. But for those concerned, the objective explanation could only be demonic. The Christian devil was “God’s ape,” constantly seeking to be honoured in ways that corresponded exactly but inversely with those of the true religion.<sup>7</sup>

If Europeans really do see rites that share certain characteristics with the Christian tradition—for example, the Aztec practice of human sacrifice and subsequent consumption of the victim's flesh—then a theory must be invented that accounts for the similarity but casts it as an illusion or deliberate perversion. If Europeans do not see such rites, then they must be invented in order to preempt any equality, any sameness, that might be acquired through conversion.

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6 Menocal, María Rosa. *The Ornament of the World*.

7 Clark, Stuart. “Magic and Witchcraft” in *Finding Europe: Discourses in Margins, Communities, Images*, page 120

The etymology of the word “cannibal” itself provides an ironic illustration of this function. “Cannibal” comes from the Spanish “canibal,” which comes, in turn, from “caniba,” a 16<sup>th</sup> century muddling of *karibna*, the name that native Antilleans used to refer to themselves.<sup>8</sup> Columbus suspected these people of anthropophagy, and within a matter of decades—quickly enough that Michel de Montaigne can publish “Of Cannibals” in 1580—the word is generalized to refer to all those rumored to partake of human flesh. The language did not require such a word—Europeans had and used the Greek—but in inventing a new word, one married so closely to the natural name of the feared Other, they were able to avoid any linguistic, and hence conceptual, link between Old World anthropophagy and New World cannibalism. The word acquires such currency that it eclipses its origins; the people of the Antilles seem to admit their cannibalism in calling themselves *carib* or *canib*. If this history seems superfluous, we must remember that it is on the level of language that the colonial world is made, since many of those who determine its contours will not travel it. What happens to the language of cannibalism is itself a sort of cannibalism—one swallows and incorporates the word of the Other, so that when it is heard again, the sound is strange.

3

In setting the stage for considering the role of cannibalism as a trope in the imagination of the Atlantic world, we have completely ignored a governing principle of those encounters. The Europeans who travel to and between Africa and the New World are not merely missionaries, and even when they are, their missionary projects require enormous resources that they expect to extract from the same people they seek to convert. Ferdinand and Isabella quietly prepare for the possibility that many of these resources will be human; upon Columbus's return, they issue a

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[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50032492?query\\_type=word&queryword=cannibal&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=1&search\\_id=bQcI-iawKAU-2724&hilite=50032492](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50032492?query_type=word&queryword=cannibal&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=bQcI-iawKAU-2724&hilite=50032492)

magnanimously worded decree stating that slavery should be illegal unless the people to be enslaved are so depraved that their conditions as slaves would be better than as free men.

Cannibalism—or suspicions of a tendency towards it—qualifies, according to the law's standards, as depravity. Very quickly, half the function of crying “cannibal” is to excuse the enslavement or exploitation of the accused. The phenomenon is transparent enough to elicit satirical scrutiny early on, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century:

I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen within fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.<sup>9</sup>

Montaigne sees in the frenzy over cannibalism a willful blindness towards parallel barbarities. The passage above is, to begin with, a simple condemnation of European religious violence that might logically extend to colonial violence. It is also an implicit criticism of the European eagerness to privilege the texts which condemn an unseen cannibalism over the authority of their own eyes, which have “seen within fresh memory” a parade of local atrocities. But Montaigne, too, relies on secondhand testimony for his information “of cannibals,” “according to [his] witnesses” and from “an interpreter who followed [his] meaning... badly,” and proceeds with his argument as though what they say is true—he does not question whether or not “acts of such

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9 Montaigne, Michel de. “Of Cannibals” in *Esssays*, page 155

barbarous horror” exist.<sup>10</sup> The question at hand is whether or not judgment can be passed in a world expanding rapidly out of view, a world which can only be known through the mediation of texts. While we “ought to have topographers who would give us an exact account of the places where they have been, they want to enjoy the privilege of telling us news about all the rest of the world, simply because they have over us the advantage of having seen Palestine.”<sup>11</sup> The problem, then, is not merely with mediation, but with the fact that it so often becomes invention.

In response to this inescapable epistemological crisis, Montaigne makes a dramatic critical turn inwards—if the validity of external information cannot be personally interrogated, then one's response must be, and relentlessly. The tendency of the clever man to “bend and disguise [things] according to the way [he has interpreted] them,” the tendency to “call barbarity what he is not accustomed to”: all of this must be rigorously accounted for in an attempt to balance out the mystery of the unknown world and the often deliberate and politically motivated inadequacies of its mediation. In other words, the Self must be known in order to compensate for the distance of the Other. For Montaigne, writing “of cannibals” paradoxically yet inexorably leads to the conclusion: “I myself am the matter of this book.”<sup>12</sup> It is not clear whether or not such a conclusion—which would be the exasperated endpoint of 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology—could be reached, and so early, within the context of just any conversation about distant strangers. No word, certainly not “slave,” requires a stronger or more immediate evaluation of another being's humanity and one's relationship to it than the word “cannibal.” It is a direct avenue to the word “man,” and insists upon the translatability of that term. Just as the cannibal must recognize in his human meal “the taste of [his] own flesh,” the critic of the cannibal must recognize in him

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10 Montaigne, Michel de. “Of Cannibals” in *Esssays*, page 152

11 Montaigne, Michel de. “Of Cannibals” in *Esssays*, page 152

12 Montaigne, Michel de. “To the Reader” in *Esssays*, page 1

the taste of his own barbarity.<sup>13</sup>

By the time Joseph Conrad writes *Heart of Darkness*, the word “cannibal” is almost an invitation to discuss European barbarity, an invitation which he accepts. It is possible to think of his masterpiece as a parallel work to Montaigne's, on the opposite end of colonial history. Both anticipate great sea changes in Western thinking—Montaigne prefigures the Cartesian revolution, and Conrad prefigures modernism. Both articulate the encounter with the Other as a personal crisis of consciousness and, to a certain degree, conscience. The crucial difference between the two that requires scrutiny is the nature of this “encounter.” Centuries have passed, and despite the striking persistence of certain anxieties, one must also admit and evaluate certain changes. The *karibna*, and almost all of their fellow natives in North America and the Caribbean, have been exterminated. At least 12 million Africans have been transported to the Americas as slaves; this trade has been abolished and the slaves have been emancipated. The British empire has come to rule almost a quarter of the earth's population.<sup>14</sup> The most significant change is that many more people have come into direct contact with one another and many more people exist as a result of that contact. Rather than simply reading the journals of Columbus and Cortés, Conrad has the opportunity to travel “the many blank spaces on earth,” which turn out, of course, not to be so blank.<sup>15</sup> Conrad's encounter with the Congo and its people on his 1889 steamboat voyage is real, and not, at first glance, mediated in the way of Montaigne's contact with America. Genre is interesting here, since Conrad makes fiction of his direct experiences, while Montaigne makes nonfiction of rumor and imagining.

We must account for the persistence of rumor and imagining in a text like Conrad's, which functions as a sort of colonial exposé even as it pushes against the constraints and fallacies

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13 Montaigne, Michel de. “Of Cannibals” in *Essays*, page 158

14 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_empire)

15 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 9



of realism. Specifically, we must account for the persistence of the accusation of cannibalism despite close contact with the man eaters in question, and zero evidence of their man eating:

We had enlisted some of these chaps on the way for a crew. Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat, which went rotten, and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils.<sup>16</sup>

Marlow never explains why he believes his crew members are cannibals, though he rarely refers to them as anything else. At his own admission, nothing occurs before his eyes, though his vision is no doubt clouded by years of accumulated representations. To paint a picture: at the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Valentin Fernandes asserts that the inhabitants of Sierra Leone “cut pieces of [their enemies] and dry and smoke them and cook them with rice and eat it.”<sup>17</sup> And just a generation before Conrad's, as recently as 1878, Henry Morton Stanley writes that “evidences of cannibalism were numerous in the human and 'soko' skulls that grinned on many poles, and the bones that were freely scattered in the neighbourhood, near the village garbage heaps and the river banks, where one might suppose hungry canoe-men to have enjoyed a cold collation on an ancient matron's arm.”<sup>18</sup> Between these two snapshots of savagery proliferate thousands more.

When texts have served so long as surrogates for experience, they do not readily abdicate their authority, but instead direct the eye to read the landscape for what they have described. The effect is that rather than looking for the landscape in the map, for the real place in the representation, one first looks for the representation in the real place. Marlow can hardly contain

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16 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 42

17 Shaw, Rosalind. “Cannibal transformations: Sierra Leone” in *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft, and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, page 51

18 Stanley, Henry Morton. *Through the Dark Continent: Or, The Sources of the Nile Around the Great Lakes of Equatorial Africa*, page

his delight upon finding an ancient navigation book full of “illustrative diagrams” in a recently abandoned hut. He enjoys “a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real” in the “dream” of the jungle—again, the promise of explaining how to navigate the landscape overwhelms and replaces the practice of doing so.<sup>19</sup> Despite the book's “honest concern for the right way of going about things”—the right way of seeing things—it does not help Marlow in any measure; instead, it causes him to “forget the jungles and the pilgrims” and deafens him to the “worrying noise” that is really only the manager and pilgrims calling his name.<sup>20</sup>

But the book itself and “the notes pencilled in the margin... written in cipher” and “plainly referring to the text”<sup>21</sup> warn against using it as a guide. They indicate, firstly, the inadequacy of the original manual—its failure as a representation. They also seem to indicate the belief that the problem of coherence between representation and reality might be solved by revising the manual. But this new version cannot be of any more use than the original, whatever its content, since its revisions are written in code—an “extravagant mystery,” as Marlow puts it. By writing inscrutably, the absent editor clearly means to guard against the eyes of others. But if these notes are meant only for him—can only ever *mean* for him—then why write them down at all? Why insist upon their presence in the main body of the book? Though he might desire to, the author cannot both speak in code, in the revisionary language of his specific encounter with the world, and partake of the discourse which promises to provide transferable truths, guidance, and rules. He must relinquish that authority, and he seems to—the evidence is in the book's abandonment. Though Marlow pockets the book as he leaves, it is with

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19 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 46

20 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, pages 46-47

21 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 46

a revelation of its absurdity “in this nowhere.”<sup>22</sup> This encounter presages his own gradual abandonment of the forms and figures of the colonial discourse. One of these figures is the cannibal, as much a part of the representational canon as the navigation book. It is the figure of the cannibal, and the refusal of “real” cannibals to adhere to it, that inspires one of Marlow's most memorable revelations. A heavy fog, from which no map can deliver him, descends on the river, and he turns his eyes towards his companions:

I looked at them with a swift quickening of interest—not because it occurred to me I might be eaten by them before very long, though I own to you that just then I perceived—and I hoped, yes, I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so—what shall I say?—so—unappetizing : a touch of fantastic vanity which fitted well with the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time. Perhaps I had a little fever, too. One can't live with one's finger everlastingly on one's pulse. I had often 'a little fever,' or a little touch of other things—the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness, the preliminary trifling before the more serious onslaught which came in due course. Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger... And these chaps, too, had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling among the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma, a mystery greater—

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22 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 47

when I thought of it—than the curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamour that had swept by us on the river-bank, behind the blind whiteness of the fog.<sup>23</sup>

Marlow expects to be eaten, and is not. The stories which have led him to believe he would be have failed to predict or describe this other possibility, and their failure brings Marlow fully into the lived moment—he experiences “a swift quickening of interest” in the specificity of his circumstances. He feels his aliveness, his “quick,” rise in relation to others. He feels a fresh curiosity absent from his prior assessment of them, “fine fellows—cannibals—in their place.” “In their place,” in the place of discourse, they act according to something like natural laws. But in *their* place, when Marlow relinquishes his efforts to mentally possess it, they act as humans do—inscrutably.

The fact that they do not eat him does not prove that they are civilized; the notion of civilization has become superfluous to humanity at this moment. Marlow does not know what it proves—their “superstition, disgust, patience, fear?”; perhaps it even proves that they never intended to eat him at all and that they are not cannibals. Their subjectivity appears to him in code in the same way that the absent editor's does and in the same way that his does to others: “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt...”<sup>24</sup> It is this mutual unknowability where “impulses, motives,” and minds are concerned that paradoxically fosters a sense of kinship. Since Marlow already suffers so much in trying to communicate, and the structure of his relationship with his crew members hardly permits it, his desire to exchange and understand finds ecstatic outlet in the admission that he “hoped, yes, positively hoped, that [his] aspect was not so—what shall I

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23 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 50-52

24 Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*, page 32

say?—so—unappetizing.” Against the differentiating efforts of the mind push the conciliatory desires of the body. Cannibalism—even just its contemplation—promises a shortcut through centuries of accumulated representations which code and lock the mind. In an exchange of terms that the subject of cannibalism always invites, “the flesh is willing, but the spirit is weak.”<sup>25</sup>

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*We killed the cook, who said he would cook us.*<sup>26</sup>

If accusing the Other of cannibalism serves two purposes in discourse—to cast a feared or politically problematic similarity as a deliberate perversion, or to, through this device, stage a critique of Western objectivity and absolutism, then it would seem to hold little power for the colonized. And yet, a little reading reveals that the fear that Africans express of European cannibals is almost as pervasive as the reciprocal, though perhaps even more persistent; according to contemporary anthropologist Rosalind Shaw, “the conviction that slaves carried away in the Atlantic trade were eaten by Europeans persists in Sierra Leone to this day.”<sup>27</sup> These stories of white cannibals begin early, focusing on:

unsettled Europeans who carried captives away in ships, and those who received them at distant destinations... Here were foreigners and vessels whose transatlantic passage reconfigured the boundary of the ocean as a space of deadly transformation, materializing the chilling convertability of human bodies, money, and foreign commodities as they moved back and forth across the water... the opaqueness of the exchanges that these ships mediated across the ocean, moreover, was objectified in the opaqueness of their own hulls, inside which the

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25 Matthew, 26:41, *The King James Bible*

26 Alexander, Elizabeth. “Translator”

27 Shaw, Rosalind. “Cannibal transformations: Sierra Leone” in *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft, and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, page 55

experience of the Middle Passage was hardly less nightmarish than the imagined scenario of African bodies being broken down into food.<sup>28</sup>

Does the native—specifically African—fear that the Europeans will cannibalize him share any psychological features with the European fear, or, since it is not related to an agenda of oppression, is it simply the logical extension of other well-founded fears for his physical well-being? The fact that it does not appear in the literature of the middle passage among a cluster of other fears, but is instead always emphasized as a particular and ultimate fear, suggests its larger scope. Is the expression of the fear, as in Equiano's narrative, simply a rhetorical device designed to turn the European accusation back at them so they might consider their own barbarity? If it serves this function, and it would not be surprising given the abolitionist ambitions of such texts, then we still might examine the extent to which this mimicry—if it is mimicry, which remains highly questionable—goes as deep as the repetition of the European anxieties about sameness.

The language of such passages suggests that it does: “I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair?”<sup>29</sup> When Equiano asks this question, he has already endured the horrors of kidnapping, separation from his family, and some of the physical hardships of slavery in Africa, so the question of what is to become of his body has already been asked and answered, almost from the moment of his capture—it is to be owned, it is to be violated, it is to be used. Somehow, the sight of the “sea, and a slave-ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo filled [him] with astonishment, which was soon converted into a terror, which [he is] yet at a loss to describe.”<sup>30</sup> This vision, which obviously does not explicitly raise the threat of cannibalism any more than the Congo River

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28 Shaw, Rosalind. “Cannibal transformations: Sierra Leone” in *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft, and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, page 54

29 Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, page 55

30 Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, page 55

does, nonetheless marks a psychic shift that results, according to Equiano, in a powerful intuition that the Europeans will consume him: “their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief.”<sup>31</sup> It is a vision of the scale and organization of Atlantic slavery. The great port represents a system in which Equiano himself, and his fellow Africans, are the missing components—they are its fuel, and the bellies of the ships will swallow them.

Equiano is not afraid of being killed so much as he is afraid of his body becoming part of this other body that is frightening not only for its foreignness, but also because it is so obviously “horrible”—the agent of horror. Equiano's question, phrased differently, is “if I am swallowed by this system, will I become like it?” The question even casts a small shadow backwards, so that we hear, as an echo, one of the few details of free African life that Equiano shares: “Some of our [animal] offerings are eaten with bitter herbs. We had a saying among us to any one of a cross temper, 'that if they were to be eaten, they should be eaten with bitter herbs.'”<sup>32</sup>

Similar concerns surface in the history of the *Amistad*. Every narration it undergoes emphasizes what Cinque and his shipmates cite as the ultimate impetus for rebellion: the threat that the mulatto cook would cook them. The pointed detail of the cook's mixed race acquires importance here. Poetically, the threat seems most potent from a man like him, who is evidence of the truth of Equiano's fears. The cook has been cooked and cannibalized, or rather, assimilated to the project of the middle passage thoroughly enough that he, too, threatens to cannibalize. Elizabeth Alexander picks up on this danger, which is again the danger of sameness, in the sonority of her poetry: *we killed the cook, who said he would cook us*. The hard cracks of “cook” and “kill” threaten to overwhelm the line, so that it almost flattens out into a meaningless

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31 Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, page 55

32 Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, page 41

cacophony, k-c-k-c-k. And yet, the language maintains a delicate hold on syntax and sanity. Cinque and his companions are able, somehow, to channel the violence of the slave ship into its unmaking without entirely unmaking themselves in the process. Something remains to be translated, to be communicated, the possibility of communion remains—

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*I confront him and shout, "Sir, is Shabine!  
They say I'se your grandson. You remember Grandma,  
your black cook, at all?" The bitch hawk and spat.  
A spit like that worth any number of words.  
But that's all them bastards have left us: words.*<sup>33</sup>

We return to the Caribbean, to the *karibna*, to the cannibal-come-Caliban. Millions have been swallowed and have emerged as English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, French-speaking *chabines*. It is not through cannibalism that the dreaded commingling has occurred, but through its closest cousin, its bedfellow—miscegenation. The real cannibalism has occurred on the level of language, which is where it began and how it was transmitted. The two are not entirely disentangled; the name the poet calls himself is the name he has swallowed from the colonizer and the name he spits back at him as evidence of his complicity, sexual and spiritual. Though language emerges as a system of differences, enforcing and naturalizing boundaries the body cannot feel on its own, it must travel and translate in order to do so, admitting its infinite affinity as it rhymes its way around the world, colonial and post. No matter how Shabine's grandfather spits, he cannot rid himself of what his "black cook" has fed him, any more than Walcott can take his tongue out of his cheek in saying that words are "all these bastards have left us." No, something sticks in the throat

*and the word was made flesh.*<sup>34</sup>

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33 Walcott, Derek. "The Schooner Flight," in *Selected Poems*, page 129

34 John, 1:14, *The King James Bible*



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