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BOOK REVIEW

The Delectable Negro: human consumption and homoeroticism within U.S. slave culture
VINCENT WOODARD, 2014 (Ed. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, foreword E. Patrick Johnson)
New York: New York University Press
311 pp., ISBN 0 8147 9461 6, £ 55 (hardback); ISBN 0 8147 9462 3, £ 18.99 (paperback)

In his brilliant reading of Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), Vincent Woodard argues for a more fluid conception of gender and black consumption in order to envision ‘new and dynamic’ worlds of ‘possibility’ for black experiences under slavery (p. 167). Woodard’s study of the archives of consumption – a term used to express a range of practices including institutionalized hunger, sexual modes of consumption, seasoning rituals, cannibalism, erotic pleasure, and soul harvesting – aims to do this by providing a new language and apparatus for thinking about how ‘blacks experienced their consumption as a fundamentally ... homoerotic occurrence’ (p. 7). Moreover, Woodard’s reading of black experiences of consumption (through the prism of homoerotic encounters and gender indeterminacy) emphasizes the possibility of agency for enslaved subjects, shedding light on hitherto under-theorized acts of resistance. In part, by taking seriously the enslaved person’s epistemology of cannibalistic practices as actual event rather than metaphor, Woodard demonstrates his commitment to centering the integrity of the knowledge paradigms of enslaved persons, thereby restoring authority to the black speaker. This important study also compels us to think anew the site of erotic pleasure and hunger (described by Woodard as auto-consumption) as places for radically transforming the discourse of black consumption and ‘the politics of interiority’ (p. 212).

This fascinating study, published posthumously with commendable editorial assistance from Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, is a tour de force with a sweeping critical vision ranging from the reading of white cannibalism in transatlantic literature to legacies of black hunger a propos homoeroticism in the context of 1960s political insurgence. The range of critical methodologies and texts (including but not limited to slave narratives, WPA interviews, advertisements, cartoons, neo-slave narratives, journals, diaries, poetry, and historical fiction) embolden this project but also threaten its coherence. The introduction to the study situates cannibalism as ‘an originary framework for the emergence of homoeroticism’ within the economies of the slave trade and plantation culture (p. 19). The concept of ‘originary framework’ correlates with the author’s interest in language and philosophy and his wider argument about the failure of critics to conceptualize the libidinal experience of the enslaved person beyond familiar binaries of homo/hetero, master/slave, black/white, masculine/feminine, etc. With its explicit aim to expand our thinking about sexuality in the period of slavery and search for a language expressive of queer subjectivity, this book will appeal to readers interested in the intersections of sexuality, language, and gender identities.

In Chapter 1, Woodard ‘establish[es] an interconnection between cannibalism and chattel homoeroticism’ (p. 25) by attending to Africanist perspectives on the economies of
consumption. Moderating the boundary between literal acts of eating, carving, and cooking flesh as well as metaphorical acts of ‘seasoning’ the flesh (through violence, religious conversion and sexual brutality), The Delectable Negro connects institutionalized practices with intimate human relations during the eighteenth century. Following Woodard’s reading of Equiano’s narrative in Chapter 1, the next chapter explores the Essex affair and the interplay between sex, honor, and human consumption in the antebellum period. Chapters 3 and 4 provide sustained original readings of two canonical slave narratives, drawing attention to the subversive use of hunger and gender performativity to claim space for a wider epistemology of slave sexuality. In Chapter 3, Woodard explores Frederick Douglass’s narrative through the lens of hunger in order to recuperate a ‘latent grammar’ for the ‘unspeakable dimensions of his own [Douglass’] sex and embodied knowledge’ (p. 104). In contrast to conventional interpretations of Douglass’s heroic resistance and rhetorical mastery, the author reads for subterfuge, encoding, and inversions of speech (via a compelling reading of incest) to demonstrate the ‘effeminate values’ and emotional and erotic life (p. 112) concealed within Douglass’s text. Chapter 4 establishes a correlation between hunger and gender categorization with particular focus on incest and human consumption in the work of Harriet Jacobs. This chapter contains a strong and original reading of the character of Luke and provides a necessary preliminary exploration of the role of white women within economies of power, sexuality, and gender consumption.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn their focus to the contemporary period and Chapter 5 in particular marks a shift in tone and methodology away from close textual analysis and theorization to wider cultural narrative. Woodard explores responses to Styron’s novel The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) aiming to illustrate the transhistorical legacies of homoeroticism and cannibalism via the recurrent haunting of Nat Turner. In my view, this chapter is the weakest chapter of this otherwise outstanding study. Chapter 6 returns to the framework of hunger, consumption and black male sexuality via an interesting reading of the black male orifice and oral sex scene in Morrison’s Beloved (1987) and includes a preliminary sketching of a genealogy of the uses of black bodies and body parts as figures for a ‘politics of interiority’ (p. 212).

The paradigmatic potential of Woodard’s conception of the black male orifice demonstrates the potential of this work to spur new approaches to the studies of slavery and critical theory and signals productive future extensions to the epistemology outlined here to include figures and persons not currently included. It would be fitting tribute to the author himself to see readers from across the disciplines engage with the provocation and cognizance of Vincent Woodard’s work.

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