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4 **BOOK REVIEW**  
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8 **The Delectable Negro: human consumption and homoeroticism within U.S. slave**  
9 **culture**

10 VINCENT WOODARD, 2014 (Ed. Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride, foreword E.  
11 Patrick Johnson)

12 New York: New York University Press

13 311 pp., ISBN 0 8147 9461 6, £ 55 (hardback); ISBN 0 8147 9462 3, £ 18.99 (paperback)  
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15 In his brilliant reading of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861),  
16 Vincent Woodard argues for a more fluid conception of gender and black consumption in  
17 order to envision 'new and dynamic' worlds of 'possibility' for black experiences under  
18 slavery (p. 167). Woodard's study of the archives of consumption – a term used to express  
19 a range of practices including institutionalized hunger, sexual modes of consumption,  
20 seasoning rituals, cannibalism, erotic pleasure, and soul harvesting – aims to do this by  
21 providing a new language and apparatus for thinking about how 'blacks experienced their  
22 consumption as a fundamentally ... homoerotic occurrence' (p. 7). Moreover, Woodard's  
23 reading of black experiences of consumption (through the prism of homoerotic encounters  
24 and gender indeterminacy) emphasizes the possibility of agency for enslaved subjects,  
25 shedding light on hitherto under-theorized acts of resistance. In part, by taking seriously  
26 the enslaved person's epistemology of cannibalistic practices as actual event rather than  
27 metaphor, Woodard demonstrates his commitment to centering the integrity of the  
28 knowledge paradigms of enslaved persons, thereby restoring authority to the black  
29 speaker. This important study also compels us to think anew the site of erotic pleasure and  
30 hunger (described by Woodard as auto-consumption) as places for radically transforming  
31 the discourse of black consumption and 'the politics of interiority' (p. 212).

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

48 In Chapter 1, Woodard 'establish[es] an interconnection between cannibalism and  
49 chattel homoeroticism' (p. 25) by attending to Africanist perspectives on the economies of

## 2 Book Review

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

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

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

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