

Eating Others: Cannibalizing and Power in France

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An expression that is attributed variously to a dying generation in the southern United States and to U.S. army troops during World War II states: ‘They can kill you but they can’t eat you.’ While interpretations of this aphorism vary, it is clear that it implies a hierarchy: there is worse than murder, there is the eating of human flesh. Or conversely, the definitive act of autonomy is not staying alive, but resisting ingestion. If not one of the Ten Commandments dictates: ‘Thou shalt not eat thy neighbour,’ it is perhaps because the spectre of cannibalism is the ultimate taboo, the most unspeakable arrogation of power. Yet when we dig into and around histories and stories of cannibalism, the lines of force begin to vacillate.

The word ‘cannibal’ comes to us from a European corruption of the Arawak word *cariba*, ‘bold’ or ‘hardy,’ by which the indigenous Antillais or West Indians designated themselves (and from which the modern geopolitical term ‘Caribbean’ is derived as well). The derivation is complicated, but the main point to be taken is that Christopher Columbus, along with other European observers in the late fifteenth century, believed the Arawaks were human flesh eaters, and so the name by which they were called, with slight distortion, came to be synonymous with what we today call cannibals (Lestringant 1994, pp. 43-69). Beginning here and continuing with the early sixteenth-century appropriation of the term ‘cannibal’ in Europe, accounts of indigenous barbarism and brutality were infused with racism — motivated by racism — another more discreet, but not less noxious, form of power. Such projections of cannibalism onto African and Caribbean peoples on the part of Europeans did not dissipate with the passage of time. My purpose here is not to present a history of these projections, but rather an illustration, focusing on a nineteenth-century ‘case study,’ as it were: an example of the uses of cannibalization taken, rather pointedly, from the age of high colonialism in France. I use the terms ‘cannibalization’ and ‘cannibalizing’ throughout these pages to refer less to the act of humans eating human flesh than to the process of humans assigning cannibalism to figures of human alterity who provoke anxiety and fear.

In what follows I turn first to the popular writer Eugène Sue’s 1831 novel, *Atar-Gull*, for its revealing inversion of scenarios of colonial power through renditions of the eponymous slave Atar-Gull as voracious cannibal. I consider the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of stereotyping in this novel that portrays the African slave as people eater while also pretending to expose the brutalities of the slave trade and presenting itself as anti slavery. In the second part of

the paper I move on to another novel by the same author, *Les Mystères de Paris*, for a rendition of urban cannibals whose social exoticising will complement and nuance the spatial exoticising by Europeans of African others.

Sue’s Middle Passage maritime novel begins with an African cannibal story offering the banally racist stuff of nineteenth-century exoticising: two warring African tribes, *les petits* and *les grands Namaquas*, respectively make meals of their enemies, and sell them to European slave-traders. One of these, Benoît, commands a laden French slave ship that’s pirated by another as it’s leaving the African coast, and divested of its human cargo and its crew. (To underscore the obvious, the seizure is not motivated by humanitarian rescue, but by the value of the African captives, euphemistically referred to as ‘ebony wood,’ as movable property.) Before re-embarking for Jamaica to sell his stolen goods to the British colonists, the Machiavellian pirate captain Brulart exploits his knowledge of African cannibal practices (as Sue exploits his command of cultural myth) to purge his white captives at the mouths of the *petits Namaquas*. Delivering Captain Benoît and his crew to the homeland of the black captives, Brulart urges the villagers to deal the white men the fate normally reserved to their *grands Namaquas* enemies, promising that white meat will afford them uncharted gastronomic pleasure: ‘Try some white meat; you’ll see that it’s a very delicate food’ (Sue 1831, p. 197). The tribesmen take the bait. We last see Benoît and his sailors hog-tied on the ground while the villagers deliriously chant: ‘We will bury them here in this noble tomb, a noble tomb for the pale faces,’ rubbing their sepulchral bellies in anticipatory glee (Sue 1831, p. 199).

So a symbolic circle of human trafficking and cannibalism is closed, leaving open questions of narrative agency and responsibility. If at first it seems obvious who the cannibals are, a second thought dispels certainty. As Benoît begins to grasp his impending doom in the guts of the *petit Namaqua* people whose families he’s plundered, he uses the label ‘cannibal’ — referring not to these prospective feeders, but to Brulart as the agent of the machination (‘But you are a monster...a cannibal’ [Sue 1831, p. 198]). If Brulart is a cannibal because he brings about the consumption of humans by other humans, what should we think about his crew, not explicitly labelled ‘cannibal’ but described as ‘blackened by gunpowder and filth [...] with savage eyes and claw-like nails’ (Sue 1831, p. 180), and introduced on a deck ‘covered with dark red stains...strewn with certain membranous debris and the tattered remains of human flesh’ (Sue 1831, p. 181). And what about Benoît, whose commerce in lives has caused the

destruction of both the dead he cavalierly relegates to the category of collateral waste of the Middle Passage, and the captives delivered alive 'to the colonies but whose lives and limbs are radically altered under the regime of slavery? What about 'father' Van-Hop, the white dealer who procures *petits Namaquas* prisoners from the *grands Namaquas* for the slave traders, and then boasts of having elevated the *grands Namaquas* from cannibalism by providing them with this alternative means of population control? What of the slave Atar-Gull, who bites open his own veins during the shipboard passage, only to be 'saved' from devouring his life by the financially-motivated ministrations of Brulart? And what of the shackled Africans in the ship's hold who seek death by straining to swallow their tongues?

These variants on cannibalism range from eating the Other, to eating the self, to having the Other eaten by another Other, to 'consuming' the Other by non-oral means — slavery, for instance. The broad category of consumption coincides with Sue's frequent metaphoric as well as literal use of the verb *manger*, 'to eat,' to connote violence of many sorts, not only digestive.

Sue's reiterated analogizing of slavery and cannibalism — the *beating* and the *eating* of humans by other humans — cries out for commentary. Certainly there's an echo of Montaigne's argument that the barbarism of 'primitive' cannibals who consume their enemies is well matched by the brutality of 'civilized' men. Sue's frequent narrative ironising of the ostensibly 'honest' and 'fatherly' slave trader Benoît exposes the hypocritical paternalism of his *métier*, which subordinates black to white lives under the guise of best (that is, most lucrative) business practice. So, for example, Captain Benoît 'trades in slaves with as much good conscience and probity as is possible to apply to business affairs, believing he is acting no worse than if he were selling cattle or colonial goods' (Sue 1831, p. 158). Sue's persistent ironising of the twinned postures of racial superiority and economic self-interest ostensibly holds him apart from them. But it's uncertain if his irony clears him of the act of Othering or wraps him in a veil of complicity with it.

Outside the cover of ironic discourse, still more unsettling phrases emerge. There's a reference to 'the stupid ignorance of savages' (Sue 1831, p. 203). The African Atar-Gull is regularly rendered as predatory: 'springing like a tiger'; 'howling like a lion' (Sue 1831 p. 244). So there's a kind of double irony that threatens to undermine the work of irony, reducing the African to tired stereotypes of the bestial, the savage, and the cannibal. While Sue periodically winks at the reader, he mass-reproduces such clichés. Central among these are overwrought images of mouths marked by excess: oversized, over blanched, extra-sharp teeth, and exaggerated smiles affixed to lips emitting subhuman cries.

Troubling in its repetition of European visual Otherings of Africans, this frequent re-opening of Atar-Gull's mouth is all the more disconcerting when reconnected with the

complicating arc of his voice. For in the course of the novel, Atar-Gull undergoes a slow, clandestine, and radical transformation emblematised by a vocal shift: his early voicelessness finally gives way to raging, unrelenting rant.

After being sold into slavery in West Africa, then pirated as chattel on the high seas, Atar-Gull is resold to the British planter Tom Wil in Jamaica, then later relocated to England and finally to France as a freed man, though still serving as Wil's personal slave. Atar-Gull's life circumscribes a full Middle Passage slave story. He's scarred by physical and psychological abuse including horrific beatings, his lover's maiming, his father's lynching. But his story departs from the trajectory of most others. He has cunningly plotted a slow course of revenge fed by a measured fanning of his smouldering fury. Over long years and with recourse to escaped slave sorcerers in the Jamaican hills, he has stealthily engineered the ravaging of the plantation fields, the poisoning of the animals, the death of the planter's daughter by arranged snakebite, and the ensuing demise of his wife. For the planter Wil, the somatised climax of all this devastation is muteness, technically attributed to traumatic paralysis of the tongue.

Wil ends up in a Parisian garret, destitute, ailing, and completely dependent on his superficially faithful former slave Atar-Gull (whose name is now Frenchified as 'Monsieur Targu'). Any food, any water, any medication that passes the lips of Tom Wil is due in fact to the sheer will of his former slave. While all onlookers — the doctor, the porter, the neighbours — marvel at the apparent devotion of the freed man selflessly nursing a bedridden, indigent, senile — and conveniently mute — 'master,' Atar-Gull takes his revenge, revealing to Wil behind closed doors his role in preparing the planter's familial and professional debacle. He tortures him by doggedly rehearsing every detail of the death and destruction he planted. Inverting years of compliant silence, he speaks truth to a silenced master, who dies way too soon for his attendant servant to inflict sufficient suffering on his former torturer. Monsieur Targu cries genuine tears of rage at the too-rapid expiration of his revenge — tears misinterpreted by observers as signs of grieving — and is duly awarded the Montyon Virtue Prize (a prize awarded to a poor French person who had exhibited virtuous behaviour) for his long submissive care of the now deceased colonist.

Beneficiary of a hefty monetary award accompanied by a truly logorrhoeic official speech, Atar-Gull epitomizes the underdog whose ruse and guile allow him to reverse positions. Risen from the lowest sort of 'valet' status to be master of his master and laureate of the state, he embodies the trickster traits known in ancient Greece as *la mêtis*, or 'cunning intelligence': traits later reincarnated by the Italian Comedy Arlecchino, and defined by Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant as 'a set of intellectual behaviours that combine instinct, sagacity, foresight, mental flexibility, ruse, resourcefulness, and vigilant attention' (Detienne and Vernant 1974, p. 10).

The reversal, like the original power structure, is recounted in oral terms: speech and muteness, feeding and starvation. Tom Wil, fed in his latter days by the sparing hand of Atar-Gull, wastes away, dying of malnutrition. Killing Wil by controlling his food intake, Atar-Gull performs a symbolic cannibalism: an eating away of the master by the slave.

But let there be no mistake: Atar-Gull is Sue's cannibal from the first. He is, after all, a *petit Namaqua*, member of the tribe that takes no prisoners because it eats them instead. Portrayed consistently as tall, menacing, and watchful, he is described with recurrent emphasis not only on his sharp-toothed mouth, but also on his pouncing, predatory form, compared successively to a lion, tiger, jackal, and serpent. Back in the Jamaica days, Atar-Gull was Wil's subservient slave during the day, only to transform at night: 'One had to see him then, leaping, panting, contorted, furious, roaring like a lion, and gnawing the earth with rage... Then his eyes would be gleaming in the dark, his teeth gnashing' (Sue 1831, p. 244). His servile daytime smile nevertheless presaged a future bite: 'His eternal smile...revealed his white, sharp teeth ...' (Sue 1831, p. 245).

Small wonder that while Tom Wil's slow death is marked by juxtaposed muteness and malnutrition, his attentive slave is increasingly defined by verbal aggression and an overpowering mouth: 'his clenched lips ... let forth the sound of his chattering teeth grinding like those of a ravenous tiger' (Sue 1831, p. 283). The slave's vigilant watch over his diminishing master is noted by the porter in similarly devouring metaphors: 'One would think his nigger was afraid *that someone would gobble up his master*; no one can approach him' (Sue 1831, p. 278; my emphasis). Tom Wil must be cannibalized, but only by the right cannibal and in the right way: a diet of meagre material sustenance and masterful psychic corrosion. When his dying hostage refuses to eat, Atar-Gull forces a few spoonfuls of bouillon down his throat to prolong the agony, while he roars out the tale of his slave's revenge: '... the nigger howled, snarling like a tiger, and leaping around the room uttering inhuman cries' (Sue 1831, p. 285).

We find ourselves often in a gray zone of discourse emanating from an uncertain voice whose source is blurred by irony and free indirection. We witness the triumph of Monsieur Targu over Tom Wil — and over his earlier incarnation as Atar-Gull as well — but it is hard to say if we're being directed to applaud the victory of a black slave reclaiming his rights, his humanity, and his voice, or the uncommon performance of a being who, having outwitted all the forces combined against him to rise beyond all expectation, remains still for Sue essentially *a nigger*, a big-mouthed African savage sharp of tooth, a brute creature grudgingly admitted his extraordinary story as an exception. For, to return to the problem of ambiguously-voiced stereotypes, we pass from recurrent images of sharp white teeth to descriptions of ominous white eyes shining

in the dark. The narrator alternates clichéd visual images with received ideas of essentialised 'African' character traits: 'these words ...marked by the hot-blooded exaltation of an African ...' (Sue 1831, p. 293; my emphasis); 'Atar-Gull had recognized the man who was the...recipient of ... all *his African hatred*' (Sue 1831, p. 267; my emphasis). He tosses the reader anecdotes compliant with the most hackneyed of cultural representations. Witness the infantilising description of Atar-Gull as an adult plantation slave in Jamaica, catching a trinket tossed by his master as a 'prize' for good behaviour: '[he] surrendered to a childish joy as he brought the watch to his ear to listen to the sound of its mechanism' (Sue 1831, p. 239).

Does it matter — does it mitigate — that such tired accounts are occasionally cut by self-conscious recognitions of the cultural work of stereotypes? Hear this commentary on the slave Atar-Gull at work in the plantation house: 'his mouth retained the stereotyped smile that you well know ...' (Sue 1831, p. 248). When do we begin to hold Sue as author ethically accountable for his narrator's miming of racial stereotypes even as he chastises racial intolerance? And how do we begin to sort out the inconsistent representations and contradictory pronouncements?

Some ten years after writing *Atar-Gull*, its author set out (rather reluctantly, under pressure from friends to branch out from tales of the sea and of society by taking the poor as his subject) to write a novel of a very different sort. His resulting pot-boiler serial novel, *Les Mystères de Paris* (*The Mysteries of Paris*) ran daily in the conservative newspaper *Le Journal des débats* from June 1842-October 1843, and inaugurated the soon-to-be international genre of 'urban mysteries,' or stories of the underbelly of city life, with a voyeuristic focus on the hungry, raging gut of the working class.

Close to the end of the thousand-plus page saga, the mobbing populace of Paris is subsumed, by Sue's clearly bourgeois narrator, under the emphatic epithet 'cannibals!' There is, to be sure, no scene of human ingestion, no sign of gnawed limbs, or body parts thrown in a kettle, but instead, a mid-Lent orgy of drinking, lewd dancing, and murderous popular rage. While the cannibal label might seem, to an unprepared reader, incongruously applied to a rowdy urban centre population far from the high seas and exotic shores, in fact, in the context of the novel, the real surprise is that it has taken this long to hear the explicit word. For *The Mysteries of Paris* stages scenarios of biting, eating, devouring, and swallowing up of human by human (largely but not entirely in metaphorical terms): in short, fantasies of class warfare played out on a very primitive level. A few glances at the very literal, physical flesh-eating fare periodically served up to readers will help to prepare them for the more significant cannibalizing sequences of the novel.

The reader is spectator to scenes best described by a few serial examples. An ostensible caretaker bites chunks of flesh out of a child's face in sadistic parodies of kissing. An unjustly imprisoned young man is marked for assassination

by a hardened killer, facially appropriated to his task of *mangeur*, 'predator,' by the description of his 'heavy, jutting lower jaw, armed with long teeth, that is, jagged fangs protruding over his lips' (Sue 1842-43, p. 950). A rodent-infested cellar serves as makeshift prison and torture chamber where the god-fearing and the evil are equally likely to be fed to the rats or to each other. Among the casualties are a vicious couple who emerge bitten, battered, literally chewed up, and half dead: which is to say, she dies, grotesquely mauled at his hand and mouth, while he survives, severely disfigured by her teeth. Let it be clear that in all of these cases of literal human predation, it is members of the lower classes who are consistently and vehemently presented as predatory, flesh eating, devouring.

These examples, prelude to a broader consideration of the dark resonances of eating in *The Mysteries of Paris*, remind us that *to eat*, like its phonetic echo, *to beat*, is always embedded in a web of violence in this novel (and we recall that the French *manger* covers a range of meanings including 'to beat,' 'to kill,' and to 'snitch,' in addition to the literal 'to eat.'). The novel all but begins with a scene of eating, just a few pages after opening, showing us dinner in a low-life tavern in what we would today call the 'inner city' of Paris: the dark twisty alleyways haunted by the poor, the criminal, and the hungry, and avoided by others. Among the lowlife frequenters of the establishment this evening we find an odd trio of diners seated together: an ex-con, le Chourineur ('The Slasher'), a foreign prince disguised as a poor artisan, Rodolphe, hosting the meal, and a young woman who goes by the name Fleur de Marie ('Mary's Flower'), who has been prostituted by ill fortune and evildoers, despite her heart of gold and secret patrician origins. (We will all learn much later on that she is in fact Rodolphe's long-lost daughter, sold off as an infant by her wicked mother and presumed dead.) When le Chourineur orders a plate of leftovers (a 'harlequin'), the narrator pauses to confide to his ostensibly bourgeois readers, in a footnote, exactly what kind of food this is, and precisely how disgusting he finds it:

A 'harlequin' is a hodgepodge of meat, fish, and all kinds of leftovers cleared from the tables of fine houses by the servants. We are ashamed to give these details, but they contribute to most such menus (Sue, 1842-43, p. 48).

Not surprisingly, the down-and-out Chourineur is the only one of the three to partake of this dish. The young woman finds her hunger suddenly dissipated, and Rodolphe is a silent observer, subsidizing but not sharing le Chourineur's delectation. But le Chourineur's pleasure is more than manifest in the glee with which he in turn describes the details of the 'harlequin' plate:

What a dish! God Almighty! What a dish! It's like an omnibus. There's something for all tastes, for those who eat meat and those who don't, for those

who like sugar and those who like spice...chicken drumsticks, biscuit pieces, fish tails, rib bones, pâté crusts, fried bits, cheese, vegetables, woodcock head, salad. Go on, eat ... eat up, this is refined food (Sue, 1842-43, p. 49).

Despite his urging, his two companions — and this bears repeating — do not eat up, and the disparity (one eats, the others don't) is significant, because the divide coincides precisely with class lines.

Not only does the divide separate the consumers and non-consumers of the leftover food; it also, more significantly, marks off two distinct evaluations of the food, represented on the one hand by the narrator's disgusted footnote, and on the other, by Le Chourineur's exulting appreciation. The divergent summaries deserve commentary. Le Chourineur clearly performs his lower-class status by first ordering and then relishing the mixed plate of food. His vigorous exclamations of gustatory delight are given as indications of his crude taste, which dwells on the sheer quantity and variety of the food scraps offered on his comprehensive plate — this at a time when the celebrity chef Marie-Antoine Carême was famously redefining and recodifying French cuisine on the basis of the simplification and separation of flavours and ingredients (Revel, 1978, pp. 282-83). As the narrator's note suggests, the mere detailing of the sundry items on the poor man's plate is cause for embarrassed bourgeois shame. Meals, of course, are cultural arrangements, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has reminded us (Bourdieu 1979 pp. 177-199). Their content and form are class dependent. So it is plausible that a plate that elicits revulsion for Sue's narrator would bring a diner like le Chourineur shivers of joy. The complication, though, is that there is in fact a confusion of both food and class hierarchies, because the 'harlequin' plate of leftovers (re) serves to the poor the fine cuisine of the wealthy.

While one might expect that revulsion would be the share of the poor diner forced by circumstance to eat the remains of the more fortunate, the novel shows us instead a narrator, standing in for the bourgeoisie, revolted by the poor man's plate — a plate that theoretically could have originated on this narrator's own table. If the lower class eater here rejoices in the good fortune fallen onto his plate from above, it is as much because he is eating upwardly, partaking, for the space of a few bites, of the fantasy of class mobility, as that his hunger is sated by the vestiges of fancy foods still partly identifiable in the jumble. If the upper-class observer is repulsed (and I include here not only the narrator but the reader he invites to participate in his disgust), this is also because le Chourineur is eating upwardly, with the difference in reaction being positional: the fantasy of social mobility in which the poor man indulges becomes, for the well-to-do observer, a threat.

The narrator's contempt for le Chourineur's lusty appetite for hand-me-down food may suggest a confirmation of rigid social hierarchies, but his derision also covers over fears of

social leaking crystallized by the downward passage of food. The 'harlequin' poses at least as great a threat to the upper classes as it does to the underclasses who are taking in the food from better-fed mouths. The representation of trickle-down eating is already a rhetorical disguise for the circulation and inter penetrability of social classes: while overtly expressing a slide down the socio-economic ladder and a corresponding descending movement of aesthetic and sensorial taste, it masks anxieties about an upward movement of the lower classes, a potential uprising materialized by the appropriation of higher-class food, a phantasmatic upward passage of hungry mouths.

So when we return now to the cannibal labelling of the angry crowd at the end of the novel, we may be in a better position to understand the apparent overstatement. The urban lower class mob, roused to a drunk, roaring pitch of anger at the height of the carnival festivities, poised to set upon the royal carriage and its entourage, is enacting the anxious fears building throughout the novel and expressed throughout as well in scenes of biting, gnawing, and eating. The finally voiced marker 'cannibal!' articulates the elaborate mosaic construction of the people's plate, the people as palate, a cannibal palate concretised at the beginning of the novel in the crude figure of the voracious Chourineur gulping down his muddled mash of upper class remains.

Sue's urban mystery transposes race onto class: it transfers racial cannibalizing to socioeconomic cannibalizing, restating, in terms of social classes, the same mixed messages his maritime novel transmits about racial Others. *The Mysteries of Paris* turns the working classes into cannibalistic eaters, effectively cannibalizing them, just as *Atar-Gull* dresses the Africans enslaved by the French and the British in cannibal clothing, projecting the invasive work of colonization onto the colonized, and displacing the devouring work of hegemonic race and class onto the dominated in a reverse paradigm of power. It would take almost two centuries before this process could be succinctly and graphically exposed as such, as it is in, for example, Didier Daeninckx's 1998 novel, *Cannibale*. But that is another story.

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Note

All translations from the French throughout are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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