CALLALOO

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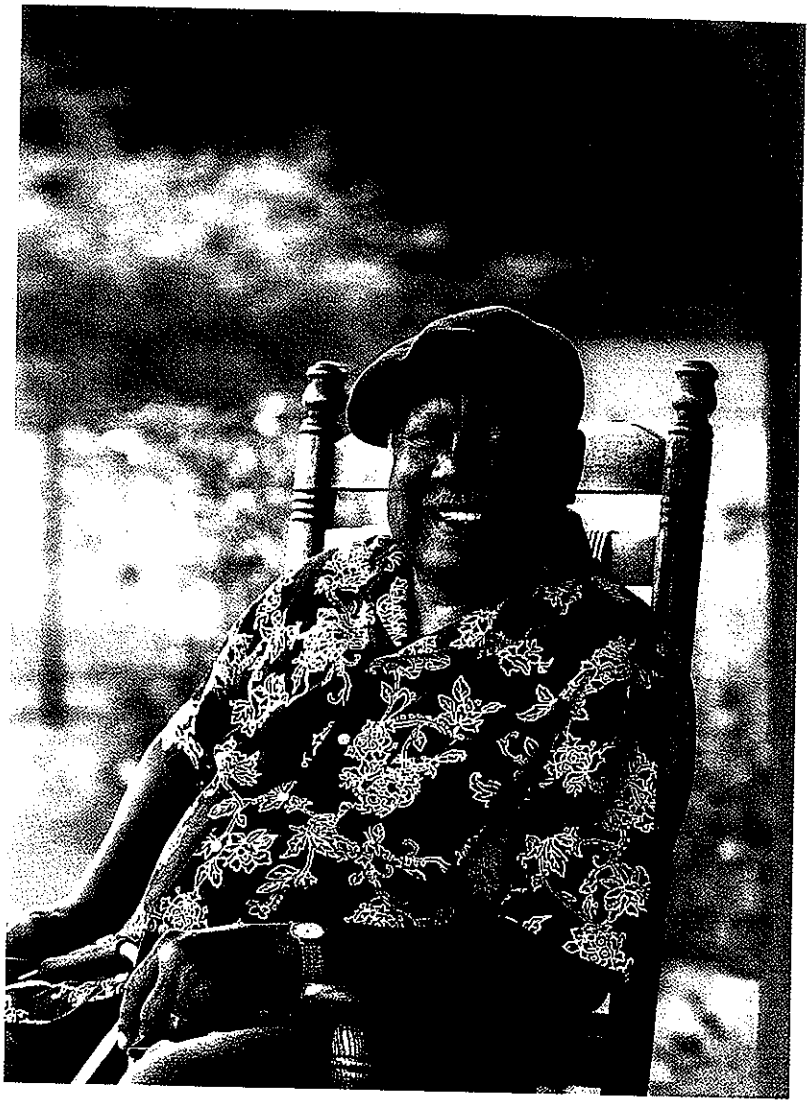

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PROSE FICTION AND NONFICTION PROSE

The Third of Four Special Thirtieth Anniversary Issues

Featured in This Issue

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Eds. Broichhagen, Vera, Lachman, Kathryn, and Simek, Nicole. *Feasting on Words: Maryse Condé, Cannibalism, and the Caribbean Text* (PLAS *Cuadernos Series no. 8*). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Program in Latin American Studies, 2006. Paper. 249 pp.

Feasting on Words presents a succulent array of *hors d'oeuvres* on an unappetizing platter. Its provocative subtitle, *Maryse Condé, Cannibalism, & the Caribbean Text*, announces an original perspective on one of the most prolific female writers of the West Indies. The contributors to the volume, all professors at U.S. universities, successfully theorize "cannibalism" as an indigenous Caribbean literary praxis of anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal political resistance that can be illustrated in novels and interviews by Maryse Condé.

Easing our digestion into this cannibal text, Kwame Anthony Appiah provides a few interesting morsels of biographical detail in a short retrospective on the author entitled "Introducing Maryse Condé." He reminds us that Maryse Condé is a Professor Emerita of French at Columbia University, whose novels have reached U.S. audiences through English translations by her husband, Richard Philcox. Maryse Condé was born and brought up in Guadeloupe and then Paris during the 1950s. Her family's bourgeois identification with France collided with the militant African Diaspora politics of the decades following WWII. Appiah directs the reader to Condé's *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* for some insight into the writer's awareness of this double consciousness in her early years. The text narrates how, as a child, Condé held Antillean literature to be exotic and surrealistic. Like many Afro-American intellectuals of her generation, Condé sought to resolve the colonial conflict of her background by spending time in Africa, first with her Guinean husband, and then in other parts of the continent before returning to Paris in the 1970s. It is during this period that Condé begins writing her novels. *Hérémakhonon* and *Une Saison à Rihata* both have female protagonists who, like Condé, travel from the West Indies to Africa in search of origins that remain elusive and disappointing. Her third novel, *Ségou* continues with the idealization of Africa, but the extended passages on Brazil signal Condé's shift to the Western Hemisphere in subsequent novels. The novel that follows *Ségou* was written and set in the United States: *Moi, Tituba* uses fiction to fill in the gaps on the historical account of a Black Barbadian woman caught up in the Salem witch trials. Condé accomplishes her literary "retour au pays natal" in *Traversée de la mangrove* and *La Migration des coeurs*, set in various Caribbean islands. Appropriately, Appiah sees Condé's personal and literary journeys as constituting a relentless quest for different points of view on her West Indian upbringing.

In light of *Feasting on Words*' thematic achievement, it is disappointing to note that the volume's structural and material construction falls short. The three pieces at the beginning of the volume—the editors' preface, an interview with Condé, and the Introduction of Condé—provide too long an opening act for the essays that follow. The essays themselves are strewn throughout in a haphazard fashion. In the interest of continuity, Lydie Moudileno's essay on Condé's rhetorical strategies in interviews would have been better placed immediately after Condé's interview, instead of sixth among ten essays. Moreover, the work could have profited by creating different sections for the various essays. Six of these essays deal with Condé's latest novel, *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, while the remaining four study other works by the writer. The editors fail to provide different sections for these essays, arranging them without a clearly stated or observable plan. The volume

ends with a very useful bibliography and some biographical notes on the contributors, but what the volume needs at this point is an afterword that would counterbalance the bulky prefatory matter. Using Appiah's brief précis on Maryse Condé as a postlude, instead of as an introduction, would have lent the volume a much-needed measure of equilibrium and a graceful note of finality.

Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003) is the story of the Guadeloupean artist Rosélie who is taken to South Africa by a lover who abandons her there. In her misfortune, she marries Stephen, a closeted gay English professor, who is mysteriously murdered in Cape Town. Rosélie crafts an identity for herself and finds answers to her husband's murder through travels in Africa, England, Japan and the U.S. Her nomadism allows her to refine her gifts of clairvoyance and painting. The abandonment of men in her life is tempered by the reflection she obtains from Fiéla, the cannibal woman she paints at the end of the text and that she transforms into an avatar of herself.

Mireille Rosello attempts to understand cannibalism in this text through her essay "Post-cannibalism in Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale*." Here, Rosello traces the development of the idea of the cannibal in Montaigne's "Des Cannibales," Swift's "A Modest Proposal," and Césaire's "Discourse on Colonialism." Like many of the contributors, Rosello locates the most productive theoretical source on cannibalism in Andrade's "Manifesto Antropógafo," the founding document of the Brazilian modernist movement of "Antropofagía." Rosello suggests that cannibalism is imagined by the colonizer-as-reader and projected onto the subjugated population of the text: "We have no facts, only hypotheses . . . only our imagination writes the narrative that creates a cannibal" (41). But what this and all the other contributors and editors of the volume miss are the implications of using the Amerindian trope of the cannibal to understand the work of an Afro-Diasporic writer. Nevertheless, Rosello's eclectic approach allows her to move from these philosophical works to more popular narratives such as *The Silence of the Lambs*. However, the author misses an important opportunity to explicate the association that this film and Condé's novel make between homosexuality and cannibalism. This becomes a blind spot for most of the contributors who, in spite of their knowledge of European settlement of the Americas, forget to note that the charges of homosexuality and cannibalism were the two most common rhetorical strategies in the representation of Amerindians as barbaric others.

Karen Lindo's "Shame and the Emerging Nation in *Histoire de la femme cannibale*" continues Rosello's social constructionist approach to the cannibal. In her essay, Lindo revisits William Arens' *The Man- Eating Myth*, where he exposes the cannibal as fictitious by arguing that the discourse on cannibalism never focuses on the act of consuming human flesh, only on the threat of its possibility. For Lindo, this invention of cannibalism allows the upholding of an otherwise impossible ambivalence: "cannibalism makes shame visible in allowing love and aggression to coincide in the consumption of flesh. The differences between eater and eaten are obliterated through the act of incorporation." (61). Through cannibalism, Fiéla is able to acquire—through bodily ingestion—the centrality of a society that keeps her at bay. Lindo then proposes that Condé's character can help us to understand how Andrade's "Manifesto Antropófago" reconciles the peripheral and the marginal in Brazilian society through the image of the cannibal.

The colonizer's invention of the cannibal and its projection onto the colonized acquires a gender component in Dawn Fulton's "A Question of Cannibalism: Unspeakable Crimes in *Histoire de femme cannibale*" and Nicole Simek's "Eating Well, Reading Well: Condé's Ethics of Interpretation." Fulton believes that "Just as the cannibal is named even before the moment of colonial contact, the title of Rosélie's painting supplants an image that already exists in her mind; it is a point of departure masquerading as an endpoint, an invention disguised as discovery" (100). Simek, on the other hand, sees Rosélie's painting as an act of possession: "She digests Fiéla . . . To represent—in the sense of portraying another, but also in the broader sense of using language, of appropriating . . . is to cannibalize (120). Through their reading of Rosélie's painting of Fiéla, Fulton and Simek appear to move beyond ethnic and national models of othering to one that takes account of asymmetries of power within subaltern communities.

Kathryn Lachman's "Le cannibalisme au féminin: a Case of Radical Indigestion" develops a theory of "indigestion" that speaks to the subversive potential of elements that refuse assimilation into the social order. Utilizing a Kristevan politics based on the female body, she presents the cannibal as the emblem of female threat to the patriarchy: "The female body, even more so than the male, has an outstanding capacity to absorb . . . (72). Ronnie Scharfman's "Criss-Crossing the Mangrove: The Literary Nomadics of Maryse Condé" continues Lachmann's feminist psychoanalytic reading and Lindo's social reconciliation motif by using Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" to understand the way in which cannibalism affords Rosélie the possibility of killing, yet keeping her lover. Ironically, the reliance of these essays on the work European theorists is incongruous with the anti-colonial hermeneutics Condé explains in the volume's interview: "to be overly influenced by theory is to pay too much attention to the canons imposed by France. If you read a work while relying on Foucauldian or Lacanian concepts, for example, this amounts to a different form of colonization—perhaps a more intellectual form, but colonization all the same" (21).

Lydie Moudileno is one of four contributors who move beyond readings of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* to explore cannibalism as a trope present in Condé's entire oeuvre. In "Positioning the 'French' 'Caribbean' 'Woman' Writer," Moudileno studies "the interview" as a literary genre in its own right. She insists that Condé's interviews must be read alongside her fiction for it is in these conversations in which Condé's rhetorical strategy of "relentless irreverence" becomes most clear: "Condé's reticent stances, her ambivalence, and her insolent approach to the interview itself only confirm her status as "inconvenante" (144). Similarly, Bishupal Linbu studies how cannibalism functions as a metaphor for translation in "Translation/Cannibalism/Reading: A New Critical Strategy in *La Migration des coeurs.*" In this essay, Linbu reads Condé's *La Migration des coeurs* as an adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* that operates within a more general trend of post-colonial re-writing of European canonical texts. By placing Condé alongside other important post-colonial "literary cannibals"—Césaire, Rhys, Coetzee—Linbu argues that "Cannibalism is therefore not only an oppositional practice but also a manner of rendering homage to the one being consumed" (150).

Carine Mardorossian's "Race by Proxi in Maryse Condé's Fiction" studies how Condé emphasizes the physicality of race itself as a social construction that shifts as her characters interact in *Célanire cou-coupé* and *La migration des coeurs*. Since the characters of Célanire and

Cathy transgress categories of race, class and species, Mardrossian argues that Condé's narratives enact an important exposure of the social construction of identity through the trope of "passing." Vera Broichhagen sees connections in three of Condé's novels—*La migration des coeurs, La vie scélérate,* and *Traversée de la mangrove*—with Jorge Luis Borges' *Ficciones.* In "To Dream of Another Land: Maryse Condé, Jorge Luis Borges, and the Invention of a Literary Tradition," Broichhagen argues that "Both Borges and Condé recognized the rich potential of being on the crossroads of multiple traditions and civilizations. Through harnessing a multicultural and multi-temporal heterogeneity, through viewing uprootedness, cultural heterogeneity and impermanence as positive elements to be exploited, these writers have turned the margin into an aesthetics" (196). Her comments on "the fantastic" and magic realism in the Americas reiterate Condé's remarks in the interview that García Márquez and Isabel Allende have "a manner of speaking about reality that I recognized as close to Antillean literature" (5). However, Broichhagen's analogizing of the Caribbean and the Mar del Plata exhibit a reproachable lack of attention to geographical and cultural specificities. The erasure of gender and ethnic differences between Condé and Borges further underscores this essay's troubling homogenizing imperative.

Undoubtedly, the central piece of this volume is the transcript of the conversation that Maryse Condé has with the editors. In this interview, Condé discusses her relationship to various pedagogical, literary and critical traditions. Condé admits that she often teaches her own books. For Condé, one of the most bewildering aspects of teaching one's own work is dealing with interpretations that conflict with authorial intent: "I like writing humorous books . . . but in fact, young people didn't interpret these novels that way at all. They even found them tragic, which was disconcerting to me" (3).

Maryse Condé continues her commentary on reading and interpretation by confessing that she finds it unbearable to read her own work, unless in a translation, also acknowleding that she rarely reads articles about her books. Hinting at the possibility that writing and cannibalism share a similar satisfying violence, Condé declares that writing constitutes an act of revenge and that being a writer destroys the pleasure of reading because awareness of novelistic structures thwart suspension of disbelief.

In the course of this conversation, Condé presents herself as a writer who thrives on the inner turmoil produced by a complex identity, one that leads to isolation and solitude—the ideal space for artistic creation. Condé' owns up to the fact that her eclectic influences are founded on having had French models forced upon her: "My rejection of French literature led me to English literature" (5). For Condé all writing is autobiographical—she prefers the term "autofiction"—and believes that writers work their entire lives on just one book. She recognizes that all of her books deal with one main theme: "My books always deal with women who have trouble living their lives" (11). For this colonized black female writer, this trouble is ultimately one of identity: "This problem has always obsessed me: how to remain myself, a Guadeloupean woman born in a small, out-of-the-way country, and not yield to the easy temptations of America—how to resist becoming American or French" (12). Further adding to her feelings of alienation as an exiled writer, Condé feels at odds with Antillean intellectual communities: "Readers in this society have been conditioned to expect political commitment . . . They want literature to idealize the past" (18). Condé then takes this opportunity to reiterates her rejection of the Négritude and Créolité movements. With equal forcefulness, she dismisses Glissant's work. She denies the existence of

the "Francophonie" as a cultural community. Underscoring her sense of isolation, Condé reveals that she politely declines to read manuscripts by emerging writers. Her reasoning is that writing is solitary work.

Towards the end of the conversation, Condé returns to the topic of teaching to voice the greatest disappointment of her career: "The one thing that I sometimes regret is that I've always worked in rich universities . . . I tell myself that a militant woman like me . . . should have worked with underprivileged people" (23). In a superb display of self-referentiality, Condé's deep introspection in this interview performs the cannibalism that the contributors theorize. It is laudable that the incorporation of an interview into a body of criticism should display an intellectual hunger of such decidedly cannibalistic qualities.

Feasting on Words is published at Princeton University—not by the well-known Princeton University Press, but, rather, the volume is a publication of the Program in Latin American Studies at Princeton. Nevertheless, the humble wrappings in no way diminish the luxury of the gift. The remarkable coherence that the various essays achieve through Maryse Condé's interview redeem the volume's structural shortcomings and assure it an important place in Caribbean literary criticism.

—*Roberto Strongman*