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The Tropics Bite Back: Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature by Valérie Loichot (review)

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Valérie Loichot's *The Tropics Bite Back: Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature* attributes the centrality of the food metaphor in Caribbean literatures to Columbus's "linguistic error," which translated an Amerindian tribal name "into an explorer's warning: *canibal*" (vii). With the discourse of cannibalism arising out of European colonization, Loichot emphasizes that this stereotype of indigenous and enslaved Caribbean peoples was the result of a psychic displacement, a projection of Europe's material and discursive violence onto the Other America it colonized and exploited. Caribbean culture is therefore responsive to the foundational imagining of the Caribbean's relationship to food as pathological. The primary concern of *The Tropics Bite Back* is to show how Caribbean writers adopt a strategy of literary cannibalism to reclaim the trope of food pathology and reinvigorate it as a symbolically rich mode of discursive resistance.

In her introductory chapter, Loichot identifies three phases of cultural resistance present within what she calls the "tropical" or "cannibal" zone of the Caribbean, which "is marked by a common agriculture of cash crops, plantation economy, a history of slavery (as origin or destination), and colonial exploitation" (xi). With folktales as emblematic of the first stage that revises the cannibal imaginary, Caribbean cultural production upsets the association of Europeans with civilization by depicting them as cannibalistic. Rather than reversing the pathology equation, the second phase reclaims the image of the cannibal as a productive metaphor for outlining the unique relationship of the Caribbean to European culture. Suzanne Césaire is one writer that Loichot cites as a model for this cannibalistic second stage. The post-cannibalistic third phase, which is heralded by the work of Maryse Condé, no longer identifies the "colonizing nation" as an "essential cultural reference" (xiii). Loichot provides a more in-depth distinction between "literary colonialism" and "literary cannibalism" in chapter 5, which places Césaire and Condé in dialogue. This concluding chapter emphasizes how literary colonialism narrates the Caribbean through an exoticizing lens that subjugates "landscape, flora, fauna, humans, and texts to an imperial gaze and desire" (141). Meanwhile, the ethical drive of Caribbean literary cannibalism highlights the "fallacy of legitimacy" that rationalizes European colonialism (144) and turns the consuming gaze back onto European literature, "devour[ing] fragments of text" (141).

The rhizomatic structure of *The Tropics Bite Back* is very much indebted to Édouard Glissant, whose theoretical frameworks were center-stage in Loichot's

previous monograph, *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (2007). Each chapter in Loichot's new book features an instructive detour that illuminates the analysis of the primary subject by providing a broader vision of relevant cultural and historical contexts. For example, chapter 1 offers an intriguing analysis of the symbolic significance behind Glissant's choice of the Indo-Caribbean dish masala to ground his theories of Caribbean culture. This chapter routes the unique imaginative potential of masala through the historical context of Martinique's food-import dependency upon France and through the trope of "Creole Stew" as a form of pan-Caribbean creative production (14). Chapter 2 focuses on the pathological dichotomy of hunger and gluttony within the work of Patrick Chamoiseau and Aimé Césaire, with a detour into the fascinating colonial context of talking birds in the writing of Georges-Louis Leclerc (Comte de Buffon), Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, Jean-Baptiste Labat, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Chapter 3 consciously deploys an innovative braiding methodology, looping back and forth between the "kitchen narratives" of Edwidge Danticat and Gisèle Pineau while also engaging a critical context on the intersection (and conflict) between domesticity and creativity in Maryse Condé, Myriam Chancy, and Paule Marshall. Chapter 4 makes the provocative case that Dany Laferrière and Gisèle Pineau write "fake pornography" (104), which depicts eating and sexuality as twin pathological appetites (107). In order to explain how these works play with the expectations of a "touristic reader" (104), Loichot offers Frantz Fanon as a useful intertextual reference for interpreting the significance of the Banania commercial figure for Laferrière, while also excavating the culinary, sexual, and folkloric significance of pimiento as symbol in Pineau. The monograph closes by initiating an invaluable dialogue, with chapter 5 positioning the trajectory of Shakespeare to Oswald de Andrade to Suzanne Césaire to Condé as "an endless chain of preservation and mutation" that does not position Caribbean writers as inheriting a literary legacy but rather as working to deconstruct ideas of origin and originality. Loichot's excellent excavation of context for and close reading of Suzanne Césaire mounts an especially convincing challenge to the dominant reading of her "unconditional praise" of André Breton (160).

The central intellectual contribution of *The Tropics Bite Back* is found in the way it parses out the nuances of the food metaphor in Caribbean writing. The introductory chapter warns that "the fluidity of the cannibal leads to a critical trap" that warrants an attention to how the metaphor is deployed (xxx). Loichot writes that the "overuse of the metaphor of cannibalism is dangerous because it (1) reinforces the projection of cannibalism and savagery onto Caribbean people; (2) it can be culturally inappropriate because it is based on concept mistranslations; and (3) it loses stable meaning because of its overuse and conceptual slipperiness" (xxx). While this study focuses primarily on the positive potential of the cannibal as literary strategy, one that "entrap[s] Western readers in their own trap" (x), *The Tropics Bite Back* productively questions the limits or limitations of cannibalism as metaphor for its own project of literary criticism. Chapter 1 models a nuanced intellectual approach by noting that "in order to avoid the traps

just described, it is necessary to keep two things in mind: first, the presence of a common culinary language to be taken metaphorically”; and “second, if we want to use food as a powerful metaphor for language, it is crucial to insist on Creole food’s complexity and grammaticality and not to reduce it (or the language it represents) to a shapeless stew” (20–21). Loichot’s rhizomatic methodology in each chapter repeatedly emphasizes the linguistic and symbolic complexity of the food metaphor through an attention to context and close reading.

There are times when the book’s own word play simplifies its nuanced conceptual approach, such that the language comes uncomfortably close to falling into the critical trap that Loichot describes. The desire to create neat equations such as “Creole Stew becomes skin; skin becomes food” (18) flattens out the extensive layers of symbolic depth that the chapters take pains to detail. Most peculiarly, the final chapter positions itself as cannibalizing the work of Caribbean writers: “Suzanne Césaire’s essays constitute our *plat de résistance*, preceded by a theoretical appetizer, and followed by a dessert reflection on postcannibalism in Condé’s *Story of the Cannibal Woman*” (142). These troubling deployments of the food metaphor are few and far between, but they undermine the progressive project of *The Tropics Bite Back* since they could be seen as mimicking the consuming gaze of a writer like Breton, rather than the contestatory cannibalism of Suzanne Césaire or Condé. Just as the imaginative appeal of the food metaphor can be used by creative writers to both reference a colonial discourse of stereotype and also draw in readers to whom such language appeals, Loichot’s aim is to adopt a cannibal aesthetic in order to honor the inspiration animating her project. Loichot positions Glissant as an effective model for this type of critical engagement with the food metaphor, but *The Tropics Bite Back* at times slips into a performance of the metaphor rather than a delving into its full complexity.

Nevertheless, *The Tropics Bite Back* offers a rigorous and original approach to the analysis of food symbolism within Caribbean literature and theory. Loichot opens up interesting questions for other Caribbean Studies critics to pursue. Why does Francophone Caribbean writing follow a trajectory of cannibalistic confrontation to a post-cannibalistic aesthetic that no longer contextualizes itself in relation to a history of colonialism? What contemporary contexts have taken precedence, thereby informing this shift in literary strategy? With Glissant favoring masala as an authentic representation of the Caribbean’s dynamic culture, how can the absence of or silence about callaloo as an alternate model be understood or explained? Since Chamoiseau’s *Creole Folktales* are inspired by Lafcadio Hearn’s 1880s project of folktale transcription, why are certain passages absent or missing from Chamoiseau’s version? What is the symbolic significance of Chamoiseau’s revision of Hearn’s transcriptions? By mapping out the central trends in how the food metaphor is deployed in Francophone Caribbean writing, Loichot’s work enables other critics to ponder the cracks in the foundation of literary cannibalism with an equally interesting range and nuance of symbolic meaning.