Mouthwork

“It’s what gets into your mouth that really belongs to you.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

It only takes a few pages of Amos Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) to note the narrative’s economic feel and the way it is hinged upon a whole range of practices, locations, maneuvers and values tied to an economy easily recognizable and instantly familiar. Narrated by a boy who is seven at the moment it begins, the novel establishes its historical background and its economic optics right at the start when it reveals the circumstances of the boy’s appearance in the eponymous bush and his first ordeals therein. Set against the backdrop of the slave trade, the narrative opens with the boy and his brother given “two slices of cooked yam” and left to their own resources by their mother, “a petty trader who was going to various markets every day to sell her articles” (18, 17). Unwarned by their father’s two hateful wives of an approaching war, and left behind to fend for themselves, the boys flee from their house and their village only to realize they have to split if at least one of them is to avoid capture. The older runs away, leaving the younger under a fruit tree from where he unexpectedly enters the “dreadful bush” (22). “[V]ery hungry” upon his arrival, the boy begins his sojourn there with his eating of the two fruits which he and his brother picked under the tree and which his brother forwent for his own sake.

As if to keep up with the spirit of consumption which inaugurates the boy’s over twenty-year long stay in the horrifying land of ghosts, the narrative has him choose the most pleasing from among three ghosts dwelling inside a hill. He enters their house to discover “a junction of three passages” (23) each leading to a room: golden, silverfish and copperish. The choice is to be dictated by a sensory impression as each of the ghosts tempts the boy with his own delicious food: “But as I stood at the junction of these passages with confusion three kinds of sweet smells were rushing out to me from each of these three rooms, but as I was hungry and also starving before I entered this hole, so I began to sniff the best smell so that I might enter the right room at once from which the best sweet smell was rushing out” (23). While he leans towards the room of the copperish ghost (because he offers African food), it is made clear to him that each of the ghosts wants him “to be his servant” (24). Thus if there is a rather rational agenda behind this necessity to “choose by mouth” (27), it is not the boy’s. Left to savour the appetizing aromas of the food, he remains bound to the pleasures of the senses beyond control and reason. What the expected service, on the other hand, may come to entail for the boy can be glimpsed early on as he wonders around the bush noting that certain chores have apparently been done though no workers can ever be seen: “Every part of this small hill was very clean as if somebody was sweeping it. […] The entrance resembled the door of a house and it had a portico which was sparkling as if it was polished with brasso at all moments” (22-23).

The apparitional nature of labour and the erasure of labourers from the ghostly landscape on one hand; and the concomitant promise and prominence of consumption on the other constitute the economic fabric on which the narrative and the boy’s travails in the bush rest. They also indicate the critical orientation the narrative offers. In the bush of ghosts, we are told, work and those who must go about it are made to recede into the background of narrative space in favour of consumption. Even when we do get to see labour and laboring bodies, they are rendered either hideous and obnoxious (and thus repulsive to watch) or utterly insignificant to the events at hand. For example, when the boy is saved from the three brawling ghosts, he is taken by a smelling ghost to the 7th town where he soon ends up turned into a spectacle, constantly changed into either a horse, or a camel, or his human form. While he does work and is abusively made to work, his true value resides in his visual utility to the ceremony his master-ghost holds for numerous other ghosts to celebrate his good luck. Mounted, kicked and flogged mercilessly, he is used to produce “gladness in the presence of bystanders” (38), his body touched, prodded and poked.

Paradoxically, then, while the novel is about enslavement and exploitation and takes the slave trade as its historical background, it does not make labour its central thematic concern nor a locus of profit and value. Rather, in the economic archive the narrative builds up, consumption and its most characteristic symbol and organ, the mouth, come centre stage. Consumption literally propels the narrative by rendering the boy-narrator an edible object on a perpetual run from the monstrous and more or less ravenous ghosts. It is the fear of being eaten that sends the boy from town to town running for his life. For example, he is nothing but meat for the smelling ghost that saves him from the three broiling ghosts, his entire journey in the ghost’s bag spent on overhearing his defender ponder whether “to eat [him] or to eat [half] of him and reserve the other half till night” (30-31); when he at last escapes the violence of the 7th town of ghosts by unwittingly turning into a cow, thus falling prey to a lion and ending up caught by cow-men, he imagines with resignation that one day he “should be killed or sold to a butcher who would like to kill me as an ordinary cow” (43). Yet unable to eat like a cow and hence too lean to be sold for meat, he is bought to symbolically feed a god in a ritual and quite literally those participating in the ceremony (45; 46). Soon after a short moment of respite, he is caught by a gang of uncountable ghosts of “dreadful appearance” (66) who, the boy fears, “were going to eat [him] alive” (67). They change him into a ceremonial pitcher, and he is nearly consumed by the dripping saliva from their mouths (75). Managing to escape them, he ends up stuck in the spider ghost bush, “wrapped as a chrysalis by the web” (89), mistaken for a ghost’s dead father, rescued from a burial ceremony by another ghost in order to be “roast[ed] and eat[en] as meat” (93).

In order to render the centrality of consumption conspicuous, Tutuola endows it with epic proportions and both colossal and grotesque bodies. In fact, this prominence is also achieved by creating a sharp contrast between what we could call the bodies of consumption (the bodies by means of which consumption gets represented in Tutuola’s novel) and the bodies of work (the bodies work is made to assume): always timid, distorted, subjugated, insignificant and violable. It is significant that in this spectral landscape of the bush the former sport grotesquely large, sometimes endlessly multiplied mouths (at times simply summoned by scenes of eating or items of food) and formidable appetites. And yet, however picturesque the contrast between consumption and work, Tutuola’s critical agenda extends beyond their polarization – something the title of this paper attempts to capture and do justice to – and points, instead, to consumption’s more complex relation to work and its more unusual function. Tutuola casts consumption as a productive activity by means of which the novel conceptualizes and depicts the production of abstract value. More specifically, it deploys the mouth as an instrument whose work mimics such production and enacts its logic.

It is the narrative prominence of the mouth and the context of slavery within which this prominence unfolds that reveals the capitalist economies Tutuola’s text engages with. While the mouth is obviously a figure for consumption (and the novel’s recurring scenes of eating no doubt bring consumption to the critical foreground here) it is the mouth’s work that lends it to a reading which aligns the novel’s economic lexicon with the finance capitalism of the 18th century and the practices which supported it. That is, despite the novel’s explicit references to the slave trade and its chilling portrayal of labour, its connection to slavery comes via (and with) the idea of the production of abstract value which emerges from the mouth of the dreadful ghosts and the work it does.

The mouth’s alimentary value resides in destruction, and destruction is, as Ian Baucom has shown, a concept indispensible to 18th century repertoire of capitalist inventions, a notion mobilized to secure the value of objects under finance capitalism.[[2]](#endnote-2) The mouth is an ideal organ with which to imagine and conceptualise the productive character of destruction given its physiological properties and the alimentary fate of food. In this paper I look at the mouth as a site where destruction becomes a trope signifying capitalist economies which rely on a conversion of what is lost (gone and destroyed) into profit and value. Yet this conversion inevitably also turns the act of consumption into a productive process. The productiveness of destruction the mouth encapsulates in the act of consumption reveals the most interesting critical proposal Tutuola’s narrative offers: translating what is lost into value, consumption re-defines itself into a form of production. The oxymoronic “mouthwork,” then, is not meant to signal the conflicting relation between consumption and work/production but, as eating is summoned to narrate the always already economic life of the mouth, to signify its dissolution revealing, along the way, capitalism’s drive to recast consumption as production. In Tutuola’s novel, such mouthwork serves to (re)produce the power of the ruling ghosts.

Beginning with Achille Mbembe’s exposition of the postcolonial economies of the mouth and the role of consumption in the production and maintenance of political power in the postcolony (something that Tutuola’s novel clearly anticipates), I look at the critical life of the mouth – its representational usefulness in narratives of European colonialism and capitalist exploitation as well as its function as a site of both political intensity and economic reflection. The latter allow to situate the mouth in the context of slavery and finance capitalism which was bolstered by the slave trade an relied on new, destruction-bound ways of thinking about value. It is these contextual references that allow to examine the way Tutuola’s novel mobilizes the mouth as a trope for capitalist economies. The forth (Mbembe) and back (18th century slave trade and finance capitalism) referencing (spanning a time that exceeds the novel’s own contextual location), the novel not only reveals its postcolonial character but also foregrounds the economic lexicon the novel forges to comment on the workings of capitalist logic.

I

One of the ghostly towns the boy ends up in is ruled by “a lame ghostess who can only creep about instead of walking” and her husband, both “the most powerful wizard[s] among all the wizards in both the Bush of Ghosts and in the earthly towns” (115). Their power “to be giving orders to every one” (115) seems to stem from and be augmented by their weekly feasts held at their house, the consumption of food preceding their administration of justice. After the banquet is finished, the two ruling ghosts hear and respond to complaints from the present ghosts about wrongdoers guilty of various misdeeds, and then decide whether to “give them the order to kill their offenders or not” (115). As the distribution of death follows a festive consumption of food, the narrative proximity between ruling and eating, judging and consuming, food and cruelty (the story of these rulers makes it quite clear that the judgements delivered are arbitrary and absolute) comes into full view. Yet what makes this proximity really conspicuous is the way it brings together the rulers and their subjects, joined by food the common consumption of which is what (re)produces the power relation here. That is, to eat together is already to consent to the power which distributes and shares the food; the body politic must consume and turn the consumption into a ceremony.

If the ghosts’ weekly gathering (which always proceeds according to a strict and pre-determined protocol) is held in order to display both eating and ruling, and thus not only the alimentary logic of power but also the alimentary logic of submission to it, then, curiously enough, the narrative is rather reticent about the kind and amount of food prepared for the occasion. No lavish tables are mentioned; no sumptuous meals described; no wealth flaunted. And yet we do know that the ghosts’ weekly dinner is made out of a ghost’s “killed and cooked” (117) child, a peculiar, appalling and totally arbitrary rule laid down by the powerful rulers. The culinary protocol, according to which everyone has to consume their child “whenever it is his or her turn” (117) applies to everyone, including the rulers. If this gruesome gastro-necropolitics tells us something about how power literally needs bodies for its own sustenance,[[3]](#endnote-3) it also reveals a curious economy underlying the regular reproduction of rule. Rather than relying on a (visual) display of alimentary opulence, something that would bespeak the rulers’ wealth and thus might (they are, after all, the hosts of the weekly feasts held at “a special hall which is built for this meeting” [115]), they have inscribed loss as the most precious signifier and materialization of their political wealth. By making loss so essential to the ghostly regime, the narrative tells us this wealth is born from what is lost in the mouth of the dining ghosts.

When decades after Amos Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is published Achille Mbembe writes that the “‘Mouth,’ ‘belly,’ ‘phallus’ … contribute integrally to the making of political culture in the postcolony,” (107) he may just as well be read as theorizing, from a decidedly postcolonial context, Tutuola’s literary take on the essentially political character of the alimentary tract and its economic import. The above anatomies of the postcolonial obscene – constitutive of the discourse of conviviality that shapes the postcolonial relations – make up a “system of signs” (107) whose discursive life shares in the production of obscenity sustaining the power of the state. To use these words “in real time, as play, as fun, as mockery,” Mbembe argues, is to make “active statements about the human condition,” to produce “discourse on the world and on death” and to furnish “a means of auto-interpretation and of negotiating that interpretation and the forces that may shape it” (107). It is also to engage with the *commandement* on its own terms, the terms it invites, sometimes implicitly but mostly ostentatiously, in its spectacular life of ribaldry and indulgence, of the obese bodies of power and the “flow of shit” they leave behind (107). “Mouth” is not only a word used by the ruled in their convivial engagement with the ruler but also an apparatus of the autocrat’s power. If, as Mbembe notes, bodies have always provided the most vivid imagery and an especially apposite repertoire of signifiers with which power represents and reproduces itself, then the postcolony has singled out “a body that eats and drinks” (107), a body whose excessive consumption must be put on display, dramatized so that “the male ruler … demonstrate[s] publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well” (110).

But bodies of the ruled are also needed for the daily maintenance of the state’s dramatization of its own power. Conviviality, sometimes also connivance, requires that there are other bodies able and ready to partake of power’s feast but also, significantly, to “dramatize [their] own subordination” and thus “play with” and “modify” the power that necessitates it (128-129). They “kidnap power and force it … to examine its own vulgarity” (109). The “grand theatre” of the postcolony (109) is a space of alimentary delight, demonstrated by the ruler (110) but also eagerly sought by the ruled whose “aim is to share the table of the autocrat, to ‘eat from his hands’” (123). It is crucial to note here Mbembe’s insistence on the significance of the body to the “postcolonial dramaturgy” (123), the way it functions as medium and material with which power displays itself and makes itself spectacular. It is not surprising that consumption comes centre-stage here. Involving the body as its own vehicle, consumption evidences “the excesses of fine food and drink, characteristic of an economy of pleasure” which marks the postcolony (127). Within this economy the mouth and the belly are “an idiom” by means of which the *commandement* organizes itself and provide the “symbolism” for its narratives of grandeur (106).

In Mbembe’s formulation the mouth is not merely a motif in the life of the postcolony or a metaphor for the autocrat’s abuses. It is a site where power literally enacts itself (132), where it is munched into being; the mouth is then also what produces and codes power as pleasure. The distribution of this pleasure requires a distribution of food, a careful arrangement of who will eat, what, with whom, on what occasions and for whom to see. To Mbembe, the mouth and the belly are “historical phenomena in their own right. They are institutions and sites of power” (132). Institutions are places where the state can bring itself to life and manifest itself; they are places of control, regulation and hierarchy, of regimented relations and systematized behaviour. To credit the mouth with such political valence as Mbembe does, then, is to recognize its highly coded character, but also its ability to produce sensations other than gustatory, to signify in non-saporific ways. If in Mbembe, the mouth is a locus of power, the power the mouth produces and signifies must also be economic, that is, propelled by economic might that can afford and display profligacy and voracity. The autocrat must be able to stage sumptuous feasts where the “lavish distribution of food” works to make visible the “relations of superiority” (131). The postcolonial obesity of power turns the mouth into something to signify economy itself: the mouth’s ability to (demonstrate) waste(fulness), hence also loss, in order to speak of (political) wealth.

II

While Tutuola’s novel abounds in representations of the mouth and surely credits it with an essential narrative function (to signify an economic logic and political power), its most solid rendition comes with a pitcher, a sacrificial container into which the boy gets suddenly transformed in the 9th town of ghosts. He is locked in an dark underground room only to notice some time later that “this doorless room changed to a pitcher and unexpectedly I found myself inside this pitcher and at the same moment my neck was about three feet long and very thick, and again my head was so big that my long neck was unable to carry it upright as it was very stiff as a dried stick” (68). Reduced to what may appear to be an insignificant utensil, the boy/pitcher in fact represents a value that exceeds its material parameters: “the whole of them surrounded me,” the boy tells us, “then all were singing, beating drums, clapping hands, ringing bells and dancing round me for a few minutes before they killed all the domestic animals which they brought before me and poured the blood of these animals on to my head which ran to the long neck and then into the pitcher in which the rest of my body was” (69). Used for ritual, the boy is now a sacrificial object whose greatest merit lies in its permanently open mouth always ready to receive a substance which acquires its value precisely in its passage into the mouth of the pitcher.

In ways similar to the ghosts consuming their own children in order to reproduce, weekly and in an alimentary way, the power of the ruling ghosts, here the narrative also brings the mouth to the foreground yet this time, it is thematized in order to emerge as a site of symbolic profit. Detached from human anatomy and rendered into a lifeless, solid form, the mouth becomes abstract and thus comes to represent abstraction itself, including the substance it is made to swallow and the symbolic meanings thereby produced. That the meanings extend beyond the physical realities of the pitcher and its contents becomes rather clear the moment we learn that many other ghosts “were trying their best to steal me for their towns as they thought I am really a god” (71). The divine value these meanings convey can be found in the desire others feel to have the pitcher and its symbolic economies. The boy may not be a ruler himself, yet his pitcher body is essential to the power of the ghosts who hold him. That the pitcher and its mouth are an emblem of coveted superiority here can also be glimpsed in certain qualities that coalesce around it and are produced by it: limitlessness and loss, both serving the produce the ceremonial character of the event. “[B]lood was always pouring on me” (73), the boy tells us, revealing thereby the greatest value of the always open mouth that consumes but is never full (hence the repetition of the ritual). Though it is an object of veneration, what makes it especially valuable to the ghosts who have it and those who would like to have it, is the pitcher’s ability to signify something that exceeds its physical form though is firmly anchored in it, something that keeps the mouth forever open and assigns a symbolic value to this openness and limitlessness as well as to what gets swallowed by it.

Mbembe’s theorization of the postcolonial body of power is particularly pertinent as it brings into proximity the mouth, economy, postcoloniality and sovereignty.[[4]](#endnote-4) If there is an antecedent to Mbembe’s critical project, and Tutuola’s novelistic take on the economic and political import of the mouth, one of similar geographical provenience and critical import in how it figures the mouth in relation to politics and economy, it can surely be found in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* where the mouth seems to hold a supreme place in the symbolic economy of European colonialism and capitalism. Marlow’s first encounter with “that atrocious phantom …, that apparition” (99) ushers in a ghastly figure whose gaping mouth is what animates the otherwise deathly body of Kurtz: “I saw him open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly” (99). While Kurtz’s emaciated body on the brink of death is surely remote from the postcolonial autocrat’s gluttonous figure, this image of Kurtz, one that confounds the production of commanding words with the consumption of the world, speaks eloquently, nonetheless, not only of the cannibalizing appetites of imperial capitalism but also of the mouth’s political significance. That there is something abiding about the mouth, as image and as threat, and the masticating work it does (or desires to do) in this imperial economy pictured by Conrad, something that apparently survives, or transcends, Kurtz’s dead body, can be glimpsed pages later when Marlow, now faraway from the “conquering darkness” (116), has the mouth emerge from a more subdued and dignified vista. Though he attempts to exorcise this recurring image, Marlow is haunted by Kurtz’s mouth, which returns, conjured up from memory, in a more edacious garb: “but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on a stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind” (116).

What remains, then, is the mouth, apparitional, though captured as a vivid vision by Marlow’s slightly astonished mind. Amidst the quietude and stillness of urban architecture, Kurtz’s mouth is the only moving thing. And yet it is also held in abeyance, the act of consumption postponed by the “as if” that also lends the image an eerie endurance, with the world and mankind perennial objects of a never satisfied planetary appetite of Kurtz’s imperial mouth. This image of suspended consumption seems an apt illustration of the workings of what has come to be known as consumer capitalism: the endless production of appetites never to be satisfied. As Botting and Wilson put it, “capitalism has to produce the desire to endlessly consume new products ... [b]ut for capitalism to sustain the desire, it must necessarily fail to satisfy it” (30). But then again, Botting and Wilson’s Lacanian take on the capitalist excesses of consumption fails to address the distribution of this desire – the direction of its flow, the political constitution of the desiring bodies and the designation of its objects in contrast to its agents. Conrad seems more precise, then, in his depiction of the geographical circulation of desires and appetites driven by capitalist dispensations. Kurtz’s never closing voracious mouth – and let us not forget that Kurtz is an employee of a European Company trading in African ivory[[5]](#endnote-5) – is an accurate representation of the commercial and capitalist value of Africa to Europe and North America. This value has a history and it is a history encompassing such recent “exportable commodities” (Wenzel, 452) as petroleum – the “black gold” of what has been called petro-capitalism (Watts, 201, 195)– as well as some earlier forms of merchandise such as, for example, palm oil or slaves. As Fernando Coronil argues, speaking of capitalism’s relation to nature, (post)colonies have been important “providers of natural resources that continue to be essential for the development of capitalism” (356).

This paper looks to how economic subjects (individuals and themes) get cultivated in/through the mouth and how the mouth comes to be an organ of both economic reflection and value production. Among the plethora of meanings the mouth summons up and bespeaks, its economic signification reveals itself particularly eloquently given the way it brings together the apparently mutually exclusive processes of consumption and production – the former always involving some form of destruction (the destruction of food), the latter relying on the creation of non-alimentary value and profit. This paradoxical character of the mouth comes into full view in Bill Brown’s discussion of the post-Reconstruction popularity of the mechanical Jolly Nigger Bank – an object designed in such a way as to make the character’s mouth swallow the coin placed on its tongue. While Brown tells us how the “black caricature has been deployed on behalf of saving” and was meant to encourage “the practice of childhood thrift” (189), it also needs to be noted how this mechanical bank turns the mouth into a space where consuming is saving, where consumption and production are simultaneous and where loss becomes profit.

III

That this peculiar economy signified by the mechanical bank has slavery as its background and that the bank’s mouth is a potent figure that codes consuming as saving, and hence loss as profit, should not come as a surprise. In his work on the dependence of finance capitalism on slavery *and* on a certain “capital logic of the slave trade” (61) that kept it going and thriving, Ian Baucom writes of the “novel epistemology appropriate to a revolutionary new world of speculation and speculative transactions” (94) underlying value production and profit generation which arose in the 18th century in the context of the slave trade. This epistemology, Baucom argues, “derived from a modern banking system which had taught eighteenth-century Britons to value the existence of imaginary things by training them to credit the power of the imagination to bring a new world of objects and values into existence” (94). Yet for this epistemology to work, it needed a proper legal life, a “social practice” that ensured a belief in “the existence of imaginary values” and was able to “[sunder] the expression of value from the existence of things” (94-95). What fulfilled these conditions was insurance. “[T]he real test of something’s value comes not at the moment it is made or exchanged but at the moment it is lost or destroyed,” writes Baucom in reference to “the genius of insurance” and “*its* contribution to finance capitalism” (95; emphasis in the original). In “a money culture” that Baucom argues comes into being in the 18th century, “value survives its objects” because in the logic of insurance, value “does not await the moment of loss to become real. It exists the moment an object is insured ... conferring upon that object a value that neither depends on its being put to use or entered into exchange as a commodity but results purely from the ability of two contracting parties to imagine what it would have been worth at the imaginary future moment in which it will have ceased to exist” (95). The feat accomplished by the art of insurance is that, contrary to Marx’s model of commodity exchange, insurance turns value into something independent from an object: “It annuls the object, abolishes it as a bearer of value, and so frees value from the degradation of thingly existence” (95).

The notorious case on which Baucom draws to peruse the production of imaginary value that has fuelled and enabled finance capitalism is the *Zong* massacre of 1781. The two contracting parties Baucom has in mind and on whose imaginative powers he bases his insights are a group of Liverpool merchants, the owners of the *Zong* ship which set out on its voyage from Africa to Jamaica in September 1781 with 440 slaves on board, under captain Luke Collingwood’s command; and its marine underwriters “who insured the ship and its cargo for over 15,000 pounds” (15). Because the ship had by mistake sailed off Jamaica and was running out of water and food supplies, Collingwood decided to get rid of some cargo (108) to be able to later claim compensation for the lost goods, the goods being 132 slaves thrown into the sea. The claim was successful as the ship’s owners “convinced a jury in the Guildhall Court that in drowning the slaves the ship’s captain ... was not so much murdering them as securing the existence of their monetary value” (8). The claim was successful because it was “an insurance case, that form of valuing things” where the value of the insured things “survive[s] the moment of their destruction” (96). As has been noted,[[6]](#endnote-6) the *Zong* case brings to the foreground the intimate connections between the transatlantic slave trade and the practice of insurance, the latter upholstering empire building and providing “a central structure for the take-off of finance capitalism” (Rupprecht 12, 13).

Baucom’s meticulous perusal of the *Zong* archive exposes an unpalatable truth about profit making under finance capitalism: the idea that “the money forms of the trans-Atlantic slave trade could attach themselves not only to the slaves who reached the markets of the Caribbean alive but also to those drowned along the way” (92). Gruesome and appalling as the *Zong* massacre is in how it emblematizes the monetary value of the destruction of the lives of the slaves, it also reveals – an hence its paradigmatic and eventful character – finance capitalism’s capacity to dematerialize the embodied existence of the human in the service of abstract value:

The *Zong* trials constitute an event in the history of capital *not* because they treat slaves as commodities but because they treat slaves as commodities that have become subject to insurance, treat them, ..., not as objects to be exchanged but as the ‘empty bearers’ of an abstract, theoretical, but entirely real quantum of value, treat them as little more than promissory notes, bills-of-exchange, or some other markers of ‘special value,’ treat them as suppositional entities whose value is tied not to their continued, embodied, material existence but to their speculative, recuperable loss value. ... [the slaves] are bearers not simply of a commodified exchange vale but of an utterly dematerialized, utterly speculative, and utterly transactable, enforceable, and recuperable pecuniary value... . (139; emphasis in the original)

What this conversion of “‘slaves’ into paper money” (93) in turn reveals is capitalism’s innovative drive and ingenious spirit, its ability to turn loss into profit, destruction into production, and to transform bodies into instruments of profitability that transcends their labour-derived utility. As Zenia Kish and Justin Leroy argue, “the function of financial instruments premised on slave labour was to multiply the forms of profitability that could be anchored in their bodies... ” (633). Thus, the insurance case which followed the *Zong* massacre “represented the ability to extract value from the bodies of Africans even after they could no longer perform actual physical labour” (633-634).

IV

While Tutuola’s writing (e.g. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*) has insightfully been read as exploring the “networks of production, consumption, and exploitation” (Wenzel 450) and as offering “an economic analysis of resource extraction and labour relations” (449), especially in reference to petro-capitalism but also to other valuable commodities within Nigeria’s economy, I wish to look at *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* as a novel purveying and pondering the speculative logic of finance capitalism that was fuelled by the slave trade but that has, while inaugurating “an abstract, speculative, hypercapitalized modernity” (Baucom 33), also survived that particular historical moment to define what Baucom has called the long twentieth century. While no paper money, or any of the intricate financial practices on which finance capitalism was (and is) based, ever appear in Tutuola’s novel, its nevertheless brims with economic imagery and often speaks an economic language whose contextual enunciation not only harks back to the times of slavery but also keeps returning to capitalist sentiments and canonical practices, namely consumption and production. It also relies on the mouth as an organ with which to represent the imaginary production of value, something which inaugurated and underpinned the finance capitalism of the 18th century.

Published in 1954 (two years after Tutuola’s first novel – *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*), *My Life* seems conveniently situated – in historical and narrative terms – at the intersection of several capitalist currents and histories. Written at the dusk of the colonial era, *My Life* appears only two years before “Shell’s discovery of commercially viable oil deposits” in Nigeria (Wenzel, 452), and thus not too distant from “Nigerian neo-colonial petro-future” with its “promise of wealth without work” (451). Like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, *My Life* obviously offers no narrative evidence of this future yet to come, but its imagery is suffused Wenzel has persuasively argued, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*’s foregrounding of one of Nigeria’s (Africa’s) exportable commodities – palm – and Tutuola’s thematic concerns with capitalist sentiments, make it possible for the narrative to be read as proleptically engaging with the devastating consequences of petro-magic capitalism. If, as Wenzel argues, the link between Nigeria’s petro-capitalism and Tutuola’s writing may be anachronistic, then the centuries long “trade in palm products” no doubt provides a less futuristic link (452). If both petroleum and palm have linked Nigeria to the circuits of global capitalism, then so has slavery,[[7]](#endnote-7) the narrative fabric of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, a novel no less economically sensitive than Tutuola’s first.

The novel offers sufficient evidence of the historical background within which it is set. While it never specifies the historical time within which the story unfolds (after all, it is a fantastic tale of ghosts and as such it necessarily suspends any claims on the real), it nevertheless explicitly names slavery as what gives rise to the boy’s travails in the bush of ghosts. Let us recall that he enters the bush having fled various wars, including “the slave wars” (18). Indeed, the boy’s description of what awaits those caught during such wars sounds like a presage of his own dreadful fate among ghosts: “These slave wars,” he tells us, “were causing dead luck to both old and young of those days, because if one is captured, he or she would be sold into slavery for foreigners who would carry him or her to unknown destinations to be killed for the buyer’s god or to be working for him” (18). Enslaved, exploited and subject to all sorts of violence, the boy moves from one unknown destination to another, hoping to finally return home. Yet if he ends up “captured” in and by the bush itself (it will take him more than twenty years to find his way home and leave its realm), he eventually returns to the same fruit tree from under which he entered the bush, and to the same enslavement from which he tried to escape, captured once more by slavers and bought at a market by a “rich man” (169), his very own brother: “But as I stood under this fruit tree, thinking with doubtful mind that – ‘This fruit tree is marked as a ‘Future-Sign’ before I entered the bush’ there I saw that two strong men held both arms at my back unexpectedly and without hesitation they tied me with rope, then one of them put me on his head and both kept going inside the bush at the same time. They were slave-traders because the slave trade was then still existing” (167).

The explicit references to slavery and to various forms of enslavement notwithstanding, this paper is interested less in these narrative credentials which in no ambiguous ways tell us of the historical background the novel adopts than in other, more implicit ways it engages with the slave trade.[[8]](#endnote-8) Focusing on the economies signified by the mouth and thus on how the narrative represents these economies, my reading traces how the mouth participates in the production of imaginary value indispensible to the rule of the ghosts. These economies not only establish a link between the past and the present (emerging from a specific historical moment – the slave trade – Tutola’s novel is less interested in what scars and traces the trade has left in the collective memory of West Africa than in what economies it has left behind), but also bring to light the persistently lingering character of such economies. In other words, something else than a depiction of the slave trade is at stake in Tutuola’s novel; moreover, its temporal referencing (the past and the present) endows the narrative with a uniquely postcolonial feel, which accords the novel a special position on the map of Nigerian literary history.

Tutuola’s unmistakable interest in resource extraction capitalism, in the various commodities it favoured at particular historical junctions (slaves, palm, petroleum)[[9]](#endnote-9) and in the kind of economic logic and relations it has engendered; his extraordinary medley and juxtaposition of seemingly disparate elements, historically and contextually remote objects and sentiments; his engagement with the lingering economies of the slave trade and the capitalist logic which was born at the time of slavery but exceeded the moment of its inception no doubt demonstrate his unique understanding of what was yet to be named the postcolonial. *My Life* mixes confidently traditional Yoruba tales with such insignia of modern times as the television or the radio; the world of fantasy with the brutal reality of slavery; real and unreal time; past with present economies. Such disparate aesthetics makes the novel a uniquely postcolonial text which recognizes the necessarily impure character of the colonizer/colonised relation. As Stuart Hall has so persuasively argued, the critical potential of the postcolonial lies in its transcendence of the binarism “on which the histories of imperialism have thrived for so long” (247). Thus in his view, “the term ‘post-colonial’ is not merely descriptive of ‘this’ society rather than ‘that’, or of ‘then’ and ‘now’. It re-reads colonisation as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural ‘global’ process... . Its theoretical value therefore lies precisely in its refusal of this ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘then’ and ‘now’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ perspective” (247). Hall’s finely nuanced and exquisitely argued defence of the postcolonial also points to its distinctive take on the scope and significance of colonisation. In Hall’s words, “the ‘post-colonial’ references something more than direct rule over certain areas of the world by the imperial powers. I think it is signifying the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonisation and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the ‘outer face’, the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492” (249). Not only does Hall emphasize the extensive character and influence of colonisation, its diversity across time and space, its “complex and differentiated” (253) forms, but he also considers them as foundational to capitalist modernity. He therefore implicitly points to the continuities and overlaps, cutting across spatial and temporal contexts, the “transversal linkages” (250) and “transcultural movements” (251) characterising the post-colonial, but also, significantly, the colonial condition, which, Hall argues, has been, always already, postcolonial.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Tutuola’s *My Life* enacts such postcolonial aesthetics rupturing the seamless compartmentalization of the world into a “clearly demarcated inside/outside of the colonial system” (Hall 247) and the capitalist modernity it has contributed to creating. Tutuola’s narrative clearly manifests an awareness of the capitalist continuities and overlaps informing and underlying the (post)colonial economies of Nigeria. The narrative’s striking reticence on the particulars of its setting – spatial and temporal – foregrounds and makes more pronounced its thematic concerns whose location within a context which traverses historical time – from slavery to Tutuola’s own day – serves to thematize capitalist modernity. If, as Andrew Apter has shown, there is a continuity between the black Atlantic economies – with palm oil “gradually supplant[ing] the slave trade” (165) and, then, later, petroleum replacing palm oil (124), Tutuola’s focus on slavery which he unlocks from its historical time accentuates an economic lexicon and thus helps him forefront the capitalist mechanisms that have fashioned finance capitalism.

V

In a narrative that begins with and is literally propelled by punishment for labour – let us recall the boy ends up in the dreadful spooky forest *because* his mother is away working and thus unable to protect him – one shall not be overly surprised to find consumption valorized and inflated[[11]](#endnote-11) to monstrous and grotesque proportions. The entire narrative of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* pivots on the act of consumption represented by and through an eating body that comes centre stage, literally and figuratively, in order to mark and orchestrate consumption’s superiority. Standing in a remarkable contrast to this cornucopia of the scenes of consumption is a dearth of work and the labouring body. Whenever we do get to see them, the former comes in a degraded form as an abusive and exploitative mode of abjection, while the latter appears as a regimented, tortured or brutalized object of an enslaving discipline of those who eschew exertion. The 12th chapter of the novel (“The Short Ghosts and their Flash-Eyed Mother”) aptly illustrates this tenor of the narrative. It has the boy land in the 13th town of ghosts ruled by the Flash-eyed mother, “an old woman ... fearful, dreadful, terrible, curious ... [and] dirty” (97). The entire space of the town is taken up by the mother’s giant, expansive body “as she alone filled the town as a round vast hill” (97). Her subjects, “short ghosts ... just exactly a year and a half old babies” (98), are made to only hunt bush animals for her and the “millions of heads” sprouting from her massive body. Her rule is based on the deprivation of her puny subjects, of food, space, growth and pleasure. Reproduced daily and tediously, this deprivation finds a routinized ritual in their day after day work of hunting which they must do to satisfy the alimentary greed of the mother’s multiplied body. Any act of disobedience or failure to bring a big enough animal, leads to punishment. The hunters are flogged into discipline by the flash of “the fire of her eyes” which burns the “skins of the animals that every one of [them] wore” (102) and thus keeps up their labouring efficiency. Everything in the town is subject to regulation and regimen and based on absolute obedience. Organized like a labour camp or garrison (and this regimentation of labour, unlike the unregulated, uncircumscribed and unsupervised consumption, also merits attention), it orders strictly the ghosts’ life: they wake up to “a terrible alarm which was in a hidden part of her body” (103); they must stand in “a single line before her as soldiers” (103) to be served pap “as when soldiers are receiving their rations before an officer” (103). This quasi-military regime is set up to keep the mother’s and the million mouths’ appetite satisfied. Its enormity is graphically represented through the mother’s body, in particular, her monstrous mouth:

[The] mother had a special long and huge head which she was using to talk and to feed herself, it was above everything in the town and it showed her out from a distance of about four miles from this town. She had a large mouth which could swallow an elephant uncut. ... There were over a thousand thick teeth in this mouth, each was about two feet long and brown in colour, both upper and lower lips were unable to cover the teeth. ... Both her hands were used in stirring soup on the fire like spoons as she did not feel the pain of fire or heat, her finger nails were just like shovels... (98-99)

A means of consumption and intimidation, the gargantuan mouth, permanently open, speaks of a constant readiness to eat but it also turns the superior head towering above everything into an emblem of the town’s major political pursuit and preoccupation: eating. Since the narrative equates the political space of the town with the mother’s body – because “she alone filled the town as a round vast hill” (97) and the town was “six miles in circumference” (98) she is, literally, the town – her acts of consumption enact her sovereignty rendering consumption into a ceaseless process that reproduces, daily and mundanely, her rule. The mother’s mouth is what keeps the town going, what ensures its existence fed by an army of workers whipped with fire if inefficient and slack. This banal reproduction of the mother’s rule – biologically and politically sustained – finds a telling representation in her permanence and immobility (she “sat on the ground in the centre of the town permanently. She did not stand up or move to anywhere at all” [97]): the colossal endurance of this massive physique always on the verge of eating renders the open mouth indispensible to her sovereignty.[[12]](#endnote-12) The mother’s body can be seen as a body of sovereignty and of capitalist imaginary because alimentation rests on the logic of reproducibility: it requires reiteration to sustain the political fictions[[13]](#endnote-13) it creates. In other words, consumption itself must be reproducible, locked in cycles of reiteration which the eating body so aptly articulates. But it must also manifest this reproducibility, make it tangible and material and thus credible. This requirement finds an eloquent illustration in the mother’s alimentary body:

Millions of heads which were just like a baby’s head appeared on her body, all circulated set by set. Each of these heads had two very short hands which were used to hold their food or anything that they want to take, each of them had two eyes which were shining both day and night like fire-flies, one small mouth with numerous sharp teeth, the head was full of long dirty hair ... as [the mother] added the dirt as her beauty, so she was not checking all the heads from passing urine, excreta and spitting on her body which would wet all her body. (100, 102)

Represented as a multiplied vessel of consumption, the mother’s body is literally shown as a product of consumption, composed of layers of waste testifying to the efficiency of the alimentary tract on one hand, and signalling a demand and readiness for food on the other. Urine and excreta are thus signs of this reproducibility and a call for more provender to fill the body’s empty viscera. Rather than disgust, they narrate satisfaction of the appetite for sovereign power but also extend an invitation to continue eating. In this eerie image of consumption it is not taste or tastefulness that count but the act of consuming itself and the demand for reiteration it always brings in its wake.

The mother’s monstrous body also reveals something of what happens to (the notion of) excess under the economic logic ushered in by finance capitalism. It seems, at first, that her enormous appetite is a rampant, uncontrolled voracity which knows no limits and respects nothing. Yet this is a misleading impression. The consumption proceeds according to an established and always observed protocol and never exceeds the limits of satiety: “Having cooked [the animal] she served all the heads to their entire satisfaction, after that she served herself to her satisfaction and then served us last according to the rule and regulation given to her by the heads” (103). There is thus a strategy, a careful portioning that reflects the hierarchy of her body/territory, on one hand, and on the other seems at odds with what is typically understood as excess. Signalled (explicitly or not) by the adverb “too” as Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, excess signifies redundancy; it tells us that “something is not really necessary, desirable or pleasing” (85). None of such redundancies can be glimpsed in the multi-bodied corpus of the mother. The acts of consumption we are made to witness may be obnoxious and dreadful to watch, but they are governed by a calculating mind.

Were one to further probe into the image of the eating mother/body and her army of labourers, one would note, however, that they do speak of excess, but it is to be found among the army of labourers rather than in the repulsive repasts of the massive body. Yet it is not their number that bespeaks excess. Rather, excess comes into view in the liberty the mother enjoys to dispense with and dispose of the subjects no longer able to hunt or offensive to her regime. “Whenever one or more of the short ghosts who were serving her as their mother offended her, both her eyes would be flashing out fire on to the body who offends her, and the fire would be burning the body at the same moment as fluffy things or rags” (99). Annoyed by their slackness, the mother threatens her subjects with nothing short of a ghastly execution: “... she ordered us to go to bush at once and we must not come back without an animal, otherwise all of us would be burnt to ashes willing or not, she concluded” (102). It is not that she no longer needs them but that she must put them to a different use. Since they have failed to reproduce her rule and authority by working for her, she must tease out of them a different (political) gain, a different kind of utility necessary to sustain her rule. Indeed, what we learn from her cruelty is that it is possible to create value out of someone’s perishment. Using her fire whip to discipline and liquidate disobedient subjects who can no longer work efficiently, the mother enacts an economy where what seems redundant gets redefined into something still needed and useful to the political status quo of her sovereignty. If this economic operation sounds eerily familiar by now, we should not be surprised. As seen above, turning redundancy into utility was a capitalist manoeuvre carried out by the owners of the Zong slaves thrown mercilessly into the sea. What the Zong massacre and the ghost mother’s rule demonstrate is that even excess does not escape the utilitarian and redemptive reason of capitalism. The paradox revealed here is that under economies both the history of the Zong and the mother’s whip regime reveal, excess acquires a phantom quality (that it assumes the body of a ghost in Tutuola’s novel only renders this point more pronounced). Excess is the redundant put to a new use; it is what must be destroyed, if need be, to create value that would not, otherwise, be redeemed.

The way the novel handles (the notion of) of excess also provides an apt illustration of Baucom’s reconstruction of the logic of finance capitalism as capitalizing on the redemption of what seems to no longer be capable of otherwise generating value and profit. There are other instances in the novel, too, which reveal this logic at work, especially if we note that to many of the ghosts who happen to capture the narrator, the boy’s greatest value does not lie in the work he is made, expected or unable to do (and sometimes neither of these) but in his destruction meant to uphold a particular regime or, in a more material way, a body that both represents and constitutes this regime. A most vivid example of the value of destruction comes with the boy’s ordeal in the Spider’s Web Bush where he is mistaken by one of the ghosts to be his long dead father: “He was exceedingly glad,” the boy tells us, “as he discovered me as the dead body of his father, then he took me on his head and kept going to the town ... When he carried me and appeared in the town all his town’s ghosts asked him that what sort of heavy load he was carrying and sweating as if he bathed in water like this, so he replied that it was the dead body of his father who died in the ‘spider web bush’ ... But when his town’s ghosts and ghostesses heard so, they were shouting with joy and following him to his house” (90-91). More gruesomely yet, he is put into a coffin and into a grave while the ghosts “performed the ceremony which is to be performed for deads” (91). The burial never comes off because the boy is abducted by another ghost whose “aim was to eat the spiders which were on the web that wrapped me and also to eat me” (92). In a perverse way, he is valuable to both of the ghosts precisely because he is considered to be already dead. ‘Killed’ to create funereal and alimentary value, the boy comes to represent the logic which haunts the entire narrative: it is the capitalist logic of the production of value out of the destruction of the bodies that are supposed to but do not quite embody it. What is still more interesting here to note is the way the narrative stages this imaginary creation of value *as* a ceremony, and thus something to be celebrated, observed, revered and watched. Because the novel dramatizes this creation, it also renders it theatrical; it becomes a representational form whose aesthetic value is no less significant than the boy’s dead body here.

VI

But if Tutuola’s narrative represents eating/consumption as productive of sovereignty and authority, as an act that while destructive in its very logic (the alimentary fate of the food ingested) also engenders something in excess of sustenance (sovereign power), it in fact practically turns consumption into production. A closer look at the mother’s outlandish body brings this quiet move into full view: “Both her hands were used in stirring soup on the fire like spoons as she did not feel the pain of fire or heat, her finger nails were just like shovels...” (99). The mother’s tirelessly performed culinary routines demonstrate how the food consumed goes into the making of the working body, how through the act of eating she literally creates herself. That consumption is a productive enterprise which turns the mother into a maker of herself is manifest in the mother’s multi-bodied body whose millions of voracious mouths are fed daily by her shovel-nails. However, this body yields profits that exceed this anatomy: making herself with her own hands by means of food, the mother is a self-architect whose consumption must never cease to nourish the voluminous parameters of her sovereignty.

Yet indispensible to this anatomy that re-values consumption as production is the mouth, an organ Tutuola gives prominence not only in the flash-eyed mother chapter but in others as well. What counts most in his ghostly account of the economies of Atlantic capitalism and their aftermath is not only the visual value of the mouth, its aesthetic contribution to the production of subjection and power (e.g. the mother’s caricatured mouth caught in a permanently menacing grimace displaying and signifying an aggressive appetite) and its obvious support of the digestive system. Rather, Tutuola’s deployment of the mouth for the purpose of narrating this quirky logic of capitalism, one that also informs Baucom’s reading of the *Zong* massacre and the culture of insurance, rests on a certain vision of mouthwork and a principle on which it relies for its effects. Yet it should also be noted that in Tutuola, the mouth is not given the same valuation for everyone; nor does everyone’s mouth signify power in the same way; for some the work their mouth does must continue to remain for the benefit of others; still others have no means of translating their mouthwork into (political) value. Therefore, the various representations of the mouth cited in this paper illustrate no so much the unequal distribution of the productivity indexed by the mouth (though this is also the case), as they do another point Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has already brought home for us: that appetites have their geographies (as did the speculative logic of the 18th century) which already position the eating bodies in specific relationships to others. These relationships determine whose bodies, dead or alive, remain capable of generating value for the benefit of others. They also reveal why consumption by some (we might recall Mbembe’s autocrat or Conrad’s Kurt here) produces something which exceeds a mere satisfaction of want. As shown below, while the boy’s mouth is frequently put to alimentary use, it can only generate value for the ruling ghosts.

In Tutuola’s narrative, the mouth is an ever-present entity, called up by its name or its uses – present or summoned up by the very alimentary work, allusions to and representations of which pepper the entire novel. If work receives a negative valuation right at the start of the novel for its production of neglect and under-consumption (the mother’s children), consumption, and the mouth by implication, is credited, by contrast, with a magical and liberating potential: the way it executes an instant transportation to a substantially different world populated by phantasmagoric creatures removed, or so it seems, from the threat of enslavement posed by the world of labour. Thus, fleeing their village and the sudden onslaught of slavers, the boy and his brother find shelter under “a kind of African fruit tree” (19) whose fruit they collect as provisions to sustain their flight. Unable to keep pace with his brother, however, the boy suggests they should part ways and thus save at least one life. The brother escapes leaving the boy, with the fruit, in the vicinity of the tree to which he returns only to find he has “entered into the bush under this fruit tree” (21). The mouth’s proximity assumed by the intended consumption comes to be the site for the boy’s introduction to the world which re-values consumption as production but whose geography already presupposes whose mouthwork will or will not be capable of such re-valuation. This geography is what leads him not away but into capital(ist) imagery that continues to devalue labour yet recasts consumption as productive occupation clad in a ceremonial garb of power the boy must serve but never enjoy himself.

Significantly, while upon his arrival in the bush the boy “immediately ... ate both fruits ... because he was very hungry” (22) – note his lack of prudence and frugality (as he tells us, though, he does not yet understand “the meaning of ‘bad’ and ‘good’” [17]) and an inability to control consumption and subject it to the rigours of rational calculation – he is bound to remain un(der)fed or downright starving, constantly either searching for food or struggling to eat what he is given (usually something that marks him as different from those who give it). The fruits may be eaten but they neither appease his hunger – which also is, throughout the novel, something that exceeds the parameters of a merely unwelcome sensation caused by the lack of food – nor exempt his mouth from ceaseless occupation or a desire for such occupation. Indeed, the boy’s arrival in the bush sets a recurring pattern: his sojourn there begins with eating and will continue to require eating which he will, however, fail to execute satisfactorily. If Tutuola’s novel mobilizes the mouth for the purpose of self-production and the concomitant production of freedom and sovereignty (as we saw in the case of the flash-eyed mother), both as a site of speech and consumption, thus re-defining consumption as a productive act, the boy, it should be noted, never really achieves this end.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The boy’s mouth remains unproductive of satisfaction and hence of himself because he is either not given food or given a food he does not or cannot eat. Unlike the other ghosts he encounters, he is unable to satisfy himself through eating. Since in the logic of the bush to eat to one’s satisfaction (a regularly occurring expression) is to be/come oneself by thus liberating oneself from hunger and the necessity to labour, the narrative not only perpetually withholds the food for the boy (the boy’s inability to become himself receives a most graphic rendition when he accidentally acquires a ghost’s head [110]) but also deprives the boy of the capacity to choose (well), an indispensible condition to the (capitalist) economies of satisfaction. His first travail in the bush of ghosts thematizes choice as tied to the delectable pleasures of consumption. His hunger makes him wander to a hill house where he finds himself “at a junction of three passages” (23) each leading to a different room. Golden, silverfish and copperish, these rooms beckon the boy with delectable food and appetizing aromas he is expected to choose and thus be allowed to go inside. Yet no matter what choice he makes, he is bound to end up serving the ghost living there as “every one of them wanted me to be his servant” (24). If the narrative equates consumption with servitude at this point, and exposes the illusory character of consumer agency – each act of consumption here is a form of enslavement as it presupposes bondage to what has been chosen and to the act of choosing itself – and thus ostensibly subjects consumption to moral censure it nevertheless signals a broader principle underlying the economic life of the bush. Let us note at this point that the destruction of freedom presupposed and effected by/through consumption is not meant as its critique but, rather, takes us beyond the moral parameters of condemnation towards (again and again) the value-generating potential of destruction which consumption enacts and on which it is based. The valorization of consumption lies, the economies of the bush of ghosts seem to suggest, in the productive life of destruction.

It will come as no surprise, then, that henceforth the narrative will persistently magnify the mouth and its properties giving it both a visual and narrative prominence unenjoyed by any other organ of the ghostly anatomies populating the different towns of the bush. For example, the boy’s frequent transformations – unwanted and unexpected – into edible bodies, both human and other, surely assume and foreground it (e.g. 42) as do the many instances of eating, hunger, and thirst but also of the provision and withdrawal of food and of the use of vessels and the capacity (or lack thereof) for speech.[[15]](#endnote-15) But it also becomes a character in its own right, the frequently hyperbolic rendition of which reveals an eloquence whose lexicon clearly leads the mouth beyond its material limits, usual functions and familiar shapes. Thus, at one point a giant pipe able to “contain half a ton of tobacco” (74) is forcibly inserted into the boy’s mouth to be blowing out smoke for the purpose of ceremonial merriment while he himself, changed into a pitcher with only his head sticking out from its mouth, is in fact abridged to the very mouth itself whose outbound contents strenuously contributes to the production of a collective ritual. Or, let us cite yet another example, where the pitcher-boy busy belching out song-driven smoke comes to be suffused with the ghosts’ fetid saliva: “After a while all of them surrounded me closely, opened their mouths downward and looked at me with surprise. ... So as they bent, their mouths which opened with great surprise downward onto my head the spit of these mouths was dropping on me and wet me as if I bathed with water, the spit was smelling so badly so that it was hard for me to breathe out or in” (75). The various defamiliarizations of the mouth not only endow it with surplus meanings and contents that reveal it as a site where political (dis)ability and forms of subjection get to be registered but they also help us see how Tutuola’s narrative has a rich archive of economic phenomena such as profusion, production, excess, value and inflation coalesce around and within it.

As these diverse examples demonstrate, however, in the economies of the ghostly bush, the boy’s own mouth remains unproductive because they always already define him as food meant to nourish the mouth of the ruling ghosts and their regimes. If he is occasionally offered food, let us still remember Mbembe’s lessons in postcolonial power, and the role alimentary conviviality plays in its maintenance. The boy may come to be included in the spectacle staged by those who capture and enslave him, as he is in the giant pipe scene cited above, but then his mouth is nothing more than a prop unable to create any value for himself yet supportive of the production of the value of/for others. Or, he may be given food, as when he is while transformed into the pitcher, yet his mouth has no ability to transform the consumed food and the act of consumption into a freedom from necessity or enslavement; or into any sort of power, political or economic.

Where the novel gets particularly graphic and eloquent in its account of the mouth’s economic import is in the 7th town of smelling ghosts ruled by a “dreadful” king and his extravagant appetites (29). It is also where the connection between slavery and its economic logic receives a most resounding articulation. Here the boy ends up confronted by a Kurtz-like mouth, gaping relentlessly, the king’s body a display and a remnant of the food consumed: “... his body was full of excreta, urine, and also wet with the rotten blood of all the animals that he was killing for his food. His mouth which was always opening, his nose and eyes were very hard to look at as they were very dirty and smelling” (29). The boy is abducted by the ghost, put into a “big bag” where he gets “totally covered with the rotten blood of the animals which he [the ghost] was killing in the bush” (30) and where he is soon joined by what’s left from the animal the ghost kills and devours. While spared being eaten, the boy is nevertheless made to witness a scene of voracious consumption by the ghost and a legion of consuming mouths: the ghost was “cutting some of the animal into pieces and giving them to all the snakes ... which were on every part of his body” (31). The boy’s virtual conversion into carcass, into meat foretells and conditions his enslavement and exploitation. Thus the king’s “always opening” mouth is where slavery, economy and eating are brought together to reveal not so much the close connections among consumption, profit and servitude but, on the one hand, the very deployment of the mouth as a figure for power, the relations of which are thus imagined as acts of consumption where to be eaten is to be subjected, exploited, destroyed; and, consequently, the mouth’s fundamental role in redefining and reimagining consumption as production hinged on the destructive nature of consumption. This logic comes into full view once we glean more details from the boy’s encounter with the smelling-ghosts and their king. The boy’s fear of being eaten coincides with the king’s establishment and reinforcement of his economic and hence social distinction, the boy himself put on display at the “good luck ceremony” where the king receives thousands of guests, “uncountable messages [and] congratulations with many presents,”, and also with the boy’s own inability to eat, his mouth literally disabled with a horse’s reins (“then he put reins into my mouth,” [37]). The king’s opening mouth is a portal to enslaving sovereignty, its gaping image and the monstrous spectacle of its masticating powers brought into such a sharp contrast with the boy’s own almost starved mouth.

VII

If consumption connotes destruction – given the negative meanings of “consume” which come, as Fred Botting and Scott Wilson reminds us, in “two senses: to use up, expend, exhaust, destroy or waste” (29) – the mouth does too, yet not simply by implication but also by the very logic of its work. To mouth something is already a form of capture, the mouth itself a signifier of containment and undoing, a space of ruination. There seems to be a certain history of the mouth where it is assumed to be such a site of destruction, one no doubt nourishing different political projects, yet nevertheless partaking of the idea that the mouth undoes what goes into it. This is an idea we find in both, say, Brillat-Savarin’s late eighteenth-century *Physiology of Taste* (1884) – a “gastronomical masterpiece” by one of the “founding fathers of French gastronomy” (Gigante, *Gusto*, 141) – Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* with Kurtz’s devouring mouth standing in for the destruction wrought by capitalist imperialism and Derrida’s less fleshly and ancient piece “Eating well,” a 1988 interview with Jean-Luc Nancy on the future of the subject. Brillat-Savarin vividly dramatizes the work the mouth – an “apparatus of taste” (...) – does, almost rendering food an enemy to be destroyed for the gourmand and his taste to be produced and couching ingestion in quasi-militarized terms: “As soon as an edible body has been put into the mouth, it is seized upon, gases, moisture, and all, without possibility of retreat. Lips stop whatever might try to escape; the teeth bite and break it; saliva drenches it; the tongue mashes and churns it; a breathlike sucking pushes it toward the gullet; the tongue lifts up to make it slide and slip...”[[16]](#endnote-16) Here, consumption is a battle the eater’s oral anatomy must wage for gustatory pleasure to arise. Derrida, in his highly intricate musings on what it means to eat and eat well and how these bear on (the idea of) the subject, tells us, in turn: “For everything that happens at the edge of the orifices (of orality, but also of the ear, the eye – and all the senses in general) the metonymy of ‘eating well’ (bien manger) would always be the rule. ... And in all differences, ruptures and wars [...], ‘eating well’ is at stake. [...] This evokes a law of need *or* desire [...], orexis, hunger, and thirst [...], respect for the other at the very moment when, in experience [...] one must begin to identify with the other, who is to be assimilated, interiorized...” (115). Both assume, though in different ways and to different effects, the mouth’s appropriating, enclosing properties. For Brillat-Savarin, the mouth is the maw: a prison-like locus of destruction with a life of its own. For Derrida, the assimilating mouth devours difference.[[17]](#endnote-17)

If Tutuola’s narrative shares in such a history by frequently drawing on the imagery of the destructive mouth (as an organ of excessive consumption and political violence), it is, first of all, to re-invent consumption as production *and* to both heed and engage with the principle of destruction which governs mouthwork and which Ian Baucom has unearthed as the logic underlying the practice of insurance which, in turn, fuelled, so substantially, the 18th century slave trade. Yet it also aligns itself – in order to achieve this re-invention – with the conceptual work of the mechanical bank of the post-Reconstruction era whose mouth was not simply a portal into the bowels of revenue but also a representation of how consumption can get transformed into a production of profit. Ist also reminds us of the historically contingent character of such re-invention by pointing out it is a slave’s body that becomes the body of such re-invention. This re-invention seems an interesting proposition given that the history of capitalism not only juxtaposes consumption and production but also casts them in a paradigm of succession with the former following – albeit in changing forms – the latter and signalling a decidedly negative shift away from the value of productive work as a source of wealth. We find this history reflected, for example, in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff’s diagnostic take on capitalism’s late twentieth-century, neoliberal manifestation foregrounding “the central impetus of capital,” namely, “its capacity to make its own vitality and increase seem independent of all human labour, to seem like the natural yield of exchange and consumption” (782), the latter becoming the “moving spirit” (780) of what they term millennial capitalism.

Tutuola’s narrative seems to have travelled beyond the neat progression of capitalist development and ahead of present-day readings of capitalism such as Zenia Kish and Justin Leroy’s, which highlight its ingenuity, its creative spirit that works, tirelessly, to produce sites for “new value creation” (632). Rendering poverty into a future benefit, “into novel forms of financial productivity” (646), philanthrocapitalism, as they call it, may be one of the contemporary forms capitalism assumes to yoke seemingly disparate and conflicting practices or sentiments in the name of profit making, but what it reveals, as does Tutuola’s novel (as did the practice of insurance bolstering 18th century slave trade), is capitalism’s capacity to work against its own logic only to re-affirm and reinstate it. Revaluing consumption as a productive act through the deployment of the mouth – a supreme organ of consumption but also one that illustrates the productive potential of destruction – Tutuola’s novel provides insightful commentary on the workings of capitalism by bringing into focus its capacity of turning the less palatable practices and sentiments into forms of productivity (whether what is being produced is the self, power, or profit). Tutuola’s mouthwork – that wends its way through the entire narrative giving rise to sovereignties and satieties – reveals and illustrates capitalism’s dependence on (this logic of ) redemption. Thus the work the mouth does destroying/consuming but also producing something in excess of what is consumed/destroyed not only tampers with the line neatly separating consumption and production but also points to this re-moralizing drive meant to salvage the destruction-in-consumption from the moral dubiety it raises (and the fact that the novel constantly tinges consumption with moral and aesthetic ugliness both exposes but also justifies the work of redemption).

Thus, Chinua Achebe may have inadequately gauged the moral import of Tutuola’s fiction when he praised him for valorizing labour as opposed to consumption. “For what could be more relevant,” spoke Achebe in his 1977 lecture at the University of Ibadan on Tutuola’s writing, “than a celebration of work today for the benefit of a generation and a people whose heroes are no longer makers of things and ideas but spectacular and insatiable consumers?” (qtd. in Wenzel, 451). Tutuola’s interest in the ethics of labour as opposed to the moral degradations of consumption goes beyond their opposition: *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* exposes capitalism’s ruse, its drive to re-moralize itself by rendering consumption a productive act beyond reprobation. The problem does not lie, then, Tutuola’s novel is saying, in juxtaposing insatiable consumption to work to bemoan the corrupt character of the former but in noting how consumption gets to be clad in the garb of productivity, how it recreates itself as productive of something that extends beyond the mere act of consuming (and the parameters of the mouth that performs it). The ghostly mouthwork fleshing out the narrative may be an odd metaphor with which to denote the productivity of consumption yet it captures adequately the kind of labour at stake in the translation of consumption into an act of production (including the simultaneous destruction, the very capturing of the labour of this work – to mouth work may be yet another manoeuvre required to mask the need for such redemption).

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1. Quoted in Mbembe, 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I draw on Ian Baucom’s superb reconstruction of the social, economic and psychic processes which governed the production of imaginary value in the times of 18th century slavery not to suggest that mouthwork as a concept I deploy here and as a figure for such production we encounter in Tutuola’s novel has relevance to the context Baucom unearths for us. Rather, I am more interested in how the logic of finance capital enabled and bolstered by the slave trade haunts Tutuola’s narrative in the form of mouthwork revealing thereby Tutuola’s engagement with the slave trade. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On necropolitics understood as a control over mortality where to exercise sovereignty is to decide “who can live and who must die” (11), see Mbembe (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In this paper I follow Achille Mbembe’s understanding of sovereignty which he lays down in his reading of Tutuola’s fiction: “The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. To exercise sovereignty is to expercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (“Life, Sovereignty, and Terror,” 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a discussion of the representation of ivory and the ivory trade in *Heart of* Darkness, see Stephen Ross. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rupprecht; Baucom; Kish and Leroy [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wenzel, 453. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Laura Murphy has brilliantly read the metaphors of slavery in Tutuola’s *My Life* focusing in particular on the metaphor of capture and relating it to historically-grounded stories about capture in the times of slavery and afterwards. Murphy shows how “fear of capture” (48) informed West African memories of the slave trade and how the different instances of capture that the novel’s protagonist experiences signify both capitalist economies and record the collective trauma of the past. See, “Magical Capture in a Landscape of Terror: The Trope of the Body in the Bag in Amos Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*” in her *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature*. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For an extensive discussion on the links between the slave, palm and petroleum trades in the Niger Delta region, see Andrew Apter. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Hall, 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On Tutuola’s use of devices such as inflation and multiplication, see Nuttal. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On Mbembe’s Reading of Tutuola, see Mbembe’s “Life, Sovereignty, and Terror.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Kyla Wazana Tompkins discusses the way eating and food and the eating body encode political fictions in her introduction to her *Racial Indigestion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Here, my interest is more in the eating rather than the speaking mouth and the ways the former works for the production of power thereby recreating the logic of the production of imaginary value underlying finance capitalism. However, it should be noted here that the mouth as a site of the production of speech merits a more careful and extensive discussion than the passing references I accorded it here. Let us briefly note, however, that while food and consumption share the same production site, and while in Tutuola the mouth’s (in)ability to speak frequently goes together with the (in)ability to eat, the silenced mouth does not always connote unproductiveness. On the contrary, the narrative demonstrates that at times being silenced provides shelter from power protecting the boy from its abuses and the violence of others’ mouth. If a silenced mouth fails to produce speech, it may still be productive of refuge from further abuses of power. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On the mouth as a site of consumption and production of speech see, Davide Panagia. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Brillat-Savarin, quoted in Gigante (*Taste*), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. While the complexity of Derrida’s interview merits a much longer discussion, what interests me at this point is the kind of mouth and the work it does that the ideas Derrida ponders upon assume. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)