Mouthwork

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Following the external reviewer’s suggestion (and also the guest editors’), I reworked the beginning of the essay and: 1. Began by introducing the novel as a text explicitly preoccupied with economy, especially with work and consumption; 2. I explained the textual significance of consumption and the ways it figures in the text, also drawing attention to how it literally ushers the narrator into the bush, inaugurating his bizarre adventures there; 3. I provided quite a few examples from the novel in order to provide the reader with “a point of entry” and let them see the uniquely economic feel of the narrative.

As suggested by the external reviewer, I added Tutuola’s voice to sections I and II. They now begin with a reading of selected passages from the novel, each of which illustrates the theoretical points being made in the sections. Section I opens with a short reading of the story about a ghostly couple who, as rulers of the bush, rely on a regularly held and eagerly attended banquet meant to display and reproduce their authority. Importantly, this reading also shows how Tutuola persistently inscribes loss as the greatest political value. Section II starts with a discussion of the boy as a pitcher and the way his disembodied mouth thematizes loss as gain and consuming as producing.

In section IV, I have added passages from the novel to provide textual evidence that the thematic framework of the narrative is the slave trade (a point suggested by the external reviewer). It is also here that I explain why my reading sees the novel as engaging with the slave trade differently than Laura Murphy’s (a scholar whose work I have been asked to refer to). The point I make here is that Tutuola’s narrative engages with the slave trade through its recreation of the particular logic of value production we saw in 18th-century speculative capitalism.

In section VI, I have modified my interpretation of the mother as a ruler literally made by the food consumed to clarify why I argue she is an illustrative example of the productive character of consumption. I have also added a paragraph in which I clarify that the mouth does not signify in the same way for everyone (and that what the boy’s mouth does is substantially different from what the mouth of the ruling and dominating ghosts does).

In section V, I offer a brief discussion of the question of excess, as suggested by the external reviewer; yet I approach the issue of excess from a different angle and argue that Tutuola’s text is not preoccupied with a critique of excess as a cause of oppression, but rather, points to how excess is co-opted by the utilitarian and rational logic of capitalism we have seen in the insurance practice and the Zong massacres; the discussion of excess in reference to Flashed-eyed Mother reveals also how the speculative logic discussed by Baucom pertains to Tutuola’s novel; Consequently and relatedly, answering the guest editors’ request for more evidence of how Baucom’s work relates to Tutuola’s novel, towards the end of this section, I speak about how the novel frequently draws on this logic, and briefly focus on an exemplary scene which dramatizes the creation of abstract value into a ritual/ceremony celebrating the value of what is (presumed to be) to be dead. Because it was not my intention to show how Tutuola’s figure of mouthwork relates directly to the speculative logic of the slave trade discussed by Baucom, I provide a note which clarifies that my interest in Baucom and his work was to show how Tutuola’s novel addresses this logic and how his frequent deployments of the mouth are his unique way of engaging with the slave trade and its aftermath.

Following the guest editors’ suggestion to reduce the number of possible meanings of the mouth I chose to focus on those that mimic the speculative logic or otherwise express related economies, whether the mouth belongs to Kurtz, the boy or the ghosts. I have cut out some passages to remove those references to the mouth which do not have any direct bearing on the economic life of the mouth. The economies of the mouth also reveal the power relations that presuppose the distribution of productivity. I return to this point in section VI.

While I recognize that the question of the mouth as an organ of speech and consumption is an interesting one, pursuing this would mean moving in a direction remote from the main thematic concern of the paper. I briefly explain in a note, however, that the mouth that is unable to eat and unable to speak (as is the case with the boy), does not lead to the same consequences vis-à-vis power. In other words, being silenced, as suggested by the external reviewer, is not always equal to being oppressed by the ghostly regimes.

I have addressed nearly all suggestions from the external reviewer and all the suggestions from the guest editors which concerned the conceptual faults of the paper. That is, I have in particular focused on sticking to (and clarifying where necessary) the economic significances of the mouth; I substantiated the relevance of Baucom to Tutuola’s novel; I made clearer than it previously was the unequal economic (and thus political) potential of the boy’s mouth as opposed to the mouth of the enslaving ghosts; I have reworked the entire beginning. Because some of these suggestions were not firm recommendations, I took the liberty of not expanding on them (I mean the last paragraph of the report). However thought-provoking they were (especially the question of representing the colonizer as a greedy, voracious eater and the possible implications of such reading), it felt that pursuing them would take the paper beyond its main focus.