**Body as Battleground: Acts of Ingestion in D’Aguiar’s**

***Feeding the Ghosts* and Philip’s *Zong!***

No other fundamental aspect of behavior as a species except sexuality is so encumbered by *ideas* as eating[.] (Mintz, *Tasting* 8)

Ingestion represents more than just a biological necessity; it is an act through which the individual negotiates the porousness of the supposed boundaries between inside and outside, and by extension, between self and other. In other words, through ingestion, the individual

fuses one’s body with matter outside of it, incorporating not just the material nourishment, but also its histories of production/distribution and its individual, familial, and/or cultural significances. Through the act of ingestion and the subsequent processes of digestion, the individual thus becomes not just a metaphorical, but a literal embodiment of his/her social worlds. With Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes[[1]](#endnote-1) providing early impetus, food studies has long explored food as a carrier of socio-cultural meaning. As Barthes argues, “[Food] is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour” (29). He further asserts that food is not merely an object, but rather “sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies” (29). This kind of acknowledgement of food’s signifying power naturally leads to scholarship which can assume that food “‘is an excellent locus for the study of group dynamics – how different populations exclude, include, reject, accept, and otherwise influence each other’” (Anne Bower qtd. in Covey and Eisnach 1). Food can, therefore, be seen as a mode of “cultural expression” (Loichot x) with wide-ranging efficacies whereby it may function as “a form of political resistance” (Loichot x) or, conversely, be a symptom of “commodified foreignness [. . . that . . .] incorporat[es] and finally annihilat[es] all difference” (Peckham 181).

In that food often proves to “establish[] who is inside and outside specific groups” (Narayan 161), it is vital to contextualize food products and foodways so as to understand their broader historical and cultural significances. In terms of the Atlantic slave trade – the socio-historical scene that is addressed by the following discussion – this kind of contextualization has been the focus of various studies, including Sidney W. Mintz’s groundbreaking consideration of sugar in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985), Meredith Gadsby’s *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women’s Writers, Migration, and Survival* (2006); Mark Kurlansky’s *Salt: A World History* (2002); Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach’s *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives* (2009), and Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff’s *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (2009). Nevertheless, understanding the role food plays in both representing and constructing individual and collective identities cannot be complete without focussing too on the act of eating and the subsequent processes of digestion. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins asserts in *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (2012), shifting the focus from food to ingestion is necessary because “acts of eating” help to “cultivate political subjects by fusing the social with the biological” (1). Food may carry socio-historical significance, but it is through acts of ingestion that individuals take into their bodies these histories and meanings and must, therefore, navigate relationships to them and to the groups and situations responsible for constructing them.

The following discussion looks to Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and M. NourbeSe Philip’s collection of experimental poetry *Zong!* (2008) to consider the act of ingestion as just such a navigation of socio-historical/political forces. Both of these texts take the 1781 *Zong* massacre as their subject, imaginatively recreating a historical event in which approximately 131 enslaved men, women, and children were cast overboard alive from the slave ship *Zong*. The justification offered for this massacre? A shortage of supplies. Specifically of water. A shortage that made it, according the ship’s captain and crew, a “necessity” to kill some, supposedly those who were already ill and potentially dying, in order to save the majority. Given the role this perceived lack of sustenance played in inciting the slavers to massacre,[[2]](#endnote-2) it is not surprising that food products and acts of ingestion are highlighted in *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Zong!*.[[3]](#endnote-3) As the following discussion will develop, acts of ingestion function as a negotiation of power relations, but whether or not ingestion brings and/or represents empowerment depends largely on the consumer’s social position. Theoretically, to be the one ingesting, rather than the being ingested, is to be empowered, but at the same time, to be the one ingesting is to confront one’s reliance on matter outside of the self, hence one’s lack of self-sufficiency. For the slavers, ingestion may at times, but rarely, bring awareness of this lack of self-sufficiency and thereby provoke doubt in the rightfulness of one’s power, but for the enslaved, the implications of ingesting (or not ingesting) are quite grave. For the enslaved, to ingest can be to consume one’s enslavement, to become one with a system that in turn devours.

In drawing attention to acts of ingestion in these two texts, I am seeking to expand scholarship which has to date predominantly framed these texts as encounters with the traumatic past. *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Zong!* do, of course, offer much to contemplations of memory, trauma, and the construction/recovery of history since their narrative content and form make such themes central. D’Aguiar’s text narrativizes an unproven but mythologized occurrence from the historical *Zong* voyage: the protagonist Mintah is the imagined reconstruction of an unidentified slave who was cast overboard as part of the massacre but who was rumoured to have climbed back on board.[[4]](#endnote-4) As a survivor of the massacre, Mintah comes to cast herself as a holder of memory and thereby is portrayed as confronting the dilemmas of representing the past. Not only does Mintah construct a written narrative of the massacre, one that is given little weight by authorities, but she also eventually sculpts figures representing the victims of the *Zong*. Despite these various efforts to honour the past, with Mintah’s depictions gaining little audience and Mintah herself in the end seeking freedom from the past, the narrative of *Feeding the Ghosts* functions to speak to the inevitable complexities and failures involved in writing the previously erased into history.

Although M. NourbeSe Philip dismisses *Feeding the Ghosts,* without specifically identifying it,[[5]](#endnote-5) as ineffective in its approach to the past because “‘A novel requires too much telling’” (“Notanda” 190), Philip’s *Zong!* has been subject to similar conversations since it, too, represents a confrontation of the historical record. Taking a two-page court case summary as the basis for her poetry, Philip has limited herself to using solely the words of this historical document or words that can be formed Boggle-like from the words of the document. As Philip describes in the concluding “Notanda” of her collection, this limit, which frustrates authorial control, achieves an engagement with the past that ethically respects the past’s inaccessibility. To tell without telling is the goal Philip sets for herself, and the complexity of her poetic form is her means of accomplishing this goal.

Even though *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Zong!* are overtly about the need to “open up a space of remembrance” (Craps 60),[[6]](#endnote-6) critical discussion of these texts have stalled around these issues, thereby problematically restricting the significance of these texts. The narrowness of this framework is particularly problematic for *Zong!* which too often has been discussed in terms of the difficulty of its form. While a focus on form is certainly valid and necessary—and it is the direction to which Philip herself points her readers—such discussions tend to overlook the poetry’s content. With the fluidity, multiplicity, and even denial of meaning becoming *Zong!*’s main meaning, readers are too easily let off the hook from engaging with the text’s content in any kind of sustained or close way. As Philip acknowledges, voices, hence characters, do emerge in the latter sections of *Zong!*, and yet readings of this text have done little to consider the details of the narratives that form out of the fragments.[[7]](#endnote-7) In turning attention to a foundational leitmotif that emerges in *Zong!*, that being representations of the act of ingestion, I propose an alternate reading strategy for this text, one that respects its non-linearity and subsequent fluidity of meaning, while still reading across its fragments and seeking to turn attention towards that which surfaces rather than concentrating solely on the absent, unknown, uncomprehended, and/or incomprehensible.

Such a reading may require provisional assumptions be made, but this kind of reading that pays attention to *Zong!*’s narrative content reveals a diegetic world, much like that of D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*, in which the act of eating is a key measure of power. The worlds of these texts confirm, much as Covey and Eisnach argue, that “[t]o understand food and its distribution is to gain insight into the operation of society” (1). In particular, in both *Zong!* and *Feeding the Ghosts*, relationships with food reflect social hierarchies. Whereas those complicit in the trade are portrayed as the eaters, the enslaved are the unnourished who negotiate bodies in constant states of dissolution.

In theory, the one who ingests is an empowered figure, who arguably “secures his own identity by absorbing the world outside himself” (Kilgour 6-7); the one who ingests, to use Bahktin’s words, “triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured” (qtd. in Kilgour 6). And yet, as represented by these texts, the enslaved cannot easily take on this role of empowered consumer. In fact, in *Zong!*, for instance, a changing relationship with food is a key marker of the rupture between the pre-slavery past and the conditions onboard the *Zong*. For Wale and Sade, an enslaved couple and the only named enslaved characters who have a storyline in *Zong!*, capture and enslavement is associated particularly with a loss of their identities as eaters. Their pre-capture lifestyle is portrayed as pastoral, both simple and satisfying. More specifically, before their capture Wale and Sade are shown to have control over their food sources. Not only do they “ha ve one go at” (168), but they also “e at fr / esh fish f rom the r / iver” (169). Sade, too, is pictured as being able to ensure that their child is well-nourished: “*sade* feeds *a* / *de* yam p ap” (160). The narration of their capture, which juxtaposes an image of them eating with the coming of the “*fun fun*” (the “white,” according to the Yoruba section of *Zong!*’s glossary), functions to suggest that part of what enslavement compromises is their agency as eaters. Their capture is portrayed as follows:

*wale*

and *sad e* eat *fu*

*fu den de fun fun dem c am ba*

*m ba m b am d*

*em ha ve bi*

*g gun* r un *wa le* ru

n run *s ade* ru n see *wal*

*e* run *sad* *e* too [.] (131)

In this scene, they transform from being eaters to those under threat and in need of escape. The narration even casts them in a Dick and Jane-like story – “run *wale* run [. . .] see *wale* run.” As such, theirs is a metamorphosis wherein they not only lose their status as eaters, but also transition from being subjects performing action – eating, running – into objects of another’s action, namely, of another’s gaze: “see *wale* run” (131). [[8]](#endnote-8)

Whereas the place and time for Wale and Sade achieving nourishment is in the past, the sailors achieve a continuum between their past, present, and future in terms of eating. While buying slaves before the voyage from “the m an in the re / d fez fr om over th / e gold dun / es” (144), the sailor describes a scene in which they “sit o n the ru / g a go od rug fr om the e / ast from t unis eat dat es fresh f / igs” (144). When they set sail, they do so with “crates of portginwinebeercider & water” (117) and “there were / spuds live fowl pigs” (117-18). Their supplies “on board” include “spu ds win e por / t ru m ha m corn & rice” (140).[[9]](#endnote-9) Even the sailor’s vision of the future with his “dear ruth” is similarly one of abundance. He describes them dining on “egg drop so up” (133); they

eat fish

roe fe ast on dat es from

the e ast cure

d ham & beef the ne gro serves fresh p

ears on a tray

with my pro fits ruth

we can ma ke gin

with the g rain in our fie

lds [.] (133)

Whether or not this depiction of abundance is a realistic possibility or just wishful thinking, [[10]](#endnote-10) this tendency for food items associated with the slavers to be mentioned in catalogue form[[11]](#endnote-11) conveys a plentifulness that is part of their imaginary, before, during, and after the voyage. They need not choose between similar food objects, but instead envision consuming whatever they wish, their choices dictated by desire rather than need. These are lists held together by “ands,” not “ors.” The slavers can enjoy “dates” *and* “fresh figs”; “spuds” *and* “rice”; “port,” “gin,” “wine,” “beer,” “cider,” *and* “water”; “fowl” *and* “pigs”; “cured ham” *and* “beef.”

The enslaved have no similar imaginary or option, to sustain, let alone build up, their bodies with nutrients. In *Zong!*, for instance, frequent comparisons between the slavers and the enslaved occur, forming an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary on the basis of access to sustenance. For example, such play with language as “pass / the peas ignore / the pleas” (82) functions to draw a comparison between the slavers and the enslaved. The use of two words that are almost, but not quite, the same establishes the imbalance between groups; the slavers are positioned to ingest “the peas,” while the enslaved can only expel ineffectual “pleas.” Furthermore, throughout *Zong!,* paratactic juxtapositions of ‘we’ and ‘they’ statements appear, emphasizing a grave contrast:

t hey fret an

d fret we eat ham and spu

ds with port [.] (166)

While the enslaved can only “fret and fret” – note the repetition of the same action – the slavers can ingest a relatively complete meal. Similarly,

they hur t we w

ill have a big d ish of s puds with b eef [.] (145)

The slavers have the sustenance, while the enslaved have only pain.In fact, while the slavers are associated with various food stuffs, the enslaved largely have only inedible matter. What the enslaved must do is “eat t / heir fea r” (145). As a result, whereas the image of the slavers becomes one of satiation, the image of the enslaved is one of malnourishment. The sailor describes, ““we e at we d /oze she [a slave girl serving the sailors] but a b it a s lip of a g irl” (145).

The manner in which words are fragmented in the latter sections of *Zong!* even further differentiates the slavers from the enslaved. The splitting apart of words into their constituent parts reveals hidden meanings within larger words, this kind of word play at times relaying further critique regarding the deprivation the enslaved face. For instance, when distinguishing between “our” and “their” fates, Philip fragments “fate” tellingly. She writes,

we a re of f to me

et our fat e their fa

te a date i da re not mi

ss [.] (166)

While “our” can be associated with the word “fat” – an association that occurs again on the following page, “the ora cle cur / se s u s leave s us to our fat / es” (167) – the “their” cannot; “fate” for the enslaved is “fa” and “te.” Fatness is available only to the slavers, not to the enslaved. Similarly, differing treatments of the word “create” reveal contrasting relationships to the act of eating. The voice, seemingly of the main sailor, asks, “wha / t do we cre ate” (167). He then concludes that he, along with his shipmates, have “rob[bed] them o / f all they cr eate” (167). The different handling of the fragmentation of “create” establishes that the “we” can be associated with the word “ate,” whereas the “they” cannot. The “they” are left with letters that may be pronounced as “eat,” but these letters do not form a word that is accepted as part of the English language, and this segmenting of the word, in fact, alters the pronunciation of “create,” taking the sound “ate” away. The deformation of the word, thus, reflects the compromised relationship with the act of eating that the enslaved experience. This spelling even hints towards an incompleteness that communicates the seeming impossibility of the enslaved inhabiting the position of “eater.” “[E]ate” could, after all, be completed with a ‘r’ to become “eater,” but it is not.

Even when the sailor does describe the “they” – interpretable as “the enslaved” – as eating, the wording tends to suggest a failure of digestion. Twice in short succession, the “they” are described as eating and subsequently defecating: “t hey eat th / ey shit” (143) and seven words later, “they e at they s / hit” (144). The parataxis of these statements, coupled with the repetition, suggests that the enslaved are caught in a cycle whereby what they ingest fails to stay with them long enough to be assimilated by their bodies.

As such, the image of the enslaved that develops is one in which they are characterized as dissolving rather than growing, excreting rather than consuming. They “leak pus” (145); they have “leaky piles” (150). Women’s breasts too are described as leaking: they have “leaky / teats” (170); their “teats / leak in necessity” (65). While this image suggests that the women at least consume nutrients enough to produce breast milk,[[12]](#endnote-12) it figures a compromised food chain. Not only are the women excretors who cannot retain what they have consumed to fuel their own bodies, but also since their breasts are described as leaking rather than as feeding the young, the implication is that what they excrete goes to waste, unconsumed by members of the next generation, who, if even still present and alive, inherit the impossibility of being nourished.

The comparison of the slavers and the enslaved in terms of their access to nourishment performs one critique of slavery and its systems. In addition, critique occurs through the association of all those complicit in the trade with dystopic overconsumption. Much as the slavers in *Zong!* are represented as experiencing conditions that allow them to choose between multiplicitous food items, in *Feeding the Ghosts*, those complicit in the slave trade are represented as selfishly consumptive. Whereas the enslaved women are portrayed as being forced to trade sex for food – food used primarily to nourish their families – the sailors and the broader British public are portrayed as inhumane gluttons.

As represented in *Feeding the Ghosts*, on board the ship, the sailors use their access to food as a weapon against the enslaved; for example, when the second mate and the boatswain enter into the hold occupied by the enslaved women, they do so “*armed* with loaves of bread and chunks of cheese” (74, emphasis added). As described by the narrator, “[i]f [the women] refused” to participate in this economy of sex for food, they “would be taken by force anyway. The women knew all this when they gave their consent for bread and cheese” (74). The women themselves, however, are not shown to benefit from this acquired food. The narrative focusses instead on the women giving this food to the enslaved men: “A piece of bread and cheese was handed to [the men] in the dark and they accepted it with thanks and ate it. If a few found it hard to swallow knowing how it was earned, it was not out of resentment for the woman, who had to do what she did for reasons they all knew, but because they were choked with anger at the men who could do such a thing to captive women” (75).The men may consume the food (with difficulty and remorse), but whether or not the women consume the food they have been forced to earn through sex is a lacuna left in the narrative. After acquiring the food, the women are instead described as “return[ing] to the slave hold and wrigg[ling] into a space between other women” (75), where “[s]emen from the crew would seep from them” (75) and where their neighbours would “order[]” their tears “to be silent” (76). Much as the enslaved were portrayed in *Zong!*, the women in this scene are excretors, not consumers.

Later in the narrative, as depicted from the point of view of Simon, the cook’s assistant who had befriended Mintah and who unsuccessfully sought justice by sharing her writings, the British people are grossly ignorant to the costs of their own consumption. As described in the novel, the trial regarding insurance monies finds in favour of the ship’s owners and thereby excuses the ship captain’s murderous actions. Shortly after the conclusion of this trial, the narrator offers the following image through Simon’s focalization:

[Simon] passed coffee houses with crowds spilling out of their doors and a sweet aroma of roasted coffee beans and molasses. Tobacco clouded the air and men puffed on pipes, productive as chimneys. Drunks with rum on their breath stumbled into this path or greeted him as though he were a long-lost friend. (176)

The image here not only features people consuming products associated with the slave trade, but communicates a dystopic excess. The crowds are excessive; they escape containment, spilling out onto the streets. This image, however, is not festive. Instead, the tobacco smokers do not just smoke but become chimneys, clouding the air; the drinkers do not just drink but are drunk. This portrayal that equates the British public with acts of leisurely, luxurious, and thoughtless consumption functions to signal the apathetic indifference to the exploitative conditions that have produced these privileges.

The inhumanity of those complicit in the trade is even further performed through reference to food and acts of ingestion during the course of the trial. Despite historical depictions of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield as one who made rulings useful in the movement towards abolition,[[13]](#endnote-13) in D’Aguiar’s depiction of Mansfield, Mansfield is more “eater” than thoughtful and fair overseer of the proceedings. Lord Mansfield may enter the court assuming the stereotypical appearance of a judge – he “straightened his wig” (137), and his robe “fell around his legs and his chair, giving him the appearance of floating above” (137) – but his first, and almost only, concern throughout the trial is that “he’d be out of the court in time to dine at The King’s Head” (137). With persistent imaginings of “a cured pheasant, his favourite” (137), he is shown to be preoccupied with his stomach throughout the trial. Furthermore, his fixation on food even casts the proceedings themselves as appetizer to the meal he desires. He “want[s] his palate gently stirred and whetted by the morning’s deliberations” (138). Aspects of the trial are represented as food stuffs to be digested by Mansfield. Mintah’s journal is said to add “spice to an otherwise bland menu of events” (155); applause from the spectators is “savour[ed]” (171). From Mansfield’s perspective, “[i]f he pictured everyone in various stages of being smoke-cured he would surely accelerate events and time itself to the propitious date at The King’s Head” (138). The dystopia of this depicted society is not just rooted in inhumane unfeeling, but in cannibalistic voraciousness, albeit a metaphorical one.

A similar dystopic hunger is expressed in *Zong!* where the sailors are characterized not just as able to feast on abundant supplies, but as cannibalistically consumptive. They “find the fu / n in [. . .] / n /egro me at” (163), “din[ing]” on it and “grow[ing] fa / t” (164). The lips, even the toes, of the women are “ripe” (71, 106) as if fruit to be consumed. Moreover, having developed “a taste / for the she / negro” (91), the sailors “feast o /n flesh” even as “she rips and tears / his cape” (128). While these references more so reflect a pursuit of sexual satiation through violence than a literal feeding upon flesh, the implication remains the same: the enslaved are objects existing solely to be consumed. The enslaved even become the bread in the Lord Prayer’s plea for sustenance. This prayer, common in Christian religions, asks God to “give us this day our daily bread,” a line that is alluded to frequently in *Zong!*. In one instance, this line importantly becomes “give us this / day our ne groes” (159). Interestingly, the multiple references to this line of the Lord’s Prayer are never followed with the rest of the prayer which asks for “forgive[ness for] our trespasses” and “deliver[ance . . .] from evil” (*Book of Common Prayer*).[[14]](#endnote-14)

As much as those complicit in the slave trade are portrayed as the ones ingesting while the enslaved become the ingested, the hypocrisy of this binary, and subsequently of a system that depends upon the dehumanization of another, is revealed in these texts through failures of digestion. In a study that forms and interprets a history of the Black body as consumable, Kyla Wazana Tompkins demonstrates that just because there exists a “fantasy” of the Black body as “edible” that “does not mean that the body will always go down smoothly” (8). In looking to such food products as licorice baby candies, Aunt Jemima syrup, and Jim Crow cookies, Tompkins attributes agency to those bodies thought edible, asserting that Black bodies can “stick in the throat of the (white) body politic” (8). In *Feeding the Ghosts*, difficulties in consuming Black bodies come to represent fissures in the ideologies used to justify slavery and excuse its exploitations and violences. For Kelsal, the First Mate responsible for carrying out the massacre, “with each slave disposed of, the churning sensation in his stomach had intensified” (67). His vomiting leads to questions regarding whether he has “los[t] his stomach for the job” (68). Furthermore, although Chief Justice Mansfield seeks an easily digestible trial, as soon as the rightfulness of the massacre falls into doubt, indigestion results. When confronted with the details of the *Zong* massacre, details which run counter to his philosophy of “protect[ing]” the enslaved – but just because “[t]hey make you a profit” (138), he is “threatened [with the] stir[ring] of those awful acids in his stomach” and their “climbing to his throat” (138). In the end, his conclusion that the actions were necessary allow his stomach to settle and become receptive to consumption: “the juices were in a state of readiness” (169). For Mansfield, the trial at last becomes digestible because “[e]veryone was well and truly smoked in his mind” (171).

Whereas Mansfield and the broader public remain blind to the costs of slavery, Simon, a man who was made critical of slavery thanks to his friendship with Mintah, has the ability to perceive the system of slavery in terms of undigested bodies. Simon realizes that by consuming the products of the slave trade, the British public is, in fact, consuming the lives of enslaved Africans. His critique of slavery foregrounds the hypocrisy at the heart of Britain’s supposed civility, a civility dependent upon a cannibalistic self-centredness. Echoing the views of abolitionist William Fox who in a bestselling pamphlet argued that consuming sugar was tantamount to consuming the blood of slaves (Morton 11), Simon reasons that “going by this last voyage of the *Zong*, [. . .] if the losses of every voyage of a slave ship were counted, for each cup [of coffee], each spoonful [of sugar], every ounce of tobacco, an African life had been lost” (176). His realization of the gravity of this loss is dramatized by his subsequent vision of the sea as a grotesque mass grave. In a text where the sea has often been represented as a mouth that “nibbl[es]” (4), that “swallow[s]” (27), that “open[s] instantly and with hardly a splash [the enslaved] were admitted into it and the opening closed” (99), Simon’s vision in part signals the gross appetite of the slave trade. The sea, as portrayed by *Feeding the Ghosts*, is a mouth that is set up to consume the bodies of the enslaved and conceal the evidence of their wrongful deaths (one recalls Derek Walcott’s famous question and answer:

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that grey vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History (“The Sea is History” lines 1-4)).

And yet, Simon’s vision is not of a sea that has been able to swallow and digest these lives. In his imagining, Simon sees a “sea full of Africans. The *Zong* rose and dipped over their bones, and the sound of the sea was the bones cracking, breaking, splintering” (176). As the vision evolves, the sea turns “red. Now it boiled with the bodies of Africans” (177), and finally, “Instead of a gigantic body of breathing salt water, he saw black skin and flesh. The ship’s prow parted, not sea, but flesh, cut through it like water, splashed it skywards in fragments like the sea, broke it up in the expectation that it would mend behind, but looking back he saw not sea water mending in a ship’s wake but broken bodies, ploughed through” (179). The progression of this image does not depict bodies decomposing. Instead, Simon first notes the bones, then the black skin and flesh, a re-embodiment of sorts taking place as the bones seemingly re-gain their flesh. What he sees is not a digestion, hence disappearance, of bodies, but instead the horror of the unassimilable, of what cannot be consumed. His vision is of a humanity broken, persistent in its haunting (but only if empathetic witnesses, like Simon, stop to look).

In these failures of digestion, acts of ingestion are shown to be uncanny reminders of the false dichotomy between self and other upon which the ideology of slavery depends. Just as slavery depends upon constructing the enslaved as non-human (so as to make them metaphorically edible matter), ingestion, as Maggie Kilgour argues, “assumes an absolute distinction between inside and outside, eater and eaten” (7). However, as Kilgour continues, this distinction “breaks down, as the law ‘you are what you eat’ obscures identity and makes it impossible to say for certain who’s who” (7). In other words, “[e]ating threaten[s] the foundational fantasy of a contained autonomous self” (Tompkins 3), because that which had been other becomes the self “as food turn[s] into tissue, muscle, and nerve and then provide[s] the energy that drives them all” (Tompkins 3). As a result, as Deane Curtin forwards, acts of ingestion draw into question “the absolute border between self and other which seems so obvious in the western tradition” (9), revealing the distinction to be “nothing more than an arbitrary philosophical construction” (9). If through ingesting, one must acknowledge that the self is not different from the other, but instead fuelled by that other, then no wonder the attempted consumption of the enslaved in these texts often yields indigestion. As much as to be the one ingesting rather than the one ingested is to wield power, to consume simultaneously “reveals the fallaciousness of the illusion of self-sufficiency and autonomy that the inside/outside opposition tries to uphold by constructing firm boundary lines between ourselves and the world” (Kilgour 9).

The enslaved, to return to Tompkins’ earlier assertion, do not always “go down smoothly” (9) in these texts because the act of ingestion can provoke a self-conscious confrontation of the consumer’s imbrication with and reliance upon that which they ingest. For example, as much as the sailor of *Zong!* seemingly celebrates his ability to dine on “negro meat” (164, 171), his acts of eating also prove to be self-consumptive. At one point, he announces that “we din e on me at” (149). The splitting apart of “me at” allows “we dine on me” to surface, illustrating a subconscious doubt in the ethics of his actions. In consuming the other, he is consuming himself (a consumption that eventually culminates in his suicide). To perpetuate the colonialist/racist argument that slavery is a just system requires a belief in the rightfulness of one’s dominance, and subsequently a repression of one’s similarity to and innate dependency upon the other. The difficulties in the digestive process that these texts portray come to symbolize the uncanny—and unfortunately fleeting— surfacing of this knowledge.

For the enslaved, however, the act of ingestion, when even possible, is even more threatening. It can signify surrender. Jane Bennett reminds that that which is consumed is “a powerful agent [. . .] that modifies” the consumer (43). Food has a “self-altering, dissipative materiality” (Bennett 51); it has the “active power to affect and create effects” (Bennett 49). As a result, “[c]onsumption may signify mastery over the other, but it may also signify one’s subjection to the other” (Roy 30). For the enslaved, nourishment is not just edible matter, but is instead representative of an ideology that gives one group the right to grant or deny another group’s access to sustenance. Consumable matter is thereby caught up in the system of slavery and as a result, symbolic of it. To consume, thus, can be to ingest one’s enslavement. Conversely, a refusal to eat can function as a form of protest and claiming of self. Covey and Eisnach, for instance, report that “[s]ome slaves refused to eat during the Middle Passage voyage as an act of self-determination and control. Refusing to eat was an act of defiance [. . .] (Shange 1998)” (2). *Feeding the Ghosts* is, in fact, rife with refusals of food. In the scene of Mintah’s being cast overboard, food is used as weapon and object of protest by the enslaved who witness this act of violence. Not only do “[a] couple of men hurl[] their bowls at Kelsal and the others” as they “r[u]n to intervene” (49), but also after Mintah has been thrown overboard, “[m]any of the adults emptied their bowls on the deck or simply threw them at the crew” (49). In the midst of depicting the chaos of this scene, the narrative-eye zooms in upon a “little girl” who is “cr[ying] into her bowl of porridge” while “an adult coaxe[s] her to eat” (49). The depiction of the aftermath of Mintah’s assumed murder – Mintah, of course, manages to climb back onboard the *Zong* – concludes with the following paragraph:

The girl stared at her bowl. Rain covered the porridge like a lavish condiment. Eat, the adult begged, eat for Mintah, so you can grow big, beautiful and strong like her. The child looked up at the adult, wished it was Mintah holding that spoon. But she had seen Mintah flung into the big water, from which no one ever returned. Knowing death had taken Mintah and so would soon take her too, she decided not to feel hunger any more, not to feel anything. To banish hunger in her wait for death to come. She opened her mouth. Closed her eyes. Shut out the wind and the rain. Swallowed the gruel. (50)

The adult constructs eating as a life-sustaining activity, something that will enable the girl to grow-up and become a figure of strength like Mintah had been. For the child, however, eating is not a step towards life but rather an instigator of death. A refusal to eat in the case of this girl is not just about taking control of one’s body; it is also about preserving a feeling of loss, of lack. Just as nostalgia functions to maintain one’s connection to a place and people lost, the feeling of hunger is figured as allowing this girl to maintain a connection with her body. [[15]](#endnote-15) To feel hunger is to feel the result of her enslavement, to feel an emptiness that cannot be filled, particularly not with the food of one’s enslavers. In choosing not to feel hunger anymore, she is choosing not to feel anything, to lose connection with her body and with the environment – the wind and rain – that surrounds it. In eating, she resigns herself to the dispossession of her body. Her swallowing of the gruel is her surrender. Concluding with sentence fragments, the wording of this passage even performs the girl’s defeat. The girl, as the subject of a sentence, disappears upon the opening of her mouth; by the time she “[s]wallow[s] the gruel,” “she” is no longer even present.

As the experience of this girl suggests, the enslaved portrayed in these two texts cannot experience the act of ingestion as the “triumph” that Bahktin suggests it is. Instead, both texts move towards climatic moments of consumption, but these acts of ingestion do not prove life-sustaining.[[16]](#endnote-16) While Wale literally ingests a letter to his wife that he has had a sailor write for him, Mintah describes herself metaphorically drinking her carvings of the *Zong* massacre victims. Both Wale and Mintah then perish, Wale jumping to his death, Mintah consumed by a fire she (mistakenly?) set.

Unlike the girl’s act of eating which requires that she ingest food that is implicated in her enslavement, both Mintah’s and Wale’s acts of ingestion take them outside of their reliance on their captors for sustenance. [[17]](#endnote-17) For Wale and Mintah, their pursuits of alternate forms of nourishment are pursuits of self-reliant forms of nourishment: Wale eats his own words, while Mintah ingests her memories.

In the case of Wale, although the paper he ingests is not literally nourishing, what it represents is symbolically so. What Wale ingests by consuming this piece of paper is proof of his humanity, even more so, proof that his humanity has been recognized by his captor. The words that Wale ingests – “de ar sade you b / e my queen e ver me i mi ss you and a / de al l my lif e” (172) – express emotion and familial bond, two qualities the enslaved were assumed not to possess. Even more importantly, Wale’s success in getting the sailor to perform a task for him represents his ability to thwart the tenets of slavery that define him as inhuman and other. When approaching the sailor, Wale states, “y ou big man / me i see yo u to wri / te wri te a / ll the ti / me me wa le you wr ite for m / e” (172), and indeed, throughout *Zong!*, this sailor has been characterized by his ability to write. Not only does he frequently write letters to his own love “dear ruth,” but also he is called upon by the other sailors to write letters to their partners. The sailor writes, “dear / clair i / write this / for / sam” (85); to “lisa,” he offers “these words” that come “from [dave’s] lips” (85); to “eve,” he conveys that “piet says he longs” (85); to “eva davenport,” he “fear[s] / the news is / not good” (85). Wale’s ability to convince the sailor to perform this task suggests that the hierarchical relationship between Wale and the sailor is, at least momentarily, levelled. The sailor consents to perform a service for Wale instead of Wale remaining in the role of subservience. Further, in writing this love letter for Wale, the sailor must confront the collapse of the binary distinguishing Wale from the sailor and his shipmates; the letter he has written for Wale equates Wale with all the others for whom he has written, and by extension, equates Sade with all the other intended recipients of the love letters. Wale’s dying declaration is even performed and recorded in English. In one way this choice of language speaks to the hegemony of English and the cultural costs that that hegemony will exact, but in another way, Wale’s use of English even further deconstructs the binary between self and other upon which the sailor’s beliefs and actions have depended.

Wale’s actions at the conclusion of *Zong!* are, of course, difficult to interpret.[[18]](#endnote-18) Why does Wale have the letter written only to then swallow it and jump to his death taking that letter with him? Why does he privilege the written word here vs. just telling the sailor of his love for Sade? Having the letter written may signify his ability to compel the sailor to help him, but in eating the letter, Wale prevents his written words from achieving the immortality that writing is usually held up to promise.[[19]](#endnote-19) Of course, by eating the letter, Wale also saves his words from History’s gaze and possible misrepresentation or erasure. Even though it remains difficult to discern whether Wale’s final act represents triumph or defeat, what his action does suggest is an attempted reunification of self. Through ingesting words that express his love for Sade and Ade, Wale attempts to become one with these words and hence with the self that was possible before slavery. As I earlier described, before their capture Wale, Sade, and Ade enjoyed a pastoral ideal; the image constructed of them is of a carefree and supportive family. By eating words that are consistent with and, hence, that materialize this prior life and self, Wale fuses his current self with his past one, to bring that past self into his body as fuel. Of course, if he were to continue living, slavery would make the continued integration of these selves impossible. So, Wale’s choice of death comes at a time when he, through his act of ingestion, can experience himself as whole. To die at this particular moment is to die when the rupture in his continuum of self has, at least symbolically, been healed.

Mintah’s acts of ingestion similarly suggest a desire to become one with herself through consumption. Even before her final climatic act of ingestion, Mintah envisions her own self as possible nourishment. After she has escaped from the sea but been recaptured, she finds herself roped to four men who had helped her in a largely unsuccessful insurgence. While covered by canvas and sporadically beaten, Mintah enters into a dream state where she realizes that “[t]hose who died must have perished with the belief that the land was the past and the sea was the present; that there was no future” (112). Throughout her contemplations, she experiences herself as “lost. At sea. Lost to her name. Her body” (112). In this dream state, Mintah moves through a return to Africa (whether this is a recollected memory of her childhood or a fictional re-imagining remains unclear) and an experience of herself as bodiless. She then describes her ideal destination: “First she wanted to feel soil, mud, stone, rock, clay, sand, loam, pebbles, boulders, grass. Then wood. There must be water. But in a stream or river. Water she could see her face in and a face she could drink” (115). This vision in part communicates Mintah’s desire for fresh water, something that will quench thirst unlike the sea water that “stung” (226) and caused her to “choke[] on salt” (53). This vision also indicates her need for the steadiness of land, a location from which she can be still enough to form a reflection of herself. But most importantly, in this river she seeks “a face” that “she could drink” (115), a desire that indicates her wish to thwart the destructive power of the Middle Passage, and by extension of the sea itself, which had “come between” (200) her and her body. To consume herself is to put herself back together. Although not explicitly stated, this self that she seeks to assimilate into her body can be read as the self that had been traumatized upon the *Zong*. The face in the water may literally be her reflection, but it is also a face seemingly staring up from below the water’s surface and thus is symbolically the self that was thrown overboard and that nearly drowned.

Similarly, when Mintah describes herself drinking the carvings she sculpts, this act of consumption is an attempt to take the traumatic past into herself. As a wood carver, Mintah creates goblets for her “visitors,” seemingly tourists who give little thought to the wood as a materialization of history: “If only they could see that what they are laying their hands on is a treasure, that it harbours the past, that it houses the souls of the dead and that the many secrets of the earth are delivered up in it” (208). Although “the past” that the wood represents is not exclusively Mintah’s traumatic past, the word choices here suggest that Mintah does make a connection between the wood and her experience of the Middle Passage. That the wood “harbours” the past suggests that for Mintah, her carving helps bring the past to shore; her carving tames the past, steadies it, frees it from the tumult of the sea; her carving helps to bring the perpetual Middle Passage to some form of a conclusion. In addition to the goblets, Mintah’s other creations are carved figures. These figures are shapes that suggest a “man, woman or child reaching up out of the depths” (208-9). As Mintah describes, “There are 131 of them” and she has “been working on another for months now” with plans for “ten more after that” (209). In other words, these are carvings representing the victims of the *Zong* massacre: the 131 men, women, and children cast overboard alive, Mintah who climbed back onboard, and the ten others who are said to have jumped to their deaths rather than waiting to be thrown. Although her visitors proclaim that they “cannot keep such a shape in their homes” because “[s]uch shapes do not quench a thirst. They unsettle a stomach” (209), for Mintah, these figures “are [her] goblets” (209). But they are not goblets from which she drinks liquid. Instead, Mintah proclaims that she “drink[s] their grain. [She] drink[s] light from them, the way it shines off head and shoulders and back” (209). Through this metaphoric drinking of the victims of the massacre, Mintah honours the dead by symbolically bringing them back to life; in consuming them, they are assimilated into her still living body, metaphorically becoming, to return to the ideas of Tompkins, the “tissue, muscle, and nerve [. . .][,] the energy that drives them all” (3).

Mintah cannot, however, gain sustenance from this act of ingestion. Just as memories of her childhood, her “diet of recall” (61), became unfulfilling, drinking the trauma of the *Zong*, even for the sake of honouring the dead, cannot nourish her. Her description of raiding the “storehouse” of her childhood memories may suggest that her diet became unbalanced – “she found she was simply retrieving the same things time and again” (61) – but her consumption of the trauma of the *Zong* massacre is even more destructive in that it involves her in a parasitic relationship. As much as she drinks these figures and the traumatic past they symbolize, the past too is said to consume her: “It used her body as such. For sustenance. For the life it could not otherwise live since it could not be told” (223). The concluding moral of this novel is that ghosts want and need to be fed. To be fed is to be cared for and nourished by the next generation; it is to be nurtured for continued “life.” Unfortunately though, it is upon Mintah that the ghosts feed, leaving her with only one last act of ingestion, an act that is simultaneously her destruction: “Fire pushed her to her knees. She opened her mouth for air and ate fire” (226).

\* \* \*

The narratives of both *Zong!* and *Feeding the Ghosts* move towards these climatic acts of eating, wherein the enslaved or formerly enslaved at last can become the eaters. In this way, one hopes that the trajectory of these narratives moves towards the achievement of power for these characters. One wants them to enjoy the act of eating as “joyful, triumphant” (Bakhtin qtd. in Kilgour 6). One wants eating to mean that they have “triumph[ed] over the world” by “devour[ing] it without being devoured [themselves]” (Bakhtin qtd. in Kilgour 6). And yet, no such victory is available. What is available to Mintah and Wale to eat, after all, is not literal food, but rather aspects of themselves. An ouroborous may eat its own tail to regenerate itself, but Wale and Mintah can enjoy no such renewal. They eat only then to be eaten, by the sea and by the flames respectively. Theirs is an ambivalent achievement of power in a world that requires physical deprivation and death in order to sustain one’s sense of and pride in one’s self. In such a world, no such binary that links eating with empowerment and not eating with weakness is possible. To eat is a biological necessity that both promotes well-being and yet acquaints one with the vulnerabilities of the body. To not eat is to face ill-health and possible death and yet to not eat may be an act of strength, a refusal to assimilate oneself with whatever systems and ideologies the food is imbricated. As conveyed by these texts, to be able to eat is not to be able to achieve power; rather, to already possess power is to be able to eat, and to do so with little conscience or regret.

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Notes

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1. Roland Barthes’s 1961 “Vers une psycho-sociologie de l’alimentation modern” helped to make the study of food as culture possible by arguing that food is a sign communicating meanings beyond itself. Lévi-Strauss’s 1965 “Le Triangle Culinaire” similarly positioned food as a form of communication, arguing that “the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure” (43). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The question remains whether or not this perceived lack of sustenance was in fact a fabricated interpretation meant to justify an action that was in fact more rooted in a desire to transfer the costs of the journey to the insurance company. A slave killed out of “necessity” would allow the ship’s owners to recoup the insured value of that slave (£30), a value not likely achievable on the slave auction blocks given the grave condition of many of the enslaved after the *Zong*’s long, arduous, and illness-ridden journey. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Another key literary representation of the *Zong* massacre, David Dabydeen’s long poem “Turner” (1994), similarly makes the act of eating a foundational aspect of its narrative. I have, however, excluded it from my discussion here because its handling of the trope of eating warrants its own argument and discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In that D’Aguiar chooses to fictionalize this rumoured event, he is himself engaging in the recovery of a lost history, and thereby, negotiating the limits and implications of that recovery. D’Aguiar’s choice to fictionalize the events and even to portray facts inaccurately (for instance, in D’Aguiar’s text, the Captain testifies regarding his decision to order the massacre whereas in the historical record, Captain Luke Collingwood died shortly after the conclusion of the journey and thereby did not have the opportunity to testify) suggests a desire to use fiction as a means of “succeed[ing] where traditional historiography” cannot (Spaulding 7). The role fictionalization can play in approaching historical events, particularly traumatic events, has been emphasized in critical discourse. Toni Morrison, for example, in her conceptualization of “re-memory” has claimed a need to “re-inhabit” the people of the past (“Living Memory” 179 qtd. in Keizer 1). In other words, there is a need to let imagination fill in the gaps and “succeed where traditional historiography” has not (Spaulding 7). Furthermore, fictionalization allowing the unknowable to gain some, albeit incomplete, presence, fictionalization too has been theorized as a means of gaining control over the past and hence diminishing its threat. Timothy A. Spaulding argues that “highly fictionalized” narratives – those with elements of the fantastic, for example – “allow[] [writers] to claim authority over the narrative construction of the past” (2). Arlene R. Keizer similarly asserts the value of achieving authority over the past by noting that “re-imagin[ing] the past [is] for the benefit of the present and the future” (17). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I have assumed that Philip’s reference to “a novel about it [the *Zong* massacre]” (190) is to *Feeding the Ghosts* since it is the sole novel overtly portraying the *Zong* massacre. Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* does feature a similar casting overboard of living slaves for the sake of insurance money, but it does not claim to specifically represent the *Zong* voyage. Furthermore, Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* makes reference to the massacre, but just in passing. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Stef Craps uses these words to describe *Feeding the Ghosts* and David Dabydeen’s “Turner,” but they are equally appropriate a description of *Zong!*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Almas Khan’s recent “Poetic Justice: Slavery, Law, and the (Anti-)Elegiac Form in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*” at least makes reference to some of the narrative content, noting the relationship between a sailor and Ruth, but most often these narrative details are absent from scholarly discussions of *Zong!*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. My reading assumes that in rendering Wale and Sade as spectacle, the narrative depicts a loss of power. Of course, a further implication of “see *wale* run” could be that this imperative functions as part of the text’s ethics of recovery and pursuit of justice. This command is, after all, also a call to witness. Philip’s echoing of a Dick-and-Jane-type narrative, nevertheless, also associates Wale and Sade’s coming enslavement with a diminishment of the narrative tools available to convey their story. Wale and Sade are under threat of capture and their story too is threatened by possible conscription into Western models. I am thinking here of interpretations of Toni Morrison’s allusion to Dick-and-Jane stories in *The Bluest Eye*. As Debra T. Werrlein has argued, Dick-and-Jane narratives, standard school readers in the United States throughout the 1930s-60s, were a hegemonic force constructing the white middle-class as the norm to which to aspire; these readers, subsequently, functioned as “a national illiteracy campaign that systematically disenfranchised young black Americans, especially young black girls” (62). Morrison opens *The Bluest Eye* with a Dick-and-Jane-like narrative, and uses fragments of it throughout, so as to foreground the exclusion of families like the Breedloves from the actual Dick-and-Jane books. Similarly, Philip’s allusion to these Dick-and-Jane narratives functions to restrict the narrative options available to Wale and Sade and thus to perform their possible representational containment. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Although predominantly the sailors are pictured as having sustenance on board the *Zong*, there is a voice, which one assumes is a French sailor, that surfaces sporadically, stating “*j ai soif*” (98) and/or “*j ai faim*” (98, 131, 152, 157). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Marcus Rediker reports, for instance, that to limit consumption, a barrel of water would be placed on the maintop platform so that “[s]ailors were forced to climb all the way up to take a single drink” (206). There too exists testimony that “sailors were sometimes ‘obliged to beg victuals of the slaves’” (Rediker 261). It may be difficult to tell whether or not the sailors exaggerated their experience of limited sustenance. Nevertheless, since the “rates of mortality of the crew on slave ships were considerably higher than for crews on other routes, including the commodity trade with Africa” (Klein 131), it is believable that the conditions they experienced were grave. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For a reading of the significance of Philip’s use of the catalogue in *Zong!*, please see Erin M. Fehskens’s “Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold: M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* and the Catalogue.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Of course, not all the women are represented as being able to produce breast milk. At another moment, a woman is characterized by “paps” that “hang dry” (121). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The portrait of Mansfield that biographers have constructed is of a man with ambivalent attitudes towards slavery. Mansfield may have made the groundbreaking Somerset decision (1772) which ruled that an enslaved person could not be removed from England against his will, a decision that paved the way towards abolition in England. But as Edmund Heward describes, “there is no evidence that Lord Mansfield’s views on the subject of the slave trade were in any way in advance of his contemporaries” (139). Norman S. Poser reports that Mansfield was affected by John Locke’s and James Beattie’s arguments against slavery (288, 290), and yet Mansfield was also known to have proclaimed that he “would have all masters think [the enslaved]free, and all negroes think they were not, because then they would both behave better” (qtd. in Heward 143). As depicted by Poser, Mansfield experienced “a tension between his rational and humane beliefs and his unwavering support of British commerce and the sanctity of property. He understood the importance of the slave trade to British merchants, yet he knew that slavery could not be justified on any rational or humanitarian ground” (290). The conclusion that Poser draws is that Mansfield was ultimately “[l]ess concerned about liberty than about social and economic damage control” (290). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. These references to the enslaved as food draw upon documented assumptions on the part of the enslaved that transatlantic slavery had the purpose of supporting European cannibalism. For example, in his autobiographical narrative, Equiano states, “I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair” (ch. 2). Although assuming that one was to be eaten is quite the conclusion to which to leap, an unthinkable conclusion is quite understandable amidst apocalyptic conditions. As William D. Piersen writes, “The tradition of insatiable white man-eaters explained why no one ever returned after being purchased on the coast” (4). Many depictions of the slave trade narrativize this fear of becoming food. For example, in Lawrence Hill’s *Book of Negroes*, Aminata, upon capture, believes that “the captors would beat us, boil us and eat us” (29), while Fanta, despite being told their fate is to be labourers, is convinced that “‘[t]hey are going to eat us, anyway’” (61). As well, the enslaved women described by D’Aguiar in *Feeding the Ghosts* are depicted as thinking “they were slaves destined to be eaten” (76). This fear of literal cannibalism may have been unfounded, but the bodies, health, and spirits of the enslaved were, of course, consumed in many other ways. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This argument is informed by Ramesh Mallipeddi’s construction of nostalgia as a key mode of resistance for the enslaved. Mallipeddi asserts that “[i]t was by tenaciously retaining and cultivating memories of Africa to the point of self-destruction that slaves sought to counter the forces of dislocation” (247). I argue that the choice not to eat functions similarly to a destructive preservation of memory in that both nostalgia and hunger are about the preserving a feeling of loss so as to preserve a connection to one’s self (body and home) before enslavement. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In the 2016 article “The Salt Bones: *Zong!* and an Ecology of Thirst,” Diana Leong similarly constructs the enslaved in terms of a perpetual lack of nourishment, her focus centering particularly on a lack of water. Asserting that “the slaves remained thirsty even with an ample supply of water on hand” (804), Leong asks, “What is it to be thirsty when one is surrounded by water?” (799). Thirst, as argued by Leong, becomes a “*permanent* condition” (807). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This pursuit of more self-sufficiency in acquiring nourishment is consistent with a broader theme, particularly in *Feeding the Ghosts*, of the enslaved seeking nourishment outside of that which is regulated by their captors. Specifically, multiple instances of the enslaved quenching their thirst with rain water are described. Not only does Mintah, upon climbing back aboard the ship, find that the “boat was full of rain” so “[s]he drank the water” (54), but also enslaved men are described as “rais[ing] their heads and open[ing] their mouths” (23) so as to catch what rain drops they can. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For example, Wale’s eating of this letter bears relation to various Biblical ideas, namely Ezekiel’s swallowing of the scroll and the figuring of Jesus as the Word made flesh. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Edwidge Danticat’s short story “Children of the Sea” from *Krik? Krac!* narrates a similar scenario, one equally as difficult to interpret. Just before the journal in which one of the protagonists has been writing is to be thrown overboard, a fellow migrant insists his name be written in it. This migrant insists his name be written despite knowing that the book is to be sacrificed, hence that the writing will not form a permanent record of his existence. Of course, Danticat’s story is made more complicated by the fact that despite the fact the journal has been discarded, somehow readers have access to its contents, suggesting that some kind of alternate, more metaphysical mode of communication has been possible. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)