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Body as Battleground: Acts of Ingestion in D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* and Philip's *Zong!*

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Abstract: This article explores the trope of ingestion in two literary representations of the 1781 *Zong* massacre, Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem *Zong!* (2008). In drawing attention to acts of ingestion, I seek to expand scholarly discussion of these two texts, which has to date somewhat stalled around framing them as confrontations with the traumatic past. Grounded in scholarship that argues that ingestion forms "political subjects" by "fusing the social with the biological" (Tompkins 1), this article posits the act of ingestion as a navigation of socio-historical/political forces. In these two texts, ingestion functions within systems of power wherein those in privileged positions can be consumers while the enslaved are excreters, with bodies in states of dissolution. Those benefiting from the slave trade are critiqued in these texts for their dystopic overconsumption and cannibalistic voraciousness, while those enslaved are portrayed in terms of the impossibility of achieving nourishment even when able to eat or drink. Although common theoretical assumptions link ingestion with empowerment, my exploration of these texts reveals the insufficiency of such an assumption. Since to consume is also to confront one's dependence on and vulnerability to outside matter, for the enslaved the act of ingestion can be an incorporation of—and hence surrender to—one's enslavement.

Keywords: *Zong* massacre, ingestion, body, transatlantic slave trade

> No other fundamental aspect of behavior as a species except sexuality is so encumbered by *ideas* as eating[.]
>
> Sidney W. Mintz (*Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* 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 only material nourishment but also its histories of production and distribution and its individual, familial, and/or cultural meanings. Through the act of ingestion and the subsequent processes of digestion, the individual becomes a metaphorical and literal embodiment of his/her social worlds. With Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes[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 assumes that food "is an excellent locus for the study of group dynamics—how different populations exclude, include, reject, accept, and otherwise influence each other" (Bower 8). 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" (x) or, conversely, be a symptom of "commodified foreignness . . . [that] incorporat[es] and finally annihilat[es] all difference" (Peckham 181).[2]

In that food often "establishes 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 I address in this essay—various studies focus on this kind of contextualization, including Sidney W. Mintz's groundbreak-

ing consideration of sugar in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985), Meredith Gadsby's *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women 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, the role food plays in both representing and constructing individual and collective identities cannot be fully understood without also focussing on the act of eating and the subsequent processes of digestion. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins asserts, 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 with them and with 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 book-length poem *Zong!* (2008) to consider the act of ingestion as just such a navigation of socio-historical/political forces. Both 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,[3] it is not surprising that *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Zong!* highlight food products and acts of ingestion.[4] As the following discussion describes, acts of ingestion function as a negotiation of power relations, but whether or not ingestion indicates empowerment depends largely on the consumer's social position. Theoretically, to ingest rather than to be ingested is to be empowered, but at the same time, ingesting means confronting one's reliance on matter outside of the self, hence

one's lack of self-sufficiency. For the slavers in these texts, ingestion may at times, though 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 grave. For the enslaved, to ingest can be to consume one's enslavement, to become one with a system that devours them.

In drawing attention to acts of ingestion in these two texts, I seek to expand scholarship that has predominantly framed them as encounters with the traumatic past. *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Zong!* do, of course, ask the reader to contemplate memory, trauma, and the construction and recovery of history since these texts' 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 enslaved person who was cast overboard as part of the massacre but who was rumoured to have climbed back on board.[5] As a survivor of the massacre, Mintah comes to cast herself as a holder of memory and thereby confronts 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, *Feeding the Ghosts* speaks to the inevitable complexities and failures involved in writing into history what was previously erased: despite her efforts, Mintah's depictions gain little audience and she, in the end, seeks freedom from the past.

Although Philip dismisses *Feeding the Ghosts*[6] as ineffective in its approach to the past because "[a] novel requires too much telling" ("Notanda" 190), *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 book of poetry, Philip limits herself to using only 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 with-

out telling is the goal Philip sets for herself, and the complexity of her poetic form is her means of accomplishing it.

Even though *Feeding the Ghosts* and *Zong!* overtly argue for the need to "open up a space of remembrance" (Craps 60),[7] critical discussions of these texts have stalled around this issue, thereby problematically restricting the significance of these texts. The narrowness of this framework is particularly problematic for *Zong!*, which is too often discussed in terms of the difficulty of its form as a performance of the inaccessibility of the past. While a focus on form is certainly necessary—and it is where Philip herself points her readers—such discussions tend to overlook the poetry's content. When the fluidity, multiplicity, and even denial of meaning become *Zong!*'s main meaning, readers are too easily let off the hook from engaging with the text's content in any kind of sustained way. As Philip acknowledges, voices—and 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.[8] In turning my attention to a foundational leitmotif that emerges in *Zong!*—the act of ingestion—I propose an alternate reading strategy for this text. Rather than concentrating solely on the absent, unknown, uncomprehended, and/or incomprehensible, this approach respects the book's non-linearity and subsequent fluidity of meaning while still reading across its fragments and highlighting the narrative content that surfaces.

A reading that respects this text's non-linearity may require meanings be provisional, but a 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, 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 slave trade are portrayed as eaters, the enslaved are the unnourished, who negotiate bodies in constant states of dissolution.

In theory, the one who consumes is empowered. This figure arguably "secures his own identity by absorbing the world outside himself"

(Kilgour 6–7) or, in Mikhail Bakhtin'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!*, 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)[9]

Sade 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), suggests 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 being under threat and needing to escape. The narration even casts them in a Dick and Jane-like story—"run *wale* run . . . see *wale* run." As such, in their metamorphosis, they not only lose their status as eaters but also transition from being subjects performing actions—eating, running—into objects of another's action, namely, of another's gaze: "see *wale* run" (131).[10]

Whereas the place and time for Wale and Sade to nourish themselves lies in the past, the sailors achieve continuity in their eating between their past, present, and future. 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)

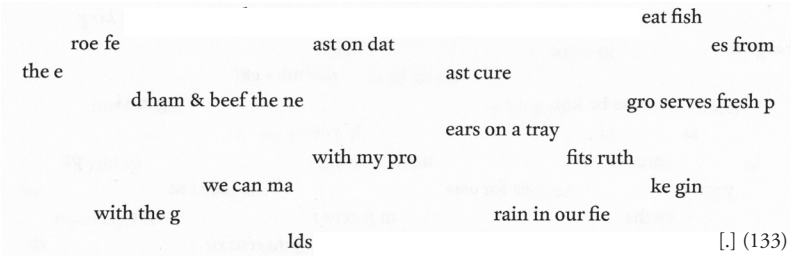
and

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)[11]

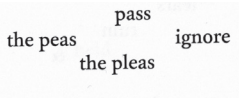
Even the sailor's vision of the future with his "dear ruth" is one of abundance. He describes them dining on "egg drop so up" (133); they



[.] (133)

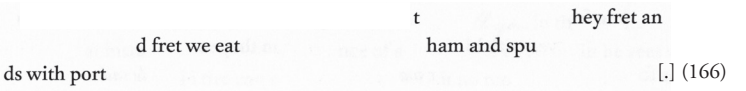
Whether or not this depiction of abundance is a realistic possibility or just wishful thinking,[12] *Zong!*'s tendency to render food items associated with the slavers in catalogue form[13] conveys a plentifulness that is part of their imaginary—before, during, and after the voyage. They need not choose 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. *Zong!* makes frequent comparisons between the slavers and the enslaved, forming an "us" versus "them" binary on the basis of access to sustenance. For example, such play with language as



(82)

draws 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:



[.] (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 foodstuffs, 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 being served by an enslaved girl:

we e at we d
oze she but a b it a s lip of a g
irl [.] (145)

The way words are fragmented in the latter sections of *Zong!* further differentiates the slavers from the enslaved. The splitting apart of words into their constituent parts reveals hidden meanings within larger words; these hidden meanings relay 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 coupled 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)—

"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 them o
f all they cr eate [.] (167)

The different handling of the fragmentation of "create" establishes that "we" can be associated with the word "ate," whereas "they" cannot. The poem's "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 the enslaved experience with the act of eating. 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, "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 dissolve rather than grow, excrete rather than consume. 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,[14] it figures a compromised food chain. Not only are the women excreters who cannot retain what they have consumed to fuel their own bodies, but since their breasts are described as leaking rather than as feeding the young, what they excrete also goes to waste, unconsumed by members of the next generation, who, if even still present and alive, inherit the impossibility of nourishment.

In *Zong!* the comparison of the slavers to the enslaved in terms of their access to nourishment criticizes slavery and its systems. *Feeding the Ghosts*, however, denounces slavery through the association of all those complicit in the trade—even the public—with dystopic overconsumption. Much as Philip's book represents slavers as experiencing conditions that allow them to choose between multiplicitous food items, *Feeding the Ghosts* represents those complicit in the slave trade as selfishly consumptive. Whereas the enslaved women in the novel 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.

The sailors in *Feeding the Ghosts* use their access to food as a weapon against the enslaved on board the ship; for example, when the second mate and the boatswain enter into the part of the hold occupied by the enslaved women, they do so "*armed* with loaves of bread and chunks of cheese" (D'Aguiar 74; emphasis added). As the narrator explains, "[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 enslaved 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 "return to the slave hold and wriggle into a space between other women" (75), where "[s]emen from the crew would seep from them" (75) and their neighbours "ordered" their tears "to be silent" (76). Just as *Zong!* portrays the enslaved, the women in this scene are excreters, not consumers.

Later in the narrative, Simon, the cook's assistant who befriends Mintah on board the ship, reveals that the British people are grossly ignorant about the costs of their own consumption. Shortly after the conclusion of the trial that ruled in favour of the ship's owners receiving the insurance money, the narration, through Simon's focalization, offers the following image: "[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). This passage features not only people consuming products associated with the slave trade but also a dystopic excess. The crowds are excessive; they escape containment, spilling out onto the streets. This image, however, is not festive. The tobacco smokers do not just smoke but become chimneys, clouding the air; the drinkers do not just drink but are drunk. This portrayal equates the British public with acts of leisurely, luxurious, and thoughtless consumption; it also signals the apathetic indifference to the exploitative conditions that have produced these privileges.

The novel further shows the inhumanity of those complicit in the trade through references to food and acts of ingestion during the course of the trial. Despite historical depictions of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield as making rulings that were useful in the movement towards abolition,[15] D'Aguiar constructs Mansfield more as "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 preoccupied, throughout the trial, with his stomach. Furthermore, his fixation on food casts the proceedings as an appetizer to the meal he desires: He "want[s] his palate gently stirred and whetted by the morning's deliberations" (138). The narrative represents aspects of the trial as foodstuffs for Mansfield to digest. Mintah's journal adds "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 society is rooted not only in inhumane unfeeling but also cannibalistic voraciousness, albeit a metaphorical one.

A similar dystopic hunger appears in *Zong!*, in which the sailors both feast on abundant supplies and consume cannibalistically. They

find the fu
n in [. . .]
n
egro me at (163),

"din[ing]" on it and "grow[ing] fa / t" (Philip 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 reflect a pursuit of sexual satiation through violence rather than a literal feeding upon flesh, the implication remains the same: the enslaved are objects existing solely to be consumed. The enslaved become even the bread in the Lord's Prayer's plea for sustenance. This prayer, common in Christian religions, asks God to "give us

this day our daily bread," a line that appears frequently in *Zong!*. In one instance, this line importantly becomes

give us this
day our ne groes [.] (159)

The multiple references to this line of the Lord's Prayer are, significantly, never followed by the rest of the prayer, which asks for "forgive[ness for] our trespasses" and "deliver[ance] . . . from evil" (*Book of Common Prayer*).[16]

Just as those complicit in the slave trade are portrayed as 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 through failures of digestion. In a study that interprets a history of the Black body as consumable, Tompkins demonstrates that just because there exists a "fantasy" of the Black body as "edible[,] . . . [it] 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 represent fissures in the ideologies used to justify slavery and excuse its exploitation and violence. For Kelsal, the First Mate responsible for carrying out the massacre, "with each slave disposed of, the churning sensation in his stomach had intensified" (D'Aguiar 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, his subsequent doubt about the rightfulness of the massacre results in indigestion. When confronted with the details of the *Zong* massacre, details that run counter to his philosophy of "protect[ing]" the enslaved—but only 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). His conclusion that the actions were necessary allows 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 critical of slavery thanks to his friendship with Mintah, perceives 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 cannibalistic self-centredness. Echoing the views of the 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" (D'Aguiar 176). His subsequent vision of the sea as a grotesque mass grave dramatizes his realization of the gravity of this loss. In his vision, the sea "opened instantly and with hardly a splash [the enslaved] were admitted into it and the opening closed" (99). In a text in which the sea is a mouth that "nibbl[es]" (4) and "swallow[s]" (27), Simon's vision signals the gross appetite of the slave trade. The sea in *Feeding the Ghosts* is a mouth that consumes the bodies of the enslaved and conceals the evidence of their wrongful deaths.

And yet in Simon's vision, the sea is unable 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,

> [i]nstead 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 regain their flesh. What he sees is not a digestion, hence disappearance, of bodies but rather 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 uncanny reminders of the false dichotomy between self and other on which the ideology of slavery depends. Just as slavery depends on 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, 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" (Kilgour 7). In other words, "[e]ating threaten[s] the foundational fantasy of a contained autonomous self," 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 W. Curtin asserts, acts of ingestion draw into question "the absolute border between self and other which seems so obvious in the western tradition," 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 it is no wonder the attempted consumption of the enslaved in these texts often yields indigestion. Even though to ingest is to wield power, to ingest 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' assertion, do not always "go down smoothly" (9) in these texts because the act of ingestion can pro-

voke a self-conscious confrontation of the consumer's imbrication with and reliance upon what is ingested. For example, as much as the sailor of *Zong!* seemingly celebrates his ability to dine on "negro meat" (Philip 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 about 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 symbolize the uncanny—and unfortunately fleeting— surfacing of this knowledge.

For the enslaved, however, the act of ingestion, when possible, is even more threatening. It can signify surrender. Jane Bennett contends that what is consumed is "a powerful agent . . . that modifies" the consumer (43). Food has a "self-altering, dissipative materiality . . . [that] enters into what we become" (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 only edible matter; it also represents 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 is symbolic of it as a result. 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" (2). *Feeding the Ghosts* is, in fact, rife with refusals of food. When Mintah is cast overboard, the enslaved who witness this act of violence use food as a weapon and

object of protest: "A couple of men hurled their bowls at Kelsal and the others and ran to intervene" while others "emptied their bowls on the deck or simply threw them at the crew" (D'Aguiar 49). In the midst of depicting the chaos of this scene, the narrative eye zooms in on 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, as I mention above, manages to climb back onboard the *Zong*—concludes with the following paragraph:

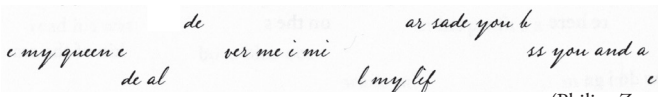
> The girl stared at her bowl. Rain covered the porridge like a lavish condiment. Eat, the adult begged, eat for Mintah, so you can grow big, beautiful and strong like her. The child looked up at the adult, wished it was Mintah holding that spoon. But she had seen Mintah flung into the big water, from 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 an instigator of death. Her initial refusal to eat is not just about the girl taking control of her body; it is also about preserving a feeling of loss, of lack. Just as nostalgia maintains one's connection to a place and people lost, the feeling of hunger allows the girl to maintain a connection with her body.[17] 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 her enslavers. In choosing not to feel hunger anymore, she is choosing not to feel anything, to lose her 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 further 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.

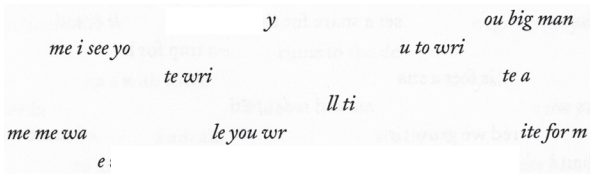
As the experience of this girl suggests, the enslaved portrayed in these two texts cannot experience the act of ingestion as the "triumph" that Bakhtin suggests it is. Instead, both texts move towards climactic moments of consumption, but these acts of ingestion do not prove life-sustaining.[18] While Wale literally ingests a letter to his wife that he has had a sailor write for him in *Zong!*, 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?) sets. 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.[19] Wale and Mintah pursue alternative, 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, it is symbolically so. By consuming this piece of paper, which holds Wale's words as transcribed by his captor, Wale ingests proof of his humanity, or more specifically, proof that his humanity has been recognized by his captor. The words that Wale ingests—



(Philip, *Zong!* 172)—

express emotion and his bond to his family, two qualities the enslaved were assumed to lack. More importantly, Wale's success in getting the sailor to perform a task for him—the writing of his letter—represents his ability to thwart the tenets of slavery that define him as inhuman and other. When approaching the sailor, Wale states,



(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 he is also 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. 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 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 deconstructs the binary between self and other on which the sailor's beliefs and actions depend.

Wale's actions at the conclusion of *Zong!* are difficult to interpret.[20] 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 instead of 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 it, Wale prevents his written words from achieving the immortality that writing often promises.[21] Of course, by eating the letter, Wale also saves his words from history's gaze and possible misrepresentation or erasure. Although it remains difficult to discern whether Wale's final act represents triumph or defeat, his action does suggest 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 describe above, before their capture Wale, Sade, and Ade enjoy a pastoral ideal; they are a carefree and supportive family. By eating words that materialize this prior life, Wale fuses his current self with his past one,

bringing 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. To die at this 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. Before her final climactic act of ingestion—the drinking of her carvings—Mintah envisions her own self as possible nourishment. After she escapes from the sea and is 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 a dream state in which 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" (D'Aguiar 112). Throughout her contemplations, she feels "lost. At sea. Lost to her name. Her body" (112). In this dream state, Mintah returns to Africa (whether this is a recollected memory of her childhood or a fictional reimagining remains unclear) and experiences 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 communicates Mintah's desire for fresh water, something that will quench thirst, unlike the sea water that "stung" (226) because she "choked 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, 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, the self that she seeks to assimilate into her body can be read as the self that had been traumatized on the *Zong*. The face in the water may be her reflection, but it is seemingly staring up from below the water's surface; the face thus symbolizes the person who was thrown overboard and nearly drowned.

Mintah's practice as a wood carver is her means of navigating a relationship with the past. As a wood carver, she 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" (D'Aguiar 208). Although "the past" that the wood represents is not exclusively Mintah's traumatic past, the word choices in this passage suggest that Mintah connects the wood to 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 bring the perpetual Middle Passage to some form of conclusion. Mintah carves figures memorializing the victims of the *Zong* in addition to the goblets, shapes that suggest a "man, woman or child reaching up out of the depths" (208–09). As Mintah describes, "[t]here are 131 of them" and she has "been working on another for months now" with plans for "ten more after that" (209). The numbers imply that the carvings represent 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). From these she does not drink liquid but "drink[s] their grain. [She] drink[s] light from them, the way it shines off head and shoulders and back" (209). By metaphorically drinking the victims of the massacre, Mintah honours the dead, symbolically bringing them back to life; in consuming them, they are assimilated into her still living body, becoming, to return to Tompkins' words, 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" (D'Aguiar 61), become unfulfilling, drinking the trauma of the *Zong*, even for the sake of honouring the dead, cannot nourish her. Her description of raid-

ing the "storehouse" of her childhood memories may suggest that her diet has become 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 a parasitic relationship. As much as she drinks these figures and the traumatic past they symbolize, the past also consumes 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, 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 climactic acts of eating, wherein the enslaved or formerly enslaved at last become eaters. In this way, one hopes that the trajectory of these narratives moves towards the enslaved characters achieving power. One wants them to enjoy the act of eating as, in Bakhtin's words, "joyful, triumphant" and for eating to mean that they have "triumph[ed] over the world" by "devour[ing] it without being devoured" (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 ouroboros may eat its own tail to regenerate itself, but Wale and Mintah enjoy no such renewal. They eat only 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 pride and sense of 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 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 may be an act of strength, a refusal to assimilate into oneself whatever systems and ideologies with which the food is imbricated. As these texts convey, 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

1 Barthes' 1961 "Vers une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation modern" ("Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption") helped to make the study of food as culture possible by arguing that food is a sign communicating meanings beyond itself. Lévi-Strauss' 1965 "Le Triangle Culinaire" ("The Culinary Triangle") 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).

2 Peckham is particularly interested in the cuisine of cultural groups that become a "form of world cooking" that is "served up by a mainstream culture and consumed in a feast that feeds the muscles of the ravenous nation" (181).

3 The question remains whether or not this perceived lack of sustenance was in fact a fabricated interpretation meant to justify an action that was more rooted in a desire to transfer the costs of the journey to the insurance company. An enslaved person killed out of necessity would allow the ship's owners to recoup the insured value of £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.

4 Another key literary representation of the *Zong* massacre, 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.

5 In that D'Aguiar chooses to fictionalize this rumoured event, he is 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 so 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). Fictionalization allows the unknowable to gain some, albeit incomplete, presence,

and consequently, as has been argued by such scholars as Spaulding and Keizer, fictionalization becomes a means of gaining control over the past, diminishing its threat, and putting it to use "for the benefit of the present and the future" (Keizer 17).

6 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. 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, Cliff's *Abeng* refers to the massacre but only in passing.

7 Craps uses these words to describe *Feeding the Ghosts* and Dabydeen's "Turner," but they are an equally appropriate description of *Zong!*

8 Khan refers 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!*

9 The visual layout of quotations from *Zong!* appears as accurately as possible. A number of quotations have been scanned so as to give a sense of the text's font style and size.

10 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 Morrison's allusion to Dick-and-Jane stories in *The Bluest Eye*. As Werrlein has argued, Dick-and-Jane narratives, which were 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, which foregrounds the exclusion of families like the Breedloves from the actual Dick-and-Jane books. Similarly, Philip's allusion to these Dick-and-Jane narratives restricts the narrative options available to Wale and Sade and thus performs their possible representational containment.

11 Although the sailors are predominantly 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*" ["I'm thirsty"] (98) and/or "*j ai faim*" ["I'm hungry"] (Philip 98, 131, 152, 157).

12 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 also exists testimony that "sailors were sometimes 'obliged to beg victuals of the slaves'" (Rediker 261). (For the source of 'obliged to beg victuals of the slaves,' please see Rediker's endnote 83 [400].) 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 plausible that the conditions they experienced were grave.

13 For a reading of the significance of Philip's use of the catalogue in *Zong!*, see Fehskens.

14 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" (Philip 121).

15 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 for abolition in England. But as 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). 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). According to 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). Poser draws the conclusion that Mansfield was ultimately "[l]ess concerned about liberty than about social and economic damage control" (290).

16 These references to the enslaved as food draw upon documented assumptions on the part of the enslaved that transatlantic slavery supported 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 may seem like an extreme conclusion, an unthinkable conclusion is quite understandable amidst apocalyptic conditions. As Piersen writes, "[t]he 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 becom-

ing food. For example, in 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* think "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.

17 This argument is informed by 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). The choice not to eat functions similarly to a destructive preservation of memory in that both nostalgia and hunger are about preserving a feeling of loss in order to preserve a connection to one's self (body and home) before enslavement.

18 Leong similarly constructs the enslaved in *Zong!* 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; emphasis in original).

19 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, the novel describes multiple instances of the enslaved quenching their thirst with rain water.

20 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.

21 Danticat's short story "Children of the Sea" from *Krik? Krak!* 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 despite knowing that the book is to be destroyed. Of course, Danticat's story is complicated by the fact that though the journal has been discarded, somehow readers have access to its contents, suggesting that a kind of alternate, more metaphysical mode of communication is possible.

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