

## Maryse Condé

### ON CANNIBALS AND OTHER MONSTERS: ARE MEN BORN EQUAL ?

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I would like to begin with a quotation. In 1841, Victor Hugo, though an ardent advocate for the Republic, for the abolition of slavery and the death penalty, exclaimed about the conquest of Algeria: "This is civilization trammeling barbarity, an enlightened people going to find a people in the dark of night. We are the world's Greeks; it is up to us to illuminate the world."<sup>1</sup> And so, at the moment of this conquest, his conscience feels no remorse but celebrates instead the victory of the French in whom he sees the promise of a better future for the world. The second quotation I'll give is from Lamartine, that generous man and convinced supporter of the Republic who, in 1842, speaks of the Blacks who will soon be liberated from slavery: "We want to gradually, slowly and prudently present the Black man with the possibility of enjoying humanity's achievements, and we invite him to do so under the guidance of the motherland, as a child who comes to complement it and not as a savage who comes to ravage it!"<sup>2</sup>

These two sentences were pronounced by extremely enlightened men more than half a century after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. They seem to imply that in spite of the proclaimed equality of rights, a more subtle inequality persists, an inequality both of nature and of origin. Certain peoples do not deserve the fine name of human from birth. The Arabs conquered by the French, the Blacks soon to be liberated from slavery are not men in the proper sense of the term. They appear as peoples that are

preoccupied with games and distractions, but not enclined to the constant effort which would bring them to be autonomous human beings. The Abbot Hardy, director of the Holy Spirit Seminary (Séminaire du Saint-Esprit), encapsulated the general opinion when he said, "We must abolish slavery without abolishing work." So the Black man, the Arab have no choice. They must conform to a model presented to them, not to mention imposed on them, by the rest of the world.

I hope to illustrate here the claim that intellectuals of what is now known as the Antillean diaspora have made for this original inequality, and their effort to make it the basis of their identity. I would like to show, in the literary field that is mine, how this affirmation of the inequality of men at their birth has become the basis for an extremely fertile claim. I believe that this inequality, perceived as harmful and dangerous, has in fact been knowingly claimed, taken up and presented as a practically positive element.

In order to understand what I mean by this, we need to go back a little bit, to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Christopher Columbus embarked into the Caribbean Ocean. Everyone knows that this was a huge mistake. He had left in search of Japan, but everybody makes mistakes, Christopher Columbus like anybody else. What is rather striking is that he finds men there that he has never seen before. But immediately he begins to gather the rumors being spread about them. These rumors say that there are two categories of men: the Arawaks, who are very nice, very wholesome, obliging, and generous, and another group whose name is a bit uncertain. Sometimes they were called Caribs, other times Canniba, still others Cariba. This was a brutal, war-faring people that presented the particularity of enjoying human flesh and of dining on their enemies.

The practice of eating human flesh is at the center of a myth that has nourished the European imagination since time immemorial. A very interesting essay by Frank Lestringant<sup>3</sup>, shows that this fear of meeting men who eat other men has existed from antiquity on. The men who were guilty of this crime were called "anthropophagites" by Homer and Herodotus. Sketchily defined, they were said to live

beyond the Black Sea, beyond all civilized space. They were nomadic and spoke an incomprehensible language. These men were in fact the limit of the human. Since no one had seen or met them, we can consider that they were a myth or a fantasy.

The “caribs” or cannibals that made their way into history at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century wrest their specificity away from the anthropophagites and displace the shameful practice towards the New World and the Caribbean Sea. The English scholar Peter Hulme has correctly insisted on the consequences of the appearance of this new, ferocious and uncompromising people.<sup>4</sup> Even though Christopher Columbus was never witness to acts of cannibalism, he gave us a detailed description of those who commit it. On January 13, 1493, he wrote in his journal: “His face was all blackened by coal though the other parts of his body were covered with various colors. His hair was very long, pulled back, tied up and held in place by parrot’s feathers. He was entirely naked. He must have been one of those caribs who eat other men.”

I would like to draw your attention to this “must have been,” because, in fact, Christopher Columbus is not at all sure. His grounds for saying this are no more than a rumor. He had been told that these Cannibals eat people, but he had seen no concrete trace of these feasts of human flesh. I won’t insist on the linguistic variants that stem from this word. I will only say that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the word “cannibalism” makes its definitive appearance in the European dictionary and little by little replaces the old word of “anthropophagy.”

From the moment Christopher Columbus met his frightful interlocutor, cannibalism became the pretext for slavery. Yet one must insist on the fact that no other description of cannibalism was ever collected in the Caribbean. Unlike what happened in Brazil when the Tupinamba Indians devoured a Catholic priest with the unfortunate name of Father Sardinha. This allows us to understand Montaigne’s question, while the murders and other atrocities committed by the Spanish in that part of the world were fresh in his mind. “Which are the true cannibals: the Europeans or the others?” I do not intend to

answer this question. As I have said, I want merely to show how these real or imaginary ancestors gave birth to a claim for cultural autonomy.

The only place where cannibalism is certifiably attested is in Brazil, while in the Antilles it remains fantasmatic. In this perspective it is interesting to read *Rouge Brésil* (Red Brazil), Jean-Christophe Rufin's novel that won the Gouuncourt Prize in 2001<sup>5</sup>. A large part of the book is based on the cannibalism of the Tupi. Rufin speaks a great deal of this cannibalism as a kind of extravagance, of perverse taste for human flesh. Yet he never stops to wonder about the subject, never gives any explanation. In reality, as even Lestringant explains at length in his book<sup>6</sup>, cannibalism was grounded in religion. It was a sacrificial act: a man, a being, was eaten because he was admired, and people wanted to possess his qualities, his intelligence, force and beauty.

The problem, however, is not to justify cannibalism (which would be rather difficult!), but to consider its heritage. And this heritage is extraordinary. In 1928, more than three centuries after the Tupinamba had devoured their Portuguese priest, a Brazilian by the name of Oswaldo de Andrade wrote a seminal text called the *Cannibal Manifesto*. This extremely interesting character was married to a woman painter and both had frequented the surrealists in Paris. Since we cannot, he says in essence, liberate ourselves from certain European contributions, nor purely and simply reject the Western heritage, language and culture, let's ingest them, integrate them into the matter of our Selves and, through this cannibalization, liberate ourselves from all dependence on the Other. As Andrade said in a terrible play on words: "Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question." Though in very poor taste, this pun harbors a salutary way of proceeding, an invitation to all the people in the diaspora of what we call the New World not to get upset if they have integrated Western values. One must only cannibalize these values, treat them with a kind of derision, in order to arrive at a way to claim an entirely liberating cultural authenticity. The revolution Oswaldo proposed certainly carries its share of derision, but it also provides a deep reflection on the nature of culture. Oswaldo's manifesto is a kind of Bible, a proposed culture for colonized peoples. This is a school with free admission and I will

quickly cite the name of another Brazilian, Mario de Andrade, who in 1928 published a marvelous book, *Macunaíma*, in which he mixes the elements of his so-called “traditional” culture and elements from Portuguese culture in order to reach the following conclusion: since culture is born of the integration of extremely diverse elements, there is no shame in possessing in one’s self a bit of western culture.

If we turn to the Antilles, the cannibalist process is a bit more complicated to follow. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* and put Caliban, a descendant of the cannibal, in parallel with Prospero, the white master. In spite of the author’s intentions, Caribbean sympathies go to Caliban, unjustly robbed of his territory, in his communion with the invisible, and who makes of his master’s language an instrument of rebellion. These three elements seem similar to those that streak the Antillean dispossession. What a paradox! Caliban, the literary creation of a Western man, born of the West’s pillaging, becomes a mythic ancestor for part of the world. Luis Fernando Retamer, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant each claim him one after the other and place him at the center of their writings. Suzanne Césaire’s sentence, as it appeared in an article called “The Misery of a National Poetry” in the journal *Tropiques*, founded in 1940 by a group of intellectuals from Martinique, is well known: “Martiniquan poetry will be cannibalistic if it is to be at all.”<sup>7</sup> For his part, Aimé Césaire writes in the *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1947): “I claim myself, we claim ourselves, of cannibal madness.” In echo to Césaire’s somewhat mysterious sentences, Franz Fanon also makes a claim to a form of cannibalism and, closer to our times, writers like Raphaël Confiant perceive identity as a way of integrating the other and transforming it as one desires.

The problem all these intellectuals confront is to define themselves as different even as they know that they possess in themselves elements that they will not be able to get rid of. Their problem is to figure out how to reconcile cultural elements that are entirely dissimilar. Their claimed identity is neither black nor Christian, nor is it civilized, rational or sexually controlled. The Antillean claims himself to be Other and conjugates an identity that remains “unknown

to the chancellery,” as Aimé Césaire puts it in *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*. (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land)<sup>8</sup>

One can therefore consider that it is not absolutely possible to be pure. In the end, all those who dream of pure culture or pure identity follow an extremely dangerous path. We have seen what Nazi thought gave to the world. There is no culture that is absolutely pure. Thanks to cannibalism, in a manner of speaking, we in the diasporas and in Latin America have been able to realize that cultures can only be born of a blending.

I know that the term “identity” is a dangerous one. In *La Pensée Métisse*<sup>9</sup>, Serge Grutinski emphasizes how much identity is too often perceived as invariant, determined once and for all by history, ethnicity or the environment. He reminds us that the world of the colonized is in a way porous to the world of the colonizer and that their values permeate each other. Today in an era of globalization, what culture remains pure? What culture remains “authentic,” as the consecrated term has it? It needs to be emphasized how much cannibalistic theories, in particular Oswaldo de Andrade’s, are ahead of their time. They offer us a way to accommodate external influences even as we preserve difference.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are now, I believe, at an important moment in the history of cultural identities. Some identities ask for blending, take up blending and want blending presented and perceived in a positive light. As Edouard Glissant writes: “Blending (*métissage*) no longer appears as a cursed given of being, but more and more as a possible source of richnesses and availabilities.”<sup>10</sup> So I feel that the title of my paper, “are men born equal,” implies a subtitle which would be “In praise of Inequalities” if we hear in this term the sense of difference and diversity. A world where cultures would be uniform would be very boring to live in. A human being that had within him neither contradictions nor tensions would not be alive. Let’s listen to Montaigne again: “an honest man is a man of mixed heritage.” (“un honnête homme est un homme mêlé.”)

*On Cannibals and Other Monsters...*

If we refuse the colonial considerations that divided the world into humans and sub-humans, we can hold onto the idea of diverse humans that certainly benefit from the same rights but bring specific riches to our common heritage. If equality is standardization, we want no part of it and loudly proclaim our right to difference.

I am happy and almost proud to descend from the cannibals that Christopher Columbus met in the Caribbean Sea because the dialogue that can exist between a descendant of the Cannibals and a descendant of Europeans can only be extremely fruitful.

Translated from the French by William Bishop

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Victor Hugo, *Choses vues*. 1841.

<sup>2</sup> Declaration made by Lamartine in February, 1842 at a banquet organized by the Committee for the liberation of slaves.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Lestringant, *Le Cannibale, grandeur et décadence*, Perrin, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters. Europe and the Caribbean 1492-1797*, New York, Routledge, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Christophe Ruffin, *Rouge Brésil*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>7</sup> *Tropiques 1941-1944*. Réédition. Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Le Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *La Pensée métisse*, Paris, Payot, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais*, Paris, Folio Gallimard, 1997.