

## Introduction

*“Master . . . eated me when I was meat”*

In the summer of 2007, I visited Somerset Place in Creswell, North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> At one point, Somerset Place, a historically restored plantation, was the most successful plantation in North Carolina and its owner, Josiah Collins III, one of the largest slaveholders in the state. It is now a state historic site sitting on over 100 acres of lush forest and wetland. My party and I arrived early one Saturday morning, parked near the overseer’s quarters, and walked the red cobblestone road down the center of the plantation—past the stocks, past the smokehouse, past the outside cooking facilities—to the gift shop where the tour begins. My travel companions browsed the bookstore while I sat in the adjoining seating area taking in the genealogy of enslaved persons who had formerly lived on the plantation. Someone had conveniently mounted photographs and biographies of these persons on the walls. There was Darius Bennett, a Somerset field hand who had heard the cannons signaling the Civil War. There was Besty Spruil Riddick seated with hands folded before a wooden shack. There was even a makeshift family tree dating back to the first enslaved Africans to arrive on Somerset Plantation.

After a while, all of us there for the morning tour made our way into the seating area where our tour guide finally came in and stood before us. He wore khaki pants, a maroon polo shirt, and glasses; he was blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and stood about 6’3” tall. For the sake of discussion, I will refer to him as Mr. Swellfellow, because he had that

look of a good hometown guy. He probably lived in the same neighborhood as his mother (if not *with* his mother), volunteered with the local fire department, had a high school sweetheart he was engaged to, went to church every Sunday, and, as far as I could see, wore honesty about his face like a child wears a milky mustache. He was totally disarming and chubby and southern and immediately attentive, standing before us, leaning on the mantle of the fireplace.

After warming to us, he began by talking about the pictures on the wall and quickly segued into minor details about the plantation. Not all of the original buildings had been restored to the plantation. This was a walking tour that would begin at the overseer's quarters and end at the big house. A woman who had once tried to escape was put into the stocks in the wintertime. Her legs froze and they had to be amputated. Each month, enslaved adults received a ration of a peck of corn and three pounds of dried meat. "The slaves on this plantation were well fed," Mr. Swellfellow emphasized, before rattling off more details about the tour. I tried to stay focused, but my mind returned to the rationed meat and cornmeal, the fact that hard field labor would have depleted such rations in a week, and the image of happy, well-fed darkies ever so casually introduced into Mr. Swellfellow's presentation.

I raised my hand and waited for Mr. Swellfellow to call on me. True to his namesake, Mr. Swellfellow noticed my hand and welcomed my question. "Mr. Swellfellow," I began, "I want to go back to an earlier point you made for clarification. You said that the enslaved were given a peck of corn and three pounds of meat and then you said they that they were well fed. But to my thinking, the enslaved must have gone hungry, especially those working in the fields who would have needed more substance than this to sustain them in backbreaking, day-long labor." The smile on Mr. Swellfellow's face dimmed a little even as he formulated an entirely hopeful response. "The slaves were well fed," he insisted. "It was not in the economic interest of the master to starve them and besides, the Collinses were kind and had benevolent relations with their slaves. They weren't the type to make their slaves go hungry."

"Actually," Mr. Swellfellow," I interrupted, "it *was* in the economic interest of slave masters to starve their slaves; this fact is well documented in literature written by fugitive slaves. And on the subject of kindness, the so-called kindness of masters hardly ever, to my

knowledge, interfered with their profit motive. What better way to profit than by giving your slaves minimal nourishment while you expect, in return for investment, maximum labor output?" Only after I stopped speaking did I realize I was shaking internally and had taken an edge to my voice. I became aware of my African American travel companions sitting across the room and the few other white tourists who were part of our morning party. Mr. Swellfellow had flushed and begun to sweat. He had become anxious and nervous. Clearly, his National Parks Service tour guide training had not prepared him to deal in a knowledgeable manner with questions of hunger and starvation on the plantation. Perhaps, too, he felt embarrassed, embarrassed at his immediately defensive posture, embarrassed at his rushing to defend the master, and, finally, embarrassed and angry at my daring to challenge what was clearly a sacred memory: contented, well-fed blacks roaming about the plantation.

Needless to say, this initial interaction with Mr. Swellfellow set the tone for the remainder of the tour. When, during the walking tour, he brought up the subject of enslaved persons stealing meat from the smokehouse, I responded by asking why such *well-fed* persons would have provocation to steal meat in the first place? At one point, thoroughly frustrated with the constant reinforcement of the pastoral and goodly nature of life on Somerset plantation, I said to our tour guide so that everyone could hear, "Mr. Swellfellow, it seems to me that you and the state of North Carolina are invested in an image of the masters as goodly and that you are not willing to entertain perspectives of plantation life that go against this reality." Swellfellow, sweating even more profusely, denied my accusations and did his best to avoid me the remainder of the tour.

"The history of slavery continues to have meaning in the twentieth century—it burdens all of American history and is incorporated into public interpretations of the past," write James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton.<sup>2</sup> We need look only as far as Somerset Place for an example of a historically laden and contested site of slave memory. There, we see the circumstances of slave existence and the meaning of the master's authority and "good will" as fluid, contested categories of experience regulated by the state and a larger master narrative of slave history. Similar issues regarding the meaning and import of slavery have affected

contemporary battlefields and Civil War sites operated by the National Parks Service. As a result of pressure from Civil War heritage interest groups, those who give tours at these sites do not speak of slavery as the major social phenomenon that catalyzed the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> In higher education, another state-regulated realm, the history of slavery continues to shape our lives. A good example of this is Brown University. Brown, like a number of universities on the East Coast, has ties to slavery that trace back to its founder, John Brown. Members of Brown's educational community who have attempted to reconcile the university's historic and economic ties with the institution of slavery have, in the process, encountered staunch resistance from the regents and alumni, among other constituencies.<sup>4</sup> From contemporary debates over national identity to concerns about modern civil rights, the legacy of slavery continues to inform and impact our sense of civic belonging and investment in this experiment called the United States.

Living, as we do, in a society in which many still deny the fundamental tie between the Civil War and slavery helps me better understand, on a systemic level, Mr. Swellfellow's resistance to my insinuations of institutionalized hunger on the Somerset plantation. An admission of institutionalized hunger on the plantation would have required Mr. Swellfellow to alter his notions of the goodly, altruistic master. As well, such an allowance would have required that Mr. Swellfellow consider how sentimental conventions, Christian morals and values, southern state formation and statecraft all informed our discussion of slaves made to hunger on the plantation.

While Mr. Swellfellow had his own geographically bounded (he was from the surrounding area) and personal reasons for denying the existence of slave hunger, my insistence upon the topic arose mostly from the researching for and writing of this book. I had come to know, through my research, that instances of hunger—within such a pristine, well-kept context—were often only indicators of a much larger culture of institutionalized hunger. I had encountered numerous masters like Somerset's Josiah Collins III, who one biographer described as “an autocrat with a will as imperious and a sway as absolute as the Czar himself.”<sup>5</sup> Josiah III, I would find out months after my plantation tour, fit the profile of the cultivated, overlording type of master who used hunger and all manner of social conditioning to wring from enslaved

people maximum labor and to instill in these persons fear and self-denial. Hunger, with persons such as Collins, was often only the tip of the iceberg. So much more than hunger was at stake in my interactions with Mr. Swellfellow: If he and I could not talk about hunger on the plantation, then we would never (as individuals or a nation) be able to talk about other intersecting issues, such as “social consumption,” “ritualized hunger,” or “cannibalistic masters” populating southern plantations such as Somerset Place.<sup>6</sup>

For my part, my encounters at Somerset Place disturbed me and catalyzed in me a state of personal and intellectual reflection. Was the nation, not to mention the state of North Carolina, ready for an open and inquiring discussion into the topics of hunger and human consumption on the plantation? Was I ready to and capable of serving as mediator of this discussion, which clearly had a life beyond the book pages I had labored to fill over the years? In the nineteenth century, none but the most radical abolitionists believed the enslaved person’s claims about consuming masters and their descriptions of a culture of human consumption pervading plantation life. Over a century later, not much had changed. Not only had we collectively forgotten many of the significant details of slavery that continue to impact the present, but we had also willed ourselves to forget the horrific forms that human hunger and the pursuit of power could take.

Despite our will to forget and desire to reconfigure the past, the reality is that institutionalized hunger and practices of human consumption characterized life on many southern plantations. No topic disturbed and mystified nineteenth-century America like the subject of human consumption under slavery. For the most part, whites during the time responded to this topic, as did Mr. Swellfellow, with an air of secrecy and shame. For example, one of the most notorious incidents of literal black consumption from the nineteenth century involved members of the whaling ship *Essex*, which sailed from Nantucket, Massachusetts, in 1838. White Nantucketers still today have little to say about the incident, especially the fact that the first four crew members to be murdered and eaten by whites were black. Nantucket was known in the nineteenth century as a Quaker and abolitionist stronghold, and its residents then and still today find it hard to explain ship captains operating as “slave drivers,” African persons treated in a brutish manner aboard whaling

ships, and, more pointedly, the master/slave ideology informing the consumption of the four black men.<sup>7</sup>

Colonial-era Nantucketers were not alone in their self-preserving silence. Slave-owning whites, for different reasons, covered up the reality of black consumption. Take, for example, the circumstances surrounding the consumption of Nat Turner, the black insurrectionist. Black members of the Southampton, Virginia, community left oral records of whites who tried to coerce them into consuming Nat Turner's boiled-down flesh and entrails. Black persons also implied that nineteenth-century whites might have consumed the revolutionary as a medicinal substance. Whites from the time period dismissed such ideas as "folk belief" arising from the backward and infantile culture of "older darkies."<sup>8</sup> To add to this, scholars of Turner's experience have, on the whole, denied, infantilized, or dismissed the observations of black persons.<sup>9</sup>

These scholars, it seems, are not aware of those aspects of U.S. plantation culture that were based in parasitism and a dynamic of human consumption. In *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Orlando Patterson describes slavery as a parasitic institution that white masters strove to conceal in ideology and act. According to Patterson, "the slaveholder," in order to maintain an image of himself as civilized and free of parasitic appetites, "camouflaged his dependence, his parasitism, by various ideological strategies. Paradoxically, he defined the slave as dependent. This is consistent with the human technique of camouflaging a relation by defining it as the opposite of what it really is."<sup>10</sup> *Parasite* is the perfect concept for my purposes, as it implies a range of consumptive acts, some resulting in immediate death but most involving the passage of time and the incremental feeding upon the human host. Most of my examples of consumption, on and off the plantation, range from the literal murder and eating of black persons to what we might think of as metaphoric acts. I refer to these metaphoric acts—which encompass starving, flesh-seasoning rituals, and sexual modes of consumption—variously as consumption, human consumption, metaphoric consumption, instances of social consumption, and even cannibalism. I will explain the historical and contemporary significance of such terms as "cannibal" later in the introduction, but I wanted to acknowledge here that I do use a range of terms to describe instances of consumption.

My cluster of terms challenges the layers of stereotype and imprecise language that have historically characterized the topic of the consumption of slaves. As a common strategy, masters often hid their appetites and hungers in stereotypes and ideologies that attributed these characteristics to the slaves. Patterson describes a reality wherein the master deflected his appetites and hungers onto myths of the chattel slave as dependent, childlike, and somehow ennobled by the master's consumptive needs. In dismissing the bonded person's accusations of consumption as infantile rants, which I point out using Turner's example, scholars have reinforced this slave-owning, ruling-class mentality and have helped to maintain a general code of silence regarding the master's appetites and sycophantic needs.

This pattern of silencing has resulted in the dismissal of the reality of those enslaved persons who frequently described slavery as an outgrowth of the master's homoerotic and consumptive appetites. Within U.S. slavery, black men and women consistently described incidents of human consumption that occurred on literal, metaphoric, and institutional levels of social interaction. These incidents often had a homoerotic or sexual charge to them. John S. Jacobs, for example, referred to his former masters as "human fleshmongers" possessed of an unnatural hunger for human flesh and soul. Naked bodies depicted on the auction block, instances of rape, and sexualized torture coincide with the hunger and satiation described by Jacobs.<sup>11</sup> For Solomon Northup, the "gastronomical enjoyments" and excesses of whites included the sexualized treatment of men such as himself at the hands of slave catchers, overseers, and masters.<sup>12</sup> Harriet Jacobs recorded in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* how white mistresses acted out hungers for and erotic desires for black women in intimate spaces on the plantation.<sup>13</sup> Issues of sexual dominance and white male fixations on black male virility informed the consumption of Nat Turner.

Acknowledging how scholars of U.S. and transatlantic slavery have largely ignored and dismissed accusations of the cannibalizing of black Americans, I take the enslaved person's claims of human consumption seriously, and I attempt throughout this project to draw attention to how blacks experienced their consumption as a fundamentally erotic, and more specifically homoerotic, occurrence. Given the taboo nature of homoeroticism in the nineteenth century, black people rarely wrote

about same-sex experiences or encounters with whites. In the context of consumption, though, this topic was unavoidable. For blacks could not identify, name in language and concept, negotiate, or resist the culture of human consumption they saw pervading plantation life without unearthing the erotic implications of their consumption and, even more, constructing a sexual politics that included homoeroticism. Amazingly, nineteenth-century black Americans, without conscious forethought, created an entirely new language and symbolic system to describe not just their consumption but also the deeper homoerotic nuances of black life under slavery. Linking this personal reality to the larger national, political terrain, they developed strategies of resistance, a politics of moral accountability, and a social vision of human consumption that implicated the most cherished values and tenets of the republic.

When black Americans described instances of the eating, cooking, and consumption of flesh in slave narratives, newspaper articles, speeches, testimonials, sermons, and autobiographies, they not only questioned the national body politic but also tried to understand why and how they had become so delectable, so erotically appetizing, to a nation and white populace that, at least rhetorically, denied and despised their humanity. A New Orleans physician, Samuel A. Cartwright, perfectly captured this denial of and despising of the Negro in his medical writings. Cartwright's popular views depicted the Negro as childlike, lacking civilization, and therefore a completely undesirable species. On the topic of Negro infantile behavior, he writes: "Negroes, moreover, resemble children in the activity of the liver and in their strong assimilating powers, and in the predominance of the other systems over the sanguineous."<sup>14</sup> Comparing the Negro's skin to that of an animal hide, he describes how his "skin is very thick" and how he has a membrane called "plica lunaris, like that which is observed in apes." He reserves his most sweeping comments for so-called African biological and racial inferiority, which in his opinion "has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves."<sup>15</sup> In reality, of course, enslaved black persons took care of whites, who often acted as sycophantic children in their demands, hungers, and insatiable needs. Under this cloud of delusion, wherein whites depicted the Negro as the helpless adult-infant that they themselves embodied, white hungers for and desires for

the Negro could flourish. On the level of acquired taste for the Negro, Cartwright's pseudo-medical science portrays how myths of the Negro child, of the exoticized and animal-like African, stoked white appetites and made the Negro into a delectable, desirous object.

Such references to black people as animal-like, infantile, and disfigured proliferate in pro-slavery rhetoric. They are so common that we do not naturally think of them as indexes of desire—of white people's fixations upon and obsessions with black bodies and sex. Even more, we are not in the habit of reading homoeroticism into comments made by persons such as Cartwright. Within the culture of consumption, there existed numerous examples of homoerotic affection between black and white men, sexualized violence, and incest bonds, among other phenomena. Yet such affections were often veiled or hidden within rhetorics of objectification and abjection. For white men, sex with and sexual attraction to black men was a natural by-product of their physical, emotional, and spiritual hunger for the same.

For black men, on the other hand, homoeroticism was a means of resisting, accommodating, and transforming the discourse of black consumption. For example, in the process of speaking about their sexual consumption, black men crossed gender boundaries, adopted the genders and identities of black and white women, and imagined themselves "giving birth" to new archetypes of the nation. Within black nationalist movements, dating from slavery to the 1960s, black men linked effeminacy and homosexuality with the white desire to culturally and spiritually consume black men. Even black women, in the late twentieth century, linked their discussions of mother hunger and self-consumption during slavery with violent acts of homoeroticism—references to male rape and oral violation. While the culture of U.S. consumption frames my narrative, this is a book as much about homoeroticism as it is about flesh consumption. Through multiple desires, African American men and women successfully resisted their consumption and constructed a racial politics based in the hunger and desire to recover self and collective.

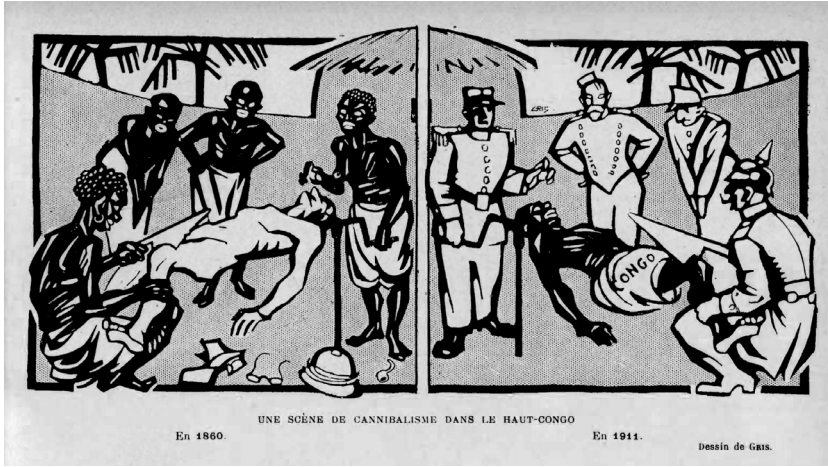
### Transatlantic Origins of Black Consumption

The origins of this U.S. culture of consumption trace back to the first contact between European colonizers and coastal Africans. By the

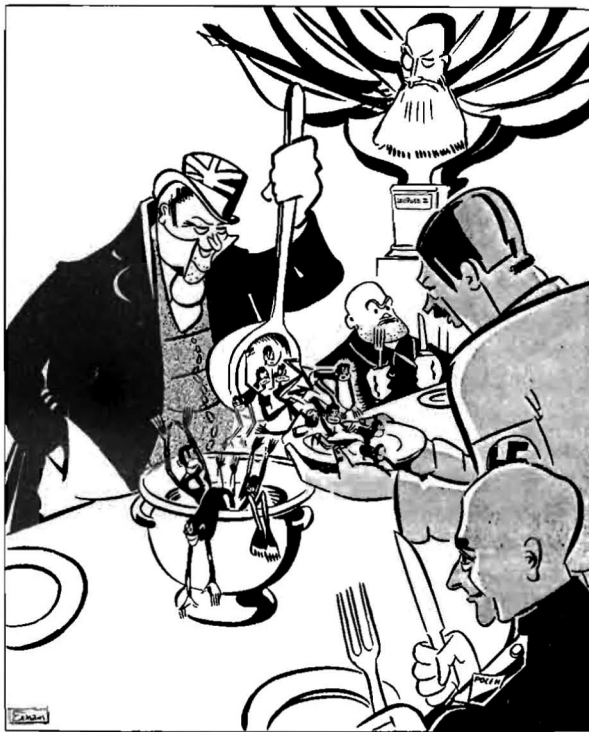
early twentieth century, even Europeans admitted to and documented a connection between European global expansion and a sexual/libidinal appetite for African flesh. A cartoon published in the French journal *Le Rire* in 1911 demonstrates how European hungers for conquest sometimes coincided with a homosexual hunger for African flesh. In the foreground of the cartoon, a porter, soldier, and general gather around a Bakongo man stabbed into a skewer. The Bakongo man spins around and awaits the slice of the butcher knife resting at his knees. A 1937 cartoon published in the Belgium magazine *Hooger Leven* that also depicted Europeans' cannibalism had a caption that perfectly captured the irony of an African turning on a skewer: "Any takers for Negro Soup?" Such cartoons depict a different species of cannibal and an altogether different master narrative of cannibalism informing European expansion into Africa.<sup>16</sup> The word "Congo" is tattooed on the African man's loincloth, establishing a connection between the carving up of Africa by numerous European nations and the carving up of the African male body.

The homoerotic bonds shared among the white men gathered around the African man highlight the promise of "Negro Soup," with the Bakongo (Congo) man serving as a symbol of their common purpose and desire. The African body is spread-eagled before this tableau of male bonding. The general and his captain of arms (who turns the skewer) look across the black man's body into one another's eyes. The other men, bent over the half-naked body, appear to be captivated by their vulnerable prey turning delectably on the skewer. One soldier has his hand on his hips; the other has his palms pressed together and tucked tightly into his groin. The knife in the general's hand resembles a phallus—thick on the bottom and narrower at the tip. With this "phallus" in one hand, the general squats between the African man's legs, holding his calves apart. The Bakongo man is positioned in a manner that provides for easy anal access—the missionary position. In the Belgian cartoon, sexual/erotic tastes are indistinguishable from the palate—the knife and the phallus are interchangeable signifiers.

This cartoon depicts a widespread belief in in Western and Central Africa that Europeans were cannibals. Groups such as the Igbo, Bakongo, Fanti, and Guinea all thought of European interlopers as cannibals.<sup>17</sup> A century earlier, for example, Ali Eisami, of the Bornu people



A cartoon published in the French journal, *Le Rire*, in 1911.



„Zijn er nog liefhebbers voor negersoep?...”

Marcel Eemans, “Zijn er nog liefhebbers voor negersoep?” © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SABAM, Belgium.

in Nigeria, described his encounter with a “European cannibal” in a manner laden with terror and homoeroticism. Eisami is transported as a slave throughout many western African regions; slave traders finally bring him and a group of kinsmen to the home of a white minister in Bathurst in 1818. The minister comes out of his home and surveys all of the slaves. He takes a marked interest in Eisami, who recalls that the man “took hold of my hand, and drew me into his house.”<sup>18</sup> According to Eisami and the other Africans assembled, the white man strongly desires him, takes a delectable interest in this Bornu man. The terrors and observations of the other enslaved African persons erupt into whispered rumor: “The White man has taken Ali, and put him into the house, in order to slaughter him.” Inside the house, Ali imagines his seducer wielding a phallic object, a long knife: “If this white man takes a knife,” he thinks to himself, “and I see it in his hand, I will hold it.”<sup>19</sup> The threat of sexual domination and dismemberment hovers at the edges of Eisami’s imagination. The Africans translate white male phallic power over the effeminized African subject into an erotics of appetite and eating.

The slave trade ferried this culture of homoeroticism and consumption aboard slave ships across the Atlantic, where it took root and assumed a number of new forms in the context of chattel slavery. For example, within plantation culture, this culture of consumption took the form of whites literally flaying and smoking African American flesh and overt references in slave narratives to masters literally and metaphorically consuming their slaves. For the slave, this culture of consumption was a fact of daily life, as was amply documented in slave narratives, Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews of ex-slaves, letters, political treatises, and autobiographies from the antebellum period.

The Belgian cartoon, Ali Eisami, and the literal and metaphorical consumption documented in slave narratives, letters, WPA interviews, and autobiographies are each examples of a horrific dimension of African American experience that is difficult, if not almost impossible, to put into language. Toni Morrison referred to this region of African American experience as the unspeakable. In her writing about nineteenth-century literature and slave culture, she makes subtle references to a white culture of consumption. In an example from *Playing in*

*the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison describes whites and, in particular, a white slave mistress as “gathering identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others.”<sup>20</sup> Morrison describes a social and emotional form of cannibalism or parasitism taking place in the context of plantation culture. This subject of cannibalism so disturbed the white, educated female audience of Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative that she moved all references to flesh-cooking, flesh-carving, and eating in her slave narrative to one chapter that readers could conveniently skip.<sup>21</sup> Many morally conscious whites registered the disturbing implications of cannibalism and sought to address its national implications. For example, in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick, or the Whale* (1851), which the author based upon incidents of consumption of black males at sea, Ishmael draws a parallel between his cannibal shipmate and George Washington, the first president of the United States: “Queequeg,” says Ishmael about his companion, “was George Washington cannibalistically developed.”<sup>22</sup> Is it possible that our beloved, slave-owning first president and founding father, George Washington, embodied cannibalistic hungers? This question, posed through a fictional character, struck at the heart of American founding mythologies, national issues of hunger and taste, genteel posturing, and ideas of a pure, white paternity.

For African Americans, this question was much more personal and poignant. Most slave narratives contained overt or covert references to flesh-eating. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Frederick Douglass described the entire institution of slavery as a towering, cannibal being: “There stood slavery . . . glaring frightfully upon us—its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh.”<sup>23</sup> Most of what Douglass knew and felt, though, about this institutionalized cannibalism remains unspeakable and undocumented: “I wish,” he says, “I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.”<sup>24</sup>

In part the subject of cannibalism has been unspeakable for black men because of the homoerotic implications of such experiences. Kara Walker, commenting upon European and white cannibalism, has observed that “there is a little bit of masochism . . . so much love and hate involved in eating something; to kill something and eat it. It’s very sexual, very sensual.”<sup>25</sup> The consumption of black flesh often

took place in the context of incestuous plantation dynamics. A master would often choose “a favorite” male slave as the object of his cultivated delight. Black men in such contexts had to negotiate feelings of affection, hatred, shame, sexual degradation, and arousal toward white men. Cannibalism was unspeakable, but cannibalism coupled with the subject of homoeroticism went against conventional ideas of black men as stoic, as embodiments of the valiant struggle of will and mind over body, as agents of reason and political strategy. To speak about “the feelings” associated with his own flesh consumption would have aligned Douglass too deeply with the unspeakable knowledge of the body as sexual and sensual object, potentially undermining the literary and literate authority we have come to associate with his masculinity.

Long before the poignant questions of the color line and the Negro problem registered in the black imagination, it seems that a more pressing problematic confronted the black citizen. In the form of a question, it might have registered as: “How does it feel to be an edible, consumed object?” In other words, how does it feel to be an energy source and foodstuff, to be consumed on the levels of body, sex, psyche, and soul? Answers to such questions had personal and national implications, as the personal plight of the Negro formed part of a larger homoerotic master narrative of colonial conquest and male desire. For the Negro as well as the white person, such questions necessitated a reconsideration of basic American values, such as gentility and social etiquette, colonial drive and hunger, and cherished racial categorizations.

### Linking Homoeroticism to Cannibalism

My study emphasizes homoeroticism over homosexuality. By definition, homoeroticism implies same-sex arousal and draws attention to those political, social, and libidinal forces that shape desire and, ultimately, the homosexual act.<sup>26</sup> The homosexual components of the feasting—partaking of the boiling pot of Negro soup—are less important to me than the racial assumptions, political aspirations, gender codes, philosophical frameworks, and cosmologies that dictated the feelings of arousal on the part of European and white Americans toward black males and hunger for black male flesh. For example, the larger discussion of Negro effeminacy, or the idea of the Negro as the “lady of the

racess,”<sup>27</sup> shapes European male desire in the Belgian cartoon; it sets the stage for homosexual consumption and makes possible what Eve Sedgwick refers to as homosocial bonding. Sedgwick has written about Victorian-era homosocial desire as operating through triangulation, operating through “its relation to women and the gender system as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> Her referent for gender is the female body. However, in the cartoons discussed above, the African man functions as the feminized figure; through him, the general, the soldiers, the porters, and the field attendants bond and share in homoerotic desire. The final outcome of the Negro Soup scene is a type of homosexual consumption. However, long before we get to the homosexual act, the machinery of homoeroticism clicks into play, shaping and dictating the meaning and significance of the homosexual act.

David Halperin has cautioned against easy confluences of modern conceptions of sexual subjectivity with those that figured in the emotional lives of premodern subjects.<sup>29</sup> His concerns reflect the general understanding within queer theory of homosexuality as a constructed, historical phenomenon. Medical and psychological discourses at the turn of the twentieth century normalized and pathologized the homosexual personality type. The word “homosexual” was, in turn, reclaimed by same-sex-identified activists, intellectuals, and cultural workers in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the word “homosexual” had no currency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; neither, for that matter, did the word “homoeroticism.” Taking to heart the importance and necessity of historical specificity, I do not attempt to homoeroticize black experience in the nineteenth century. That is, I do not attempt to graft an arbitrary language and sexual modality onto the time period. The word “homoeroticism” in my study serves as a referent for a large set of same-sex desires and intimacies that include romantic friendship between men, same-sex incest in the context of plantation patriarchy, the romanticization of and exoticization of whiteness, and literal and metaphoric cannibalism, among other things. All of these terms I identify and extrapolate from their appropriate historical and cultural contexts. Often, though, when a blanket term is called for, I use the word “homoeroticism” to refer to any combination of these subcategories of experience.

By coupling homoeroticism with cannibalism, I have sought to ground the meaning of the word “cannibalism” in the African/

European encounter and in the Middle Passage (the originary site of black erotic/sexual encounter). Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* resuscitates the Atlantic as a living symbolic and cultural entity for black people of the African diaspora. Gilroy effectively recasts the Atlantic as a twentieth-century migratory structure (through the image of ships) composed of triangular routes along which black people in South Africa, England, and the Americas have ferried philosophical, political, and musical materials. Like Gilroy, I also appeal to the African diaspora as a site of black cultural formation and transmission. However, for me the organizing metaphor is not the ship but the captured bodies brought aboard slave ships and the ways those bodies, specifically male bodies, underwent processes of sexual and social cannibalization.

Traditionally, historical considerations of cannibalism in the context of European exploration and occupation of foreign lands focus on European ideas of natives (American and African) as cannibals. Take the 1503 decree of Queen Isabella of Spain that dictated that "no Indians under her dominion were to be hurt or captured."<sup>30</sup> However, "a certain people called 'cannibals' might be fairly fought and, if captured, enslaved, 'as punishment for crimes committed against my subjects.'"<sup>31</sup> This early distinction between "Indians" and "cannibals" would eventually give way to the thought that all Indians and Indian ways were heathen or subject to cannibalistic practices. Similarly, Europeans, generally speaking, believed diverse African groups, from one end of the continent to the other, a cannibalistic race.<sup>32</sup> Nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans promulgated the idea of the heathen African, which also implied cannibalism. Speaking of the Christian reformation of the African cannibal, Rev. Henry Ward Beecher defined heathenism in 1850 as derived "from idolatry, from fornication and incest, from infanticide and cannibalism."<sup>33</sup>

Today, a growing body of cannibalism scholarship has developed that spans the disciplines of literature, anthropology, history, philosophy, political economy, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. In fact, cannibalism is said by many scholars "to be one the most important topics in cultural criticism today."<sup>34</sup> An exciting outcome of this emerging corpus of cannibalism scholarship is that it takes us beyond the Eurocentric master narrative of cannibalism into a complex arena

that includes, for example, recent sophisticated work on African Mane and Azande customs and practices of cannibalism.<sup>35</sup> We now have a deeper understanding of the human sacrifice and consumption rituals of Aztec and other Meso-American people.<sup>36</sup> We also now have studies that excavate and analyze European legacies of religious, medicinal, and survival cannibalism and still other studies that locate the cannibalistic urge within the European Enlightenment itself—within the workings of the modern and postmodern European and American state.<sup>37</sup>

The postcolonial branch of contemporary cannibalism studies has been most helpful to my work. This branch has, more than any other, undertaken to unearth and analyze the cannibalism discourses that arose from colonial contact between Europeans and Africans and Native Americans. As I emphasized earlier, Europeans were not the only ones who understood the colonial encounter in terms of cannibalism. On both sides of the Atlantic, in Africa and the Americas, black and African people in the nineteenth century documented this culture in slave and travel narratives, political philosophy and treatises, newspaper articles, and sermons, among other types of documentation. For example, the famous 1839 slave insurrection aboard the ship *Amistad* occurred because the Mende revolt leader, Sengbe Pieh, and those who followed him feared that Spanish slavers intended to eat them.<sup>38</sup>

As I have demonstrated, the African belief that Europeans were cannibals was not uncommon. Importantly, such beliefs represented the captured African's first articulations of an intersection between themselves (their bodies, erotic life force, labor capacity, and exoticization) and the European's hunger for new land, physical and psychic contact with foreign others, and a perfect state of global dominion. The logic and incisiveness of those first African critiques of European cannibalism have accrued power and congealed into a number of contemporary African cannibal discourses. For example, in contemporary Sierra Leone, the land of those original Mende aboard the *Amistad*, cannibalism serves as a "politically charged hidden transcript" intended "to expose, discredit, and disrupt the imbricated relations of power at work in Sierra Leone during the late 1980s just prior to its descent into civil war."<sup>39</sup> Today, "in the context of postcolonial African political struggles, the language of inequality continues to revolve around the metaphors of eating and, by extension, cannibalistic consumption. The trope of

cannibalism as a symbol for the economic exploitation, material accumulation, and violent coercion carried out by postcolonial elites has, in fact, come to dominate African political discourse.”<sup>40</sup>

Because the examples of cannibalism that I use in the book range from figurative tropes to literal flesh eating to rituals of flesh taking and harvesting, I employ a cluster of terms that delineate the range of applications and cannibalism contexts that my study encompasses. The list includes the words “consume,” “consumption,” “social consumption,” “appetite,” “taste,” “delectable,” “delectability,” “hunger,” “ingestion,” and “auto-cannibalism.” I use the words “cannibalism” and “consumption” interchangeably: The phrase “a culture of consumption” might elsewhere appear as “a cannibal culture.” I frequently use “consumption” as a modifier, as in “consumption rituals” and “consumption practices.” I think that my preference for the word “consumption” has something to do with the word’s rootedness in modern notions of market economies, commodities, consumer appetite, and so forth. While my usage is always particular and usually grounded in human-to-human exchanges, I always have in mind the affluent, ruling-class eighteenth- and nineteenth-century economies that make possible the consumption of the slave along with other traded commodities, such as liquors, spices, and foodstuffs from foreign lands.<sup>41</sup>

I use the words “taste,” “appetite,” and “delectable” mostly to refer to how the desire for the African slave or American black person had epicurean implications. This desire was less about literal consumption and more about the cultivated taste the white person developed for the African. Whites often satiated this taste and appetite through acts of violence, sexual exploitation, imagined ingestion of the black, or through staged rituals designed to incrementally harvest black spirit and soul. The delectability of the black person was of course a factor in literal flesh consumption, but my main point, which I explain at length in chapter 1, is that literal cannibalism always occurred within cultural, ideological contexts. The cultural contexts to which I frequently refer—the plantation, the slave ship, the general schooner, the African coastal town—were highly eroticized situations and locales. The words “delectable,” “taste,” and “appetite” bring together homoeroticism in these contexts with overlapping occurrences of consumption.

My use of the word “hunger” relates to the idea of auto-cannibalism. Auto-cannibalism, or self-consumption, involves people consuming

themselves voluntarily or through external coercion. In many instances, the cultivation of literal and emotional hunger in the slave produced the opposite effect. The hunger for familial connection, for self and safety, and the ability to resist literal and spiritual consumption led to just that, resistance and self-reclamation in the slave. In the second part of the book, chapters 5 and 6, this idea of hunger takes prominence, as I delineate the numerous ways the slave resisted cannibalization and struggled mightily against the institutionalized urge for self-consumption.

The emphasis upon the economic and metastructural in contemporary cannibalism discourse, especially within the postcolonial branch, has tended to obscure the underlying erotic implications of cannibalism between Europeans and Africans. This body of belief and political philosophy tends to evade or stop short of addressing issues of sexuality, sexual power, desire, and same-sex eroticism. I foreground same-sex eroticism because it brings the focus to issues of desire, power, and gender formation and helps me establish cannibalism as an originary framework for the emergence of homoeroticism out of the transatlantic slave trade and plantation culture. At the juncture where homoeroticism and cannibalism intersected, a new type of cannibalism system—beliefs and practices—emerged. On the continent of Africa, encounters with white “Christian minister cannibals” expanded traditional western and central African cannibal beliefs to include the Church, mercantilism, and European imperialism as institutionalized venues of cannibalism and resource consumption. In the U.S. South, the complexity and newness of this cannibal system registered in legal and religious discussion about “Christian cannibalism” and an existent “cannibal jurisdiction” within southern legislative and geographic territories.

### Slavery as History and Memory

Much of contemporary scholarship on the African diaspora or the black Atlantic has tended to follow Gilroy’s path, emphasizing routes of transmission instead of the roots of origins and cultural legacies. An unfortunate result of this approach to the black Atlantic is that, as Houston Baker Jr. notes, much of the “multilocal history” of specific diasporic communities gets erased or overlooked. In particular, Baker takes issue with Gilroy’s mishandling of the history and legacy of

slavery and bondage: “*The Black Atlantic* remains surprisingly abstract and indeterminate with respect to the very ‘chronotype’ the book claims as its analytical ‘organizing symbol’—namely ‘ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean.’”<sup>42</sup> In fact, “after early mention, *ships* virtually disappear from Gilroy’s work. They disappear as chronotypes, material vessels ‘transplanting’ black populations, dread transports of ‘conquered’ peoples to penal colonies of the Americas. *Ships*—as disciplinary and carceral ‘holds’ on the shackled black body—receive no extensive treatment in *The Black Atlantic*.”<sup>43</sup>

As Baker does in *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/ Re-Reading Booker T.*, I also aim to “bring together ships and plantations.”<sup>44</sup> For this issue of roots of cultural transmission is not simply a matter of revising or changing the master narrative from Eurocentric to African origins of black American culture. Rather, at stake in this debate over cultural origins is a deeper understanding of the ways in which, for example, the penal politics of slavery and chattel bondage speak to current political phenomena, such as the incarceration of black people and black men in particular; economic issues of racial reparations and the larger, systemic sedimentation of racial inequality; and issues of trauma and post-traumatic stress that affect the ideological and material aspects of black uplift politics and communities. To give a more concrete example of the contemporary implications of the cultural origins debate, in chapter 5 I examine how William Styron’s historical novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* occasioned the first-ever public debate on the subject of homosexuality in the context of slavery. This national debate, occurring in the 1960s, demonstrated how, for black people, the memory of slavery and questions of cultural origins attached to the slave ship had profound political implications rooted in the history and memory of slavery.

My transhistorical approach to slavery is informed, in part, by contemporary calls in African American cultural studies for the excavation of documented material on the subject of homoeroticism during slavery. Many black gay scholars in the 1990s saw their contemporary dislocation from black communities and political infrastructures as linked to a larger history of dislocation and silencing dating back, at least, to slavery. Charles I. Nero, for example, felt that 1980s Afrocentrists, Black Arts spokespersons, and Black Power advocates might have changed

their ideas about black gays as threats to and pariahs within black families had they known that homoeroticism existed during slavery. Referencing a few antebellum court cases in which black men were persecuted for sodomy offenses, Nero wrote: "Although the evidence for homosexual practices among black male slaves is small, it does suggest that we do not exclude homoeroticism from life on the plantation."<sup>45</sup> Beyond these instances of criminalization, Nero concludes that additional evidence of homosexuality excavated from "diaries, letters, and narratives" would go a long way toward helping us to "revise our models of the black family and of homosexuality as alien to black culture."<sup>46</sup>

Intuitively, black gay men understood the issue of homosexuality during slavery as a complex phenomenon shaped by a number of factors, including the nation's unresolved relationship to the legacy of slavery, black liberatory ideology dating back to slavery, and, most importantly, the maintenance of traditional notions of family and community that originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The legacy and memory of slavery had a powerful effect that left many black gay men feeling isolated from and rendered invisible within black communities. Joseph Beam said it first and best: "I cannot go home as who I am. . . . When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. . . . I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous."<sup>47</sup> Beam's comments echo back through time to the threatening relationship between the homosexual Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights movement, and, before Rustin, to the homosexual threat that Augustus Dill represented to *The Crisis* magazine and W. E. B. Du Bois. Both Rustin and Dill experienced scandalous public sex incidents in the 1950s and 1920s, respectively, that involved arrests and, in Rustin's case, widely circulated media attention. Both men, loyal and dedicated racial liberation advocates, were asked by key black figures to remove themselves from organizing centers of the Civil Rights and Reconstruction movements. As Philip Brian Harper has noted, the black homosexual functioned in the twentieth century as an index for black masculine anxieties. These ranged from the very personal and painful anxieties of lynching, castration, and the denial of civil rights to a larger set of anxieties rooted in historical erasure and cultural genocide.<sup>48</sup>

Black gays in the late twentieth century found themselves in a double bind of history and memory, which had an unfortunate result: Black people equated their sexual identities with homosexual violation dating back to slavery. In response to this dynamic, such black gay scholars as Robert F. Reid-Phar, Darieck Scott, Nero, Marlon Ross, Charles Clifton, Dwight A. McBride, Harper, Lindon Barrett, and Ron Simmons, among others, took this opportunity to historicize their sexual identities and subject positions and to call attention to the ways in which black people, at least since the Reconstruction era, have conflated the legacy of homosexuality during slavery with a twentieth-century notion of the black faggot, or “Negro homosexual.”<sup>49</sup> For example, Eldridge Cleaver associated anal sex between a white man and black man with a racial death wish extending back to slavery and with miscegenation. Cleaver conflated his contemporary understanding of the homosexual person with the particular and different ways in which homosexuality was thought of and configured in the context of slavery. Working with Cleaver’s idea of the “Negro homosexual,” Reid-Pharr asserts, in *Black Gay Man*, that “to be fucked in the ass by the white man is not simply to be overcome by white culture, white intellect, white notions of superiority.”<sup>50</sup> Contradicting Cleaver, Reid-Pharr suggests that the act of anal penetration, at least in the realm of memory, “opens up space for the reconstruction of the black imaginary such that the most sacrosanct of black ‘truths’ might be transgressed.”<sup>51</sup> Truly, the inability to creatively imagine homosexuality during slavery reflected a fundamental fear within the black collective of moving outside of the normative categories of masculinity, reproduction, pleasure, and family.

Elaborating on this point, Reid-Pharr notes that black people are most accustomed to thinking of black female violation during slavery because this theme “resonates with a long history of Black American literature and lore in which the licentious white man acts as the absolute spoiler of black desire.”<sup>52</sup> Reid-Pharr’s assertions are borne out in the heartrending depictions in black men’s slave narratives and autobiographies of black mothers, daughters, and wives raped by white men or the whole lynching and raping dynamic wherein black men are the historical objects of lynching and castration and black women serve as the historical objects of rape. “The image of the white (Southerner) fucking the black man, however, throws all this into confusion,” Reid-Pharr

contends.<sup>53</sup> It did not occur to Cleaver or to many of his compatriots in the 1960s that a sexually receptive black man during slavery might have absolutely nothing to do, historically speaking, with a self-declared, cosmopolitan homosexual man living in the 1960s or 1990s.

In the twentieth century, our most prevalent examples of same-sex contact during slavery have tended to focus on anal rape and other types of sexual abuse, a fact that underscores this issue of memory or, more specifically, the failure and inability to imagine homosexuality in complicated ways during slavery. This was the problem that Nero had with Morrison's depiction of black men preferring sex with animals and performing forced fellatio on white prison guards in *Beloved*.<sup>54</sup> Deborah McDowell suggests that in order to see black masculinity during slavery in a more complicated frame we may have to revise our prevailing genealogy—our way of locating black male heroicism and virility at the center of black uplift and liberation in the nineteenth century. Citing Douglass's slave narratives, McDowell focuses on his omission of his matrilineal legacy, suggesting that his gender, sex, and uplift politics derive from the female body—black female subjugation, mother hunger and loss, rape and sexual violation—as opposed to the genealogy of white male dominance and authority that Douglass foregrounds.<sup>55</sup> A black feminist, E. Frances White, has admitted that for her and many others the issue of homosexuality during slavery brings to the surface ambivalent feelings. Nevertheless, she encourages scholars of the African American experience to explore “the implications of homosexual rape and its relationship to heterosexual rape.” Furthermore, she advocates that we inquire “with Morrison-like curiosity . . . why historians have presented the African American past as if the only sexual concerns that black men had during slavery were castration and whether they could protect (and, for some, control) black women's bodies.”<sup>56</sup> Baker enacted just such a revision when he asserted, in *Turning South Again*, that “there existed a deeply homoerotic bond between Booker T. Washington and *all* white men—but in particular and most expressly between the Wizard of Tuskegee and General Armstrong.”<sup>57</sup> Baker's comments, while speculative and cautious in his text, reflect a gradual turning within African Americanist scholarship toward the erotic and interior lives of black men during slavery.

All told, we have at the end of the twentieth century a collective call and move to excavate homoerotic materials and theoretical frameworks

as a means of redefining and better understanding African American and larger American experience. *The Delectable Negro* responds to this collective call for a deeper, more useful understanding of homosexuality in the context of slavery by focusing on the nineteenth century as a moment in which black masculinity, racial identity, homoeroticism, and a distinctive American appetite for black male flesh and soul congealed. I concur with Maurice O. Wallace that still today too few critics and historians have pursued the problems and paradoxes inherent in black male enslavement.<sup>58</sup> Wallace's excellent and wide ranging study, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995*, foregrounds sexuality, homosocial behavior, and black masculine anxiety as crucial social and theoretical frames for black masculine studies, focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His approach to the study of black masculinity marks a general shift echoed in more recent works that deal explicitly and implicitly with black masculinity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among them, *Turning South Again: Rethinking Modernism/Re-thinking Booker T.* (Baker); *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (Ross); *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (McBride); *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (Harper); and *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American* (Reid-Pharr).

No study on black masculinity in the nineteenth century focuses on homoeroticism. This has partly to do with issues of material evidence that have been duly noted by scholars of the African American experience. Many have argued that there simply are not enough primary materials available to conduct such a study. Contrary, though, to these claims of absence, I argue that homoeroticism *did* exist among nineteenth-century black peoples, chattel or free, literate or nonliterate, though a number of factors have prevented us from being able to discern and engage with the subject of homoeroticism as it existed then. Most importantly, our contemporary framing of homosexuality has obscured our vision. In addition, the absence of an appropriate linguistic apparatus, the dearth of historical documentation, and the lack of theoretical models with which to excavate homoeroticism from extant historical documents have all contributed to a lack of substantive information on the subject of homoeroticism.

The extant materials on homoeroticism that I work with in this study include slave narratives, Works Progress Administration interviews of ex-slaves, advertisements for runaway slaves, neo-slave narratives, journals, diaries, novels, poetry, and historical fiction. Most of the materials that I work with are staples of African American literature and culture, such as the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. Other materials, such as James L. Smith's slave narrative, advertisements for runaway slaves, and numerous articles from black newspapers published in the nineteenth century are additions to the archive. In this way, I have attempted to respond to the call for the excavation of materials on the subject of homoeroticism during slavery.

The chapters of the book conform to my theoretical framing of homoeroticism in the context of cannibal culture and as a derivative of African homosexual practices reconstituted in the Americas. Chapter 1, "Cannibalism in Transatlantic Context," opens with an examination of Olaudah Equiano's well-known slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Equiano's narrative brings together the themes of homoeroticism and cannibalism. It gives ample examples of Europeans' and West Africans' beliefs about cannibalism in the context of young Equiano's romantic, chivalric relationship (formed aboard a slave ship) with a young white American lad from the slave-owning South. Scholars have tended to dismiss the depictions of cannibalism in the narrative. I treat them seriously and use them to establish an interconnection between cannibalism and chattel homoeroticism and to establish a transatlantic context for incidents of cannibalism and homoerotic interactions in U.S. plantation culture that I discuss in the second chapter.

In chapter 2: "Sex, Honor, and Human Consumption," I examine literal and symbolic examples of human consumption in the antebellum United States. I begin with a discussion of the above-mentioned *Essex* affair, which involved the consumption of four black men in the nineteenth century. Isolating issues of male secrecy, shame, and honor inherent in the *Essex* affair, I move to a broader discussion of the same issues in the slave narratives of black men who documented their social consumption. Finally, in the context of black male lives and voices, I look at the widespread nineteenth-century concern over whether the United States was becoming a cannibal nation. This debate, which

occurred among the clergy, congressmen, judges, and artists, among others, centered upon slavery as an essentially consumptive institution.

The third chapter, “A Tale of Hunger Retold: Ravishment and Hunger in F. Douglass’s Life and Writing,” focuses on Frederick Douglass’s depiction of human consumption as a phenomenon that ate away at the psyche and soul. None was more articulate than Douglass about how these dimensions of the consumption of slaves eroded one’s ability to resist and strategize against slavery. His observations in this chapter provide a blueprint for how the slave struggled in mind, emotions, and spirit not only against social consumption but also against endemic mechanisms of starvation and hunger designed to break the enslaved person. Douglass’s own hunger for self, familial and ancestral bonds, and civil status manifested as complex erotic ties to white men and cross-gender behavior. Douglass’s gender-variant and homoerotic experiences provide an opportunity to think anew about nineteenth-century models of black masculinity as gender variant and tied to emotional/erotic urges.

The focus of chapter 4, “Incest and Human Consumption,” is Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life a Slave Girl*. Jacobs’s narrative depicts some of the more graphic scenes of human consumption ever portrayed in a U.S. slave narrative. She depicts masters, within the domestic realm, as epicures of black flesh, sex, terror, and institutionalized hunger and starvation. Focusing on Luke (a black man raped by his master) and Jacobs herself, I elucidate the intersections between incestuous plantation dynamics and the culture of human consumption. Both Luke and Jacobs are infantilized and form part of a genealogy of human consumption that, for the master and mistress, extends back to childhood and learned, sycophantic relationships with mammy figures, black uncle figures, and black playmates.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at the topic of human consumption from more contemporary perspectives. Chapter 5, “Eating Nat Turner,” focuses on William Styron’s novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). This novel, along with *Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), the edited black response to the novel, marked the first time that the subject of homosexuality during slavery had received sustained, public debate. I focus on what many black intellectuals and activist called Styron’s “homosexual” representation of and degradation of Nat Turner’s life and revolutionary

efforts. Other black male critics of Styron's novel accused him of effeminating and cannibalizing Nat Turner. (As I have mentioned, Turner's corpse was treated in a manner that suggests it might have been consumed as medicine and dispensed as a component of pharmacological serums.) In this chapter, I explore homoeroticism and cannibalism as transhistorical phenomena, linking the consumptive history presented in chapters 1 and 2 to the political insurgence of the 1960s.

The final chapter of the book, chapter 6, "The Hungry Nigger," opens with an examination of the controversy surrounding the chain-gang oral sex scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Black male responses to this scenario and the novel in general have ranged from accusations of homophobia to a lambasting of Morrison's "valorization of black suffering" to reading the scene as a psychoanalytic encapsulation of black male erotic life on the plantation. I suggest that the profound usefulness of this scenario is in conveying how, at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, we are still at a loss for language and appropriate metaphors with which to describe black male hunger within a plantation culture of consumption. Hunger serves in the novel as an index for a culture of consumption; for black male emotional loss, trauma, and need; and for a complex black male erotic life. I draw parallels between Morrison's novels and late-nineteenth-century neo-slave narratives. From Morrison's novel, I segue into a more formal theorization of what I call the "black male orifice." This section of the chapter takes into account the long-standing historical challenge of theorizing and thinking through black male erotic orifices, the anus and mouth in particular. Working with Baker's notion of the "tight place," I suggest that we need to ground these erotic regions, along with the notion of black men hungering, in actual historical places. To this end, I sketch a genealogy of the black male orifice that recuperates the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, and transatlantic slavery as homoerotic and erogenous zones of black male experience.

As a final prelude, I pose the question: What if the nineteenth-century cannibalism question and debate pointed in a direction of inquiry we desperately needed to resolve? And from this side of things, what if we in this contemporary moment have a responsibility to make sense of that question, tracing its outgrowths to our current political and social climates?