

*The Tropics Bite Back: Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature*

Valérie Loichot

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Once in a while, an academic book is not just significant because of its ideas, arguments, and solid research, but because it is so stimulating and well-written that it lures the reader back to enjoy the prose (and even amazingly, the end notes). This is such a book. It joins a growing scholarly field which examines the role of food in postcolonial cultures, going far beyond the identification of local cuisines to thinking about the relation of food and power.

It is odd to review the afterword first, but there Loichot explains what is at stake in this area of research for her, and it seems right that such a good book should come from someone with such a grounded and unpretentious sense of social justice. She speaks of her journey from working-class Europe—specifically a childhood in the Jura, on the border between France and Switzerland—in a family ancestrally experienced in the hardships brought by war. She there learned the importance of resourceful cooking, but also noticed as a teenager the Fort-de-Joux where “Toussaint Louverture died of cold and hunger,” evidence of a “gloomy history graven across my native landscape” (177), itself one of the experiences which brought her to Caribbean literature and made her think that hunger in various human experiences needed to be connected.

The silence she sees as imposed by hunger is refuted by Caribbean writers who have made it central to their work, and by Loichot’s work as well. She engages both with human willingness to commit atrocity and with human endurance and strength expressed through writing, to witness and oppose it. This is a book which confronts a particular kind of pervasive evil: the perversion of natural desires (to eat and for sexual pleasure) within systemic oppression.

The book is organized, as Loichot says, without intent to encourage either a chronological or a teleological reading, with the bold design that “each practice” by the writers discussed could “coexist logically with each other” (xxxvii). Focusing on Francophone Caribbean writers, she mentions in passing major Anglophone and Hispanic voices, indicating that she is aware of the Caribbean as a multilingual region but, almost like a structuralist, sees common patterns emerging in the region. Her emphasis on one linguistic subregional space is however perfectly valid: both translingual Caribbean connectivity and the special particularity of each language and even each nation space are vital to understanding the region (let alone its diasporas).

She frames her argument by looking at cannibalism, which she reads (with the help of other scholars) as a diverse trope signifying, amongst others things, racist myth, textual ingestion and reinvention, and tourism. There is also something especially dangerous about “the mixing of racial bodies through the act of reproduction,” dangerous because of the likelihood of old stereotypes being enlivened by it, but also liberating, if understood as something to be deconstructed and left behind.

Glissant is central to Chapter 1, which explores his food metaphors, Chamoiseau to Chapter 2 (hunger and overeating), Francophone Caribbean diasporic writers, including Danticat, to Chapter 3 (the relation of creolisation, food, and writing), and “fake pornography” (104) (the dangers of being trapped in pathologies whilst attempting to utilize them in writing) to Chapter 4. The whole book is, as Loichot says, “concerned with the cultural construction of a Caribbean self” (I could have done without the hyper-alliteration here as in the title), whether individual or collective. The “culinary coups” are renditions of various kinds of “food,” with “coup” punned as blow as well as triumph and political act “of resistance” (xxxvii). This is a somewhat reductive understanding of a political coup, which can be operated just as often by reactionary forces as by libertarian ones but the overall design of the argument is interesting and engaging.

Loichot is a very good close reader, highly sensitive to nuances of language, (and as mentioned before, very alive to puns). For example, “tasting French food” in Martinique becomes “tasting French language and ideology” but a taste of France can also be a “violent lesson of imposition” (5). She should have referenced the particularity of the history of the breadfruit (the Bounty Mutiny and its aftermath) rather than simply citing one scholar who is eminent in food anthropology but vague on this topic, and another who is just wrong. Anglophone scholars working on plants and ecology in the Caribbean have the benefit of Richard Drayton’s fine work, and in this case venturing into the breadfruit story through such research would have given more substance to the breadfruit section.

Sometimes Loichot repeats an assumption made by Francophone Caribbean literary scholars and historians without asking any questions, as when she writes that Glissant is arguably the most influential conceptual theorist from the region (he and Brathwaite have complemented each other in their theoretical work), or that Brathwaite’s “submarine unity” or Benitez-Rojo’s “repeating island” can both be indicated by reference to cuisine (13), when in fact each is particular to the phenomenon which each thinker created to articulate it. Food ancestries are a key piece of the historical record of human development and culture and as such pepperpot could have been better discussed by explaining its origins in South American Amerindian culture before its migration to Barbados (12), especially as a note usefully explains the name applied to a stew eaten in revolutionary America but omits to mention the cassareep which defines the origins of the pepperpot dish.

Loichot uses theory lightly but usefully (Derrida and Bhabha as well as Glissant), so that it never overwhelms the text, as when she connects Bhabha's concept of mimesis with a reinvented dish in a "land of exile" (97). Thus it seems part of her project to make sure that the reader remains aware of the ethical realities which are her concern. Her account of the experience of hunger manages to avoid both anthropological distance and sentimental urging to feel something not available to those who have never seriously been hungry. One sentence serves to demonstrate her skill in navigating a difficult and painful topic: "We mustn't minimize the enormous physical and symbolic violence of imposed hunger; the same is true of hunger's correlate, namely food dependency or gluttony, accomplished through strategically encouraged overconsumption in slavery and postslavery Martinique" (34). There follows not only reference to Chamoiseau's stories but to the legal codes which defined how much food could be given to slaves and how what was given was also bland and monotonous. Loichot cites Michael Pollen's argument that food diversity in humans is key to mental development (of course slaves invented many variations on their poor diet by growing supplemental food and finding ways to make dull rations more palatable). Then, one of the key arguments Loichot makes is that textuality itself, in its ability to devour other texts, can take us beyond the cycle of "the cannibal and the victim, the victorious and the cooked, the trapper and the entrapped, the primary and secondary..." (176). She suggests that eating with someone and feeding someone else leads to freedom from such oppositional identities.

Though Loichot shows a bit of her missionary side in her strong arguments, her work is wonderfully provocative about a series of interlocking critical issues. She embeds the texts she discusses in their literary, historical, and cultural contexts whilst encouraging a connective apprehension of issues across time and space. This is a hugely enjoyable and rewarding book.