



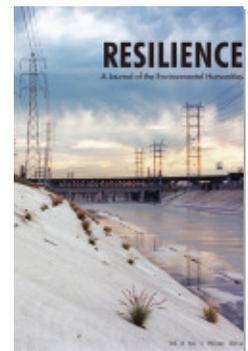
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Sushi, Otters, Mermaids: Race at the Intersection of Food
and Animal; or, David Wong Louie's Sushi Principle

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Sushi, Otters, Mermaids

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ANNE ANLIN CHENG

“Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude”
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

1. Sushi

A certain degree of cognitive dissonance is required for the full relish of this fare. Too lusciously beautiful to eat and too lusciously beautiful not to eat—the always unsettling complicity between aesthetics and consumption marks but one of the many paradoxes that the sushi eater sustains. It is about accepting the literal and the esoteric at the same time. It is about holding on to the idea of preparation and the hope of spontaneity. It is about imbibing the ocean and art in one mouthful. What is painstakingly curated on the plate rubs up uncomfortably and tantalizingly against the rawness of its eating. Sushi and its naked sibling, sashimi, offer adventures in flirtation, throwing their feeders into teasing contact with the limits and prohibitions of nature, health, sociality, culture, and politics. As the at once exotic yet also commonplace culinary choice, sushi symptomizes the technology of racial formation often at work in American food cultures. More intriguingly, it also opens up a larger philosophic debate about the nature of our human ontology at the overlapping edges of zoology and anthropology. If the argument can be made, as it famously has been by Lévi-Strauss, that cooking as a protocol of food preparation connotes human culture and that edible meat is distinct from nonedible flesh, then sushi presents

one of those foods that resonates cannily against these distinctions, for it is food that insists, for some unnervingly and for some with delight, on its own fleshness.¹

What follows presents a speculative meditation *through* sushi on the twinning demands of aesthetics and corporeality, metaphor and literalness, animality and civilization. It is my assumption that food, animal, and race studies have much to say to one another because of their shared stakes in understanding a set of issues surrounding the contingent nature of the human. I am less interested in the sociology of sushi as industry and more in the ontology of sushi eating as an occasion to explore the alimentary, cultural, and psychical crisis of human boundary that allows us to reconsider—perhaps even remap—some of the most fundamental terms of our sociality and our humanness.

My interests are partially driven, let me confess, by my own appetite for sushi, but they are inspired and fed by an exquisite, mysterious short story written by David Wong Louie called “Bottles of Beaujolais” (1991). This uncanny little story about romance, ecology, and sushi eating invites fascination yet remains difficult to digest for several reasons. Written in the wake of a decade of intense Asian American activism, this story seems intentionally to stand outside the genre of ethnic *bildungsroman*, which had dominated the growth of Asian American literature. Race and ethnicity do not appear to be explicit issues of concern in the diegesis. Although the tale’s first person narrator is presumably Asian American and his love object a Caucasian woman, the plot does not remark on this aspect of their relationship, nor is it in any way a typical or recognizable story of interracial romance. The surrealist elements of the plot also seem to hinder any quick digestion. We might say that Louie’s story refuses to serve up the racial and generic appetites that fuel much of the making of Asian American literature.

Yet to say that race (and what it means to be reading for and chewing on race) is not part of the story seems shortsighted, for the text is deeply preoccupied by questions of species difference, which, as we know, is foundational to how race has been conceptualized by Western thinkers in the eighteenth century and throughout the Age of Enlightenment.² I suggest that more than displacing racial difference to species difference, this story does the even more disturbing work of asking us to rethink the origin of special difference—that is, the logic of biological taxonomy itself. It compels us to consider, first, how taxonomies of power

(such as race and species) are imbricated and, second, what happens when we confront the collapse of their shared assumptions. Specifically, this paper will trace the emergence of what I will call the *sushi principle*, which stands in the story not as a structural prescription but as structure's opposition. I wish to distill this sushi principle as an active agent in the text that reveals and revels in the conflation between *meat* and *flesh* at the multiple levels of consumption, aesthetics, and affect that not only inform the sociocultural dimensions of this cuisine but also sheds light on the larger issues of race and animality that are provoked by acts of eating. Instead of seeing sushi as merely decorative (as background and as edible ornaments), sushi eating in this story provides the aesthetic agent and the corporeal medium through which the text imagines a radical reconfiguration of the relations among man, woman, and animal. At the heart of this story is a profound question about what constitutes a family of man, an inquiry that allows Louie to explore through an idea of shared consumption alternative racial and interspecies relations.

Louie's story from the early nineties anticipates a set of pressing contemporary conditions facing our consuming desires: the rapid decrease in food supply, massive global environmental changes, the increasing tension between animal and human rights, the conflict between activism and multiculturalism.³ It is not a coincidence that food and animal studies are two of the fastest growing critical discourses in the humanities these days, and what these fields of inquiry have to say to critical race studies is, I think, extremely pertinent. Today, with the critical foci on "animal" and "food" reaching their heights, Louie's story offers a vivid opportunity to attend to the unspoken racial logic that subtends and connects the questions, Who is a human, and what is it that we eat?

What then does it mean to approach sushi as a food; a commodity; a cultural marker; a racial sign; an affect; a metaphor for species difference; and, finally, potentially, a critical agency?

2. Otters

From the very beginning, "Bottles of Beaujolais," originally collected in a volume called *Pangs of Love*, thrusts its readers into a quandary about the collusion between nature and culture. The plot goes like this: The anonymous narrator meets the woman of his dreams (whom he names Luna) in the urban sushi restaurant in which he apprentices. The two

of them embark on an impromptu date next to and then inside a giant aquatic habitat, as if Louie has created his own watery version of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, briefly referenced in the text itself; except, this contemporary incarnation takes place not out in the woods but inside a restaurant and gestures to a romance not between men and women but between man, woman, and . . . otter.

For in addition to the narrator and his human love interest, there is an important third participant in the meal: a large otter named Mushimono, who was being kept inside an artificial aquatic habitat as an exotic attraction for restaurant goers. Mushimono lives inside a man-made habitat, a twelve-foot tank that reaches ceiling height and juts six feet into the restaurant. The fish tank occupies more than half the space of this Manhattan eatery. The narrator, who aspires to become a master sushi chef but who is currently assigned the humble task of caring for the transplanted otter, describes the tank:

Mushimono's world was an exact reproduction of the lakeshore environment of southern Maine from which he came. Mr. Tanaka [the restaurant owner, who makes a brief appearance at the beginning of the story] had hired experts in the fields of ecology, zoology, and horticulture to duplicate the appropriate balance of vegetation, animals, and micro-organisms found in the wild.⁴

In this zoological tour de force, reality and simulation fuse. And if this artificial ecology achieves the fantastical goal of being hospitable to a life taken wholly outside its natural habitat, then it must also remind us that the restaurant, too, is a carefully orchestrated and highly produced habitat for human feeding. Mushimono's supernatural, man-made habitat, replicated by science and mediated through human designs, reflects back on the human environment as also simulation and projection. We have to wonder what is the "natural setting" of our feeding and, as we will see later, our loving. The artificial domestication that is the very idea of a restaurant—and here, moreover, the secondary-order artificial exoticism of that domestication in the form of the sushi restaurant—all suggest that human anthropology bears an intimate relation to other "ecological, zoological, horticultural" (and, I would add, racial) constructs.

This restaurant qua aquarium immediately places its visiting inhabitants (both diegetically and extradiegetically) in a queasy relationship to the limit of the civilized and the human as well as between the un-

easy slippages between being a spectator and the spectacle, between being a consumer and the consumed. From Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in the eighteenth century to Margaret Visser today, food writers have long understood that the ability to eat in a restaurant (unlike eating out in the wilds) and the rituals of eating (like table manners) represent enduring marks of civilization and humanity.⁵ (This is, of course, also the assumption that Manet plays with in *his* provocative scene of transgressive dining.) As Brillat-Savarin pithily puts it, “Men dine while animals feed.”⁶ Yet by juxtaposing the restaurant and the fish tank, by insisting on their intimacy—a proximity that is not only spatial but also atmospheric (moisture and heat seem to be continually seeping and shared between the otter tank and the restaurant proper)—“Bottles of Beaujolais” underscores the duplication between artificial animal nature and natural human artifice. Indeed, what is more apropos to remind us of these inversions than sushi itself: the iconic food for blurring the lines between rawness and sophistication, nature and commodity, exoticism and the quotidian?

It is easy to see that sushi eating in its contemporary American incarnation connotes an exotic, exclusive, acquired taste that has nonetheless become routinized in popular culture. As Kyla Tompkins observes, “Foodie culture is founded on problematic racial politics in which white, bourgeois, urban subject positions are articulated . . . through the consumption and informational mastery of foreign, that is, non-Anglo-American food cultures.”⁷ She argues that raced bodies in America, from black to Asian bodies, have constituted eerily “edible” bodies for mainstream American culture since the nineteenth century. And Amy Bentley has eloquently named the conflation of consuming foreign foods with consuming foreign others as “culinary tourism.”⁸ She, for example, offers Mexican food as an instance of how a “foreign” food has become a staple “American” food even in those areas where there is rabid anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Mexican, political sentiments. In many ways, the rampant American consumption of its racial others is unconscious—indeed, could not afford to be otherwise.

Yet more than being just a manifest symptom of racial tourism within American food cultures, sushi really brings out questions about how the consumption of race impacts and troubles the ontological border of its consumers. As a cuisine, sushi compounds its proffered feast of nominal cultural or racial otherness with a further provocation: a

haunting specter about the resemblance between edible and not edible bodies. If what and how we eat has traditionally defined at least one of the major differences between us and other (nonhuman) animals, then sushi eating invokes a crisis that has always been brewing inside that distinction. I suggest that sushi insists on its own fundamental otherness in more ways than one, even when it can be found in practically every corner of American metropolitan cities, *and* that it does so, not through its apparent racial sign nor through its supposedly exotic origin, but through its disruptive effects on our human ontology. In short, sushi eating *queers* its eater, not by being foreign per se, but paradoxically by being too intimate.

“Bottles of Beaujolais” makes the startling and profound proposition that “eating in the raw” provides the very site for realizing the extraordinary and mundane corporeal exchanges that can take place between living creatures, underscoring the fragile separation between the familiar and the exotic, the domestic and the foreign, between those whom we love and those whom we consume. As anyone who works on the subject of food (or psychoanalysis) knows, consumption is rarely a one-way street. The ambivalence attending to sushi as artistic artifice and as undiluted rawness casts doubts on the status of its eater: is the person who eats this raw meat, or fresh flesh, a primitive or a gourmand? The line between *haut cuisine* and savagery has always been teasingly tenuous. From escargot to foie gras, from bird’s nest soup to blood sausages, gourmet food has always courted the primitive and cultivated savage refinement. As Joseph Litvak has taught us, sophistication and disgust are two sides of the same coin.⁹ This tension inherent in eating as potentially a base yet transcendent activity haunts not only the history of the philosophy of taste but also what might be called a primal scene in the birth of the American diet. One of the earliest treatises of a self-consciously American diet must be Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). There Thoreau devotes whole sections to the subject of “Cuisine” and what it means to dine au naturel.

As many would recall, Thoreau urges the practice of economy in three particular areas: clothing, shelter, and food. He sees this self-disciplinary economy as contributing to the civilizing project, which in turn participates in the mission of nation building. This minimalist approach toward food repels what he sees as the “childish and savage tastes” of “savage nations.”¹⁰ Implicit in Thoreau’s treatise lays a phil-

osophic stake in equating the human, the modern, and the (white) American.¹¹ In order to transcend the mortal, hungry, and corrupting body, Thoreau not only discourages his readers from eating meat but also, at times, from eating altogether: “I believe that everyman who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind.”¹²

Yet those who are familiar with *Walden* will also remember that the essay exhorting a diet of berries and twigs also includes an unexpected homage to hunting. The lean, acetic, transcendent Thoreau finds himself repeatedly haunted by another specter of himself: one who is earth bound, full bodied, and bloodthirsty. Consider the dramatic opening of the section “Higher Laws”:

As I come through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.¹³

How do we reconcile Thoreau the vegetarian with Thoreau the carnivore?

Does being wild mean consuming or being consumed by wildness? This tension registers an ongoing ambivalence in American philosophy about ideas of simplicity versus abundance, essence versus superficiality, higher laws versus human nature, and selfhood versus otherness—an ambivalence, moreover, that is undergirded by an implicitly racial logic, such as Thoreau’s distaste for “savage nations.” Historians and cultural critics have extensively documented the enduring and abject association between raced subjects and animality: blacks as apes, Asians as pigs, Jews as rats, and so forth. These animalized bodies are then consumed in a variety of ways for multiple purposes: for labor, as affective compensation, and in the service of national consolidation, just to name a few. This consumption, moreover, has been done in the names of desire and of repulsion—what Eric Lott famously coins the “love and theft” of American racial dynamics, which in turn has produced what Tompkins has eloquently named America’s “racial indigestion.”¹⁴

“Bottles of Beaujolais,” however, does not exactly rehearse this history of discriminating (even if uneasy) consumption in order to reprimand

it; instead, it appears to have radicalized this history into a fantasy of *indiscriminate* hunger, where everyone and everything becomes potential targets of consumption. That is, rather than retreating to an ethics of restraint (for example, the choice to be a vegan), this story insists that we confront the boundlessness of our eating. Even more disconcertingly, in Louie's text, to be an eater is to immediately become potentially the eaten. (Does not the specter of cannibalism always haunt the omnivore?) Here, in this sushi restaurant, itself a product of American immigration history and transpacific economics, the ambivalence registered in early American writing about securing the civilizing boundaries of the American diet reaches its fullest and most radical extension, where eater (or consumer) and food (or alien other) not only resemble one another but also *become* one another.¹⁵ As the nonhuman, exotic, foreign, and transplanted other in the story, Mushimono's presence in the sushi restaurant breeds a host of lingering, ambiguous possibilities. Is he a vertebrate who is clearly *not* meant for eating, or is he? After all, as an exotic window display, he is already there *as* bait. Indeed, Mushimono is named after a Japanese dish: a steamed egg concoction often containing meat. So Mushimono, by way of *mushimono*, already evokes a strange figure of meat that contains meat. (And is it not precisely the anxiety of such *intimate contact*—meat with meat, self with self—that much of religious prohibitions about eating set out to prevent?)¹⁶ This allergy to the intimacy of meats—a distressing proximity whose extreme incarnation must be cannibalism—haunts sushi eating and perhaps explains why the habit of American sushi restaurants to display goldfish as part of their décor can seem so uncanny and yet telling. The perversity of displaying real, live sea life next to prepared seafood registers more than sadism and points to the arbitrary logic of what separates the edible from the nonedible.¹⁷ *Sure, we know we do not eat gold fish, but does the gold fish know that?* And, indeed, is not Mushimono's subjectivity precisely that which has been repressed by the fastidiousness of the human care that surrounds him? It is surely ironic to fuss over how fresh the fish being fed to him are and how authentic his tank vegetation is when he is isolated, held captive, and put on display. The ritual of care disguises the violence, just like the preparation of sushi itself.¹⁸

The story's *mise-en-scène* disrupts the hierarchy of the food chain by offering us, instead, a series of thought-evoking juxtapositions. On the one hand, we can say that the transplanted Mushimono on dis-

play extends the racialized logic that informs the long tradition of pseudoscientific-zoological display of “exotic” or “freakish” others. But on the other, the *mise-en-scène* stages a concentric circle of display tanks and microclimates: Mushimono’s fish tank inside the restaurant that is itself another tank, an ethnography of multiple life forms engaged in convoluted and mutually contaminating ecologies. Thus, instead of a vertical, hierarchical structure implied by either race or consumption, we have in this story, instead, a horizontal and concentric geography, suggesting that the initial power structure in this story (e.g., man eating lower case animals or dominant culture eating the exotic other) is rapidly rearranging and reshaping itself into an alternative ecology.

Mushimono stands as more than a symbol of spectacularized difference. He is also an agent, for the story reminds us that Mushimono is an avid fish eater himself. The otter thus mirrors both the fish being served and the human eating next to him. There is, after all, more than a little bite to a story about people eating sushi next to a large mammal who feeds on fish and shellfish. Indeed, all the human characters in this story bear an uncanny affinity to the meat they consume or prepare. There is a wonderful little moment when the restaurant owner, Mr. Tanaka, who has eyes like “little dead black roes” (37) (a description, by the way, at once zoologizing and racializing), lectures to the narrator about Mushimono’s discriminating taste. Mr. Tanaka warns the narrator that the otter is very selective and eats only *fresh live* fish—unlike, we must immediately realize, Mr. Tanaka’s human clientele, who spend a great deal of money on a discriminating diet of *fresh dead* fish.

Our human fussiness about food may presumably distinguish us from the animals, but our omnivorousness also testifies to our indiscriminacy. More importantly, the otter in the sushi restaurant raises the problem not of whether there is a difference between eating fish or eating otter but of the deeper uncertainty of what constitutes the edible versus the inedible. *This* inherent, flickering imbrication between “meat” and “flesh” constitutes the function of what I am calling the sushi principle. And as such, it both instantiates and disproves human exceptionality, for sushi (a culinary art that requires decades of dedicated training) symbolizes the supposedly exclusively human value for aesthetic experience—even as a raw food it transgresses the protocols of civility. Moreover, sushi violates civility not simply because it is uncooked but because, in being raw, it remains close to being flesh, and

this fleshness is something that the sushi eater both disavows and celebrates.¹⁹ So we are not talking about the old fetishistic logic (“I know, but . . .”); instead, we are looking at a strange upkeep of detachment and attachment (“I know, *and* . . .”). The critical question here (both for us and for food studies in general) must extend beyond locating structuralist categories and their breakdowns—that is, beyond the task of rethinking who is the sophisticate and who the primitive—and attend to the even more urgent inquiry of how the failure of that distinction reflects back on our own *fresh* and *dying* flesh.²⁰

The sushi principle insists that we remain in the ethical relay between being “meat” and being “flesh.” I say ethical because to remain aware of this ambivalence is to resist the complacency of humanness on the one hand and the condescension of imagining we can relinquish our human privilege on the other. The sushi principle’s negative capability leads us to a curious, glaring gap between our biological attachment to yet ontological detachment from our own *meatness*, a schism that can only open up during brief and uncanny intervals of clarity. Thus, more than a commodified technology of racial formation, sushi eating provides a trope for the dizzying technology of subject (de)formation being enacted every time we eat. It demands from its gourmets a principle of avowed disavowal in the face of bareness. Above all, it puts on the chopping block our very sense of our own boundaries, for to feed on sushi and sashimi is to plunge headlong into the double delirium of knowing my own animalness even as I partake in the social-aesthetic ritual designed to disguise (but never quite fully) the rawness, vibrancy, violence, and naturalness of that eating. It is to open myself up to the vulnerability of my own flesh.

We can work hard to define civilized humanity, but the haunting thought remains: *the omnivorous body is always, deep in the background, potentially a threateningly edible body*. This is because the idea of “human flesh” is itself already so ambivalent, so ready to hark back to the very “meat” from which it distinguishes itself. And if we see, as Tompkins has urged us to, how racialized this dynamic can be, then we must now also consider how ontologically disruptive (rather than filling) this eating is. Even at the height of Eurocentric humanism, the “edible body” has not gone down easily. In his classic treatise *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* (which has not gone out of print since its first publication in 1825), Brillat-Savarin

argues for humanity's superiority among other animals on the basis that he is omnivorous and the "great gourmand of Nature."²¹ Yet, even in this most humanist of treatises, we see that it is precisely in the act of eating that the human and the inhuman merge:

As soon as an edible body has been put into the mouth. It is seized upon, gases, moisture, and all, without possibility of retreat . . . and it [the edible body] is pulled down into the stomach to be submitted to sundry baser transformations without, in this whole metamorphosis, a single atom or drop or particle having been missed by the powers of appreciation of the taste sense.²²

How can we fail to observe in this act of digestion the transcendent eater is also the most crude and voracious of feeders? In this passage, different "bodies" infuse one another. The passive food being eaten—the "edible body"—seems to hold as much agency and embodiment as (if not more than) the eating, human body abstracted as mouth and saliva.²³ It is the object of consumption, not the gourmand, who possesses body, psychology, desires, and fears. Indeed, throughout Brillat-Savarin's grammar, evident in the original French and lovingly retained by M. F. K. Fisher's English translation, we note again and again how the object of consumption appears to be the one exuding action and affect.

The human body and the consumed edible body merge, not just because one becomes what one eats as Brillat-Savarin asserts, but because, as Louie's story dramatizes, *the eater can easily become the eaten*. It is *this* porousness that various prohibitions about eating (what is proper versus improper food) are designed to seal and are continually threatened by. To eat animals is not to master animals but to betray one's own intimacy with them. (The Thoreauian dilemma—how to be wild without being devoured by it—becomes the recipe for a psychoanalytic insight: *being equals having*.) Even our esteemed eighteenth-century gastronome will go on to make the eccentric yet telling observation that we can pass along, in the manner of familial transmission, our human enjoyment of eating animals *to* the animals: "This pleasure is even contagious; and we transmit it quickly to the animals which we have tamed."²⁴ For us today, it is difficult not to hear a parable about colonial mimicry in Brillat-Savarin's observations about domesticated animals. What happens when the creature that we train ends up mimicking us to

the point of becoming us? What happens when we resemble “it”? What does this resemblance do to the “family of man”?

It is into this breach between the inescapable custody of our own humanness and the intrusive awareness of one’s own objectness, sliced opened by the sushi principle, that Louie’s delicious and delirious story dives. And in that free fall, some unlikely new relations get born. Can there be kinship (what would it look like?) that is not human or blood-line based but structured along other networks of animated affinities?

3. Mermaids

Enter Luna.

In “Bottles of Beaujolais,” the other figure, in addition to the otter, that comes to join this strange little family unit is the woman. But she is not just any woman. When we first meet Luna, the female protagonist and the object of the narrator’s romantic interest, she is coming into the restaurant, drawn by the lure of Mushimono in the window. She initially appears as the undoubtedly privileged human spectator of the exotic animal caged behind the glass. We are told, for example, about her snakeskin shoes, an exotic fashion accessory that surely underscores her human dominance in the food chain. Yet her humanness wavers the moment she crosses the threshold of the restaurant. The narrator begins by describing her in terms of food (“her baby shrimp lips”) and quickly comes to identify her with Mushimono: “I dreamed of [her], naked as the otter, standing in the street outside the lakeshore, tapping at the window” (50). Luna, however, is not simply like Mushimomo in her feminine fishiness; she is like Mushimono in that they both seem to possess an uncanny quality for transformation:

Perhaps it was the eerie quality of the fog-sifted light . . . that caused the twin curves of Mushimono’s belly and spine to run congruously before taping together at the S of his thick, sibilant tail. . . . My thoughts drifted off to a moving figure of another sort: Luna, and the gentle crook of her neck, the soft slope of her shoulders, the slight downward turn of the corners of her mouth. (37)

In this moment of transgendered and transspecies queering, Mushimomo and Luna mirror one another in a simultaneous evolution, both becoming an *other-other*, a different sort of semiaquatic animal, a mermaid.



Fig. 1. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

And can we resist hearing in the lines quoted above the echo of another sibilant beauty with a sad mouth? In Botticelli's intrauterine dream of cosmic birth and commotion, Venus appears as a kind of mermaid, that iconic association between femininity and fishy otherness (fig. 1). Ideal white femininity is therefore elevated precisely at the same time that it is animalized. As art historians have long observed, this beauty embodies many paradoxes: she stands as the center of this vibrant universe and yet is herself strangely torpid; she represents aesthetic birth but is also corporeality itself; she is a classic beauty whose proportions are in fact far from classical. Her slim, long body with those arms that are just a tad in excess of proper proportion give her an oddly marmoreal quality that the poet Robert Hass will later come to famously memorialize as "otterness" itself. In the poem "Against Botticelli," a meditation on the grief of being human, Hass describes the Botticelli Venus:

Or spray of that sea,
irised: otters in the tide lash, in the kelp-drench,
mammal warmth and the inhuman element. Ah, that is the secret.
That she is an otter, that Botticelli saw her so.²⁵

For Hass, this hybrid body—one that is neither ethereal nor earthly, neither fully human nor wholly animal—stands as a cipher for the melancholia of being a human animal.

Like Botticelli's marmoreal beauty, Luna, too, will rise from the waters; and like Hass's invocation, she will emanate elements of the human and the inhuman. For Luna will fall into the pond inside Mushimono's tank:

With her next step she suddenly plunged into thigh-deep water, stirring a turbulence that sucked the lilylike filets [salmon sashimi that the humans were eating and that Luna was trying to feed to Mushimono] toward her. When the ripples subsided, one filet was clinging to the front of a bare thigh. Rather than removing it, she smoothed the lox against her skin with caresses and pats that produce sounds like those of lovers' stomachs pressed together. (50)

And with her drenched skirt wrapped tightly around her legs like a tail, she will emerge a mermaid-otter: "As she emerged from it . . . she unhitched her algae-blotched skirt and let it fall in a pile at her feet" (52). In this cross special birth, Luna's human, white skin takes on and becomes sashimi and fish food (and is, implicitly, a racial other); she is the food she eats and the food she feeds to the nonhuman animal. In pushing to the foreground the intimacy among woman, fish, and food, Luna stands not merely as some modern-day degraded version of the Botticelli Venus but rather as her modern-day incarnation, for Botticelli's goddess was "otter" as well. Just as the sushi principle reminds us of the innate rawness of eating and the aesthetic practices that both disguise and enshrine that bareness, this bared body emerging from the fish tank does the work of spelling out the conflation between nakedness (as a property of the animal) and the nude (as a domain of idealized humanity) that has always haunted the female body.²⁶

This fusion between woman and otter thus does not so much reproduce the classic association between woman and atavistic otherness, as it seems to unleash, instead, a larger and stranger principle of animation and transmutation that suffuses the world of the story.²⁷ To be with Luna, then, means crossing the lines of racial, special, sexual, and even person-versus-thing difference. Is this modern-day Venus a mate or a food for the animal that she increasingly resembles and replicates? Why is this scene of baptism also an enactment of epidermal transfusion? And if so, what kind of new skin or flesh is this? What is *its* status in the food chain and the family of man?

Let us first acknowledge the implicit racial and animal logic that

has always haunted the figure of the mermaid. It is probably safe to say that the ancient fear of and fascination with the mermaid in many human cultures since antiquity has much to do with deep-seated anxieties about interspecies encounters, worries that survive in modern-day eugenics and antimiscegenation sentiments. Indeed, early visual and verbal representations of the mermaid tend to emphasize the creature's monstrosity rather than her romance or beauty (see figs. 2–4).²⁸

It is not surprising to learn that this monstrosity, underscored by the mermaid's frequent categorical placement in the Victorian bestiary, often carries racialized undertones as well. In the middle of the nineteenth century, at the height of European imperialism and exploration, the figure of the mermaid reemerges in popular culture and as pseudo-scientific sightings with a vengeance, often as illustrations that combine fish tails with what look like Asian or African or simply simian features, often from non-Western locations.²⁹ It would take the master fairy tale weaver Hans Christian Anderson to domesticate and make over the historically (and racially) queer mermaid by giving her the specifically melancholic, human, and, I might add, *mulatto* pathos of mourning her own mixedness.³⁰ The Little Mermaid's profound self-rejection and ultimately tragic self-erasure (choosing to disappear into sea foam in order for the prince to marry a "real" woman) symbolizes both her lack and her most human aspiration. The mermaid thus finally takes on pathos (and eros) when she turns into a sacrificial homage to "proper" and "pure" human kinship.

But what happens when the mermaid remains incomprehensibly and uncolonizably hybrid? Can kinship be formed in the face of such alienness?

The "mermaid"—that is, the interspecies being in this story—tends to stay consistently between worlds and insistently weird. Hybridity is neither mourned nor celebrated. "It" simply *is*. Mushimono weaves in and out of maleness and femaleness, animal and person, being mute and "sibilant" (37). Luna morphs between woman and animal, mundane and ethereal, a soaked woman and a drenched goddess. (Let us remember that Luna's real name is Peg, as the narrator bemoans, "Peg! I thought. *Peg?* One hangs coats on pegs. How could my Luna be this monosyllable? This *Peg?*" [43]) Yet, one could argue, within the logic of the text, Peg may not be so inappropriate a second name for Luna, for she is a changeling on whom much is hung. This constant fluctuation

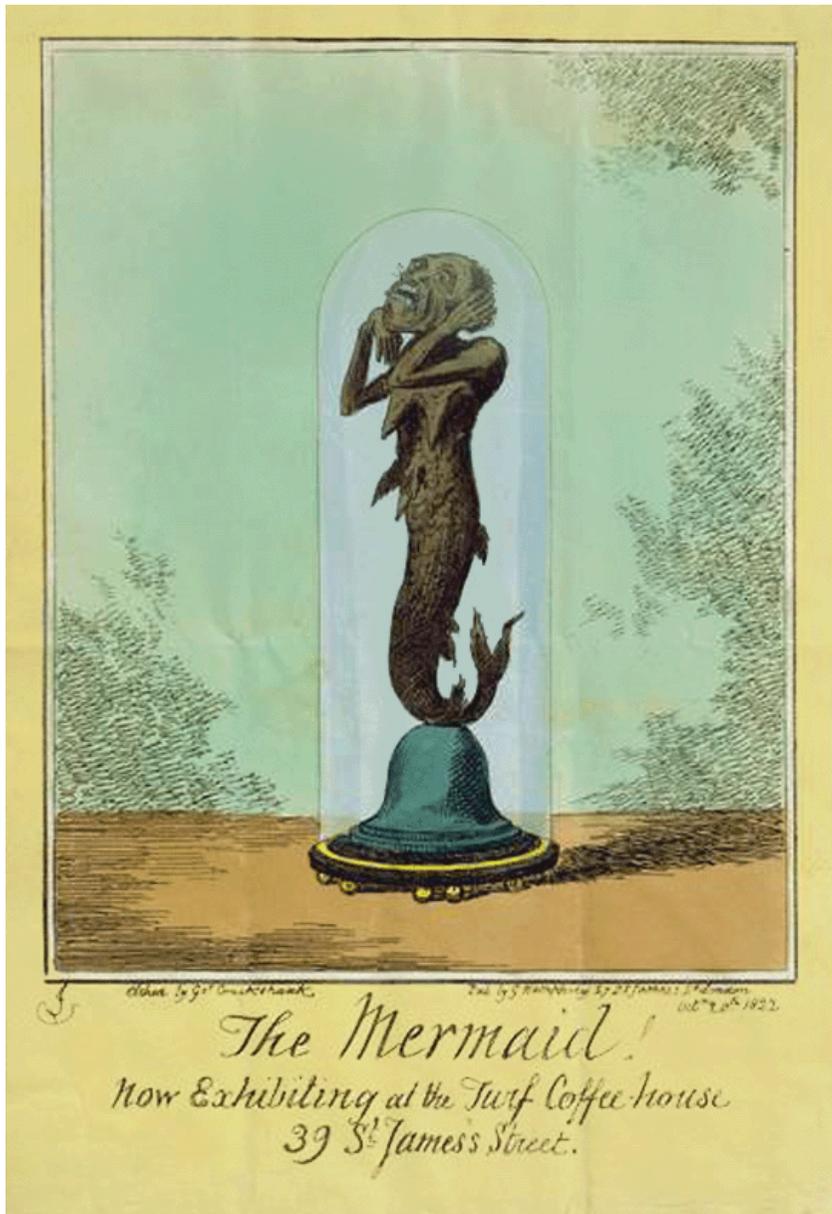


Fig. 2. *The Mermaid at the Turf Coffee-House*, Geo Cruikshank. Courtesy of the Library of the Congress, London Metropolitan Archives.

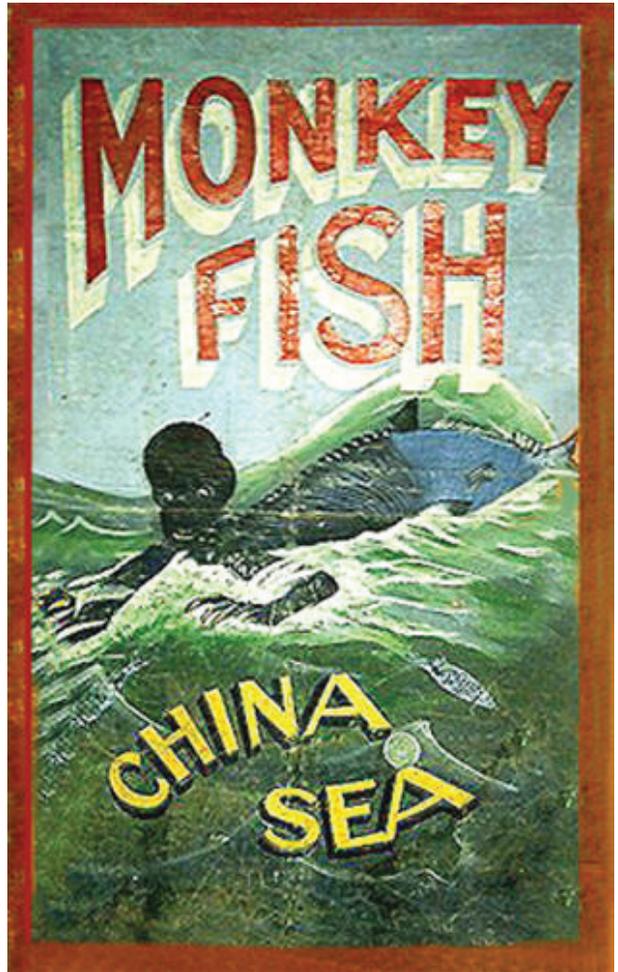


Fig. 3 (top left). A mermaid, situated on a rock. Courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

Fig. 4 (right). *Monkey Fish*. Courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

Fig. 5 (bottom left). A mermaid, with measuring scale. Courtesy of the Wellcome Library, London.

between the literal and the allegorical, between the mundane and the transcendent, presents another incarnation or extension of the sushi principle. It infuses the story on the levels of language, narrative style, and character, producing a threateningly and seductively porous world.

In such a world, we find a crisis, not of discrimination, but of *indiscrimination*. At the climax of this odd meal, the (Asian American and male) narrator appears to have lost the fundamental ability to distinguish between different kinds of flesh. He tells us that he actually confuses his own flesh for the flesh of the fish in a moment of ecstatic bliss:

I went behind the sashimi bar to prepare a snack for us. I selected a long shiny knife from Mr. Tanaka's impressive collection. I was surprised by how light it felt in my hands. . . . The steel seemed to melt into the flesh. At first, I was tentative in my approach, but soon, caught up in the sensuality of slicing, in the thrill of moving through flesh, I was imitating the sashimi master's speedy hands. . . . Where was the mystery of his art? It was mine already. . . . I looked over at Luna and smiled while my hands whittled away at the shrinking hunk of fish. . . . I glanced down to admire my handiwork. My hand was a bloody mess." (45)

After the narrator makes sashimi out of his own hands, instead of rushing to the hospital or applying a tourniquet to his wounds, Luna lovingly cups his blood in the saki bowl (here, the bowl acts as yet another tank in the story), and they drink ceremoniously from it: blood, wine, saliva, fish, and flesh as one. Here the specter of cannibalism (both the eating of the other and of the self) becomes more and more real. We might say that both the narrator and Luna have fallen under the sway of the sushi principle, finding one another in that unsavory but enchanting euphoria between meat and flesh, between the erratic and the erotic, between matter and sentience.

Before we can parse the political implications of this terrible euphoria, we must of course inquire, Would or could the white man's flesh be mistaken for sushi? In this story, we must note, the permeability of flesh and meat seems significantly consigned to the female, the raced, and the animal. At the same time, however, this capacity for *being cut*, for living in a world of indiscriminancy (to the point of being radically corporeally accessible), also allows for a curious form of agency. That is, these moments of boundary violations, while clearly perturbing, none-

theless seem tied to the critical agency in the text. If the sushi principle can make meat out of those who are woman, animal, or raced, then Louie's story imagines that it can also make sashimi or mermaids out of anyone and everyone. We can be made strangers to ourselves with shocking ease.

This is perhaps why I would posit these sites of contamination between beings in the story as ethical rather than political. We are not being given a solution so much as we are being given a meditation about what it means to be radically open to difference, what it means to live outside the boundary of taxonomy and in the interstitial spaces between the binaries traditionally set up by structural anthropology. The categorical oppositions that form the foundation of everyday experiences are systematically being undone in this story. The appearance of the "other" launches the shock, not of difference, but of intimacy. Thus the specter of special difference does not reinstate a dyad—human or not, flesh or meat—and instead expresses itself *as* categorical failure, as a relational ordering that is subject to unpredictable transformation. This may be why the story seems intent on unraveling the structuralist assumptions of quotidian life by staging and baring the intersection of zoology and anthropology. In their introduction to the volume *Knowing Animals*, Philip Armstrong and Laurence Simmons address the fundamental anthropomorphism in the heart of animal studies and the zoomorphism in the heart of human studies:

The creatures that occupy our taxonomies are never purely non-human. They are never free of us. Their bodies, habits, and habitats are shaped by human designs; they are contaminated by, but also resistant to, our philosophies, theologies, representations, interests, intentions. On the other hand, and just as surely, our concepts and practices are never purely human in the first place. For we are not free of the animals either, although the tradition of humanism . . . promised we should be. Animality infests us, plagues us, goes feral on us.³¹

If we are to speak of anthropomorphism in our views of the animals, then we must also speak of zoomorphism in our perceptions of the human. This mutuality offers a crucial caveat to animal studies and what is also known as posthuman studies, for one of the limits of both has been the ways in which the animal comes to serve as a metaphoric crux with-

in theories of language and law. From Darwin's dog to Derrida's cat, the animal has often been enlisted as a critique of privileged humanity—at times, as an explicit means of shaming us out of our human complacency.³² That is, there is a scholarly tendency to interpret the animal as either mere human proxy or a sign of alterity. But we have not acknowledged deeply enough how, no matter how much we wish to “recognize” our animal cousins, we can only and always only see them *through* our inescapable humanness or how our understanding of ourselves is so deeply indebted to how we have imagined animality in the first place.

Even the birth of the human kinship system as a discipline of study and as a cornerstone of modern anthropology offers a repressed tale of crossbreeding. As Gillian Feeley-Harnik has pointed out, Lewis Henry Morgan, the father of modern anthropology, formulated his seminal work on the human kinship system based on much of the insights he developed while studying the Seneca Indians *and* a community of semiaquatic creatures: alas, not mermaids or otters, but the “humble” American beavers of the Great Lakes regions of Michigan.³³ How we think about our social principles (our supposedly unique and elaborate network of kinship structures; our specifically human relation to property; above all, our presumed sociality over and beyond biology) has never been free from our conceptualization of the animalized and racialized other. And, I propose, no other site demonstrates this complicity more acutely than where and what we eat.

Margaret Visser tells us that the social rituals and traditions surrounding eating “give rise to many basic human characteristics, such as kinship systems (who belongs with whom; which people eat together).”³⁴ In “Bottles of Beaujolais,” however, it is the eating *with strangers* that actually brings to light the unspoken assumptions we have underlying what we consider to be “basic human characteristics.” The story begs the questions, To what extent are our normative ideas of basic human characteristics fundamentally weird, and could there be kinship between the human and the not human? We might think of the meal within Louie's story as enacting an active revision of the very idea of the family of man. The story breaks down the human kinship system (and its embedded familial and racial systems) into a network of *abstract and hence transferable corporeal and affective properties*. This transference is realized not only by the story's adherence to what I am calling the sushi principle but also by the story's other major trope: blood. The title “Bottles of Beaujo-

lais” refers to the drink shared by our two human protagonists, but both the title and the wine it names are already substitutes. There was never any beaujolais available in the restaurant. From the start, Luna and the narrator had to substitute saki for beaujolais. (It is notable, by the way, that substitution provides the basic logic for relationality in this tale, as if, in this wholly consumable world, only such capacity for nonmelancholic replacement can ensure the continuation of life.) The bowl of saki-beaujolais then undergoes further transformation (or is it transfusion?) when Luna lovingly pours the narrator’s own blood into the saki bowls, from which they drink ceremoniously. Cannibalism, kinship, transubstantiation, marriage, and birth converge vertiginously.

By literalizing the blood that is shared and circulated between different and self-same mouths in this exchange of radically different bodies, the story paradoxically undoes blood’s privileged status in the dominant fictions of traits, kinship, and inheritance. Nontangible qualities also get transferred among the three beings, human and nonhuman, in the story. Mushimono is more than just a witness to this eccentric human ritual or victual. Let us not forget that mushimono, the custard dish, is often made with or infused by saki, making Mushimono’s meaty body itself an echo of the saki-filled bowl being consumed by the humans. Moreover, let us observe, too, that the word *saki* is a homophone for *sake*, the Japanese word for salmon, the fish filets that our threesome alternately eat and wear as skin. In this scene of fleshly substitution, affective exchange, and linguistic morphing, the very idea of vessels (be it a soup bowl, a fish tank, a sentence, skin, or a body) becomes flexible structures, sometimes containing, sometimes contained.

Is this a scene of (racial) transfusion, (spiritual) transubstantiation, (elemental) translation, or all three? I suggest we are witnessing, not some clichéd act of erotic vampirism, but the earnest effort to reimagine the creation of a new family, a new consanguinity. That is to say, while the connection between food and sex (for example, eating as the sublimation of erotic drive) is well rehearsed, this story is significantly sexless, as if the text is trying to radically reimagine human-nonhuman relationality. We may be witnessing here a most symbolic yet also most literal form of a new affinity of blood. Perhaps this is why in the climax of the story we find, not sex, but a totem meal.³⁵ This may also explain why in this fable the radically porous site turns out *not* to be the female body and genitals (the “wet otter”?), as traditional psychoanaly-

sis would have it, but the human mouth. Indeed, the entire *mise-en-scène* of the story feels increasingly like a gigantic digestatory system. Again, we turn to Brillat-Savarin's hauntingly visceral description: "The sapid molecules must be dissolved in no matter what kind of fluid, so they may then be absorbed by the sensitive projections, buds, or suckers which line the interior of the apparatus for tasting."³⁶ The diegetic world of "Bottles of Beaujolais" is exceptionally moisture laden, ripe for absorption and feeding, as if the entire restaurant has become a giant mouth. In this vaporous world, everyone and everything is *sapid*—capable of tasting and being tasted. The doubleness of eating—making mincemeat out of the other but also of the self—compels us to consider the foundations of humanness and how some of the basic categories of difference in biology and anthropology have worked to disguise human affinities for the nonhuman.

In her essay "Being Human: Bestiality, Anthropophagy, and Law," literary critic Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks suggests that the founding law of human civilization (and the human kinship system on which that civilization rests) may not be the prohibition against incest as Freud asserts but the prohibition against anthropophagy. In other words, who belongs in the family of man may be determined less by whom you can or cannot sleep with and more by what you can or cannot eat.³⁷ This evocative proposition suggests that we reconsider how food, as much as sex, might determine the limits on which humanness is built. (Does it seem revealing that, in light of contemporary bourgeois values, it is often much easier to know with whom we ought or ought not to sleep than to determine what we can or cannot eat?) "Bottles of Beaujolais," however, suggests that cannibalism might be the condition of, not the exception to, civilization. We have to be willing to eat ourselves and others in order to be the privileged humans that we are. This is not simply a story of moralism where we learn that humans are indeed animals too but a more disturbing tale about how being nonhuman and other may be *the very mode of our ontology*.³⁸ Consumption makes otherness our own, but it also opens us up to an unruly sociality where what is our "own" becomes food for the other. This insight into our fundamental, ontological alienation, which surely also plays itself out externally over and over again as racial differentiation, does not dilute the impact of racism; on the contrary, it underscores how quotidian, inescapable, and porous our appetite for the other is.

In the end, we have a new family of three inextricably linked but separate beings. This is a brave new world but not one that is triumphant or redemptive. The end of the story sees our three protagonists leaving the hothouse environment of the restaurant to emerge into the larger world. The narrator follows Luna, or Peg, into a city taxicab, followed by Mushimono, who leaves his “natural” habitat to get into the cab with his human companions. We have a sense of an Edenic expulsion that also spells the beginning of a new world: “No moon in the sky . . . lots of snow . . . I shook my sore hand . . . I followed the flight of several flakes . . . to the white street below . . . Absolute quiet, as it must have been at the beginning of time.” (54). To quote Hass again, is this the paradise we “pray not to get / and are glad for and drown in”?³⁹ Both the story and the poem offer us melancholic meditations on how to *live within* the pull of transcendence and the weight of de-transcendence.

Man, woman, and otter speed into the dark night toward an unknown future. This is and is not a new family. The narrator and his heroine remain dramatically alien to one another, as they are to the otter, even as all three become increasingly ensconced in each other’s lives and physical space. Luna is at once horrified by and accepting of Mushimono’s presence in the cab, just as the narrator takes his mutilation in delirious yet lucid stride. Indeed, we do not even know who will survive this ride. Could there be life for those fed on the sushi principle, which has managed to sustain them on the delicate and impossible simultaneity of being human *and* nonhuman?

As the bleeding man, the drenched woman, and the live otter rush into the dark city night, we wonder whether the threesome’s ejection out of the restaurant at the end of the story implies a waking from the nightmare of their too-intimate human-animal night or whether it is but another swerve in the dream that was set into motion. Looking at the narrator’s description of the silent night toward which they speed, are the characters fleeing toward the end of the earth or the beginning of time? When Luna, with “her pale face” likened to “the leaden-gray of cod fish,” seemed finally to start to emerge from their romantic *petit dejeuner* with her skin growing cold and clammy, is reality finally setting in, or is she somehow turning even more permanently into the mermaid?

Instead of answers, the story leaves us with a kind of *horizontal transfer* between states of conditions: what Louie repeatedly calls “transla-

tions.” It is as if, in insisting on change rather than epiphany, Louie wants us to experience aesthetic transformation without transcendence. What then is transformation without transcendence?⁴⁰ It is here that we might consider the role of the style of the story itself as coming into play like yet another mermaid. I am referring to the story’s at-times smooth and at-times deliberately jarring fluctuation between the mundane and the surreal, a motion that traps us in the condition of being in-between. We shuffle between the quotidian and the sublime without either a sense of deflation or degradation or a sense of transcendence and redemption. We might say that miscegenation, while absent as a theme, resurfaces as the *logic and style* of this text. The mixed style that we have been discussing (that oscillation between the fantastical and the prosaic, between, let us say, the twin poles of Luna and Peg) actually has the effect of *detaining us within and attaching us to a never-ending relay* between flesh and spirit, between body and metaphor. In short, the reader, too, has been bred by the sushi principle. Thus the metaphysical and physical transaction between unlike states in the diegesis that we have been tracing also reveals itself through the story’s own aesthetic undulation between the material and the abstract, between the literal and the metaphoric. Like Mushimono in his lakeshore home, we move among real constructs and fabricated realities. Herding us between the metaphoric and the literal, the stylistic hybridity that this text enacts compels us to remain within transition itself, allowing us neither to escape into a world of fantasy nor to emerge from its dreaming.

Dare we as readers risk the utter annihilation or the brand new beginning that are the only two possible outcomes of radically reimagining our world ecology and the way we eat (and read)? Can we survive a future when we *live* the discomfort of our own flesh?

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NOTES

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

2. See Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997).

3. For a wonderful case study of this last point, see Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), which parses out the ongoing controversy in San Francisco between animal advocates and race activists over the treatment and sale of live animals in Chinatown.

4. David Wong Louie, “Bottles of Beaujolais,” in *Pangs of Love* (New York: Plume, 1992), 39. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

5. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, trans. M. F. K. Fisher, (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 1994); Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origin, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

6. Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 121.

7. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2.

8. Amy Bentley, “From Culinary Other to Mainstream American: Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine,” in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004): 209–25.

9. See Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

10. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Widler, 2008), 24.

11. Indeed, Thoreau lays this stake deep in a Western philosophical tradition that harks back to Aristotle.

12. Thoreau, *Walden*, 262.

13. Thoreau, *Walden*, 161.

14. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

15. The development of sushi in America is directly linked to immigration history, as the first sushi restaurant in the ethnic enclave of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles in the 1950s was opened to cater specifically to the new wave of Japanese immigrants to the United States. For a history of the development of sushi as an industry in the American food industry, see Sasha Issenberg, *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* (New York: Gotham, 2008).

16. On three separate occasions, the Torah tells us not to “boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Ex. 23:19; Ex. 34:26; Deut. 14:21). The Oral Torah specifies that one must wait a significant amount of time between eating meat and dairy because fatty residues and meat particles tend to cling to the mouth. What makes this contact between meat and mother milk “unhealthy” is surely precisely the taboo of a food coming in contact with where it came from—that is, the contact that reveals *the unbearable sameness of flesh*.

17. It is beyond the scope of this essay, but this question of how someone can be-

come ontologized as “edible” can be further developed and placed in dialogue with the works of Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); and Val Plumwood, “Integrating Ethical Frameworks for Animals, Humans, and Nature: A Critical Feminist Eco-Socialist Analysis,” *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 2 (2000): 285–322.

18. My gratitude to Claire Jean Kim for urging me to consider the question of Mushimono’s subjectivity and for her other insights as well.

19. To understand how strange the idea of “fleshness” is in the art of sushi, we might also consider the other extreme idea to which it harks: pure artificiality. It is not a coincidence that this delicate and immediate cuisine should like to advertise itself through shiny, laminated preservations. Japan is *the* leading manufacturer of plastic foods. No self-respecting restaurateur in Tokyo would open a sushi restaurant without first visiting the neighborhood of *Kappabashi*, where thousands of plastic foods of every kind are preserved in every reality-defying action: simmering, pouring, frying, or just sitting in their placid, forever contentment. The plastic sushi that tends to accompany all sushi restaurants in America and Japan alike may not be a tacky gesture of redundant commodification but may instead speak to a deeper ambivalence in the art of sushi as a sustained performance treading between authenticity and artifice, between imminence and delay, between rawness and preparation.

20. We might think of the sushi principle as articulating precisely a critique against the form of structuralist anthropology exemplified by a text such as Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Raw and the Cooked*.

21. Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 22.

22. Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 46.

23. Here we might engage Jane Bennet’s wonderful work on rethinking the nature of agency as not necessarily attached to persons, reconceptualizing different forms of what she calls “agential” dynamics. See Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

24. Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 46–47.

25. Robert Hass, “Against Botticelli,” in *Praise* (New York: Ecco Press, 1999), 10.

26. Again, it is beyond the scope of this paper, but there is a fascinating and relevant history here to consider as well about the relationship between the nude and the naked. Art history has long taught us that there is an unassailable difference between the naked and the nude: the former designates degrading corporeality while the latter represents abstract, idealized forms. The nude consecrates ideal humanism, invoking the mind and the intellect, while the naked remains tethered to the abject body and carries a host of related connotations about animality and racial difference. This segregation of the nude from the naked, codified by Kenneth Clark in 1956, has remained remarkably uncontested to this day. See Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). The reign of this theoretical distinction is extraordinary not only given the set of class, racial, and gender ideologies underly-

ing Clark's own writing but also given the fact that the nude has never been as easily disentangled from the naked as this overefficient classification suggests. As evidenced by the Botticelli, even the classic nude in her most idealized form has the proclivity to carry a whiff of the animal. And as works by contemporary artists such as Vanessa Beecroft dramatize, the nude always stands in danger of becoming the naked, just as the naked provides the corporeal condition disavowed but retained by the nude. My interest here is not to highlight the failure of "high art" to sustain its intellectual critique but to underscore what the hybrid mermaid body tells us about our ambivalences toward our own flesh. The encounter with "naked flesh" launches us into states of desire and states of alienation, between the encounter with the raw and the aestheticized. We can also bring Thoreau into this conversation, for his struggle with the dilemma of "wilderness"—how to be it without being devoured by it—is itself indebted to a long Western philosophic tradition that equates nakedness with regressive savagery and the nude with idealized (transcendental in Thoreau's terms) human form. For a wonderful study of why Asian art does not have nudes and what this says about the absence of the binarism between animality and the human that dominates Western philosophy, see François Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, trans. Maev de la Guardia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

27. We might also think productively about this transformation drive in Louie's story as a form of animation that is akin to what Mel Chen theorizes as "animacy": "a specific kind of affective and material construct that is not only nonneutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things, but is shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations of animacy in the contemporary culture of the US." Mel Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 5. The kind of boundary crossing that takes place between animate being and inanimate objects in Louie's story both reveals and disrupts our basic assumptions about our often hierarchical principles of life.

28. Mermaids have populated the human imagination for millennia, from the river valleys of Mesopotamia circa 900 BCE to Africa's Nile Valley to the Mediterranean world of Greeks, Romans, and Minoans. For many of these cultures, the mermaid represents danger, and in the Christian Europe of the Middle Ages, the mermaid is often found in bestiaries. See Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008), 23–72.

29. One of the great hoaxes of Victorian England was the importation of fake mermaid corpses that are often made by sewing together a fish tail with monkey skulls. It is not a coincidence that Western imperialism and exploration should boast of acquiring such subhuman creatures. The furor over the so-called Fiji Mermaid is one such example of these creatures being sighted and then presumably imported from Japan and other "exotic" locals and then placed on auction during the Victorian period. See Paolo Viscardi, Anita Hollingshead, Riss MacFarlane, and James Moffatt, "Mermaids Uncovered," *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 27 (2014): 98–116. This is also part of the long

history of the pseudoethnographic “freak show” that accompanied the imperial mission. See Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 302–3; Jan Bondeson, *The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 36–63. It is ironic that in “indigenous African beliefs, the human-aquatic creatures” were also thought to be racially other, except, there, she was often thought to be European; see Drewal, *Mami Wata*, 37.

30. Hans Christian Anderson, *Little Mermaid* (New York: Minedition, 2004).

31. Philip Armstrong and Laurence Simmons, “Bestiary: An Introduction,” in *Knowing Animals*, ed. Phillip Armstrong and Laurence Simmons (Boston: Brill, 2007), 18–19.

32. For a reading of Derrida’s famous cat encounter, see Kaplana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). For a reading of animals in Darwin as curious figures of nonhuman agency, see Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). The use of animals to differentiate humanity is of course an enduring gesture. On this, see Chen’s chapter “Queer Animality” in *Animacies*. Here, however, I am pointing to the presumably inverse tradition of citing the nonhuman animal as an agent of duplication and hence shame for us.

33. See Lewis Henry Morgan, *The American Beaver and His Work* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1868). Gillian Feeley-Harnik demonstrates that Morgan’s human guides and informants in both projects were the same. The “Ojibwa trappers” (cited by Morgan in the preface to *The American Beaver*) who were explaining human kinship and labor practices to Morgan were also informing him about beaver kinship and labor practices. See Gillian Feeley-Harnik, “The Ethnography of Creation: Lewis Henry Morgan and the American Beaver,” in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, ed. Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 54–84. And if Morgan was becoming increasingly aware of the beaver dams and lodges as active signs of a communicative system between humans and animals, these are insights influenced by Ojibwa lore and its views about the relation between people and animals. Morgan’s thinking about the network of human blood and inheritance grew out of his thoughts about social relations and property among the beavers. Thus Morgan’s work instantiates the long, enmeshed interrelations among race, humanism, conquest, animalism, culture, and science.

In *The American Beaver and His Work*, Morgan meticulously details in words and drawings the beavers’ designs as process; their elaborate and adaptive construction methods attentive to both environmental and human presences; what he calls their “psychology”; their family and generational relations; and, above all, their intimate integration into a landscape made of wood, water, stones, earth, sticks, and humans and their structures. Thus, more than an implicit critique of nineteenth-century humanism, more than even a recognition of nonhuman kinship systems, *The American Beaver* gestures to the potential polylinguism of life and maps a radically hybrid ecology in which the human and the nonhuman animal communicate and interact. For all of the limita-

tions of Morgan's work—his monumental *Systems of Consanguinity and the Affinity of the Human Man* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) has been much criticized since its initial publication even as it remains a key text—it is this idea of hybrid ecology that I want to hang on to for our discussion to follow.

34. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, 1.

35. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 13:1–164. It is as if Louie has radically revised Freud's notion of a totem meal, replacing the primal father with this triangulation of three equal, imbricated, but unrelated beings.

36. Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 40.

37. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks [Kalpana Rahita Seshadri], "Being Human: Bestiality, Anthropophagy, and Law," *Umbr(a): Ignorance of the Law* 1 (2003): 97–114.

38. The idea that we are constantly, simultaneously, and not necessarily distinguishing between taking in, digesting, and spewing out otherness may not be as abstract as it sounds if we consider how our own biology might be enacting, on a quite material level, such active porousness. Recent scientific research has shown that our old midcentury conception of human-skin ecology—the traditional idea that our bodies are in constant danger of and therefore in constant battle against microbes, bacteria, and fungi that will invade our bodies—may be wrong. Scientists believe that we are inundated by microbes, bacteria, and fungi on our skin and in our guts from the moment we are born. See Lita Proctor, "The Human Microbiome," *10M Forum*, February 22, 2012, accessed April 17, 2014, http://www.10m.edu/~media/01%2002%20lita%20proctor_Primer%20on%20the%20microbiome_0222012.pdf (site discontinued). See also Rob Stein, "Finally, a Map of All the Microbes in Your Body," *NPR*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2012/06/13/154913334/finally-a-map-of-all-the-microbes-on-your-body>. The human body contains about 100 trillion cells. However, only maybe one in ten of those cells is actually human; the rest are from bacteria, viruses, and other microorganisms. Research has also shown that these systems of microbes have far more extensive functions than we had believed, including beneficial, even essential life-preserving ones. What emerges is a picture of our human skin as a complicated ecology that might be considered a biological system of its own.

39. Hass, "Against Botticelli," 10.

40. I should note that this question also brings up the issue of the act of reading, which is after all *the* mode of consumption facing us as readers of this story. So much of this story resists consumption even as it offers consumption as an object of thought. If Louie is trying to tell us something about the nature of inexplicable, mute aesthetic experience, the kind that punctures but refuses recuperation, then I think it is important to allow the story its refusal of resolutions. From Leo Bersani's *Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) to cultural studies' own increasing discomfort with reading as redemption, there has been in recent years some critical re-

sistance to the notion of aesthetic recuperation. While I am wholly sympathetic to that reservation, lately it has also increasingly seemed to me that the critique of redemption itself—often formulated as a replacement of moralism by ethics and often achieved at the price of some kind of human shaming—can run the danger of reproducing a piety of its own. Consider, as cited in this essay, how often the animal in animal studies—from Darwin’s dog to Derrida’s cat—is seen as the agent of our shaming. But I have to wonder whether there might be those kinds of aesthetic experiences that offer us an encounter with the other that does not guarantee our redemption nor require our shame as compensation? This story seems to offer us one site for such patient contemplation.