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Foreign Food, Foreign Flesh: Apathetic Anthropophagy and Racial Melancholia in Houellebecq's *Submission*

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Abstract

This article explores the cannibalistic dimensions of racial disgust and desire in Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*. Situated within broader discourses of French *déclinisme*, *Submission* offers a melancholic portrait of white nostalgia. Through the tastes and consumptive practices of his characters, Houellebecq depicts white identification as dependent on an ambivalent relationship to corporeal difference. Paying close attention to the mouth's dual function as a site of *ontological triage* (sorting out the human from the non-human, the edible from the inedible) and *ontological transformation* (converting dead matter into living flesh), I argue that cannibalist desire is integral to white nationalist anxiety.

I. Meat

One of the more telling projects of the *Rassemblement National* is their vendetta against halal meat. Calling for a lawsuit against commercial fraud in 2012, Marine Le Pen claimed that “the entirety of meat distributed in Île-de-France, unbeknownst to the consumer, is exclusively halal” (“L’offensive,” my translation). For Le Pen, this insidious ruse was a way of showing the French that they were being disrespected in their own country. She continues in *Le Parisien*, “the fact that everybody is obligated to *submit* to dietary constraints imposed by a religion... is profoundly unacceptable and disgraceful” (“L’offensive”; my translation and emphasis). This particular alimentary strain of xenophobic anxiety has resurfaced at various points in the party's history under various guises—at times under the aegis of corporate transparency (“Le Pen”), at times under the banner of animal rights (“L’offensive”). Of course, nativist fear of halal meat neither begins nor ends with the RN. Marine Le Pen took her cues in 2012 from an *Envoyé spécial* exposé (“Envoyé special”), protests against halal meat processing across France have drawn participants from multiple parties (“L’extrême droite”), and conservative pundit Éric Zemmour writes of *la*

halalisation of France (*Le suicide*), a term that—perhaps more legibly than the RN’s complaints—betrays the ways in which fears of foreign meat refract broader anxieties about what Renaud Camus has called *le grand remplacement*. Indeed, the link between *la halalisation* and *le grand remplacement* is hardly coincidental; in Zemmour’s formulation, Camus’ relatively structural fear of the body politic’s gradual replacement is articulated on the individual level, as foreign meat is metabolized by the host and literally transmogrified into once “native” flesh. We might say that *le grand remplacement* wages a sort of guerilla warfare, gradually phagocytosing the ailing body of the West through many *petits remplacements*.

Moreover, the condensation of racial anxiety in the meat of the other is not specific to France. Timothy Morton has written of the olfactory dimensions of anti-Pakistani sentiment in 1980s London (“Pakis stink [of curry]”) (3); Nitzan Shoshan has explored the metonymic slippage between kebabs, Turks, and Arabs among Berlin neo-Nazis; Amy Bentley has documented the curious popularity of Mexican food in highly anti-Mexican regions of the US; Vincent Woodard has analyzed the homoerotic cannibalism of slave-master relationships on US plantations, and Kyla Tompkins has explored the figuration of Black bodies as edible flesh in 19th-century American literature and dietetic discourses. These authors have all contributed to a growing interdisciplinary conversation about the peculiar alimentary dimensions of racialization.¹ If, as Sylvia Wynter and Alexander Weheliye have suggested, the modern, secular, and Western version of the human known as Man “differentiates full humans from not-quite-humans and nonhumans” (Weheliye 139), how do those who fantasmatically inhabit the position of the first category perceive the bodies of those thought to inhabit the second? What particular turns does the libido of Man take when he encounters an Other whom he refuses to see as a reflection of himself, but whose ontological contiguity with his own “threateningly, potentially edible” flesh he cannot deny? (*Ornamentalism* 115). In this sense, race continually blurs the line between flesh and food, between human and animal. When conceived as a form of ontological power, as the ability to delimit categories of living flesh,² racialization returns us to the perennial question of the relationship between literal and libidinal hunger. What is the connection between meat that we eat and flesh that we lust after, food that we cannot stomach and people whom we cannot countenance?

Given the breadth of such questions, I will take up for consideration one particularly suggestive text as a way of exploring the anthropophagic dimensions of racial disgust and desire: Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*. Released on the day of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, *Submission* imagines France in 2022, when the Muslim Fraternity has won out over the National

Front in the presidential elections. The Islamic party institutes a series of sweeping reforms: women retire from their jobs and wear the veil, the government helps to arrange polygamous marriages for professors and politicians, the Sorbonne becomes an Islamic university, and so on. Houellebecq's novel serves as an uncannily apt analogue to Marine Le Pen's earlier comments, insofar as the protagonist's anxious relationship to submission is articulated through a borderline obsessive relationship with foreign food. It is not my intention to interpret the text as a direct reflection of xenophobia in French society at large—there are of course important distinctions between the racist discourses that weave their way throughout journalism, punditry, academia, dinner table conversations, and so on, and those that are reproduced in a work of literary fiction, albeit a widely read one. Nonetheless, *Submission* was not written in a vacuum; it is both structured by and structuring of broader conversations about national identity, foreign immigrants, and the future of France. *Submission* can thus be read as one heteroglossic text operating in a vast discursive field, one that has both influenced and been influenced by people like Marine Le Pen, Éric Zemmour, and Renaud Camus.

I should note, moreover, that my analysis of *Submission* will precede at times via a seemingly reductive set of structural categories: white vs. non-white, man vs. woman, Western vs. non-Western, etc. These should be understood as *fantasmatic elements* operating within Houellebecq's novel, and certainly not as stable identities that correspond faithfully to a stable, sociopolitical reality beyond the text. While a detailed interrogation of the relationship between unconscious fantasy³ and quotidian embodiment—or more broadly, between structure and event—transcends the scope of this article (see, for example, Derrida, Bourdieu, Butler), Houellebecq's text arguably does more to undo the reciprocal constitution of these dichotomies than it does to shore up their integrity. Indeed, the permanent threat of categorical contamination in *Submission* constitutes an integral part of the text's fantasmatic efficacy. As such, it will be important to keep in mind systematicity's constitutive impossibility as we track the relationship between food and flesh, self and other, and white and non-white characters in the Houellebecqian universe.

II. Melancholia

The psychoanalytic concept of melancholia is by no means a novel heuristic for understanding Houellebecq or his intellectual milieu. Even before *Submission's* publication, Michel David argued that this particular form of mourning characterizes not only Houellebecq's entire oeuvre, but also the author himself. More recently, Louise D'Arcens has situated the melancholy of *Submission* within the broader trend of French *déclinisme*,

citing texts such as Nicholas Bavarez's *La France qui tombe*, Hervé Juvin's *Le renversement du monde*, Renaud Camus's *Le grand remplacement*, and of course, Éric Zemmour's *Mélancolie française*. The logic here is that each of these writers, like the patients that Freud documented in his 1917 essay, refuses to accept the loss that catalyzed his profound depression. Rather than redirecting his [*sic*] libido onto a substitute object, the melancholic identifies with the lost object. As such, the subject cathects his own ego with both the love he had for that object and his hatred of the object for having left him (Freud 249). Hence the curious blend of arrogance and extraordinary self-pity displayed by figures such as Camus, Zemmour, Houellebecq, and—in the novel—François.

The protagonist of *Submission* further fulfills Freud's original diagnostic criteria through his supreme difficulty in deriving pleasure out of life (Houellebecq 31); his tendency to subject himself to situations that he knows he will despise (115); his obsession with death, obesity, and decaying bodies (19, 44, 37); his perpetual lassitude (31, 47); and his utter confusion with regards to the workings of his own desire (91). I should note here that it is not my intention to diagnose François as a patient, which would presuppose that he was a subject in the first place—as opposed to the symptom of a subject (that is, Houellebecq). I am less concerned with how we might arrive at a final characterization of François, and more concerned with what melancholia as a heuristic allows us to understand about the particular discursive constellations that emerge in *Submission*, whether in descriptions of the protagonist or in the narrative as a whole. To this end, I would add that there are two closely related elements missing from the above list of the novel's melancholic traits—elements that, while latent in D'Arcens' and David's work, remain relatively underexplored in literature on the subject: (1) François' obsessive relationship with food and orality more broadly, and (2) the novel's viscerally ambivalent relationship to racial difference. It is these two symptoms that, when read together, offer a particularly compelling answer to our earlier question about Man's libidinal engagement with "not-quite-humans." However, since these dimensions of melancholia are so closely intertwined in the text, I will take a brief aside to contextualize each of them.

With regards to the first point (orality), consider that the key etiological feature in Freud's original essay—that which distinguishes healthy mourning from pathological melancholia—is the introjection of the lost object, a psychic form of *consumption* (Freud 249-50). True to the etymological roots of the word (*melan* – black, *kholē* – bile), melancholic identification is a radically gastroenteric process. According to Karl Abraham, object loss is linked to the first stage of the anal-sadistic phase, wherein the child grapples with the trauma of involuntarily expelling a part of

himself. The indignation towards this lost object thus takes the form of a nascent sadism—the desire to annihilate the beloved shit that has left him (Abraham 426). Meanwhile, identification qua introjection is modeled on the physical act of eating—of taking something into oneself. When a lost human is introjected as an object, then, melancholia is rendered a doubly cannibalistic act—firstly in that a person is being devoured, and secondly insofar as that loss was originally experienced as the ejection of fecal matter. Abraham supports this thesis with a number of case studies in which the patients unconsciously conflate the beloved, the edible, the lost, and the dead. A man who has lost his wife and child to a botched cesarean section is haunted by a dream in which he witnesses strips of his wife’s hacked up body hanging in a slaughter house, while other patients harbor recurring fantasies of “biting into every possible part of the body of their love object—breast, penis, arm, buttocks and so on... or [otherwise occupying] themselves with necrophagic images” (Abraham 448).

With regards to the second point (race), authors such as Anne Cheng, David Eng, Shinhee Han, and Paul Gilroy have demonstrated how racial subject formation under the conditions of white supremacy operates according to a melancholic logic. “On the one hand,” Cheng writes,

[white identity is] secured through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate and whose ghostly presence nonetheless guarantees its centrality. On the other side, the racial other (the so-called melancholic object) also suffers from racial melancholia whereby his or her racial identity is imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost-never-possible [white] perfection. (*Melancholy* xii)

White and non-white subjects are thus caught in a reciprocal, asymmetrical melancholic bind, simultaneously loving and hating their racial others. While the above authors have mobilized this theory primarily to account for the psychic fallout of racism experienced by people of color, melancholia also serves as a powerful heuristic for understanding the ways in which racism on the part of the white subject is partially constituted by the desire to both *be and have* the racial other.

III. Spice

Returning to Houellebecq, consider the endless train of “ethnic” microwave dinners that François consumes throughout the course of the novel. These frozen commodities—*tikka masala*, *biryani*, *rogan josh*, Berber-style *moussaka*—serve on the one hand as the protagonist’s pathetic attempt to liven up his insipid life with the spice of the other, and on the other hand, as a sign of his enduring attachment to the generalized disgust that renders his life so dreadful in the first place (Houellebecq 31, 103). As in bell hooks’s seminal essay “Eating the Other,” racial and ethnic otherness

in *Submission* are offered up as a means of ameliorating what Sam Keen has called cultural anhedonia (hooks 25): the notion that pleasure has somehow withered away in postmodern society. The spice of “primitive” people—imagined as less modern, less alienated, less repressed—rescues the flavorless wash of whiteness from sinking into a Baudrillardian symbolic death (hooks 23). In hooks’s text, white people attempt to harvest this dangerously raw pleasure via vacations, sex, food, and countless other commodities. Along these lines, note how the marketing of François’s TV dinners mirrors the broader affective ambiguity of the melancholic circuits in which they materialize: frozen exotic food signifies, on the one hand, the bountiful promise of a colorful, fertile, unalienated elsewhere, and on the other, the frigid, isolating hell of late modernity in the West.⁴

Crucial for our purposes, though, is the direct link that Houellebecq makes between foreign fare and foreign flesh as escapist commodities:

Escort sites were something like restaurant guides, whose remarkable flights of lyricism evoked pleasures decidedly superior to the dishes one actually tasted... Eventually I decided on Nadia, a girl of Tunisian extraction⁵. It was arousing, in a way, to pick a Muslim, given the overall political situation (Houellebecq 159; my emphasis).

Unsurprisingly, François discovers that Nadia turns out to have sex “like a robot” (Houellebecq 159). The escorts are thus like the frozen dinners not only in that they promise a bright flash of exotic pleasure, but also in that they wind up thoroughly disappointing. It would be wrong, however, to attribute this hedonic insufficiency to the mere superficiality of capitalist simulacra. Frozen dinners and foreign escorts are appetizing to François precisely because they are somewhat *unappetizing*. That is to say, the self-sabotage characteristic of François’s melancholy operates both on the level of pursuit (wherein François cannot bring himself to *want* to enjoy anything) and on the level of object-choice (wherein François seeks out objects of pleasure that he finds disgusting). Paradoxically, the TV dinners and the escorts are thus insufficiently pleasurable in part because they are insufficiently disgusting.

As multiple scholars have noted (Clément, Huston, David) it would be a profound understatement to say that erotic disgust is a common theme throughout Houellebecq’s work. In *Submission*, the protagonist is utterly transfixed by the bodies of women that revolt him (Houellebecq 19), he underscores his poor taste in contrast to his urbane colleague (75), he states outright that humanity disgusts him (176), and he even feels sick during sexual encounters: “I didn’t even want to fuck her, or maybe I sort of wanted to fuck her but I also sort of wanted to die, I couldn’t really tell. I felt a slight wave of nausea” (37). This is not, however, a Sartrean nausea—a bilious encounter with the raw existence of things, stripped

of the palliative guise of essence. Indeed, an existentialist rendering of François' predicament would relegate the embodied effects of race and gender to the realm of mere facticity. In this view, nausea has less to do with the particular incarnation of a sociocultural identity, and more to do with the relationship between facticity and transcendence per se. Houellebecqian nausea, by contrast, is intimately bound up with the bungling materialization of raced and gendered bodies.

Note that François's final thought in this passage—*I feel sick*—triggers the realization that sushi, a foreign food he had ordered to seduce a woman, has not yet arrived: "Where the fuck was Rapid Sushi, anyway?" (Houellebecq 37). While the protagonist of the novel might not seem to be a virulent racist to certain readers (he expresses slight discomfort around white nationalists, generally can't be bothered to care about anything political, and ultimately converts to Islam at the behest of the university), we mustn't forget that the entire conceit of the novel is a xenophobic fantasy that recapitulates the fear-mongering rhetoric of the far-right (satirical potential notwithstanding). Any signifier of foreignness in this novel—anything Arab, anything Muslim, anything non-Western—is thus necessarily occupying the position of a phobic object.⁶

Moreover, *Submission's* melancholic relationship to corporeal difference is articulated as much along racial lines as it is along gendered lines. That is to say, its racism is virtually always articulated through misogyny. Women in the text appear as helpless ingénues (Myriam), voluptuous vixens (Nadia), revolting hags (Chantal Delouze), obedient cooks lurking on the periphery of conversation (Marie-Françoise), and submissive veiled automatons (the Muslim students shuffling through the hallways of the university).⁷ Above all, though, women in *Submission* are instruments of flesh, both in that they are *made of* flesh and in that they *work with* flesh. Nostalgically pondering the era of Huysmans, one of the many men that François idolizes with manifest homoerotic intensity, the protagonist draws a direct connection between women's dual function as purveyors of carnal pleasure—to make meat and to take meat:

Certainly, in an era when a wife bought and peeled the vegetables herself, trimmed the meat and spent hours simmering the stew, a tender and nurturing relationship could take root; the evolution of comestible conditions had caused us to forget this feeling, which, in any case, as Huysmans frankly admits, is a weak substitute for the pleasures of the flesh. In his own life, he never set up house with one of these 'good little cooks' whom Baudelaire considered, along with whores, the only kind of wife a writer should have—an especially sensible observation when you consider that a whore can always turn herself into a good little cook over time, *that this is even her secret desire, her natural bent.* (Houellebecq 82; my emphasis)

As in Chantal Akerman's infamous meatloaf scene in *Jeanne Dielman*, the ability to turn dead flesh into edible meat is here explicitly linked to a woman's ability to turn her own living flesh into fuckable meat. Furthermore, the close relationship between a woman's own flesh and the flesh that she prepares is dramatically intensified when the woman is *racialized*. As the book progresses, the new regime gradually seduces the (exclusively male) faculty members of the university into conversion by offering them a tantalizing array of wives whose primary purposes are cooking for and making love to their husbands. Indeed, an analysis of Houellebecq's text is hardly necessary to uncover the ways in which racial and gendered difference work to exclude women of color from the category of the human. He writes, "A woman is a human, obviously, but she represents a slightly different kind of humanity. She gives a life a certain perfume of exoticism" (Houellebecq 176).

The simultaneous disgust and desire that François derives from consuming foreign women like Nadia and Rachida (who, he notes, meticulously *licks* up the drops of his semen [Houellebecq 168]) is thus bound up with his penchant for foreign food on a dizzying number of levels: the slippage between the women's flesh and edible meat, the eroticization of foreign women's ability to make food, the repetitive ingress and egress of organic matter entailed by the sexual acts themselves, the joint commodification of spicy women and spicy food, and finally, the inevitable disappointment that both of these escapist routes lead to.

IV. Taste

On a broader level, *Submission* figures the virtuosic cultivation of taste as a *sine qua non* of racial and socioeconomic power. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Houellebecq consistently contrasts François's passively lowbrow palate with the exquisite tastes of his nativist colleague, not so subtly named Godefroy *Lempereur*. (Aside from the obvious connotations of his surname, could this be a reference to Godefroy de Bouillon, a leader of the First Crusade?) *Lempereur* appears exclusively in lush, ornate settings, always sipping top-shelf alcohol:

With its leather club chairs, dark floors and red curtains, Delmas was exactly his kind of place. He would never have set foot in the café across the street, the Contrescarpe, with its annoying fake bookshelves. He was a man of taste. He ordered a glass of champagne... (Houellebecq 75)

Moreover, consistent with the magisterial feel of *Lempereur's* baroque taste, we are told that the white nationalist *mondain* resides in the heart of Chinatown: a sort of colonial outpost just minutes away from Place d'Italie. As one of the novel's principle stand-ins for the far-right, *Lempereur* thus serves as a rococo nod to the carnal undertones of Bourdieu's

theory of taste. If to be distinctive is to distinguish, Houellebecq's text reminds us that the mouth's function as a site of *ontological triage* (combining for quality) is inextricable from its function as a site of *ontological transformation* (converting food into flesh). Occupying the pole position on the Great Chain of Being then—a hierarchy that stitches together spectra of race, class, gender, and species—is as much about *consuming* as it is about *determining* what lies below. Hence Roland Barthes' argument that "full-bloodedness is the *raison d'être* of steak" (Barthes 69). In order to assimilate the "bull-like strength" of this particular cut of meat—at once a "part of the nation," "inalienable [French] property," and "the very flesh of the French soldier"—the French man must eat it *saignant* or *bleu*, culinary terms which index the blood that must be spilt in order to constitute virile, patriotic life (Barthes 69-70). As in *Submission*, Barthes' *Mythologies* suggests that the ability to select proper foods is inextricable from that very act's capacity to metabolically and symbolically constitute the raced, classed, and nationalized flesh of the eater.

The construction of traditional Frenchness (read: white, masculine Frenchness) as rooted in the cultivation of proper taste is corroborated by a shift that occurs midway through the novel, when François leaves the city and seeks refuge in the countryside. Here the frozen TV dinners and endless stream of discount curries vanish, giving way to warm, fresh, home-cooked French cuisine. As François is mesmerized by the political meditations of Alain Tanneur (and sinks once again into a flight of homoerotic fancy), Marie-Françoise orchestrates a resplendent display of traditional food: tartlets stuffed with ducks' necks and shallots, a fava bean and dandelion salad with shaved parmesan, a lamb shank confit with sautéed potatoes, and a *croustade landaise* with apples and nuts—accompanied by a Cahors, a Sauternes, and finally, Bas-Armagnac in the sitting room (Houellebecq 135).⁸ *La vraie France Profonde*, this scene seems to suggest, lies as much in the bowels of the country as it does in the bowels of the Frenchman. Consider how the consumption of a French *digestif* helps coax François into a state of nostalgia for medieval Christendom. While he "[wilts] in the brandy fumes, pondering the old spy's lustrous skull and smoking jacket," François gradually submits to the nationalistic pride of the "neat, elegant, cultured, ironic old man" rattling off Péguy and going on about the grandeur of European heritage (Houellebecq 136).

Moreover, the role that scenes of epicurean mastery play in conjuring up a vision of a bygone white man's France are obversely substantiated by the hopeless disaster that results from a world in which women work. When François goes to a friend's barbecue, he soon realizes that the wife had "been working all day and was exhausted..." (Houellebecq 80). Plus, he notes, "she'd been watching too many reruns of *Come Dine with Me*

on Channel M6 and had planned a menu that was much too ambitious” (Houellebecq 80). Owing to the apparent incompatibility of professional and domestic prowess among women in a Houellebecqian universe, she ruins her morel soufflé and her guacamole, her husband gets too drunk to grill, and François ultimately has to take over, only to put the nail in the cheap, pre-fab coffin: “before I knew it, the lamb chops were covered in a film of charred fat, blackish and probably carcinogenic... we were alone before the mound of charred meat, and the other guests were emptying the bottles of rosé, oblivious” (Houellebecq 80). The sociocultural fallout of late modernity then (overworked, undersexed spouses; screaming children; inordinate drinking), crystallizes in this scene as a culinary failure. The distance between the countryside and the suburbs—between the refined guardians of *la France Profonde* and the frazzled vanguard of a depressed, postmodern Europe—finds visceral expression in the contrast between a perfectly cooked lamb shank and a revolting slab of charred beef.

V. Allophagy & Autophagy

Through the tastes, consumptive practices, and culinary arts of Houellebecq’s characters, we have explored how his novel paints a vivid picture of the melancholic bind that characterizes racial subject formation, grounding this affective ambivalence in its similarly slippery somatic substrate: the vicissitudes of the gut. So far, we have analyzed these libidinal dynamics primarily through the white man’s relationship to foreign meat (broadly construed). But as Cheng reminded us in the beginning of this essay, racial melancholia is as much about the self as it is about the other. The simultaneous disgust and desire that the white subject experiences in the face of racial difference is predicated on a fraught dialectic of identification and disidentification with that other, and thus, by extension, with the self. Drawing together the strands of misogyny, racism, and gastroerotic anxiety that we have traced throughout *Submission*, consider how the following excerpt illuminates the reflexive structure of the novel’s melancholia. Conflating leftist intellectualism, emasculation, and submission to foreign influence via the consumption of a supposedly disgusting Arabic commodity, Houellebecq writes with distinctly Poujadiste verve:

The advancement of Steve’s career at the university, according to Marie-Françoise, was due entirely to the fact that he was *eating Big Delouze’s pussy*. This seemed possible, albeit surprising. With her broad shoulders, her grey crew cut, and her courses in ‘gender studies’, Chantal Delouze... had always struck me as a dyed-in-the-wool lesbian, but I could have been wrong, or maybe she bore a hatred towards men that expressed itself in fantasies of domination. Maybe forcing Steve, with his pretty, vapid little face and his long silken curls, to kneel down between her chunky thighs brought her to new and hitherto unknown heights of ecstasy. True or false, I couldn’t get the image out of my head

that morning, on the terrace of the tea room of the Paris Mosque, as I watched him suck on his repulsive apple-scented hookah. (Houellebecq 25; original italics)

We see melancholic self-hatred here not only insofar as François is disgusted by his own obsession (the consumption of “ethnic” commodities), but also insofar as the true target of *décliniste* anxiety is really other French white men. Like Pierre Poujade, Éric Zemmour, and Renaud Camus, François and Houellebecq seem to be more repulsed by those “true French” people (read: white progressives) that bend over and submit to foreigners than they are by the foreigners themselves. (Marine Le Pen: “the fact that everybody is obligated to *submit to* dietary constraints imposed by a religion... is profoundly unacceptable and disgraceful” [“L’offensive,”].) The ways in which Houellebecq’s novel reveals the melancholic structure of French nativism thus mirror broader theorizations of racial disgust by scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek, and Michelle Stephens, who have demonstrated how hatred of the racial other betrays a more fundamental horror of confronting head-on the fantasmatic means by which the hegemonic self is precariously established.

Indeed, the Lacanian idiom that subtends the work of these three theorists not only provides a means of accounting for the affective contradictions that pervade *Submission*, but also clarifies the intimate relationship between *food* and *race* in the melancholic universe. Julia Kristeva argues in *Black Sun* that the melancholic “mourns not an Object but the Thing... the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated” (Kristeva 13). While object loss can be compensated for by libidinal displacement across signifiers, the loss of the Thing can never be recouped. One cannot symbolically substitute what cannot be symbolized in the first place. If François seeks the *jouissance* primordially fused to the Thing then, he finds it in the cannibalistic consumption of his own, fleshy doppelgängers—those racial others whose dreadfully alluring mixture of mimesis and alterity throw into crisis the possibility of an immaculate white body. For as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks has argued, *whiteness functions as a “master signifier (without a signified) that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference”* (Seshadri-Crooks 3-4; emphasis added). To mourn the loss of whiteness—for this is indeed the core of French *déclinisme*—is to mourn that emptiness at the center of the wheel that allows it to turn in the first place;⁹ the originary loss which inaugurates the play of signifiers in a white supremacist symbolic economy. If whiteness is the master signifier that allows French flesh to enter into being, and the symbolic efficacy of whiteness depends upon

the relegation of “other” types of flesh to sub-human, edible status, *then a melancholic relationship to whiteness itself is by definition a form of racial cannibalism*. In François’s case, this carnal communion with an abject reflection of the self thus serves as a masochistic repetition compulsion to restage, over and over again, the loss that he cannot bear to acknowledge. Put more simply, François lives in a perpetual state of choking on the other, or, as Kyla Tompkins has so eloquently put it, of racial indigestion (Tompkins).

Moreover, insofar as this “choking” on the other is inextricable from the fantasmatic means by which the choker is established in the first place—a disidentification qua dyspepsia—racial indigestion perpetually blurs the border between eating the other and eating the self, between *allophagy* and *autophagy*. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the internal contradictions of melancholic logic (i.e., “I” eat the other, the other becomes the one that does the eating)¹⁰ reflect the aporetic structure of the very concept of cannibalism. The word *cannibal* is a variant of the Spanish term *Caribal*, which in turn refers to the Carib people, who Christopher Columbus and his crew believed to eat human flesh (Kilani 15). Paradoxically, the cannibal’s status as monstrous other depends on its status as a human who eats other humans. But if being a human who eats human flesh removes one from the category of the human, then one is not eating what one is, and one is not aberrational in the first place. A strange hybrid of Bertrand Russell’s logic and Broadway’s *Sweeney Todd*, the cannibal is the barber who eats all those, and only those, who do not eat themselves.

The tenuousness of the line between allophagy and autophagy—both in melancholic identification and cannibalist semantics—points up the more capacious problem that Butler has characterized as “the resolution of a tropological function into the ontological effect of the self” (Butler 169). If the entity which turns upon itself¹¹ is reflexively constituted by that turning, in what sense can the entity be said to exist in the first place? It is precisely this foundational movement, not as immaterial figural turn, but as radically material chiasm between eater and eaten, that opens up an understanding of racist anxiety operating beyond subject/object dichotomies. Indeed, reflecting on the captivating fleshiness of sushi, Anne Cheng argues that the consumption of this foreign fare “provides a *trope* for the dizzying technology of subject (de)formation being enacted every time we eat” (*Ornamentalism* 115; my emphasis). Along similar, though less immediately gastronomic lines, note that the transformative moment of the novel—what allows François to return to the Brave New World of Islamic Paris from *la France profonde* and finally submit to the new regime through conversion—is François’s melancholic meditation on the Black Virgin at Rocamadour. We might read “Black Virgin” here in two senses: first as the abject reflection of Mary’s divine, marmoreal body (charred

like the meat at the barbecue); and second, as Black in the racial sense. François stares at her for days, *forgetting to eat*,¹² savoring the crystallization of his despair in material form. And then, finally, Houellebecq writes in the voice of François,

I felt her moving away from me in space and across the centuries while
I sat there in my pew, shriveled and puny. After half an hour, I got up,
fully deserted by the Spirit, reduced to my damaged, perishable body.
(Houellebecq 144)

This relieving moment of externalization comes to an end, and he must re-identify with, re-consume, his chewed up, spit-out double. In this excruciating flash of clarity, he can no longer take refuge in the other—the Black Virgin, the Tunisian sex worker, the *tikka masala*. He is devastatingly, resoundingly *himself*. In Ouroborosian moments like these, where allophagy gives way to autophagy and the consumptive body turns upon itself, we catch a glimpse of the relationship between the far-right's obsession with the image of France as an ailing, decomposing body and its anxious relationship to the introjection of foreign flesh on multiple fronts: via borders (immigration), via mouths (eating), and via genital orifice (fucking and getting fucked, in both senses). For François and *les déclinistes* more broadly, abject rumination coincides with melancholic consumption—at once coprophagic, necrophagic, and cannibalistic—precisely at the point where the racial other's nightmarish body materializes, a ghostly incarnation of the white subject's traumatic relationship to its own terrifyingly mortal, terrifyingly mediocre flesh.

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Notes

1. While these texts and this paper deal specifically with racialization in Europe and the United States, I am not arguing that these gustatory dynamics are unique to the West. I am suggesting, however, that they are integral to understanding the ways in which racial hierarchies—which are both historically and symbolically linked to *species* hierarchies—continue to be articulated at the level of the unconscious.
2. To be sure, a project perpetually haunted by its constitutive *failure* to keep types of flesh from bubbling up out of the slots to which they are assigned.
3. I intentionally forego the classic orthographic distinction between conscious fantasy and unconscious phantasy in order to resist an analysis that draws clear lines between these psychic scenes. The conscious/unconscious, *f/ph* distinction is moreover complicated by the possibility of a third instance: what Sándor Ferenczi called the biological unconscious. Indeed, building on Ferenczi's work, Elizabeth Wilson has gone so far as to suggest that the gastroenteric tract itself may be a site of fantasy.
4. Houellebecq explicitly maps out this civilizationist geography in his description of the porn that François watches, comparing a collective blow-job to the avian evacuation of cold, dreary climates: "The penis would pass from one mouth to the other, tongues crossing paths like restless flocks of swallows in the somber skies above the Seine-et-Marne, when they prepare to leave Europe for their winter migration" (25-6). The cool,

- temperate North is the site of pixelated proxy-pleasure; the warm, tropics the site of the real thing (perhaps even *das Ding*).
5. The capitalistic connotations of “extraction” are an artefact of the English translation. However, they do help to make up for what is lost in the shift away from the French “*Nadiabeurette*,” which plays on the homophony between *beurette* (Arab girl) and *beurre* (butter).
 6. There are, of course, crucial distinctions between the ways in which different non-white bodies are fetishized in white supremacist contexts (see, for example, Cheng, Massad, hooks). The collapse of non-Western signifiers into a monolithic “phobic object” is here meant to underscore the Houellebecqian logic of whiteness, and certainly not to provide an exhaustive description of the ways in which historically specific discourses of otherness have been erotically figured vis-à-vis white masculinity.
 7. To cite but one of many examples of Houellebecq’s prurient, racist misogyny: “Hidden all day in impenetrable black burkas, rich Saudi women transformed themselves by night into birds of paradise with their corsets, their see-through bras, their G-strings with multicoloured lace and rhinestones. They were exactly the opposite of Western women, who spent their days dressed up and looking sexy to maintain their social status, then collapsed in exhaustion once they got home, abandoning all hope of seduction in favour of clothes that were loose and shapeless” (Houellebecq 79).
 8. Although it is Marie-Françoise who is François’s colleague, an authority on Balzac, it is her husband who does all the talking. When François leaves, he *bids farewell* to Alain, while he merely compliments Marie-Françoise on her cooking.
 9. This metaphor is inspired by the story of Lao-tse’s chariot wheel in Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (127).
 10. Judith Butler formulates this paradox concisely in *The Psychic Life of Power*: “The ‘turn’ that marks the melancholic response to loss appears to initiate the redoubling of the ego as an object; only by turning back on itself does the ego acquire the status of perceptual object... Not only is the attachment said to go from love to hate as it moves from the object to the ego, but the ego itself is produced as a *psychic object*; in fact, the very articulation of this psychic space, sometimes figured as ‘internal,’ depends on this melancholic turn...” (Butler 168-9).
 11. “Tropé” derives from the Greek τροπος (*tropos*), a variant of the base verb τρέπειν (*trepein*), meaning “to turn” (“tropé”).
 12. He suffers “an attack of mystical hypoglycemia” (Houellebecq 143).

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