

“DIG, WHAT MAKES YOUR MOUTH SO BIG?”: OFF-MODERN
NOSTALGIA, SYMBOLIC CANNIBALISM, AND CROSSING THE
BORDER OF THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE IN CLARENCE MAJOR’S
“THE SLAVE TRADE: VIEW FROM THE MIDDLE PASSAGE”

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ABSTRACT

African American literature on the Middle Passage has always challenged white supremacy’s language with its power to define and control. This article demonstrates how the border of such a “Universal Language” is challenged and trespassed in Clarence Major’s ekphrastic poem “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” in order to communicate – through the implementation of the voice of a disembodied water spirit Mfu – the black perspective on understanding the slave trade and effectively resist the symbolic cannibalism of Western Culture. The trope of antropophagy often appears in Middle Passage poems in the context of (mis)communication (which results in the production of controlling, racist images of blacks) and stands as a sign of Euro-American power to create the historical, hierarchical, racial reality of the Atlantic slave trade in its economic and symbolic dimensions. The strategy implemented by Major in his poetic confrontation with representation of historical slave trade in European and American Fine arts may be classified as “off-modern” (to use Svetlana Boym’s (2001) nomenclature), which immediately places his poem in a “tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia” as a means of a critical analysis of the heritage and limitations of a given culture. My claim is that the poem’s “off-modern nostalgia” perspective is a version of textualist strategy which Henry Louis Gates (1988) identifies as Signifyin(g). Major/Mfu successfully perforates and destabilizes the assumed objectivity and neutrality of the images of blacks and blackness created and circulated within the realm of the visual arts of the dominant Western Culture. In “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” Signifyin(g) takes the form of what could be called an ekphrastic (re)interpretation of actual works of art and joins in the critique of essentialist views often associated with understanding of meaning.

Keywords: African American poetry; visual arts; representation; images of the blacks; ekphrastic Signifyin(g); Middle Passage; slave trade.

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African American literature on the Middle Passage has always challenged white supremacy's naturalizing/normalizing language with its power to define and control, a language which anoints itself as universal and draws a clear-cut line between whiteness and blackness, humanity and monstrosity, non-anthropophagy and cannibalism, the communicable and the forcibly silenced. As convincingly argued by Craig Werner in his essay "New Democratic Vistas", language in a solipsistic culture (such as the racist United States, for instance) is nothing but a "dialect of the dominant group" (1986: 62) that enforces its system of values and norms (presenting them as universal) through discursive practices (granting, regulating, or denying access to discourse according to its vested interests), which, arguably, pertains to all kinds of texts of culture, literature and the visual code of Western art included. Such distinctions and reservations confront us with the ethical aspects of looking and envoicing, inherent in ekphrastic practices, touching upon issues such as: exploration of the difference and relationship between the visible and the articulable in their epistemological function; the conceptualization of gaze and an analysis of hidden ideologies in visual representations; and the working of what Marilyn Frye calls the "arrogant eye" (1983: 66–72). As Brian Glavey acutely observes, "questions of visibility politics are often not questions about visibility *per se*, but rather about visibility as mediated by or put into relation with speech acts" (2016: 9). Here I am interested in demonstrating how the border of this "Universal Language" is trespassed in Clarence Major's ekphrastic poem "The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage" (1998) in order to communicate the black perspective on understanding the slave trade, and to effectively resist the symbolic cannibalism of Western culture as well as challenge its nostalgic mythology preserved in works of the visual arts by taking an "off-modern" turn. For this reason, the article consists of two parts: in the first part I demonstrate an interconnection that exists between the concepts used, establishing in this way a field of theoretical reference for the reading of Major's poem, and in the second part the poem is analyzed and interpreted.

"The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage", which confronts the question of the representation of blacks and blackness in the visual arts, should be perceived as an attempt to "see through race" understood as a "medium ... – that is, as an 'intervening substance' that both enables and obstructs social relationships" (Mitchell 2012: 4), in order to reveal the complexity of racist mechanisms inscribed in particular works of Western art (and in the code of Western art itself), the historical character and inconsistencies of those mechanisms included. In this way Major's "painterly text" (Selzer 1998), like African American contemporary poetic ekphrasis in general, becomes an epistemological tool for a quasi-nostalgic revisiting of the past in order to sound the eternal idols (in the fashion of Nietzsche's hammer used as a tuning fork) and

reveal Western art’s complicity in the production of race and thus the legitimizing of racism, as well as – to draw an analogy with Hortense Spillers’s in-depth comments on slavery – a means of exposing race as a “primarily discursive” phenomenon which requires constant “reinvention” by “every generation” (Spillers 2003: 179–189) of readers/viewers. Such reinventions must inevitably involve rethinking and (re)interpreting the images and narratives of race spawned by the objective claims and universal concerns of the hegemonic Western culture in the past.

The strategy implemented by Major in his poetic confrontation with the representation of both historical slave trade and blacks in European Fine arts may be classified as “*off-modern*” (to use Svetlana Boym’s nomenclature), which immediately places his poem in a “tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia” (Boym 2001: xvi) as a means of critical analysis of the heritage and limitations of a given culture. As Boym argues, the “history of nostalgia might allow us to look back at modern history not solely searching for newness and technological progress but for unrealized possibilities, unpredictable turns and crossroads” (2001: xvi). In the context of this observation, the critic clarifies the term “*off-modern*” in the following way: “The adverb *off* confuses our sense of direction; it makes us explore side shadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress; it allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narrative of ... history” (Boym 2001: xvi–xvii). As a result of its interest in such an active re-reading and re-interpreting of the past, preserved for instance in the form of historiography, objects of art, and other artifacts, “[o]ff-modernism offers a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and no less modern reinvention of tradition” (Boym 2001: xvii). The concentration on and foregrounding of various off-center details in the works of art which Major’s poem confronts create proper conditions for reading their frequently covert messages pertaining to the black historical presence and experience.

The communicability of both the phenomenon of the Atlantic slave trade and the experience of the transported Africans has always been a central problem of African American poetry on the Middle Passage, from Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage” (1962) to a relatively recent volume *Ardency. A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels* (2011) by Kevin Young. The authors of such poems, in order to achieve their epistemological goals, have had to make crucial aesthetic and philosophical decisions as to what necessary strategies to employ and what choices to make on the level of the poetics of the text. Less conspicuous is the presence of the trope of cannibalism in this poetry, as its application and intensity differ substantially from poem to poem. Sometimes cannibalism is directly mentioned and taken literally, whereas in other poems it is merely alluded to, implied, taken metaphorically or even unspoken. In all cases, however, this trope

is closely connected with access to discourse and power, enslavement and freedom, being devoured by rational language-cum-economy of Modernity, and the black sustainability that opposes it. Thus, it must be taken into consideration when Middle Passage poems are read and interpreted, especially because the motif of antropophagy often appears in them in the context of (mis)communication (which results in the production of controlling, racist images of the blacks) and stands as a sign of Euro-American power to create the historical, hierarchical, racial reality of the Atlantic slave trade in its economic and symbolic dimensions.

As mentioned above, not every poem on the Middle Passage openly uses the trope of cannibalism. For example, neither Robert Hayden's now classic "Middle Passage" nor Sonia Sanchez's "Improvisation" mention cannibalism directly, which, arguably, does not mean that the trope is completely absent in them. In the former poem its absence is quite conspicuous, especially when it is read in the light of the poems written much later. Apart from a passing remark about the "butchered bodies of ... true Christians" (Hayden 1962: 53; emphasis mine), which can be classified as a discreet allusion to cannibalism, there are no other references to it in the text. Even the incident with the *Amistad* cook, who threatened in jest the transported Africans that they would be fattened and devoured on arrival, is not mentioned, despite the fact that Hayden's poem is rooted in painstaking research, conducted by its author, into the *Amistad* case, which makes cannibalism *present* as a taboo topic in the text. Sanchez's "Improvisation" is a different matter: it also does not introduce directly the theme of cannibalism, but the trope is strongly encoded in the sequence of phrases dispersed in the text: "coming across the ocean" (1995: 75), "packing of all of us in ships" (1995: 76), "standing on auction blocks" and "giving birth ... / [e]very nine months" (1995: 77), which points at the commodification and consumption of African bodies by the economic system of Modernity.

Cannibalism is mentioned most frequently in Kevin Young's quasi-epic collection *Ardency*, which deals with the *Amistad* rebellion and makes an attempt to restore the voice of the "cargo" through the means of the polyphonic utterance of traumatic experience of the transported African slaves. In Young's poem this frequency results from the fact that a cannibalistic threat made by the cook may have been a catalyst for the rebellion. In "New Haven", a poem written in the form of a letter addressed to John Quincy Adams, who defended the Africans, a slave signed as Kin-na states it directly: "Cook says he kill, he eat Mendi people; / we afraid; we kill cook. Then captain kill one man with knife, and lick / Mendi people plenty. We never kill captain, he kill us ..." (Young 2011: 36) There are also further references to the factual knowledge about the events that took place on *La Amistad*. For instance force-feeding, which had cannibalistic connotations for the transported slaves, appears in "Processional" ("the rice our people / for

generations / grew – forced / down our gullet”) (Young 2011: 60), only to gain vehemence in bitter irony of “Rice Song”: “How / could we not / believe in heaven / having swam / thro hell? Forced to eat rice till vomit” (Young 2011: 102). Quite significantly, those facts are uncovered not by legal documents but through the incorrect voices of the black witnesses, especially the personal voice of Cinque, the leader of the rebellion. Moreover, in several places cannibalism is treated openly metaphorically: for instance in “Catechism”, where it stands for what Marilyn Frye calls “arrogant gaze” (1983: 66–72) – the gaze that appropriates and deprives of subjectivity and identity (“Savaged, ravaged / by the cannibal eyes of the cruel – / by those who could call themselves / *master* or *senor* or *Christian* / or all three – their eating eyes – / their *thou shalt not* / Then they turn us chattel”) (Young 2011: 124); in “Prayer”, where a Christian prayer becomes distorted so that its devouring nature is revealed (“standing in the eve of prayer” is transformed into “standing in the eaten prayer”) (Young 2011: 39); or in “Processional”, in which the West’s Satanic appetite is pointed out (“How many the sea / swallow’d – I could / not say – see – / Ah was not of the Lawd”) (Young 2011: 60). But in Young’s volume the act of speaking itself allows the black subject to reject in “Doxology” the role of a passive victim and dream of cannibalistic role-reversal based on a kind of mimicry:

They claim us flesh
eaters, – wish
we were and then
could have done to them
what Cook promised
awaited us –

(Young 2011: 80–81)

Similar strategies are implemented also in other Middle Passage poems. In Elizabeth Alexander’s “Translator”, a part of “Amistad” sequence in her volume *American Sublime*, the fear of white cannibalism taken literally is the first thing among atrocities mentioned by the slaves to James Covey – an African shipyard worker in New Haven, who spoke Mende and was employed as an interpreter: “We killed the cook, who said he would cook us. / They rubbed gunpowder and vinegar in our wounds. / We were taken away in broad daylight” (Alexander 2006: 39). Baraka’s “So the King Sold the Farmer”, by referring to the Middle Passage as “original western / holocaust” (1995: 265), establishes anthropoemic dominant of the culture of Modernity, only to immediately reveal concealed anthropophagy as its pre-condition: “They threw / our lives / a way / Beneath the violent philosophy / of primitive / cannibals / Primitive / Violent / Steam driven / Cannibals” (1995: 266). In Clarence Major’s “The Slave Trade: View from the

Middle Passage” the trope of “cannibalism” appears as Modernity’s insatiable, motivated economically, greed for “ivory, gold, land, fur, skin, chocolate, cocoa, / tobacco, palm oil, coffee, coconuts, sugar, silk, / Africans, mulatto sex, ‘exotic’ battles, / and ‘divinely ordained slavery’” (1998: 301) and as a projection on the Other of the Enlightenment’s repressed anthropophagic drive.

Whatever strategy is used in the individual works by Alexander, Baraka, Hayden, Major, Sanchez, and Young, their lowest common denominator is to restore the communal voice of the African witnesses/victims of the Middle Passage in order to break through the apparently transparent screen of the Universal Language. Whether it is attempted by means of a scrupulous study of historical facts and documents (Hayden), a jigsaw-puzzle technique of putting the lyrical and concrete details together (Alexander), polyphonic combination of letters, testimonies, and libretto (Young), superhuman speech of a trickster-like ghost (Major), cool observations-cum-outbursts of panic (Baraka), or inspired, trance-like improvisation (Sanchez), the purpose is to communicate the original experience of enslavement and the Middle Passage, which involves resistance and challenge to the tyranny of the Universal Language by taking a quintessentially off-modern turn in their representation.

The quotation from Major’s “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” used in the title of this article (“Dig, what makes your mouth so big?”) parodies the third question asked by Little Red Riding Hood, the one concerning the grandma/wolf’s devouring teeth. In Major’s wording the question points at the inseparability existing between physical, metaphorical, and symbolic cannibalism: the ritualistic consumption of human flesh practiced in some “primitive” cultures; the “gobbling up” of millions of Africans to feed the demand for cheap labour made by the New World’s economy; and the devouring of the Other’s identity in the process of enslavement and replacing it with a system of controlling images to provide moral and rational support for the slave trade. The question is in fact the second fairy-tale reference in the poem and comes immediately after an utterance made by Hansel to Gretel: “I’m afraid to go / to Africa because cannibals may / eat me / as they do one another” (Major 1998: 312).

In the context of what awaits the children lost in the haunted forest, this statement’s ironic undertone tastes delicious as, in the manner of psychological projection, it points at the covert anthropophagic practices of the White Witch Europe. The irony is maintained in Red Riding Hood’s provoking enquiry which, through the use of the word “dig” – characteristic of the *chic* black speech of the Black Power era yet nostalgically African in origin as it comes from *deg, dega*, which means in Wolof “to understand, appreciate, pay attention to” (Holloway & Vass 1993: 140) – forces the hungry American wolf in grandmother Europe’s costume to admit to and understand the nature of its own insatiability by digging

(into) its own subconsciousness. The effectiveness of this particular abuse of enchantment lies in the very justness of the big mouth metaphor which seamlessly combines the tropes of cannibalism and creation of a specific reality through the means of widely circulated images and word-of-mouth myths about Africans. Beginning the question with the imperative “Dig” – with its Senegambian roots – suggests an intention to take these images and myths to task and reinterpret them from the perspective of enslaved Africans.

This apparently nostalgic gesture (founded on a combination of the fairy-tale motifs and the mother-tongue, which suggests a yearning for the time of childhood or innocence) is in fact quintessentially off-modern. On one hand it uses nostalgia as a means of a “rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress”, but on the other hand, unlike nostalgia-proper, it refuses to “obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology” (Boym 2001: xv). Arguably, only on this condition the history of blacks in European discourse is analysable and re-interpretable.

Both flesh eating and the incapability of comprehensible speech have always provided a touchstone of difference. Herodotus uses them in strict interconnection with each other:

These Scythian husbandmen then occupy the country eastward for three days’ journey.... Beyond this region the country is desert for a great distance, and beyond the desert Anthrophagi dwell....The Anthrophagi have the worst savage customs of all men ... *they speak a peculiar language*; and ... are the only people that eat human flesh.

(quoted in Arens 1979: 10)

As Joy Porter (2012: 43) notices, “signifying inhumanity in others has always made it easier to treat those others in inhuman ways”, an observation that certainly applies to the white perception-and-treatment of blacks as cannibals. But from the point of view of the subject of this article equally important is Herodotus’ use of the physical space in symbolic function: the desert separates the human from the pseudo-human. In Middle Passage poems a similar role is played by the ocean since, according to white ideology, its crossing from Africa to the Americas meant for the transported blacks a journey towards civilisation and humanity, symbolised by understanding/accepting the Universal Language of the Christian religion and European philosophy, which rationalised slavery. Being incapable of understanding this Language equalled (self-) exclusion from the human race through discovering one’s inferiority, as testified by Gronniosaw.

During the crossing from the Gold Coast to Barbados, Gronniosaw – an African prince freshly captured and bought by the Dutch enslavers – makes an intriguing observation about the captain reading from the prayer-book:

[W]hen I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.

(quoted in Gates 1988: 136)

Gates comments on the profoundly symbolic quality of Gronniosaw's humiliating experience that establishes or reveals the subtle power relationship between whiteness and blackness, speaking and silence, presence and absence. The critic points out that according to Gronniosaw's narrative: firstly, "[t]he silent book did not ... acknowledge the black presence before it" (Gates 1988: 136); secondly, that "Gronniosaw can speak to the text only if the text first speaks to him" (Gates 1988: 137); and thirdly, that the African, devastated by his realization of the difference between his master's and his own relationship with the book, "seizes upon one explanation, and only one: the salient difference was his blackness, the very blackness of silence" (Gates 1988: 137).

But Gates goes beyond the strictly academic identification of the occurrence of the trope of blackness-as-absence in the excerpt quoted above when he points out the possibility of a more logical explanation: that the "book refused to speak to him because he could not [yet] speak Dutch" (1988: 137). The book devours Gronniosaw's black identity by turning his physical presence into a symbolic absence. Somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, between his Motherland Africa of his past and the future Land of the Founding Fathers America, Gronniosaw discovers his blackness to be despicable and abject, as his African self is simultaneously rejected and muted by the book's authority. This leads him to immediate uncritical acceptance of the authority of White Language. As a result, Gronniosaw's unpleasant experience represents a *rite de passage* from one identity to the other, which – to continue this cursory reference to Julia Kristeva's concepts – reminds to some extent of a passing from the (innocent) "semiotic" to the (post-lapsarian) "symbolic" with its power to define, introduce norms, and establish conditions and rules of rejection and abjection.

In contrast to this subjection, the black persona in Major's poem performs an unrestricted monologue, and thus embodies the regained African voice which had been lost during the Atlantic slave trade, a voice which sets for itself a task to (re)interpret white representations and controlling images of blackness, and by extension, to dis/un-cover the ideological foundations of "divinely ordained slavery", when – to use H. A. C. Cairns' ironically nostalgic phrase quoted in the poem – "[i]t was a good time to be white, / British, and Christian" (Major 1998:

301). Major’s “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage”, as its subtitle aptly suggests, is situated in the space in-between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. That middle-ground position is paralleled by situating the persona’s voice at the nexus of several discourses and experiences. The poem is a cross between a reflective narrative and a narrative poetic essay: it begins with the personal story of Mfu, which quickly becomes transcended and extended in order to reflect on the causes, consequences, and the realities of the slave trade. Mfu’s standpoint becomes precisely defined at the very start of the poem:

I am Mfu, not a bit romantic, a water spirit,
a voice from deep in the Atlantic:
Mfu jumped ship, made his escape, to find relief
from his grief on the way,
long ago, to Brazil or Georgia or Carolina –
he doesn't know which;
but this is real, not a sentimental
landscape
where he sleeps free in the deep waves,
free to speak his music:
Mfu looks generously in all directions
for understanding of the white men
who came to the shores
of his nation.

Mfu looks for a festive reason,
something
that might have slipped.

Mfu looks back at his Africa,
and there at Europe,
and over there at the Americas,
where many of his kin were shipped
and perished ...

(Major 1998: 300–301)

As a disembodied “voice from deep in the Atlantic” and a “water spirit”, Mfu is not limited physically and historically by time and space. His story is marked with a tinge of nostalgia, in the sense that it is also based on the “relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (Boym 2001: xvi). His suicidal leap overboard into the brine of the Atlantic, a desperate act committed by some of the transported Africans in order to escape the atrocities of the journey, allows him not only to “find relief / from his grief on the way”, but also to gain freedom to “speak his music”. By stressing the inseparability existing between music and language in African cultures (music as a mnemonic device in tonal languages),

the phrase introduces a uniquely black perception of slavery as well as a quintessentially black way of expressing this perspective. In spite of the fact that the above-quoted extract is densely intertextual (Mfu's compulsion to speak, after passing through an extreme experience during the sea journey, has obvious Coleridgean connotations – like the Ancient Mariner, Mfu is possessed by speech; the positioning of the speaking voice between the intimate "I" and the external apparently omniscient narrator brings to mind "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage"; and we also hear here a subtle echo of Ariel's song, which simultaneously sends us to Hayden's "Middle Passage" and its intertextual play with that excerpt from *The Tempest*), the persona rejects the temptation of a literary self-absorption of the text by emphasizing the fact that he is "not a bit romantic" and that "this is real, not a sentimental / landscape".

At the same time Mfu declares openly his purpose and reveals his strategy: he "looks generously in all directions / for *understanding* of the white men" and "looks for a *festive reason*, / something / that might have *slipped*" (emphasis mine). The words "understanding" and "reason", together with Mfu's distancing himself from a Romantic context and the depersonalization of his speech, establish his intellectual and argumentative attitude in search of the subconscious mechanisms supporting the idea and practice of slavery. Simultaneously, in this context, words such as "festive" and "generously" acquire a taste of irony; and, according to Linda Hutcheon, irony regarded as a "way of seeing the world" (1994: 1) has a strong potential for creating a specific ideological community equipped with the discursive means to oppose a dominant Language that fashions itself as the exponent of the Universal (Hutcheon 1994: 1–8).

In this way a uniquely black standpoint is established in Major's poem. Moreover, such a standpoint position situates Mfu's slave trade story in the realm "beyond individual psychology" (Boym 2001: xv) which is, as pointed out before, another characteristic feature of nostalgia *per se*. Yet, his readiness to critically "explore sideshadows and back alleys" (Boym 2001: xvii) makes his perspective quintessentially off-modern. Mfu's method resembles the playfully ironic strategy of dealing with Euro-American cultural discourse, identified by Gates as Signifyin(g) and symbolized by the linguistic activities of "two separate but related trickster figures" (1988: xx), Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, whose "central place ... in their traditions is determined by their curious tendency to reflect on the uses of the formal language" (Gates 1988: xxi) that serves as a means of control, dominance, and oppression. According to Gates, Africans were not completely devoured by the West's symbolic order and its attendant ideologies that attempted to "create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness" (1988: 4). The critic points out that the "African ... was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler, through space and time; and like every traveler, the African 'read' a new environment within a received framework of meaning

and belief” (Gates 1988: 4). Mfu (and his extension in the persona of the third-person narrator-commentator) is precisely such a traveler, decoding and deconstructing the messages concerning Africans generated by the racist order of the West. Major’s Mfu is an emanation of the black critical power epitomized by Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey.

At the very end of the first part of the poem Mfu is declared to be quite disinterested. After purifying himself psychologically by confronting the banal reality of being sold to slavers “for a damned shaving brush” by his own Chief Aidoo who “never had even one strand of facial hair” (Major 1998: 302) but “merely wanted [Mfu’s] / young wife” (Major 1998: 303), Mfu is

totally without
judgement
or ambition, suspended between
going and coming
in no need of even nutrition –
gray, eternal –
and therefore able to see, hear, and know
how to shape memory into the thing of wholeness
and to give this memory
not “the Negro revenged” voice
of abolitionist Wm. Cowper –
bless him –
but to see, say, what went into the making
of what, in those days, they called
Negrophobia.

(Major 1998: 304)

Liberated from his mortal coil and personal sense of hurt, and having crossed another barrier of the Universal Language in the form of abolitionist ventriloquism – yet another aspect of white cannibalism – Mfu is equipped with both objectivism and sharp tools for analysis and interpretation received from the tricksters. This power allows him to “shape memory into the thing of wholeness” by exposing, challenging, and simultaneously counteracting the controlling images of blacks produced in Western visual arts. In this way Major/Mfu’s strategic off-modern perspective preempts even a possibility of Europe’s art-induced nostalgia which, to quote Michael Kammen’s words, “is essentially history without guilt”. Since, as Kammen states, “[h]eritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than with shame” (1991: 688), it is necessary to remember Boym’s warning that in this sense nostalgia is an “abdication of ... responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure” (2001: xv).

Major’s poem consists of brief vignettes referring both to widespread motifs and themes concerning the representation of blacks as well as black-and-white hierarchical relationships and to the particular works of European and American

art. Linda Ferguson Selzer makes an almost complete catalogue of these references. The critic argues that Major efficiently implements his technique of “associative collage” to achieve a particular ideological goal: to “document European [this term clearly includes Euro-American] culture’s normalization of its own history of conquest through the representation of black people in a hierarchical history of progress” (1998: 210). Such a categorizing and symbolic representation of black people helped establish the norm of white supremacy – as argued by Toni Morrison (1993), the ideal of whiteness in America was established to a large extent through the construction of blackness as its negative counterpart.

Drawing on the Menil Foundation’s *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (1976), a four-volume collection of white representations of blacks in the visual arts, Selzer manages to identify most of the specific paintings Major’s “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” signifies on through a series of interconnected direct references and allusions. In her discussion of the “genealogies of various visual themes representing Blacks and of individual works themselves” (Selzer 1998: 227), the critic also makes extensive use of the comments of art historians Jean Devisse and Hugh Honour, the editors of volumes two and four respectively. In consequence, Selzer not only offers a disciplined and profound analysis of concrete works of art and themes, but also pinpoints the nature of the “ongoing struggle over meaning and form that takes place within an arena of conditioned systems of production” (1998: 226). Nonetheless, the critic also neglects, overlooks, or simplifies some issues which seem to be important in the understanding of Major’s poem.

Mfu deliberately initiates a striking role-reversal: in a manner resembling the symbolic strategy of the West exploring/colonizing the depths of the Dark Continent, Mfu sets off on a “tour deep into Europe,” whose purpose is to “explore / its sense of Mother Nature” (Major 1998: 305) in order to reveal the strict connection existing between the conviction of the universal character of the laws of nature and expansion of the slave trade during the Enlightenment. Here Major refers to the engraving “Allegory of Nature” that serves as the frontispiece for volume IV of G.-T. Raynal’s 1774 edition of *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, a work which discusses such topics as commerce, religion, and slavery from the perspective of the Enlightenment. The picture depicts in the foreground Nature represented as a naked white woman with six breasts suckling two babies – white and black – “this is good Europe” (Major 1998: 305); whereas in the background some whites overpower a group of blacks – “this is bad Europe” (Major 1998: 305).

If “[b]oth Europes baffle Mfu” (Major 1998: 305), it is because it dawns on him that, in spite of the assumed intended moral message of the picture (that slavery is against nature), the allegory reveals the contrary truth: that from the

European subconscious perspective Nature suckles its black offspring merely in order to bring them into submission. In place of the expected juxtaposition, the logical yet ironic connection existing between the “good Europe” and “bad Europe” is inadvertently revealed in the engraving, and in this light violence against blacks remains safely within the limits of the natural order, whose norm is white. Mfu discovers the Enlightenment in Europe to be Janus-faced rather than divided or conflicted, and driven by economic-and-power rather than moral principles – hence the sarcasm of the rhetorical question: “Could it be solely about greed and profit?” (Major 1998: 305).

Nonetheless, it must be added that Major/Mfu’s reading of the two components of the allegory of Nature also reveals his intention to interfere with the white symbolic order and to destabilize its Universal Language. This goal is achieved through the specific use of the technique of ekphrasis, since the apparent mimetic quality of the description of the engraving is seriously undermined by an intentional distortion of its visual content: the six-breasted white woman who represents Nature in Mfu’s view turns into a “giant pink pig” (Major 1998: 305), which proves that he refuses to emulate, copy, or repeat European truths; instead he intends to carry out critical interpretations of what he sees. Replacement of the Nature-as-woman from the actual picture with a Nature-as-sow seems to be part of his method of role-reversal: just as Africans were reduced to the level of primitivism and biology in the West’s discourse of race, here “charitable, kind, / compassionate Europe” turns out to be driven by its irrational, animal instinct (which is suggested by phrases such as “tit” and “[a] suckling sound”) whereas the rational, well-organized Europe is “evil”, and “mercenary”, hence more powerful (Major 1998: 305). Arguably, Mfu employs ekphrasis in its literal etymological meaning (Greek *ek* – ‘out,’ and *phrazō* – ‘I explain, point out’), and uses this literary technique in order to read hidden messages out of the visual representations of blackness in European art. In this light, Mfu’s trickster-like interpretative activism may be perceived as a strategy for resisting the symbolic cannibalism of the Universal Language with its clear-cut binary categories that allow the keeping of blacks in their “natural”, subservient roles.

Among the visual *topoi* identified by Devisse and Honour as frequently occurring in the representation of blacks in Western works of art, there are two such motifs strongly present in Major’s poem: the motif of the black supplicant and the image of the powerful black man at arms. In spite of the apparent contrast between them, both may be placed in the category of controlling images which provide the grounds for and support the idea of the religious, intellectual, and cultural inferiority of blacks. Their genealogies and histories are painstakingly described by Selzer (1998), who draws on Devisse’s and Honour’s expertise in the field of art history, so there is no need to explore this area in detail here. Nonetheless, the critic’s discussion turns out useful for the purpose of showing

the especial importance of understanding Major/Mfu's method of crossing the border of the Universal Language by means of re-interpretation: in the former category – of the Ethiopian Eunuch, the Queen of Sheba, and African in Josiah Wedgewood's abolitionist medallion; and in the latter – of the black King Caspar, the black St. Maurice, and Jean-Baptiste Belley as painted by Anne-Louis Girodet.

The three abovementioned epitomes of the black supplicant theme are part of Mfu's ironic vision of the process of spiritual enlightenment of Africa by making it part of the Christian world. The Ethiopian Eunuch is traditionally represented at the moment of receiving baptism from Philip, which is typically understood by Christian interpreters as an act that "establishes Christianity as a universal religion" and "validates the proselytizing of all peoples, including pagans" (Selzer 1998: 215), bringing them into the "Christian economy of salvation" (Selzer 1998: 214). Inspired by the Ethiopian Eunuch story, the poem's baptism scene, which takes place "somewhere / on the coast / of West Africa", involves white missionaries "do[ing] the dunking" who "wear Josiah Wedgewood's / medallion / of a pious-looking African face / with the inscription: / 'Am I not a man and a brother?'" (Major 1998: 306). The pose of the supplicating slave on the medallion, so strongly suggestive of inferiority, submission, and innocence, makes it possible to read it as a variation on the Ethiopian Eunuch theme and find in it a "prior emasculation of power that identifies the supplicant as a figurative, if not a literal, eunuch" (Selzer 1998: 215–216). The message here is quite clear: the enslaved blacks must not demand but ask docilely for their freedom by appealing to whites' sense of morality and humanity. A warning of what would be the consequence of the irresponsible liberation of the slaves appears in Major's poem in the form of an anti-abolitionist cartoon from 1789, showing "[a] black man dressed like an English gentleman / ... bludgeoning a poor, suffering white man over / the head with an ignorant-stick" (Selzer 1998: 316). In contrast with the not-so-Noble Savage committing cruel acts of retaliation, the black supplicant serves as an unquestionably positive image of a black, predating the archetype of the gentle-hearted slave Uncle Tom, who always recognizes "natural" white superiority.

Seen in this context, the black Queen of Sheba provides another example of a positive image of universal blackness represented as a beautiful regal black woman yielding to the intellectual and spiritual power of the white king. Drawing on Devisse's commentary on the Queen of Sheba's iconographic history¹, Selzer observes that the Queen, who is represented in the Bible (*I Kings 10*) – without her race revealed – as a lover of wisdom who comes to test King Solomon's knowledge, when her figure appeared in the black version in Western art, was

¹ See endnote 8 in Selzer 1998: 228.

“often ... interpreted as an icon representing spiritual and intellectual enlightenment” (Selzer 1998: 213) of the blacks, received through recognition of the Christian truth. In “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” the black Queen of Sheba appears as a “healing spirit for the downtrodden / blacks”, being a part of a white monk’s “vision” (Major 1998: 308) of his own successful missionary work among the Africans.

Even though Selzer mentions in the endnote that “in many traditions” the Queen is portrayed “negatively as a seductress who tempts Salomon” (1998: 228), the critic does not make use of this fact for recognizing another sarcastic role-reversal performed in Major’s poem. In his trickster-like attempt to understand Europe, Mfu characterizes the monk’s vision of the Queen as “secret” and complements it by his “secular dream ... out of rhyme / with his devotion”, a disturbing, conspicuously erotic dream of the “Sable Venus, / herself a Creole Hottentot, / surrounded by chubby pink cherubs” (Major 1998: 308). This particular wording betrays the anchoring of the monk’s dream in Thomas Stothard’s “The Voyage of the Sable Venus” (1801), a painting whose outrageousness comes from its rich-yet-vulgar symbolism borrowed from Botticelli’s masterpiece, which here legitimizes the carnal exploitation of black women as one of the obvious gains of the Middle Passage. Both the Queen of Sheba and the Sable Venus are presented in positions of inferiority and passive feminine acceptance of the natural white masculine order which must remain unquestionable and unchallenged – the monk “prays / that the white Venus and the black / eunuch, / seen together like white on rice, / will remain cool, nice, and chaste” (Major 1998: 310).

Even though the position of the supplicant is presented as natural for blacks within the white order of things as constructed by the discursive-cum-symbolic operations of its Universal Language, the figure of a powerful black man also appears in Major’s poem. Once again, Mfu trespasses on the territory of this Language with his black dialect when he demonstrates his deep skepticism concerning the ideological neutrality and innocence of the purpose this image is implemented for in Western art. For instance, Mfu discovers that the white monk prays not only to a modest and humble “black Saint Martin”, but also to “black Saint Maurice, / in armor, patron saint / of the Crusade / against the Slavs” (Major 1998: 308), a phrase that depicts him in the context of Germanic medieval expansionism as a figure of great military and religious achievements, which is also reflected in the term “Maurician Imperialism” denoting interconnection between conquest and conversion by force. Seen in this light, “St. Maurice represents *par excellence* the appropriation of the image of a powerful black man to express white imperial, ecclesiastical, and cultural power” (Selzer 1998: 219). Thus, the powerful black man at arms, like the black supplicant, belongs to the category of controlling images of blacks circulated in Western art. Pairing “black

Saint Maurice” with the humble “black Saint Martin” (also known as “Martin of Charity” and “Saint of the Broom”) is a clear example of Major/Mfu’s implementation of the strategy of Signifyin(g) for the purpose of exposing the manipulations of the Univeral Language.

Another example in the same category, and one entirely unexplored by Selzer, is Jean-Baptiste Belley, a “captain during the French Revolution”, whose 1797 portrait by Girodet makes Mfu wonder at the “noble, dignified / presence / of black intellectuals and military leaders / among the good Europeans” (Major 1998: 311). Mfu says about Belley that “[s]urely / this man / lived with irony as if it were a cancerous / sore in his throat” (Major 1998: 312) – a comment which, arguably, refers not only to the ironies of Belley’s life, such as being “born to a Senegalese slave” (Major 1998: 312) and “fighting, no doubt, for justice for all” (Major 1998: 311). Girodet’s painting represents him in the uniform of the National Convention and leaning against a Roman bust of abovementioned G.-T. Raynal, but he and the philosopher do not look in the same direction, and Belley is portrayed with a conspicuous penis bulging in his breeches, which evokes the savagery or even animality ascribed to his race. As Frantz Fanon notes, “in relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level” (1967: 157). In fact, through the means of projection of repressed white sexuality, “[h]e is turned into a penis” (Fanon 1967: 170). The visibility of the shape of a penis in his portrait may be read as a signal that, in spite of wearing white attire, Belley does not belong to the white phallic order which is essentially cerebral and remains separated from actual sexuality. As a result, he is deprived of real power.

Selzer’s conclusion that “[b]y resisting the constructions of blackness in actual works of art, Major’s poetry works to destabilize Western representations of racial difference” (1998: 226) should be taken as supportive of my claim that the poem’s “off-modern nostalgia” perspective is a version of textualist strategy which Gates identifies as Signifyin(g). Major/Mfu successfully perforates and destabilizes the assumed objectivity and neutrality of the images of blackness created and circulated within the realm of the visual arts of the dominant Western Culture. In “The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage” Signifyin(g) takes the form of what could be called ekphrastic (re)interpretation and joins in the “critique of fixity or essence often associated with ... understanding of meaning” (Selzer 1998: 226). Arguably, most of Major/Mfu’s observations are virtually incomprehensible without seeing the actual works of art the poem activates and without having extra textual information on their themes and *topoi*, since in the poem they are described and commented on from a specifically black epistemological position with concrete ideological intentions. Major/Mfu’s ekphrastic Signifyin(g) is rooted in the exploration of “sideshadows and back alleys” and in a virtuoso interplay of motifs and controlling images of blackness. This allows us, to use Amiri Baraka’s phrase, to move “[b]eneath the violent

philosophy / of primitive / cannibals / Primitive / Violent / Steam driven / Cannibals” (1995: 266). Major/Mfu’s strategy to “speak his music” turns out to effectively violate the border of the Universal Language and resist the symbolic cannibalism of Western culture.

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