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Writers, Rebels, and Cannibals: Léonora Miano's Rendering of Africa in *L'Intérieur de la nuit*

Abstract

Léonora Miano's first novel *L'Intérieur de la nuit* received a laudatory critical reception when it was published by the French publishing house Plon in 2005. The novel's depiction of an act of cannibalism in a village of a fictional African nation provides the turning point and central event of the narrative. The novel's cannibalism has also been central to its critical reception in the west. While many Francophone works have employed and developed the metaphor of the act of cannibalism, Miano "cannibalizes" in her novel in unique ways that prove simultaneously problematic and productively revealing.

This article considers the interviews Miano has made in defense of her novel together with a close reading of the text. The analysis reveals the dilemmas and limitations a Francophone author faces in an act of cannibalizing Africa in literary form and within a western literary and cultural market place invested in trafficking and recycling images of Africa as a dark, backwards continent of unfathomable violence and savagery. This article also examines the close connection between the novel's fictional rebels who impose cannibalisms on African villagers, the novel's main protagonist Ayane who witnesses the scene from a distance, and Miano, the western educated author who renders all of this both from within an African "interior of night" and from the west.

Keywords

Léonora Miano, novel, *L'Intérieur de la nuit*, cannibalism, interview, Francophone literature, Africa, west, rebellion

Writers, Rebels, and Cannibals: Léonora Miano's
Rendering of Africa in *L'Intérieur de la nuit*

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The term “cannibalism,” first coined by Christopher Columbus as he was writing about the Arawaks in the Caribbean, has been used repeatedly by imperial Europe in an effort to distinguish itself from the subjects of its colonial expansion and to justify the colonization of territories. Although this term was in the past used to construct differences between colonizers and colonized, Francophone authors have, in turn, appropriated the trope and produced numerous texts highlighting its potential for resistance. Cannibalism as a Western construct has allowed the Francophone author to construct, exploit, and also question images of exclusion, destruction, regurgitation, and renewed strength. From Negritude's founding text *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* ‘Notebook to a Return to the Native Land’ (Aimé Césaire, 1939) to contemporary texts such as *Cannibales* ‘Welcome to Paradise’ (Mahi Binebine, 1999), or *Histoire de la femme cannibale* ‘The Story of the Cannibal Woman’ (Maryse Condé, 2003), Francophone authors have used cannibalism to challenge colonialist delineations between “civilized” and “savage.” In place of such delineations, these authors evoke images of cultural assimilation, alienation, and destructive consumption.

While many contemporary Francophone works have employed and developed the metaphor of the act of cannibalism, Léonora Miano “cannibalizes” in her novel *L'Intérieur de la nuit* ‘The Interior of the Night’ in ways that prove simultaneously problematic and productively revealing. She has joined the ranks of Francophone writers living in Paris such as Ahmadou Kourouma, Calixthe Beyala, and Jean-Luc Raharimanana, who, with great success, have emphasized

the need to criticize the “dream of Africa,” bringing the responsibilities of Africa’s contemporary state of decay to Africans themselves, relating histories of nepotism, corruption, oppression, savagery, and, among others, cannibalism.

Miano’s trajectory is similar to many African authors living in Paris. She was born in Douala on the coast of Cameroon and left her native land at eighteen years old to settle in France, where she has lived ever since. First enrolled at the university in Valenciennes to study Anglo-American literatures, she soon moved to the University of Nanterre in Paris. Although she began writing at the age of eight, she submitted her first manuscript to a publisher after turning thirty. Since *L’Intérieur de la nuit*, she has also published *Contours du jour qui vient* (2006) ‘Outline of the Coming Day’ and *Tels des astres éteints* (2008) ‘Like Dead Stars.’ While her first two novels take place in Africa, Miano sets her latest work in Europe. All three novels explore social, political, and metaphysical questions, including the ways individuals come to perform unbearable acts, African relationships with the European continent and the former colonial powers, and women’s roles in Africa in the twenty-first century. In these novels, Miano develops themes of cannibalism, prostitution, witchcraft, vagrancy, murder, and violence.

By writing about such contentious issues and also known facts of the recent history of Africa, authors are, in the words of Suzanne Crosta, “bringing negative forces in the open in order to reflect on possible solutions” (98). This form of literary shock treatment has provided Francophone writers impressive book sales and a means of denouncing situations in Africa while sensitizing, and perhaps even mobilizing, their largely Western readership.

But such literary successes come with the problems of perpetuating if not an African dream, a European nightmare image of Africa. Clearly identified as Africans, authors such as Kourouma, Raharimanana, and Miano have come to represent an “authentic” African voice within the Western literary marketplace. As expert witnesses of their culture, these authors are, as Christiane Ndiaye puts it, perceived as the ones “capable of revealing to the world ‘the soul of the black people’” (97). The danger of such writings, Ndiaye explains, is that they can be reduced to a justification of some of these “absolute truths” about Africa. Ndiaye writes that, “some are

thus inclined to read Kourouma for confirmation of this pseudo-truth once conveyed by colonial discourse that claims that Africa is and will remain an impenetrable 'dark continent'" (102). Kourouma himself felt the need to denounce such selective reading by those who, attracted by the idea of violence as specifically African, forgot "to take into account that the first violence in the novel [*Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*] is the one levied by the colonizers and their ethnologists" (qtd. in Ndiaye 102). Such reductive interpretations of works which have emphasized an African violence have also drawn the attention of scholars such as Isaac Bazié, who closely examined the reviews of Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* 'Allah is not Obliged' (2000). What Bazié discovered was that popular media criticism of the book

move[s] along one main axis with the following two poles: Kourouma's uncovering of an "anemic continent" dying under the weight of natural disaster and the barbarous stupidity of its potentates; and on the other hand, Kourouma's treatment of the French language, mention of which is almost commonplace. (qtd. in Ndiaye 96)

A similar axis of commentary has dominated the media coverage of Miano's *L'Intérieur de la nuit*. What this media criticism has overlooked, however, are the ways Miano's novel can be understood as, on the one hand, an attempt to explore the conditions that give rise to the abominations of contemporary Africa, and on the other, a text that reveals the complex situation of the contemporary Franco-phone writer living in Paris and writing about Africa.

Instead, French critics remain narrowly focused on the beauty and power of Miano's literary use of the French language, or the authority and the accuracy of her depiction of a violence-ridden Africa. Miano's first novel could hardly have received a more enthusiastic or laudatory critical reception when it was published by the popular French publishing house Plon in 2005. Valérie Marin La Meslée in *Le Point* magazine called it a novel "d'une beauté stupéfiante" 'of stupefying beauty,'¹ while the Parisian-based Franco-phone website *afrik.com* praised Miano as a novelist who chooses "une langue classique et une écriture maîtrisée" 'a classical language and a masterful writing.' *Lire* magazine classified the novel as one

of the five best books of 2005 and, according to Thierry Gandillot of *L'Express*, it is “un roman d'une puissance digne des tragédies grecques” ‘a work that has the power of ancient Greek Tragedy.’ The book, to date, has won five French literary prizes including Le Prix Montalembert and Le Prix Louis-Guilloux.

Although the novel marked an impressive literary debut for Miano (whom French literary critics celebrated as a promising young Cameroonian writer who has lived in Paris for the past fifteen years), *L'Intérieur de la nuit* was not the first book she had produced or presented to the Plon publishing house. Miano has explained that the success of *L'Intérieur de la nuit* was preceded by unsuccessful attempts to get Plon to publish other manuscripts she had submitted: works that were placed in an urban, Parisian context rather than an African one. Miano's decision to turn to the African context—as much as her choice to use “classical style and masterly writing”—helps to explain her authorial success. More specifically, Miano's choice to place cannibalism at the center of that “African context” has played a crucial, albeit controversial role, in establishing her as an influential new Francophone literary voice and African author.

In all of the reviews of *L'Intérieur de la nuit*, as in virtually every interview Miano has given in the wake of its success, the most prominent subject has been the book's terrifying and graphic scene of cannibalism where African villagers unwillingly castrate, eviscerate, and then consume the body of a boy from the village. This disturbing scene in the novel has clearly played a key role and it is worth noting that the turn to African cannibalism proved to be a fruitful career move by an author responding to the dictates of a Western literary marketplace. In making such a move, however, does Miano perpetuate some of the most ironclad stereotypes of Africa as the Dark Continent? Even as the novel has helped establish Miano as an influential new African author, the French media discourse on Africa to which she and her novel have contributed in the wake of the novel's success may make her complicit in a complex and problematic instance of cannibalizing Africa. Ultimately, what this amounts to, I want to suggest, is a contradictory cultural power grab and an assertion of authorial agency fraught with dangerous implications. A consideration of the interviews Miano has made in defense of her novel, together with a close reading of the text it-

self, can ultimately reveal more about the dilemmas and limitations of Francophone African authorship within a Western literary and cultural marketplace invested in trafficking and recycling familiar images of "Africa."

L'Intérieur de la nuit and Miano's authorship may best be understood as a revealing instance of the limitations and perils of cannibalizing Africa for a Francophone author who writes at a geographical distance even as she lays claim to an "insider's" position from "inside the night" of a dark Africa, as her novel's title suggests. Even as *L'Intérieur de la nuit* sets out to illustrate and denounces a lack of self-reflection or passivity of some Africans—which can be read as the result of poverty, fear, and hunger—the interviews, and Miano herself during those interviews, tend to highlight a problematic violence-ridden Africa instead.

African "Reality": As Dreamed, Gathered through Anthropological Evidence, and Seen on TV5

When asked about her novel's title, *L'Intérieur de la nuit*, Miano immediately insists that it was her choice and not the decision of her editor or publisher. In an interview with the website *Amina*, Miano explains that the title was, in fact, the first thing she had in mind when she initiated the book project. "Tout s'est écrit autour de lui" 'Everything was written around it,' she explains, "Je l'ai rêvé. Il fallait que ce soit une nuit" 'I dreamed it. It had to be during the night.' Thus from the novel's start—that is, both in its creative genesis and in the title that launches the narrative—it proceeds from a premise of exploring, rendering, and somehow getting "inside" of "night" constructed as a metonym for "Africa" as both a dark place and a dream space that is illusively constitutive of one's self. Thus the novel's title anticipates the author's and the book's exploration of Africa as Dark Continent and—as such—something that is the imagined dream (or nightmare) of individuals otherwise positioned outside even as they seek (and seek to understand) some kind of connection.

During that same interview published on the website *Amina*, Miano explains that she is particularly interested in anthropology and that in developing the topic of her novel, she has gathered infor-

mation on how sacrifice rituals get performed during elections and armed conflicts. Miano's turn to anthropology serves as a reminder of her distance from her subject (even as the authority of her authorial voice is undeniably tied to her status as a native informant). She also maintains a certain distance from pure anthropology, however, in that she blends her collection of anthropological data on sacrifice rituals with fictionalized imaginings of how those rituals could play out as acts of cannibalism. (She conflates sacrifice rituals with acts of cannibalism and, in doing so, implies that the latter are a far more widespread part of African cultural practices than they actually are).

Accused of promoting European stereotypes about Africa, Miano has repeatedly defended herself by invoking an African "reality." In a number of different interviews, she has explained that the subject of her novel was inspired by programs she watched on French television. In one instance, she describes having seen a program on TV5 on armed conflicts in Africa during which young soldiers were forced to practice acts of cannibalism. Describing how repulsed she is by these images and accounts of barbarity, and by what she calls "all the violence," Miano declares with an emphatic anger that she is fed up. She directs that anger at Africans for committing violence on themselves and each other. "Je n'aurais jamais pu faire ça" 'I would have never been able to do that' she asserts in a moment of righteous indignation during an interview with Tirthankar Chanda. She also declares that in such images "elle ne reconnaît plus son pays" 'she does not recognize her country anymore,' articulating a disavowal of any feeling of connection to such a violent place. In not recognizing what she also identifies as her own, Miano explains that she was motivated to write her book as a way to denounce the violence that Africans are inflicting on themselves. "C'est aux Africains de le dire," 'Africans have to say it' she declares in an interview with Anne Crignon for the popular French weekly *Nouvel Observateur*, "et je parle en tant qu'Africaine. Je veux juste que ça s'arrête" 'and I talk as an African. I just want it to stop.'

Thus in her numerous interviews for the French media, Miano insists that she speaks "as an African" delivering a message "to Africans." As she describes it, hers is a tough but necessary message: "Africans" must stop their patterns of self-inflicted violence—

a violence she renders as both a metaphorical and literal instance of cannibalism. In making all of these declarations, Miano seems unaware of the irony in her gestures and statements: that in these interviews she is both speaking *to* the West (and not to Africans) and also *from* the West (in that the sources she cites for her exposure to “African realities” come by way of Western anthropology and the French television media, both of which have long contributed to generalizations, caricatures, and old clichés of Africa as a hopelessly backward, primitive, and violent dark continent).

In one interview that Miano gave for a Cameroonian newspaper (a rare instance where she does address an African audience), she explains to Yves Atanga that “ce qui peut me déranger dans l’Afrique d’aujourd’hui, c’est que nous ayons une passion pour le côté ténébreux de nos cultures et que nous oublions souvent le côté plus lumineux” ‘what disturbs me today about Africa is the passion we have for the dark side of our cultures and that we often forgets the luminous side.’ Too often, however, Miano herself seems to forget to whom the “one” of her own public address and personal perspective refers. So too does she seem to disregard the fact that her own exposure to “realities” of Africa—though coming from the “luminous” screen of a television set in a Parisian apartment—too often contributes to recycled perpetuations of the stereotypes of “dark” Africa. In this light, or perhaps more accurately in this darkness, Miano’s anger and frustration seem misdirected. Even as she insists that “African violence” must stop, she actively contributes to its discursive proliferation in the interviews she gives in the wake of her successful fictional rendering of an African savagery and violence that is so avidly consumed in a Western cultural marketplace.

The Problems and Promise of Limited Vision and African Subjectivity within “The Interior of Night”

Despite the politically problematic apparent lack of self awareness in speaking to French media sources as an “African” author who claims to speak for and to Africans, Miano’s novel reveals a far more nuanced and seemingly self-reflective exploration and articulation of the dynamics and challenges of Francophone authorship, author-ity, and exiled “African” subjectivity. In its third-person narration,

L'Intérieur de la nuit tells the story of Ayané, a young girl who, having left to study in France where she is writing her dissertation (and is thus much like Miano herself), returns to Eku, her native village, “une enclave protégée par une clôture de collines” ‘an enclave protected by an enclosure of hills’ (31), located in the fictional nation of Mboasu which the book places “at the heart of the African continent” (92). Ayané returns to her African village in order to attend to her dying mother, but she finds herself feeling alienated from the villagers, who don’t accept her as one of them. What she experiences there constitutes a kind of worst-case African scenario. All able-bodied adult men have abandoned the village, leaving only infirm elders, children, and women trapped in a life of tradition, boredom, misery, and fear. To make matters worse, these miserable villagers also find themselves caught up in a civil war with insurgents surrounding the village and eventually invading it on one literally and metaphorically dark night (the source of the novel’s title). Not knowing that the men of the village have fled, the insurgents come to “recruit” new soldiers. When this proves fruitless, they decide to kidnap young women to use as a source of entertainment for their troops. Before leaving, the soldiers explain to the villagers that in order to restore Africa to a state of unity and tradition, they must perform a ritual act of sacrifice. The soldiers then force the villagers to kill and then eat one of the young boys from the village. In carrying out these orders, the villagers, fearing for their own lives, either passively or actively participate in the sacrifice.

The novel is divided in two distinct parts, with the act of cannibalism serving as the clear marker between the two. The first half recounts Ayané’s return to her village and her alienation within the community. After the cannibalization of the young boy, the remainder of the novel involves Ayané’s efforts to figure out what happened and why. When first arriving back in the village in the novel’s first half, Ayané finds herself deeply frustrated by the passivity of the villagers who accept their grim fate and the confines of a tradition that has proven harmful to the community. She is further frustrated by their adamant refusal to accept modern ways and attitudes. Rejected by the villagers as the novel’s first half draws to a close, Ayané prepares to escape from the village to a large city nearby where one of her aunts lives. She climbs a tree at the edge of the village and

awaits the cover of night under which she plans to make her escape. That night, however, she winds up bearing partial witness, from the distance and relative safety of the tree, to the violent and disturbing scene imposed on the village community by the soldiers. From the height of her tree at the edge of town, Ayané sees and hears incompletely the scene that unfolds in the village. Before she is able to climb to a position where she can see what is happening, she hears the traumatizing scream of a child. After that one marked sound she then gets to a vantage point where she can see but not hear. What she sees is the open carcass of the boy without knowing how it came to arrive at that state or the details of the act that the community was forced to perform. Although Ayané's perspective on the horrifying scene is limited to incomplete bits of sight and sound, the novel's third person narrator delivers a greater omniscience on the scene. Thus the reader knows more about what has happened than Ayané has herself witnessed or heard. As the novel's narrator explains, two men from the village remove the testicles of the nine-year-old boy while he is still alive, with all of the gathered community watching, including his only brother. The body of the child is then severed, prepared, and distributed to the villagers, who, under threats that they too will be killed, unwillingly chew and swallow the pieces of flesh they are given.

The second half of the novel consists of Ayané trying to piece together the bits of sound and the images she experienced in an attempt at some kind of perceptual unity or understanding of what occurred. Whereas Miano unequivocally claims to write as an African to Africans in her interviews about her novel, *L'Intérieur de la nuit* itself offers a much more complicated construction of a mediated, distanced, and fragmentary perspective that calls into question the legitimacy and reliability of the Westernized African, who, coming back to her village, finds herself facing an extreme challenge both in understanding and communicating with African villagers.

The subjective challenge and limitations that the young Ayané grapples with in the novel parallel that of Miano as the Francophone author and creator of the fictional (yet at least partially autobiographical) character in the novel who has also chosen exile. From her perch in the tree, Ayané struggles to understand what is going on, and while doing so also worries that if "elle descendait, elle ferait

du bruit, attirerait l'attention, ce qui ne lui vaudrait rien de bien" 'she got down, she would make noise, [and] attract attention, which would lead to no good for her' (87). It is thus from a relatively safe distance (be it the tree at the edge of the village, or from a couch watching television in France) that both Ayané and Miano try to explain and narrate the scene and put the pieces back together. Miano writes that, "du haut de son arbre, Ayané n'osait plus maintenant faire un geste" 'from the height of her tree, Ayané did not dare make a move' (86).

Ayané also recognizes that looking at the scene through the dense foliage of the mango tree was like "regarder un film muet sans les sous-titres" 'watching a silent film without the subtitles' (116). Once the insurgents have left the village, Ayané escapes and goes to a neighboring city to find refuge with her aunt. Even in this urban retreat, Ayané's brain remains "saturé d'images impossibles à analyser et de questions sans réponses" 'saturated with images that remain impossible to analyze and with questions that have no answers' (144). Her journey to the city proves uneventful as she finds the urban setting to be drowning in a perturbing silence. This silence evokes not only the way the West—including the Francophone writer nestled in Paris—is exposed to this African "reality," but also offers a comment on its resulting and surprising passivity.

At the same time, the distance of Ayané's tree does not make her any less complicit in the sacrificial act than her fellow villagers. Like Miano, who as an African, a woman, and a human being, finds herself repulsed by what she sees and hears on TV5 and yet is trying to explain the horrors, Ayané wonders how one writes, judges, and understands a community when one "se trouv[e] hors de ce cercle et ne se sen[t] pas plus libre que les autres" 'finds oneself outside of the circle and yet does not feel any freer than the others' (87). Ayané, as the novel's narrator explains, finds herself confronting the fact that "elle ne pouvait pas demeurer là, derrière la maison de ses parents, à tout ignorer. Elle ne pouvait pas se trouver si près, et ne rien savoir" 'she could not remain here, behind the house of her parents, ignoring everything. She could not be so close, yet not know anything' (122). The novel's account of Ayané (which simultaneously serves as a commentary on Miano's authorship) continues:

Elle ne pouvait évidemment plus rien entendre, après avoir entendu [le cri de l'enfant]. Comment ne pas chercher à en connaître la provenance et la destination? Ce cri n'avait pas surgi sans raison. Ce n'était pas par hasard non plus qu'il avait cédé la place à ce silence, à cette abolition de la vie.

She could not hear anything else after having heard the scream of the child. How could one not look for where it came from, and where it went? This scream did not occur without reason. It was not by chance either that a long silence, this negation of life, succeeded it. (122)

Ayané's quest to understand what happened that night parallels the quest of Miano, who has justified the writing of her book as the result of her feeling "fed up with all this violence" and feeling a need to speak as an African to Africans. "Je suis ici chez moi" 'This is my home,' exclaims Ayané, who demands to be told the truth about what happened that night (181). Confronting the silence of Ié, the community leader who refuses to share what happened, and unable to communicate with the villagers who refuse to engage her, Ayané finds herself frustrated in her attempts to understand what brings a community to the unbearable.

In her attempts to make sense of the horror she has witnessed, Ayané does not turn her inquiry or accusations on the financially and physically drug-addicted mercenaries whose sinister directives grow out of constructions of a mythological African past. Instead, she directs her suspicions and accusations at what strikes her as the frustrating passivity of the villagers who are told, at gunpoint, to perform the act of cannibalism. Here again, Ayané, like Miano in her interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, explains that, unlike the inhabitants of the village who were required to perform acts of cannibalism and murder, "jamais elle n'aurait pu tuer [un homme], même pour abrégé ses souffrances" 'she would have never been able to kill a man, even to shorten his suffering' (141) and refuses to accept any extenuating circumstances that could explain or justify the actions of the villagers.

As the novel draws to a close, however, another voice interjects to explain. It is Ayané's aunt, Wengisane, who lives in the neighboring city and accompanies her back to the village. Wengisane—a

female elder—strives to help Ayané understand the situation of the villagers immobilized in “un abîme d’ignorance et de superstitions” ‘an abyss of ignorance and superstition’ (194). Wengisane speaks in a voice of condemnation as she addresses her niece:

Si, tu as honte. Comme tous les Africains, comme tous les Noirs qui ne savent plus se regarder qu’avec les yeux des autres. Tu te dis que c’est vrai, ce qu’ils ont dit de nous que nous sommes des bêtes, que nous n’avons pas d’âme.

Yes, you are ashamed. Like all the Africans, like all the blacks who can only look at themselves through the eyes of the others. You tell yourself that it is true, what has been said about us, that we are savages, that we have no soul. (196)

Ultimately, Wengisane’s condemnation counters Ayané’s indignation at the combination of violence and passivity that they both see in the villagers. These last pages of the novel, in introducing an alternative African voice with greater claims to an insider’s perspective, deliver a far more self-reflective caution against the problems inherent in Miano’s own agency as a Francophone author. In her authorial act—which can be seen as a clear contrast to the passivity of the villagers—Miano runs the risk and must face the danger of trying to reject and critique such passivity in a way that can wind up returning to the vision of “the eyes of others.” While Miano’s many interviews about her successful and critically acclaimed novel show her speaking out from a perspective shaped by such Western visions of an inscrutable African darkness, the novel itself may in fact achieve its greatest success through its final turn. In its last forty pages, *L’Intérieur de la nuit* privileges the voice of an African insider who critiques Ayané’s own complicity in the Westerner’s tendency to “cannibalize Africa” through the recycling of incomplete, fragmentary media images of a violent continent trapped in a dark nightmare of violence.

Ayané, ma petite, ne décide pas comme d’autres avant toi l’ont fait que tout ceux qui ne répondent pas à tes critères ne sont pas des êtres humains. Ils ont agi ainsi parce qu’ils étaient probablement trop hu-

mains, trop fragiles.

Ayané, my girl, don't decide like others have done before you that those who don't fit your criteria are not human beings. They acted in this way because they were probably too human, too fragile. (195)

In the end, Miano's novel succeeds—not because of its masterful use of the French language—but rather in gesturing toward a critique emanating out from inside the night.

Acts of Cannibalism

The act of cannibalism is in various ways at the core of the novel. As mentioned previously, it has motivated multiple interviews of the author, triggered reactions from the public, and in some ways allowed Miano to succeed in a Western literary and cultural marketplace. It is also a fictional scene placed at the center of the novel, simultaneously culminating its first part and motivating its second part. Like a heart pumping blood through the body, the scene of cannibalism is the crucial organ that keeps the narration moving.

In the first part of the novel, as the threat of the rebels to the villagers grows more intense, Miano inserts numerous references to food and eating that give a “knowing” reader—one who would undoubtedly have heard of the controversial scene of cannibalism before buying the book—a foreshadowing taste of what is to come. The rebels move into the village at the time when “les familles allaient partager le repas du soir” ‘the families were going to share their evening dinner’ (70). The omniscient narrator explains that the villagers “seraient ingérés par le nouveau système que [le chef des rebelles] entendait créer” ‘would be ingested by the new system that [the chief of the rebels] intended to create’ (95). After killing the chief of the village, one of the rebels “demande à deux femmes d’âge mûr d’aller chercher une marmite et de quoi allumer un foyer... Il leur fallut ensuite se procurer les ingrédients qu’elles utilisaient pour accommoder des plats à l’étouffée” ‘asks two older women to fetch a pot and material to light a fire.... They also had to find the ingredients suitable for use in stews’ (89). One of the women asked “quelle nourriture ils veulent que nous préparions” ‘which food they wanted them to prepare’ (89). As the first part is about to end, the

women, following the orders but not knowing anything about the intentions of the rebels, are engaged in preparing the dish and while the spices and yams are cooking, the women complain that “il est stupide de procéder de la sorte” ‘it is stupid to act like this’ and that “Il valait mieux commencer par la viande” ‘it would be better to start with the meat’ (108).

In the second part, the act of cannibalism continues to echo out as the scream of the child imprinted on the mind of all those present but also as the motivation that drives Ayané’s quest for identity and understanding. The novel turns into a kind of detective fiction with cannibalism as the crime being investigated and with Ayané, the protagonist, searching for a motive, making the question “why it was done” rather than “who did it.” The classical denouement comes at the end of the novel with the crime being solved—not by Ayané but by the knowing native informant, Ayané’s aunt, who returns to the question of agency over motive, implicating the Western gaze and construction of a cannibalistic African Other. Wensigane explains that

tu ne peux pas juger des gens à qui tu n’as rien à offrir de mieux que ce qu’ils ont: leur vie et leur manière de vivre. Tu ne peux pas te tenir au bord du fossé au fond duquel ils se débattent, cet abîme d’ignorance et de superstitions, pour ne faire que les y enfoncer un peu plus.

you cannot judge people to whom you have nothing better to offer than what they have: their life and their way of living. You cannot stand on the edge of the rift at the bottom of which they lie, this abyss of ignorance and superstitions, in order to push them in a little bit deeper. (194)

In a classic *Noir* turn, the detective protagonist (Ayané) becomes implicated as a guilty party.

Thus, the novel hinges on the act of cannibalism at its narrative center. It is a scene perpetrated by an army composed only of men who, in their thirst for power and hunger for a return to a traditional past, impose cannibalism on the villagers as a means of restoring lost unity. As the rebel leader characterizes it, the act will serve as a symbol of love and trust and a giving of food that will announce

connection, goodwill, and love. The rebels set out to use cannibalism as a backward-looking means of unifying the community and come to the village in order to “rétablir un pacte” ‘re-establish a pact’ (76) between the Iwie and Eku descendants. As such, the forced act of cannibalism is intended as a meal that will “**rapprocher les membres d’une communauté**” ‘bring closer the members of a community’ (107). As the narrator explains “quelques bouchées [du corps de l’enfant] suffiraient pour sceller le retour aux valeurs ancestrales, et rétablir chacun des villageois dans sa fonction de membre d’un corps indivisible” ‘a few bites of the child’s body would suffice to mark the return to ancestral values and re-establish each of the villagers in his or her function as a member of an indivisible body’ (117).

The villagers’ forced cannibalism is the horrific act that motivated Miano to write this novel in order “for all the violence to stop.” For Miano, as for Ayané, this violence is inconceivable and “plus qu’une agression émotionnelle” ‘more than an emotional aggression’ (134). Although located at either end of the spectrum, both narrative trajectories—that of Ayané and that of the rebels—are very similar as they advance on a parallel track feeding and building their quest for identity on the same pattern. The coming of age of Ayané resembles that of the rebels. Ayané and the rebels are together feeding on the act of cannibalism as a tool of return and powerful regeneration. They each go back to an originary source and a purportedly primal identification.

“Vêtue d’un pantalon et d’une veste en jean” ‘dressed in a pair of trousers and a jean jacket’ (24), Ayané comes back as someone marked by a Westerner’s dress and perspective to attend to her dying mother. Upon her arrival in her village, her behavior towards her community reveals her absolute ignorance of the cultural, economic, and day-to-day conditions of the community. Her attitude of superiority is, in some ways, the embodiment of what the rebels are fighting against and motivates their attempts to “rétablir la vérité qu’ont maquillée les Blancs lorsqu’ils sont venus ici prendre possession de nos vies” ‘re-establish the truth that Whites have altered when they came here to take possession of our lives’ (75) in order to counter “toute ignorance de soi” ‘all ignorance of oneself’ (95).

Because Ayané comes to be present for her mother’s death, her

return to her parents' village serves as a way to reconnect with her past, but also as a way to put to rest her attachment to this past. As the narrator explains, "tout ce qui lui importait, c'était de s'assurer que ses parents fussent bien étendus l'un près de l'autre et de trouver le moyen de quitter ce monde" 'the only thing that mattered to her was to make sure that her parents were buried next to each other and to find a way to leave this world' (52) since "de toute manière, elle n'avait plus rien à faire là. Elle n'y avait plus personne" 'anyway, she had nothing left to do here. There wasn't anybody anymore' (54). The act of cannibalism that she partially witnesses, however, winds up triggering an act of communion with the community from which she previously felt distant and disconnected. While trying to get a full picture of the events that happened that night, Ayané relentlessly questions people and finally gains a better understanding of the complex, blurry, and not-so-comforting face of reality. Just as the act of cannibalism is intended by the rebels as a meal "dont le but était de rapprocher les membres d'une communauté" 'whose aim was to bring the members of the community closer' (107), the same ceremony indirectly allows Ayané to identify with the people of the remote village. Whereas the act of cannibalism brought food to seal the community, Ayané sees knowledge and remembering (and Miano sees writing) as the food with which to feed one's identity. Furthermore, Ayané's participation in the act of cannibalism happens through a sensory apprehension of the event from a removed distance. As Maggie Kilgour explains in *From Communion to Cannibalism*:

To think is to taste, as in the act of knowledge we imagine that we draw the outer world into our minds and possess it. All of our senses make contact with the world outside of our own bodies and so may be imagined as introducing it into ourselves. We "take things in" with our eyes and absorb sounds through our ears; both seeing and hearing are therefore often considered to be a more refined version of taste. (9)

While Ayané remains physically removed from the communal act of cannibalism, her status as participant observer with mediated ties to the community makes her complicit in the act. Similarly, Miano is implicated in a kind of literary and figurative act of cannibal-

ism even as she and Ayané insist they would never be able to kill a man, let alone eat him. Like the other members of the community who, to save their own lives, obey the orders of the soldiers to eat the boy, Ayané appears passive, and takes things in while praying “Faites qu’ils ne me trouvent pas” ‘let them not find me’ (116). As Ayané’s aunt explains later, “ils ont agi ainsi parce qu’ils étaient probablement trop humains, trop fragiles” ‘they acted like this because they probably were too human, too fragile’ (195). It is this very same act of cannibalism, carried on by the villagers because they were too human, that brought Ayané down from the tree—symbolic of an ivory tower—on which she was perched, made her confront her past, and dismantled her Manichean perspective, thus exposing her to the uncertainties of humanity.

In both narrative trajectories—that of Ayané and that of the rebels—there is a clear parallel between eating, living, and remembering. Those human activities all center around notions of ingestion of the past, conflict in the present, and an uncertain future. Thus, those two acts of communion, real and textual, exist symmetrically in the novel (and in Miano’s act of authorship) in a complex and contested dialogue.

The questions raised regarding an individual’s past, present, and future ultimately lead to the central question of how to be modern. Ayané’s lack of perception and motivation prior to her return to Africa reveal the sense of apathy and rootlessness that comes with attempts at a complete break with one’s past. When asked by her aunt where her place was, Ayané answered “Nulle part, je crois. J’ai renoncé à toute appartenance” ‘Nowhere, I think. I have renounced any belonging’ (199). Unhappy with this way of refusing to criticize herself, Wengisane accuses Ayané and states “Bien sûr! Tu es centrée sur toi-même! Ton système de survie est stérile, et n’a certainement pas plus de valeur que celui de ces villageois que tu dénonces” ‘Of course! You are centered on yourself! Your survival system is sterile and does not have much more value than that of the villagers you are denouncing’ (199).

Similarly, a faithful imitation of the past suggested by the act of cannibalism is also highly problematic, to say the least. The potential of a renewed society is intrinsically negated in the very act of communion chosen to celebrate this new community. A number

of instances in the novel punctuate this ceremony and foreshadow the fate of the doomed community. First of all, two men are asked to do away with the chief of the village. “Isango et Ibanga séparè[rent] la tête du vieil Eyoum de son corps, d’un coup de machette précis, presque sans bruit. L’ancien resta là, décapité” ‘Isango and Ibango detached old Eyoum’s head from his body with a precise machete blow, nearly without a noise. The old man remained there, headless’ (88). Later, as the killing of the little boy is about to take place, the narrator describes the three villagers who are about to perpetrate the murder as shivering so strongly “que leurs corps allaient bientôt se désagréger, faisant voler au vert des myriades de petits morceaux” ‘that their bodies were about to fall apart, blowing into myriads of little bits’ (113). Finally, as one of the men is about to stab the little boy in the chest, one of the rebels orders him

de prélever en premier les organes génitaux de l’enfant. D’une main mal assurée, les yeux baignés de larmes, il s’exécuta. Il dut s’y reprendre à plusieurs reprises, pour découper l’ensemble. Le petit poussa un cri aigu, qui devait s’imprimer à jamais dans la mémoire de chacun.

first to take away the genitalia of the child. With an unsteady hand, the eyes bathed with tears, he complied. He had to do it several times to cut the whole thing. The child hurled a high-pitched scream that was to be imprinted forever in each person’s memory. (115)

The numerous images that center around the dismemberment of men, their divided bodies and ultimately their castration counter the rebels’ intentions of unifying the members of the two communities under one body. Eyoum’s lack of authority results in his decapitation. The severing of the head serves as a corporeal and metaphorical dismemberment of the nation-state.

In constructing her novel and the problem of Africa it depicts, Miano sets her sights on the young male rebels, led by an educated young man, who arrive as outsiders to impose cannibalism on the villagers.² These rebels operate through Western tropes and symbols in a variety of ways. As the leader of the rebels enters the village with his two brothers, the narrator compares him to “une hydre tricéphale” ‘a three-headed hydra’ (74). The leader later introduces

himself with the following words: “Je suis Isilo, et voici mes frères, Isango et Ibanga. Nous sommes tous trois une seule et même personne, puisque nous sommes sortis le même jour du ventre de notre mère” ‘I am Isilo, and here are my brothers, Isango and Ibanga. The three of us are one and the same person, since we came out the belly of our mother on the same day’ (74). Their references to being three in one body and then a three-headed hydra invoke the Christian trinity and Greek mythology, respectively. Furthermore, the cannibalistic act they force on the village community is constructed by these young men as a parody of the Eucharist. Therefore, through and through, these rebels function through Western models and metaphors. In that sense, Miano’s criticism seems to allude to certain African leaders, who learned in France, Belgium or the United States to become soldiers, and then became tyrants, impoverishing their country, keeping their people in a constant state of fear (with some of them, like Mobutu or Bokassa, being accused of cannibalism).

In forcing the act of cannibalism, the rebels impose an unviable future, and their attempt to explain their motivation to the villagers can be described as a kind of indigestible science. They propose an imposition of the past without transforming it, which, as such, can only be laid down in one’s memory in the most passive and submissive of ways. It is like food that is absorbed, but not digested. In this connection, the narrator explains that the villagers

ouvraient la bouche. [Le chef des rebelles] enfournait un bout de ce qui fumait. Certains restaient la bouche ouverte un moment, avant d’être rappelés à l’ordre. Les autres l’ouvraient, refermaient, mâchaient. Puis ils s’en retournaient.

opened their mouth. [The leader of the rebels] put in a piece of what was smoking. Some stayed with their mouth opened for a while, before being called back to order. The others opened it, closed it, chewed. Then, they would leave. (123)

Motivated by an archeological nostalgia, the project of the rebels rests on a fossilized culture. Ayané’s attitude as she comes back from Europe is similar in the sense that her intransigence and her refusal

to consider the present imprisoned her in what she thinks is a coherent and unified structure. As the narrator puts it:

cette voie semblait faire fi de tout, et menait à un monde d'illusions. Elle prétendait que les choses étaient telle qu'elles devaient être, qu'un être humain n'était en aucune façon tenu de reconnaître une terre, un peuple et des racines, même pour leur tourner le dos. Il n'y avait ni à admettre, ni à refuser. Il n'y avait qu'à fermer les yeux. Sur cette voie, le genre des êtres et leur culture, tout cela était mis de côté au profit d'une identité supérieure qui n'était en réalité qu'un manque de substance.

this path seemed to do away with everything, and led to a world of illusions. It pretended that things were the way they should be, that a human being should in no way recognize a land, a people, and the roots, even to turn their back. There was no admitting, no refusing. You only had to close your eyes. With this path, the type of people and their culture were all put aside to serve a superior identity that was in reality only a lack of substance. (205)

Ayané's quest for truth in the second part of the novel seems to suggest an alternative that relies on the digestive process, on the transformation of the past that must be recognized, rendered, and, in part, discarded. It is the devouring and transmutation of the past that helps the daughter to separate from her mother. She has become a modern subject. This alternative is described as:

un pas vers ces inconnus familiers, un pas sincère, dénué de mesquinerie et d'idées préconçues, qui viendrait faire connaissance et non pas prendre en défaut. [Cette voie] aussi était longue et rude, conduisant sinon à l'acceptation, du moins à la compréhension et au respect.

a step toward those familiar unknowns, a sincere step, void of any pettiness and preconceived ideas, that would come to get to know and not try to catch it out. [This path] while long and difficult, would lead, if not to acceptance, at least to understanding and respect. (205)

Accused of being a witch by Ié, the old woman, Ayané is chased away from her village, irremediably controlled by traditions, fear,

the respect of myth, arbitrariness, and the lack of argument. As the African village does not allow for change, Ayané takes refuge at her aunt's in the nearby modern African town, where she might somehow resolve her identity crisis.

As the novel draws to a close, Ayané meets a crazy woman whom she recognizes as Epupa, "comme une des plus jolies et une des plus courtisées, du temps où elles fréquentaient l'université" 'one of the prettiest and the most sought after girls at the time they were going to college' (207). Abandoned by her parents, Epupa "marchait de long en large, crachant à terre et éructant" 'walks up and down the street with rage, spits, belches' (207) and threatens people who cross her path. Engaging in a long and coherent speech during which she accuses the African people of the tragedies that inhabit their country, she finally calms down and, while Ayané is trying to offer comfort, whispers: "Si tu savais comme ça fait mal... Mais pourquoi ils n'écoutent pas... Pourquoi ils me marchent dessus sans me voir?" 'If you only knew how painful it is... Why don't they listen... Why do they step on me without seeing me?' (209). Ayané's reaction to this articulation of frustration and despair is to embrace and join Epupa in her screams. The novel ends with this image and sound of two seemingly mad women clinging to each other and harmonizing a cry of desperation and incoherence.

In leaving her reader and the novel on such a note of desperate sorrow, Miano leaves open how best to interpret her own literary voice and rendering of African cannibalism. As such, Miano transcribes Ayané's scream in cacophonous harmony with Epupa—a kindred female victim of the cannibalism and cannibalization of Africa—as something forced on a dark continent that continues to be misunderstood and wrongly digested. Miano's novel may best be understood as setting out to make the reader see and listen to Epupa, and to link her despair and screams to those of the Western-influenced Francophone intellectual and author.

Notes

1 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2 The narrator specifies that Ayané recognizes the leader: "Elle l'avait vu à Sombé. Lorsqu'elle achevait sa licence, il terminait une maîtrise d'Histoire, pour enseigner, disait-il" 'She had seen him in Sombé. When she was finishing her

undergraduate degree, he was finishing a Masters in history, to teach, he said' (87).

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