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Cover Page Footnote

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Margaret Foster

ABSTRACT

Food has a dual physical and sociocultural relationship to human life; thus, images of food and eating are uniquely powerful when subverted in literary or aesthetic representations for the purpose of evoking what Joyce Carol Oates (1998) calls "aesthetic fear." This paper analyzes the eater/eaten binary in horror storytelling in order to characterize the differences between aesthetic representations that affirm and subvert the existing food chain. The analysis identifies comparisons and contrasts between the aesthetic representations that work within our authentic fears, and those that subvert them. Three key renditions of the food chain illustrate these comparisons: the predator/prey relationship; the relationship between plants and plant-eaters; and the human life cycle. The imagery examined draws on key narratives from distinct eras in the Western literary canon (Classical mythology; Western European fairy tales; and American horror movies). These analyses give voice to the abstract anxieties expressed by food imagery, addressing larger questions surrounding human identity and life itself.

You Are What You Eat

Food makes us human, both literally and figuratively. Physically, what we eat becomes part of our bodies; socioculturally, the rites surrounding food preparation and consumption have been mythicized all over the world. Cooking together, eating together, passing recipes from generation to generation—these traditions become an expression for our relationships to our bodies, our communities, and our gods. This romanticization of food is itself the essence of humanity: the desire to infuse our meals with not just nutrients but also symbolic meaning is among the human tendencies that separate us from our animal origins and relatives.[I]

The dual physical and sociocultural relationship that we have with food positions it as uniquely powerful when subverted in literary or aesthetic representations to evoke fear, disgust, or repulsion.[II] In literature and cinema, the bodily connection the audience feels to eating lends a visceral quality to an otherwise voyeuristic genre. In her conceptual essay "The Aesthetics of Fear," renowned horror storyteller Joyce Carol Oates distinguishes this sensation from real-life fear, writing, "the aesthetic fear is not an authentic fear but an artful simulation."[1] Food symbolism, then, acts as a tool to blur the boundaries between authenticity and aesthetics. In a movie theatre, the distance between screen and audience is reduced when we see close-up shots of gratuitous gore (a character being eaten alive, for example). When the familiar textures of food and eating become deadly, these images make the threat to our physical safety feel more "real."

And yet, there is another fear at play as well: these images threaten not just our mortality but also our humanity.[2] When our conceptions of food are challenged

I. As French gastronome Brillat-Savarin proclaimed, "Animals fill themselves; man eats. The man of mind alone knows how to eat" (12). His sentiment has been echoed by later food critics, notably Elizabeth Robins Pennell.

II. Many thanks to Lola Juan-Moreno, Ph.D., for this expansion.

in narrative, we are forced to question our understanding of the world around us—what we eat, how we eat it, and how doing so alters our relationship to the world around us.[III] Thus, the duality of our intimate connection to food makes narratives of fear and food more unsettling (or "scarier") as they force us to confront the essence of our humanity.

Fearmongers

Oates concludes "The Aesthetics of Fear" with the declaration that "We fear most the loss of meaning. To lose meaning is to lose one's humanity…It is the anxiety of the individual that the very species may become extinct in our complicity with the predator—the cannibal/ vampire—within."[3] In Western[IV] culture, meaning is often produced and understood through the use of binarism—that is, the construction of binaries that position two identities or characteristics as mutually exclusive and indelibly different. Innumerable binaries permeate our everyday existence: man/woman (known as "the gender binary"), white/nonwhite, straight/gay, and many more. Binaries express a simple, reductive power dynamic: dominant/nondominant, where the nondominant group is often referred to as the "Other."[V]

Within binarism, our sense of meaning is threatened when binaries are subverted. The binary might be exposed as incorrectly reductive—often with the discovery of a third category that does not conform to the binary, or through the revelation that its two sides are not mutually exclusive.[VI] Binary subversion can also occur via *inversion* of a binary, where the Other dominates the dominator. If the binary's power dynamic is reversed, the Other is empowered—and no longer Other.

In either case of subversion, the binary is threatened when its significance is undermined. A "loss of meaning" arises when what we think we know is eroded along with our sense of self and sense of control over the world around us. Oates proposes that this disempowerment is the fear that horror stories evoke; what we truly fear is nothing more or less than the loss of control over the world we have created for ourselves.

Our relationship to food is informed by the eater/eaten binary. We eat food; it does not eat us. We are food to predators; we do not eat them. Moreover, eating is so deeply a part of human life—connected to notions of home, family, gender, and more—that to subvert it undermines other fundamental aspects of humanity. When something so integral to our individual and collective identities is made perverse, the subversion is compounded: it feels like a dual loss, of both the self and the collective construction of human reality. In other words, we become "meaningless."

Corpus Operandi[VII]

In this paper, I will examine narratives that use food imagery to evoke aesthetic fear not only for our

III. My understanding of this idea was heavily influenced by Professor Ángel Rivera's spring 2015 rendition of SPAN 133: Hispanic Cultures, which focused on Latin American science fiction.

IV. Following Anzaldúa among others, I will use "Western" throughout this paper to refer to dominant or mainstream culture in Western Europe and parts of the Americas (particularly the United States). "Western culture" refers to dominant culture in these regions—understood as predominantly white, Christian, patriarchal, heteronormative, and middle-class. This description, also referred to as "mainstream" Western culture, is not to be mistaken for *majority* culture. Rather, dominant culture reflects the most influential and therefore visible systems of power. (See Anzaldúa and Kumashiro for exemplary—though not exhaustive—accounts of the role dominant culture plays in identity performance, "post"-colonial theory, and radical, anti-oppressive education and activism.)

V. To give a concrete example, Islam is an Othered religion in the United States, while elsewhere it is understood as the dominant religion. It is important to emphasize again that binaries are inherently reductive. By collapsing all variety into two supposedly contrasting and all-encompassing categories, they erase important nuance. The religious "Other" in the United States refers to any religion that is not Christianity, despite the infinite spiritual practices that do not include Christian faith. The "Other" is relative, and indeed, Octavio Paz opens his famous *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*) with a quote from poet Antonio Machado: "*Lo otro* no existe." I have argued elsewhere that spectrum rhetoric also evokes binaries in positioning two characteristics or identities as mutually exclusive, thus leaving it impossible to occupy both positions ("Beyond Binaries"). My understanding of binaries as it is presented here is informed primarily by Kumashiro and Anzaldúa's work surrounding race and sexuality, which explores the binary as an oppressive tool.

VI. Elsewhere, I have argued that the existence of bisexuality is an example of breaking down binaries in a way that is uncomfortable to gay and straight people alike ("Beyond Binaries"). Similarly, Hodes argues that the existence of "biracial" children in the antebellum South (and beyond) threatened the Black/white binary, and by extension, white supremacy.

VII. "Corpus" in Latin most frequently means "body," encompassing a variety of applications similar to the English "body." Here, it plays on "modus operandi" (method of operating)—as a pun referencing "corpse" and "corpus" as a selection of text.

physical well-being (through the mortality of a character), but also for our humanity (through forcing us to question the essence of the human condition). I will characterize two divergent mechanisms of aesthetic horror: the affirmation of the eater/eaten binary and its subversion. In representations that affirm the binary, characters eat or are eaten according to the real-life food chain; in representations that subvert it, the eater becomes the eaten and vice versa. All narratives examined use the act of eating to provoke reflection on the human condition. However, affirmations of the eater/eaten binary provoke this reflection by amplifying existing realities, while subversions do so by destroying current modes of meaning.

I will ground my analysis in three separate renditions of the eater/eaten binary: hunter/hunted, carnivore/plant, and parent/child. The hunter/hunted binary explores the human identity as predator or prey—an affirmation of the eater/eaten binary is when we are eaten by predators higher than us on the food chain, while subversion of the binary entails being eaten by our own prey. "Carnivore/plant" refers to the understanding that plants occupy the bottom of the food chain (irrevocably the "eaten" in the eater/eaten binary). Any representation of carnivorous flora subverts this relationship. Finally, the parent/child rendition of the eater/eaten binary understands the cycle of life as a symbolic process parallel to the food chain in its linear, infallible correlation with the passage of time. In this case, the affirmation of the eater/eaten binary would be where children eat their parents, symbolically taking their place in the natural life cycle. The subversion of the binary would be where parents eat their children, disrupting the symbolic passage of time. To supplement my analyses, I draw on other cultural constructs that inform ideas of eating in everyday human life. Most frequently, I will expand on traditional Western gender roles as inseparable from narratives of food preparation and consumption.

I originally intended to use a corpus that provided examples and counterexamples from three distinct stages of Western literature: Greco-Roman mythology, "medieval"[VIII] fairy tales and folklore, and films from the last century. I chose the first two eras of literature for their prominence in Western cultural consciousness. I chose to incorporate film in acknowledgment of its current and historical popularity as a medium of horror storytelling.[IX] However, this systematic approach was met with limitations, which I will identify below as they arise.

The corpus is further limited by space and time.[X] As such, I will generally focus the bulk of my analysis on subversion of the food chain rather than its affirmation. All sections will begin with a brief survey of aesthetic horror stories that subscribe to the norm (where the eater/eaten relationship portrayed mirrors that of real life) and then move to the analytic portion to describe deviation from the norm (where the eater becomes the eaten). Together, the comparisons and contrasts between these two groups will illustrate the divergent ways in which these mechanisms evoke aesthetic fear.

Another Beast Entirely: When the Hunter Becomes the Hunted

The human fear of predators large enough to swallow us is older than storytelling.[4] According to our traditional place on the food chain, carnivores bigger than us hunt us down and eat us—evolution has instilled in us a corresponding fear of being chased and eaten alive. Narratives of aesthetic horror often incorporate this fear, from the Homerian Scylla[XI] to Stephen King's titular It. These monsters play into our instinctive fear of large, inhuman predators.[5XII]

This narrative also plays into dominant notions of masculinity: many anthropomorphized monsters who hunt down and terrorize their victims can be replaced

VIII. I use "medieval" in quotes to acknowledge that fairy tales were often canonized much later than the historical medieval era, by the Brothers Grimm among others.

IX. My selection of these three eras of Western literature—as well as the specific narratives I analyze within them—is also ultimately a reflection of my own upbringing as white, middle-class, Christian, and U.S. American. The myths, movies, and fairy tales that constitute the corpus are primarily stories to which I was exposed in my own childhood and adolescence. Insofar as my positionality reflects many aspects of dominant U.S. culture, the media and myths that my family, many of my friends, and I consume dovetail with mainstream cultural interests. In other words, the corpus is influenced by personal experience, but not arbitrarily so.

X. Earlier versions of this paper examined a wider selection of films, striving to address differences between mainstream horror and horror that was made by or marketed toward members of marginalized communities. Due to space limitations, I have chosen to focus on mainstream horror in this paper; accordingly, the films tend to be white- and male-dominated. Likewise, my choice to include fairy tales and Classical mythology implies a historical canonization of these myths and folktales by white middle-class men. These nuances will also be expanded in the analysis sections.

XI. In the *Odyssey*, Scylla is a six-headed sea monster that attacks Odysseus and his ship (Guerber 357-9).

XII. Lane and Chazan highlight the shark; Zipes references Jonah and the whale (2).

with men in horror stories. Absent supernatural elements, many "slasher" films recount the narratives of violent men who terrorize and slaughter the film's protagonists for their own arbitrary reasons.[XIII] According to traditional Western gender roles, men are archetypal hunters, while women are archetypal cooks and caretakers;[XIV] often, a male-presenting monster hunts down and kills his victims in an expression of masculine aggression. Before King's shapeshifting It is revealed to be a giant spider-like creature in its purest form, the monster most often appears as Pennywise the Dancing Clown—essentially a serial killer and cannibal of children.[6] Meanwhile, Zipes reminds us that the antagonistic wolves in fairy tales are likely inspired by medieval werewolf trials, which were similar in theme and scope to witch trials.[7][XV]

These archetypal monsters both remind us of our physical mortality and challenge us to find our place among monsters and men. And yet, they are ultimately familiar narratives. Serial killers are statistically cisgender men,[8] and cis men are overwhelmingly more likely to be violent stalkers than their cis female and transgender counterparts.[9] Providing male-presenting monsters like Pennywise with superhuman powers merely recreates this existing reality on a symbolic plane. We fear these monster men for the same reason we fear giant, animal-like predators: just as we have evolved to fear huge creatures that swallow us whole, we instinctively fear violent men who threaten our safety in the real world. The movie or mythical setting works within these authentic fears and provides a direct aesthetic counterpart, ultimately reproducing the eater/eaten binary.

Meanwhile, the eater/eaten binary is subverted when the hunter becomes the hunted. Rather than a fear of being overcome by an animal too big to be taken down by human intellect and opposable thumbs, the hunter-as-hunted fear is one of unnatural disempowerment. If our traditional place on the food chain is contradicted, it signifies a deep-set loss of control over our place in the world as humans. These narratives challenge hegemonic "manliness," as well: when men are hunted by the beasts they once pursued and conquered, they lose their central identity as hunters and, therefore, as men. If the male character is interpreted allegorically as a representation of humanity, this emasculation becomes universal to the human condition.

Among the most memorable mythological renditions of this narrative remains Prometheus, a humanoid Titan who was condemned by the gods for bringing fire to humankind.[10] As punishment, Prometheus was sentenced to spending all of eternity chained to a rock atop Mount Olympus, where an eagle (or vulture) would eat his liver each day. Each night, his liver would grow back, ready to assume fresh torture in the morning. The aesthetic horror of this particular story comes not just from its textured, visceral details, but also the inhuman indignity that Prometheus is forced to assume. Offered like a slab of meat on the mountainous plate of the gods, Prometheus is reduced to prey for an animal ordinarily pursued by humans. He loses his agency in addition to his entrails.

Although Prometheus is not technically human himself, he is generally depicted with a humanoid body[XVI]—as such, his story subverts the eater/eaten binary from the perspective of the human audience. Even more significantly, Prometheus is saved by a human, Heracles,[XVII] who kills the bird of prey and frees Prometheus from his chains.[11] The danger is ended not just because Prometheus is no longer in mortal peril, but also because the unnatural (albeit godly) reversal of the food chain is rectified.

In a more modern example of the hunter-as-hunted subversion, the parody horror movie *ThanksKilling*[12] straddles the line between humor and horror in its depiction of an anthropomorphized Thanksgiving turkey that hunts down and murders its would-be consumers. The humorous elements in *ThanksKilling* are precisely what makes the myth of Prometheus so horrifying: *ThanksKilling* works as a parody because it subverts the intimate relationship we have to food. The humor is found in the absurdity[XVIII] of such a drastic subversion of the rites surrounding American Thanksgiving. *ThanksKilling* evokes the dual connection between bodily harm and threat to humanity, but only to remind us how foolish it would be to think an undead turkey

XIII. Intriguingly, sometimes the monster or man takes the role of a moralizing agent (particularly when it comes to women's bodies)—*Cabin in the Woods* points to the stereotype of "the whore" dying first in horror movies, thus symbolically punishing her for her transgressions.

XIV. See below for more analysis on femininity.

XV. As writes Zipes, "There was a virtual epidemic of trials against men accused of being werewolves in the 16th and 17th centuries similar to the trials against women as witches. The men were generally charged with having devoured children and having committed other sinful acts" (4).

XVI. Guerber (p. 407) reminds us that the myth of Prometheus likely began as an anthropomorphized lightning bolt.

XVII. Following Rhys Townsend, Ph.D., I will use "Hercules" only when referencing a Roman retelling.

XVIII. This idea was also a central tenet in Professor Ángel Rivera's spring 2015 rendition of SPAN 133.

could hunt and kill us. The possibility is further mocked with the use of exaggerated tropes from slasher horror films, which serve to distance the audience from *ThanksKilling*'s subversive premise. The transparently bad special effects remind us that the bodily threat is unnatural and therefore unreal—underscoring the assumption that subversion of the eater/eaten binary is so impossible as to be considered laughable.

In lieu of analyzing a lesser-known fairy tale or providing an incongruent comparison,[XIX] I turn to the Classical myth of Artemis and Actaeon as a final example of the hunter becoming the hunted. According to Ovid, the hunter Actaeon wanders away from his hunting expedition and accidentally encounters the virgin goddess Artemis bathing herself. Furious, she transforms him into a stag, whereupon he is hunted down and eaten alive by his own pack of hunting dogs.[13] This mythological punishment represents, even more literally than in the case of Prometheus, a subversion of power: the master (the hunter) becomes the hunted—the prey for his own loyal bloodhounds.

The sexual undertones of Actaeon's crime cannot be missed.[XX] Actaeon commits a violation of vision, defiling Artemis' purity when he sees her naked form. His punishment is symbolic and literal emasculation: as a stag, Actaeon becomes the object of pursuit and consumption for the dogs he once commanded. The consequences are not only deadly, but also signify a loss of human agency. Without the eater/eaten binary and our rightful place on the food chain, our role in the world becomes meaningless; we are no longer human.

All of these narratives evoke not just fear of a horrible death but also an ominous, lingering fear for the broader human identity that each of these characters represent. When the hunter becomes the hunted, the aesthetic fear is not an allegorical interpretation of an existing, authentic fear for humanity. The subversion of the hunter/hunted binary does more than overpower us like the pincers of giant spiders or the strength of predatory men. Instead, it disempowers us as agentive beings who claim their rightful place on the food chain.

Eaten Out and Eaten Alive: Poisonous and Carnivorous Plants

Unlike animals, real-life plants are relatively stationary and therefore nonviolent by nature. However, poisonous plants still pose an authentic threat to human health. Representations of such plants are frequent in both mythology and fairy tales: Odysseus encounters the Lotus-eaters on his journey home,[14] who have been lulled into sedation by eating only the lotuses and their fruit; *The Wizard of Oz* features the famous poppy field;[XXI] and a lesser-known Grimms' fairy tale, "The Salad,"[15] features lettuce with transformative powers (one head turns the eater into a donkey, the other turns them back).[XXII]

The traditional association between women and plant life[XXIII] yields insight into representations of deadly femininity. While monstrous men pursue their victims like bloodthirsty animals, female villains are often portrayed as flowery seductresses.[16] Rather than resorting to overt gore or pursuit, women tempt and ensnare.[XXIV] Frequently, horror stories that feature monstrous women are moralizing tales that warn against "women who step out of prescribed roles, and

XIX. There are few examples of hunters being hunted by their prey in Western European fairy tales. A thematically similar example might be found in the Brothers Grimm rendering of "Cinderella," which concludes with Cinderella's wedding doves gouging out the eyes of her step-sisters (161). While not wholly comparable to the eagle eating Prometheus's liver (and although it is unclear whether the doves actually eat the eyeballs), the imagery itself is similar: the step-sisters are victimized by peaceful birds, the likes of which would hardly be our predators. The disempowerment reflected here is still one that disrupts the hunter/hunted binary, albeit not in such a way that telegraphs aesthetic fear for the audience.

XX. The episode of Actaeon raises interesting questions about sexual consent, and illustrates why sexual violation is defined by the impact of—rather than the intention behind—our actions. Ovid himself relates his (male) audience's discomfort with this view, writing, "You will find Actaeon guiltless...what crime is there in error?" (61). I have alluded to this symbolism elsewhere ("Silence-Breakers and Silence-Makers") and am preparing a separate manuscript that will further explore this dimension of the myth. I would also like to thank Mal Sklar for contributing to this latter interpretation of Actaeon (personal communication, 2014).

XXI. Although the poppies are not ingested, the symbolic effect is much the same as that of the Lotus-eaters.

XXII. The connection between forbidden fruit, temptation, and sin has been connected to the Bible's story of Adam and Eve, as well as Heracles in the Garden of Hesperides: Eve eats the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, guarded by the serpent; Heracles must procure a Golden Apple of the Hesperides, guarded by the dragon Ladon (Guerber 225).

XXIII. For example, this association is reflected in the Greek pantheon: Gaia is often compared to Mother Earth; Demeter is goddess of the harvest. Meanwhile, flowers are often considered to be a visually yonic symbol (and have a cultural reputation as "girly"). I would like to thank Liza Lavrova and Mitchell Dumke for their commentary on this statement.

XXIV. Although plants are stationary, they often rely

especially those who strategically deploy their sexuality as a form of control."[17] Such figures are widespread in popular culture. Perhaps the most prominent villainess who explicitly associates plant life with seduction is DC Comics' Poison Ivy, of *Batman* fame.

Women are also more likely to poison than are men, another stereotype represented in storytelling (for example, Snow White's Evil Stepmother and the poison apple). The intimacy of death by poison gives further expression to the symbolic relationship between sex and eating, both of which are found in representations of deadly femininity. Under heteronormative patriarchy, women are sexualized for the benefit of men, and traditionally prepare food for men as their mothers and wives. Both sex and eating provide opportunity for women's power to overcome that of men's; in each scenario, men are caught with their defenses lowered. Accordingly, anxieties around women's cooking can be seen in storytelling, alongside anxieties concerned with women's sexuality.[XXV] Unlike the threat of animal predators, death by poison is disquieting because it represents death from the inside out. Instead of being swallowed whole by some giant beast, we ourselves swallow a tiny seed or drop of venom, which tears our insides apart. This death is the perverted opposite of conception. Instead of being impregnated with the seed of life, we have ingested seeds of death.[XXVI]

Death by poison does not, itself, signify a subversion of the food chain. We are still the eater, the plant the eaten. As such, it does not represent a loss of meaning comparable to the hunter becoming the hunted. In fact, while poison often represents a threat to *masculinity*—the pursuer is defeated by the pursued, man submits to woman—it does not threaten deeper notions of *humanity*, given that the mode of entrapment still falls within dominant representations of femininity. The aesthetic fear we feel at Poison Ivy ensnaring her victims does not evoke a threat to our deeper humanity, only to the lives of our heteronormative heroes.

Intriguingly, the Western canon yields far fewer examples of deadly plants that subvert the eater/eaten binary (where plants eat us, instead of vice versa). In fact, there are virtually no examples of carnivorous plants in the Western literary tradition until the 1800s, when "man-eating plants" came to be sensationalized as colonization expanded in Africa and Central America.[18XXVII] "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid" by H.G. Wells is among the first known stories that incorporates a bloodsucking plant.[19XXVIII] Wells' short story incorporates elements of seduction: the protagonist, Wedderburn, is obsessed with the unusual plant, which emits "a rich, intensely sweet scent" when it flowers. However, Wedderburn is not lured into eating the orchid. When the orchid finally flowers, the opposite occurs instead—the plant begins to suck Wedderburn's blood. In other words, Wells' orchid subverts the eater/eaten binary.

Following "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid,"

on animals' movements to disseminate their seeds—which can be read symbolically as plants "manipulating" animals into serving their purposes (another connection to deadly femininity, where women manipulate men into doing their bidding).

XXV. This anxiety has its cultural parallels in anxieties surrounding the "mysterious" changes of (cis) women's bodies as they undergo puberty and motherhood (Santos and Allan). Where cisgender male bodily changes tend to be visible throughout the body's development, the vagina is internal and therefore largely invisible (and thus, difficult for the patriarchy to regulate). Similarly to pregnancy, cooking takes place in what are traditionally women's spheres. The only visible part of the process to men is the product (a child; a meal). The difficulty in patriarchal control over this aspect of femininity informs most representations of female-coded monsters (Santos and Allan); the cultural construct whereby women are sexualized under male gaze is, similarly, a notion that springs from the patriarchal necessity to define women by their relationship to men. Santos and Allan indicate the movie *Teeth* as a prime example of vagina dentata (toothed vagina), itself an expression of this same fear.

XXVI . There is also a notable parallel between force-feeding and rape, given that both involve forcible penetration. The historical example that comes to mind is suffragettes in the early 20th-century U.K. (and likely elsewhere), who were force-fed in prison to prevent them going on hunger strike. This punishment was presumably partnered with sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence (Enloe).

XXVII. A "true" account from German explorer Carl Liche describes a "man-eating tree" from Madagascar, which was published in the *South Australian Register* in 1881. Both the scientist and plant were later proven to be complete fabrications (Sullivan and Eaton).

XXVIII. It's worth noting that even in Wells' story, the orchid is still from a faraway "exotic" land (with "horrible natives" who are said to be "the most disgusting wretches"). These descriptive elements underscore the colonial narrative from which the very notion of carnivorous plants sprung forth. The story fairly explicitly builds upon the falsified accounts of "man-eating trees," emphasizing that the plants belong to the world of the ethnic, geographic, and religious Other—not to the culture of the Western European protagonists. (The "backwards" world of the Other is often used in works of aesthetic fear to sensationalize difference from everyday life of the dominant group, which typically comprises the intended audience.)

possibly the most enduring representation of a carnivorous plant can be found in *Little Shop of Horrors*, a "dark" comedy movie-turned-musical-turned-movie. The story's main antagonist is a gigantic Venus flytrap-style plant[XXIX] adopted by Seymour, a florist's assistant, who christens it "Audrey II"[XXX] (after his coworker and crush Audrey). Audrey II develops the power of human speech and manipulates Seymour into feeding it, first with droplets of his own blood, then by dismembering other characters.

As a villain, Audrey II confounds gender norms[XXXI] as well as the eater/eaten binary. First and foremost, the plant is not poisonous but bloodthirsty. Meanwhile, although Audrey II seduces Seymour, it does not seduce him to eat *it* as in the case of poisonous plants; rather, it seduces Seymour to *be eaten*. This subversion of the food chain and gender roles makes Audrey II remarkable—the plant, ostensibly feminine, is anything but. During "Feed Me/GetIt!," Audrey II's most explicit "seduction" scene (and debut song), the plant convinces Seymour to murder in exchange for money and fame. During the scene, Seymour cries, "Look, you're a plant! An inanimate object!" Audrey II pushes Seymour into a chair with its tendrils and yanks him closer, just outside its leafy lips, which conceal alarming teeth. "Does this look inanimate to you?" it responds. The plant is implied to have growing superhuman strength instead of relying on trickery to lure its victims closer.[XXXII]

Although *Little Shop of Horrors* is intended to be humorous as well as horrific, its close resemblance to "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid" reminds us how terrifying such a plant would be in real life. Audrey II's power to terrify comes not from its size or smooth talking, but from it being a plant that nevertheless dominates the food chain as a carnivore. Seymour succumbs to taking orders from the talking plant, which demands "more, more, more!" blood from increasingly innocent victims. Unlike cautionary tales against villainesses who seduce and ensnare, the triumph of carnivorous plants represents a deep-set loss of meaning in our traditional understanding of the food chain, and of the nature of plant life itself.

Coming of Age with Consumption and Cannibalism

The real-life food chain has a natural flow downward, according to which larger animals eat those smaller than them. This unidirectionality informs the eater/eaten binary. Cannibalism, where people eat each another, disrupts this flow—instead of solely eating downward, cannibals eat *across* the food chain. Cannibalism is also one of the most fundamental taboos of humankind;[20] the most terrifying murderers in Western cultural consciousness often practice cannibalism or necrophilia, in explicit violation of their victims' humanity even after their death.[XXXIII]

Yet consumption of another person is not always monstrous.[21] In fact, it is a basic tenet of life: as fetuses,

XXIX. Here again we see connections between plant life and femininity: the name itself invokes the goddess of love.

XXX. In the 1960 movie, the plant was named "Audrey Jr." instead.

XXXI. However, the confounding of gender norms only goes so far. Audrey II is voiced by Levi Stubbs, a Black soul singer whose performance voicing Audrey II incorporates cadence coded as Black in an obvious and questionable contrast between Audrey II as the villain and the rest of the main cast, who are all white (here I use "coded" in the sense of semiotics, following Orbe). Although Stubbs was Black himself, it is important to acknowledge the ways that all media representations play into racial stereotypes and caricatures; in the case of Black masculinities, problematic stereotypes are often representations of violence and aggression (Brooks and Hébert). This stereotype comes from the myth of the "Black Beast Rapist" in the United States, wherein Black men are viewed as hypersexual and overly aggressive. Hodes notes that the creation of this myth was an intentional "sexualization of politics" (171) in response to white anxieties surrounding emancipation; indeed, the term "miscegenation" was invented as propaganda during the 1864 presidential election in an attempt to mobilize white voters against abolition (Hodes 125). The canonization of the "Black Beast Rapist" gave—and still gives—white men and the Ku Klux Klan an excuse to terrorize Black men. The choice to "code" Audrey II in this way thus problematically emphasizes the hypermasculine quality of Audrey II, downplaying its deadly femininity. The casting and directing choices are especially suspect in that all the other main characters are white; the contrast between the heavily-coded-as-Black villain and the comparably innocent white protagonists is microaggressive at best.

XXXII. It's also worth noting here that the movie offers social commentary on class and greed; Seymour, desperate to get out of "Skid Row" and leave poverty behind, is ensnared by the money and fame that Audrey II promises.

XXXIII. *The Silence of the Lambs* features Hannibal Lecter, possibly the most famous cannibalistic serial killer in popular culture. Real-life serial killers are frequently the basis for such characters, often problematically so: several books portray Jeffrey Dahmer and his murders (e.g., *Zombie, Exquisite Corpse*), with varying degrees of fictionalization. However, although these books explicitly profit from Dahmer's victims' pain, they make little apparent contribution to ending the oppression of queer people of color, whom Dahmer intentionally chose as victims due to their marginalized status

we begin as an extension of the mother's body. Drinking one's mother's milk is not considered cannibalism, but rather nourishment of the natural life cycle.[XXXIV] Although physical consumption of our parents' bodies does not continue past infancy, we symbolically absorb parts of our parents as we come of age and take their place in the world. Often, this process is represented with food: recipes are passed from mother to daughter, such that mothers are replaced by daughters through the act of eating.[XXXV] In the case of cannibalism, the eater/eaten binary is expressed by the child/parent binary: as long as children symbolically "eat" (or take the place of) their parents, the natural life cycle is not disrupted.[XXXVI]

The tale of "Little Red Riding Hood" (or "Red Riding Hood") offers a rare glimpse of this depiction of cannibalism in the Western canon. The earliest known versions of the tale are coming-of-age stories, which incorporate cannibalism as part of Red Riding Hood's growing up.[22] Before dressing as the grandmother and getting into bed, the wolf arranges a slab of Red Riding Hood's grandmother's flesh and a bottle of her blood in the pantry, which he later tricks Red Riding Hood into eating.[23] Here, critically, the act of Red Riding Hood eating her grandmother is not dehumanizing; instead, Red Riding Hood comes of age by symbolically taking her grandmother's place through ingesting her physical form.[24] Using the wisdom she has gained, Red Riding Hood is then able to escape the wolf with her own wit.[25] The scene also had sexual undertones, as was typical of contemporary coming-of-age stories.[26][XXXVII]

There are few films or Classical myths that incorporate children eating their parents in an affirmation of the life cycle comparable to Red Riding Hood. However, there are plenty of narratives where children murder their parents. For example, the movie *Sinister* features "a messed up [*sic*] Willy Wonka" villain[27] who lures children into murdering their families. Similarly, the Classical hero Theseus "accidentally"[XXXVIII] compels his father, King Aegeus, to kill himself in grief—thereby securing their kingdom for himself.[28] These narratives speak to the real-life fear of the corruption of youth: fear that either children will be manipulated by some external agent into doing the unthinkable, or that children will overthrow their parents during the quest for power.

These narratives are more than monster movies. *Children of the Corn* is not creepy because of the monster, He Who Walks Behind the Rows, but because the children have built a cult-like society around the absurd worship of a cornfield. The fear in this story and those like it is not just the mortality of the parents, but the complicity of the children in destroying them. If our children violently overtake us, they reject their relationship to the natural human life cycle. Apart from the unjust and untimely slaughter of individuals, this narrative evokes an authentic fear surrounding the life cycle: that future generations will reject the traditions and identities we have made for ourselves and will become inhuman in the process. In other words, we fear that we will inadvertently raise our children to be monsters, who bite the hand that feeds them.

Yet these tales stop short of evoking fear that the

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in society.

XXXIV. Part of the power in the imagery of demigod twins Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she-wolf (Guerber 133) is the very inhuman quality by which they are nursed. (The imagery also has a possible double entendre, "lupae" being slang for female sex workers in Ancient Rome.)

XXXV. Literary examples include Elena Medel's "Pez" ("Fish"); Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*; DreamWorks' *Kung Fu Panda* (which, intriguingly, applies this trope to a non-biological father/son relationship); and many more. After I had written the bulk of this paper, the work of Luce Giard was brought to my attention; Giard explores collective feminine identity as defined by constructions of food preparation and consumption.

XXXVI. A sexual violation of the life cycle is incest (another deep cultural taboo). When parent mates with child, it breaks down the unidirectionality between generations, thus disrupting the natural order of the life cycle. Oedipus links these two taboos by killing his father and marrying his mother (Guerber 283-293)—see below for more analysis on patricide.

XXXVII. Zipes suggests that the "wolf" had explicit roots in historical "werewolves," and as such is indeed intended to be a "rape parable" even in its original folk version (4). Meanwhile, Douglas presents a convincing anthropological argument that the early renditions of the story incorporate elements of contemporary coming-of-age rituals. However, Zipes and Douglas both cite that this significance is lost with later adaptations of the story that omit the cannibalistic and coming-of-age elements in favor of positioning it as a moralizing tale.

XXXVIII. King Aegeus drowned himself in the Aegean Sea out of grief, thinking the black sails on Theseus's approaching ship to mean that Theseus died on his mission to slay the Minotaur in Crete (Guerber 260). Most accounts indicate that Theseus "forgot his promise to change the black sails for white" on his journey back (Guerber 260). However, Theseus is also described as "although very brave...not very constant" (Guerber 258); when he tires of his ally Ariadne on the same journey back from Crete, he abandons her on the island Naxos (Guerber 258). This characterization, plus the fact that Theseus is left a kingdom upon his father's death, makes Theseus's true motivations suspect.

human relationship to life itself will symbolically disintegrate. The linearity of time and the life cycle still continues, albeit with scary and unpleasant consequences. Meanwhile, a direct contrast to the "natural" (albeit coercive) cannibalism in "Red Riding Hood" can be found in the Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel."[29] Rather than a tale of children eating and killing their parents in violent affirmation of the existing life cycle, the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" tempts wayward children into her candy house in the hopes of fattening and eating them. This version of cannibalism provides a clear threat to the life cycle—an older woman eating small children is a symbolic reversal of "Red Riding Hood." Fortunately, Gretel pushes the witch into her own oven before she and her brother are eaten, eliminating the threat and restoring the natural order.[XXXIX]

Although filmic representations of cannibalistic infanticide are rare,[XL] this narrative finds its Classical parallels in figures who either eat their children, as in the case of Kronos,[30] or kill and cook their children to be fed to others, as in the case of Medea[31] and Tantalus.[32][XLI] In each of these stories, the parents commit infanticide for their own personal gain. Kronos eats his children to maintain sovereignty, while Medea and Tantalus cook and feed their children to others out of spite and cruelty.

The common thread among these representations of cannibalistic infanticide is a disregard for one's children as part of what makes a parent human. A parent eating a child is the ultimate violation of the shared, abstract human identity that makes us who we are. The life of the parent is symbolically extended at the expense of the life of the child (and literally so, in the case of Kronos). Perhaps more extreme is when the parent has no regard for humanity at all and uses their children's bodies out of spite for others, demonstrating complete indifference toward the life they have created (as per Medea and Tantalus). When parents undermine the natural life cycle and subvert the eater/eaten binary for their own gain, they rescind the essential purpose of human life: to keep the species alive. Without acknowledgment of and respect for the larger, collective human identity that we maintain for future generations, we lose connection to the abstract humanity that makes us more than monsters.

When we become the eater of our children, we have not only disrupted the natural life cycle, but also violated an essential tenet of humanity—respect for human life. Cannibalistic infanticide shows not just a lack of regard for our equals, as in representations of zombies and the like (see below), but a lack of regard for humanity writ large. To be human is a fundamentally collectivistic project. Parents eating their children is the ultimate defiance of that fact. Physically, it extends our lives at the expense of our children, negating our own mortality. Abstractly, it denies our relationship to those around us, by feeding on the human life cycle instead of supporting its future. When we reverse the life cycle, we have done the unthinkable—we have become monstrous, disconnected from time and life itself.

Authenticity or Aesthetics?: Allegory and Subversion

In all of the above iterations of the eater/eaten binary, the food chain and life cycle are representative of a natural order, that is, the relationships between life and death across species. Whether portrayed with predators, plants, or people, subversion of the food chain or the life cycle represents more than a loss of immediate control over our individual circumstances. The simple loss of control over our surroundings does not itself represent estrangement from them, or even a loss of agency—in fact, the realization that human agency is limited is often referred to as "growing up." In response, we make sacrifices to stay alive, as do those around us. Herein lies the monstrosity latent in humanity: zombies, vampires, werewolves, and more half-human monsters are mirrors of the real-life horror we feel when our friends turn against us and "consume" us for their own empowerment. They do so often not of their own volition, but because they themselves have been consumed by a disease or instinct that commands them to do so. Ours is a "dog-eat-dog" world: every day, we are overcome by those around us. In real life, we "eat"

XXXIX. "The Juniper Tree" is another Grimms' tale that incorporates cannibalism of stepmother to stepchild. I have chosen to focus on Hansel and Gretel here as a better-known fairy tale, although "The Juniper Tree" is incredibly gruesome and warrants further examination with these lenses.

XL. An indirect comparison might be made with parody musical *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* where Dr. Frank N. Furter feeds Dr. Everett Scott the remains of Dr. Scott's nephew Eddie. However, this gruesome scene falls more into line with monster movies: Frank is later revealed to be an alien, while Dr. Scott did not intend to eat his nephew (and it is ambiguous how much, if any, of Eddie's meat Dr. Scott actually ate). As such, the symbolic life cycle is not threatened to the same degree as in the examples above. What is wrong is his murder and death itself: cannibalism is an added, gruesome detail.

XLI. Tantalus's famous punishment is to spend all of eternity in Tartarus (hell), standing in a stream with grapes above his face, yet unable to reach the stream below to drink or the grapes above to eat (Guerber 162).

one another symbolically for our own advancement. We climb the social or corporate ladder at the expense of our peers. As nations, we wage wars. We are hunted down by men and creatures too large for us to fight alone; we are seduced by beautiful plants and people whose purpose is to destroy us; and our greedy children seek our wealth and power. Seduction, violence, domination: these dangers are central to the human condition. Their aesthetic, allegorical representations are not subversions. They are reminders.

The estrangement-based aesthetic fears represent, instead, a different loss of meaning. When the eater becomes the eaten, our shared relationships to the broader, more abstract world around us are threatened. Subversions of the food chain and life cycle threaten not our relationship to one another, but rather our relationship to the world around us. When these binaries are subverted, universal truths—the passage of time, sex, mortality, sustenance—are destabilized. In this way, ironically, what makes us less human is not when we are made aesthetically monstrous; rather, it is when the world around us disintegrates, and we are destroyed with it.

Hungry for More?

In "The Aesthetics of Fear," Oates ultimately proposes that "The aesthetic of fear is the aesthetic of our common humanity."[33] Much of horror storytelling accordingly dedicates itself to the question "How human are we?"[34] This paper has focused on fictional expressions of this question: otherworldly settings that challenge us to face the bizarre and strange, and to find ourselves within it. And yet, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the strength of our relationship to humanity—as well as to the world around us—is ultimately one of our own making. We are as human as we choose to be.

Beyond aesthetics, beyond storytelling, our eagerness to dominate one another is evident in our real-life news reports and headlines. Oates' question is answered each day with war, oppression, and manifestations of visible and invisible violence. Food imagery is used in the above aesthetic examples to provide a visceral connection between abstract and physical fears; meanwhile, hunger and food are weaponized around the world daily. Starvation is a more effective weapon than bullets; panem et circenses[XLII] is a more powerful policy than the loudest of rallying cries. Diet culture is the evidence of a successful siege against our bodies. Violence is always intimate, as abstract as it is physical.[XLIII] The question of humanity becomes a moot point in a world where people are slaughtered, swallowed, and starving—in a world where we allow ourselves to become monsters.

Perhaps a way to reaffirm our humanity in such bleak circumstances is to share our meals, nourishing one another physically and psychologically. Empowerment ought to mean sharing resources: working together to keep us from being hunted down or poisoned. It ought not mean disempowering others for the sake of our own advancement. Ultimately, there is no reason for the eater/eaten binary to be reversed, no reason to fear the food chain or life cycle. If we are *what* we eat, then perhaps we can also be *how* we eat—perhaps eating together can mean being together, coming together over our food in love and harmony.

XLII. "Bread and circuses," the policy adopted by many Ancient Roman politicians to keep "the masses" complicit.

XLIII. Activists often take advantage of this fact. Poetry from the Spanish Civil War—where the fascist nacionalistas used starvation as a weapon against the republicanos—often used imagery of food to denounce both the starvation of the republicanos and innocent civilians, as well as to allude to the intimate violence of war itself. "Oda a la alcachofa" ("Ode to the Artichoke") by Pablo Neruda and "Nanas de la cebolla" ("Lullabies of the Onion") by Miguel Hernández are prominent and haunting examples.

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