

ON THE VISCERAL 2

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*I*n curating the eight essays and six short *bocados* that make up the two special issues of *On the Visceral*, we have, it seems, put them in two disciplinary clusters. The first set of essays spanned historical and visual studies and seemed to delight in detailing perverse acts—vaginas ejecting golf balls, necrophilia, masturbation with religious icons, sex with animals. Taking up the term *queer* to encompass a wide range of nonnormative pleasures, acts, and embodiments, the essays by Zeb Tortorici, Jennifer C. Nash, Leah DeVun, and Rachel Lee got at the gut by peering closely at, and into, its extremities. We aimed for the gut, we exclaimed somewhat gleefully in the last introduction, and we got ass.

As you will see, the second set of essays moves in quite another direction. More literary, taking up Karl Marx, US and Native American poetry, drama, memoir, children's literature, and twentieth-century African novels, these essays wonder over the relationship between metaphors of the body and the body itself, and then in turn seek to excavate those metaphors—even metaphoricity itself—for critical possibilities and limits. Sianne Ngai, Bethany Schneider, Ewa Macurá-Nnamdi, and Ramzi Fawaz meditate on the gut as metaphor for *feeling*, studying how different writers use gut-based affects—most often disgust and hunger—as textual strategies that might produce political motivation. But they also think through ingestion, digestion, excretion, and regurgitation as affiliated movements and metaphors. In this set of essays the gut is understood more precisely as the stomach, and the possibilities of reading the stomach as a place from which one can be moved are foregrounded.

What is it about the gut that provokes so much dissident feeling? In following the trajectory of this double issue over the last year, we have seen a wide range

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of interpretations of our early call for papers. Initially titled “On the Visceral: Food, Sex, Race, and Other Gut Feelings,” in many ways the issue has left food far behind. This seems less about the relevance of food to our story, because certainly food plays a bit part in every essay, and more about how we might expand that field of study if we begin with the idea that both ingestion and food are mutable terms themselves.

More than that, the electric critical energy of the “visceral” or “gut” metaphor seems worth marking, not least because its diffusiveness means remaking our expectations of what “queer” is or how “queer” works in the context of these pieces. Perhaps because they are interior to the body and therefore not easily named or described, these terms produce a rich and centrifugal metaphorical life that is somehow consonant across multiple images.

In the four essays presented here, as well as the “Bocados,” sex and sexuality, biopolitics and food, sensation and erotic life, racialization and subjection weave in and out of each other. This is not, in short, a set of essays in which we ask you to read for the signs of gay or lesbian life; instead the authors here come at viscosity looking for its ability to signify toward forms of feeling that are not always liberatory or even eventful.

If *viscerality* is a key term, in these essays viscosity also begs its opposite: *abstraction*. That term is most carefully thought through in Ngai’s essay, “Visceral Abstractions.” Opening with an anecdote about the critic Barbara Johnson’s aversion to eating faces (like the ubiquitous smiley face, an iconic abstraction of a gesture) and working from there to apprehend the process of abstraction inherent in Karl Marx’s concept of abstract labor, Ngai seeks to mark the abstract on a visceral level. As she wonders why abstraction is so hard to theorize, she shows—alongside a reading of Rob Halpern’s book of poetry *Music for Porn*—that it is viscosity itself that makes abstraction available to our understanding. Queering the abstracted body of *The Soldier* in a way that makes its viscosity palpable, Ngai uses Halpern’s work to demonstrate the symbolic work of *The Soldier* in “the instrumental use of ‘queer affections . . . to bind our national interests.’”

By contrast, reading the rapacious prose and historiographical method of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*, Schneider finds that in the literary and the literary-critical, the viscosity of cannibalism is both ontology and epistemology. As signaled in the title, “A Modest Proposal: Laura Ingalls Wilder Ate Zitkala-Ša,” Schneider argues that the little white girl’s cannibalization of the spectacle and remains of native displacement is part of her education into both settler-colonialist citizenship *and* the modern regime of taste. Reading for signs of meals and signs of scopic desire, the cannibalistic method of *Little House on*

the Prairie leaves behind traces of its consumption of both Plains Indian life and Zitkala Ša's literary legacy. The little white girl has eaten Indian history (and perhaps the Indian girl), but as Schneider's essay shows, it, and she, will not go down so easily.

We were thrilled to receive a submission from Poland, an essay by Ewa Macura-Nnamdi. Macura-Nnamdi takes up the alimentary life of postcolonial power via a reading of Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera's collection of short stories, *The House of Hunger*. For Macura-Nnamdi, it all starts with the mouth, "a most exquisite and potent instrument of and conduit for colonial domination and indoctrination. . . . All orifice, the colonized body finds itself hungry for the masters' spoils." The master's house indeed, but with a twist. Remembering the etymology of the word *queer* as a twist or turn, this pun is intended, as Macura-Nnamdi leads us through the alimentary track, marking it as a source of great power in the tale of decolonization. In the troping of ingestion and vomiting, Macura-Nnamdi observes a style of resistance to the hegemony of colonization. What is unique about her perspective is that she moves away from the optic of the carnivalesque, which is often applied to this work in particular, and by extension to works from Frantz Fanon to J. M. Coetzee, to take seriously the theoretical pressures brought to bear by a formidable regurgitation on the part of the colonized. A thorough exploration of the body as a metaphor for the body politic, in the end Macura-Nnamdi's essay asks, what would it mean to make a pedagogy from such consumptive viscosity?

Indigestion is at the heart of Fawaz's essay, the last in this pair of issues. A detailed voyage through the gut of Tony Kushner's now-canonical play *Angels in America*, "'I Cherish My Bile Duct as Much as Any Other Organ': Political Disgust and the Digestive Life of AIDS in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," puts forward a theory of what Fawaz calls "ill liberalism." Linking "the material experience of HIV/AIDS . . . to an intuitive or 'gut feeling' of aversion for the state of American politics," Fawaz continues the concern with textuality that echoes through this issue by connecting performance to the affective work of the play's visceral language. Like Ngai, who similarly explores Marx's use of disgust to provoke political feeling, Fawaz connects the play's visceral language—shitting, vomiting, spitting, choking, burning with bile—to Kushner's desire to reroute cultural disgust with the bodies of people living with, as well as dying from, AIDS, toward a political disgust that might incite action. Once again breaching the abstract and the real, or what he terms the literal and the figurative, gut language here transcends the "merely representational" to become materially effective, at the level of affect.

In the end, we might ask: what is queer about the gut? Given the creative

and wide-ranging critical energy of the essays that responded to our initial provocation we can only begin to answer that question. Hidden within and connected by the folds and twists and turns of our flesh, the gut has everything to do with what is felt, but its hiddenness makes of it its own mystery. To aim for the visceral, we have found, is to come at feeling, at sex, at sensation, at theory itself, from a queer place. The gut, it seems, has a mind of its own.