

Montaigne's Cannibals' Songs

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For all he has to tell us about any number of other things, Michel de Montaigne rarely speaks of music. His sporadic references to harmony, singing, and musical instruments are brief and general, the most common of commonplaces in an era when the recounting of ancient musical lore came easily and the concept of harmony exercised a pervasive and complex fascination. He might, for instance, rehearse quickly the tale of Pythagoras and the drunken youths tamed by music, a story infinitely repeated from Boethius throughout the Renaissance (see "Of names"); he might speak generally of the harmonic union of contraries in the makeup of the world ("Of experience"); he might summarize by way of aside the belief of philosophers in a sounding harmony of the celestial spheres ("Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law"); or he might affirm the power of a singing voice or a church organ over his own hearing and the hearing of others ("Apology for Raymond Sebond"). He might even nod approvingly in the direction of sung popular poetry ("Of vain subtleties"), although for the most part his discussions of poetry and poetic effect have a decidedly bookish feel to them and seem to distance, in an un-Pleiadean manner, written verse from its sung delivery. It is all enough to make us take Montaigne at his word when, in the essay "Of presumption," he confesses that "Of music, either vocal, for which my voice is inept,

or instrumental, they never succeeded in teaching me anything.”¹

In this circumstance Montaigne’s “Of cannibals” emerges among the *Essais* as unique in the attention it pays to singing. The words of two songs comprise most of the first-person ethnographic evidence Montaigne reports of his cannibals, that is, of the Tupinamba (or Tupi) Indians met by Frenchmen in the Bay of Rio in the 1550s. Moreover, Montaigne implicates these songs in what he takes to be the essential elements of Tupi social order.

Yet merely to note this prevalence of song is already to strike out on a little-trodden path in interpreting the essay. Among the *Essais*, “Of cannibals” has received far more than its proportionate share of commentary, a share enlarged in recent years by the poststructuralist, new historical, and revisionist critical readings of Michel de Certeau, Frank Lestringant, Stephen Greenblatt, David Quint, Philippe Desan, Carla Freccero, and many others. But this extensive literature has only infrequently lingered over the cannibals’ singing. It has, indeed, so rarely broached the basic questions of when and why the Tupi sing that it suggests, as a body of commentary, a constitutive deafness to this aspect of Montaigne’s text.²

To be sure, scholars have listened acutely to other important issues. “Of cannibals” has attracted comment for its ostensibly utopian picture of Tupi life, stressing a pristine intimacy with nature long lost to European society; for its evasion of ethnocentrism in describing cus-

¹ I cite these essays in the translation of Donald M. Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965). For the passages alluded to see, respectively, 202, 835, 78, 448, 227, and 486.

² I read “Of cannibals,” essay 31 of the first book, in Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Maurice Rat (2 vols., Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), and also in Frame’s translation. For the passages quoted below I use Frame’s translation; for citation I give pagination from both Rat and Frame.

toms radically different from European ones; and for its use of these unfamiliar customs to reflect on the foibles and failings of a French society torn by violent religious strife. In these discussions, "Of cannibals" has emerged as one of the clearest manifestations of a singular and attractive feature of Montaigne's thought: its insistent acknowledgment of the contingency and instability of his (and by extension Europe's) knowledge, customs, and ethics. "It seems," Montaigne writes, that "we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in." This poverty of perspective leads us to label barbarism "whatever is not [our] own practice" and renders invisible to us our own intolerance and inhumanity.³

These themes are famously evident in Montaigne's evenhanded approach to the Tupi eating of human flesh, a practice that most Europeans, then and more recently, have preferred to see as the ultimate mark of a primitive and bestial non-Europeanness. In the face of such views Montaigne compares, in resounding phrases, Tupi cannibalism with the savagery of the religious wars of his own France:

I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such [Tupi] acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit, in having him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine (as we have not only read but seen with fresh memory, not among ancient enemies, but among neighbors and fellow citizens, and what is worse, on the

³ Rat, 234; Frame, 152. Another essay centrally concerned with this theme and adducing New World examples is bk. 1, essay 23, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law."

pretext of piety and religion), than in roasting and eating him after he is dead.⁴

Nevertheless, cannibalism was hardly, in Europe, a custom; and so for Montaigne its carefully staged practice among the Tupi called for explanation. The explanation he provided links it with polygamy, the other most strikingly foreign custom of the Tupi. Together these practices represent for Montaigne an Indian "ethical science" of utter simplicity and naturalness. It has two obligations only for Tupi men: valor in war and love for their wives. These two articles, Montaigne tells us, are preached to the men each day before breakfast by a tribal elder; they also form the message of the "priests and prophets" who descend from the mountains every so often to exhort the men "to virtue and their duty" (Rat, 237; Frame, 154).

Cannibalism expresses Tupi valor by virtue of the steadfastness of captives in the face of being eaten. Prisoners taken in war are not killed and consumed immediately; instead they live freely, even for two or three months, among their captors. During this time their captors, Montaigne says,

entertain them with threats of their coming death, of the torments they will have to suffer, the preparations that are being made for that purpose, the cutting up of their limbs, and the feast that will be made at their expense. All this is done for the sole purpose of extorting from their lips some weak or base word, or making them want to flee, so as to gain the advantage of having terrified them and broken down their firmness.

But this attempt to terrify the captive, this "demand... that they confess and acknowledge their defeat," inevita-

⁴ Rat, 239; Frame, 155. In bk. 3, essay 6, "Of coaches," Montaigne again favorably compares New World societies with Europe, lingering this time over the European greed, hypocrisy, and treachery involved in the conquest of Mexico and Peru.

bly fails: "there is not one in a whole century who does not choose to die rather than relax a single bit," Montaigne tells us. In this stoic firmness, for Montaigne, lies the fulfillment of the Tupi obligation of valor. And in this fulfillment, moreover, lies the sole rationale for Tupi warfare itself. In their vast and abundant territories, the Tupi and their allies and enemies do not fight for the conquest of new land and material possessions, but only to exercise their "rivalry in valor."⁵

The valor and love required of Tupi men are expressed, indirectly, by Tupi wives, and hence in the structures of Tupi polygamy. Wives are not jealous of their husband's other wives, Montaigne tells us, but instead "strive and scheme" to increase their number, since a large number of wives is given to the best warriors and marks their valor. Moreover, the solicitude of Tupi wives for their husbands' other companions turns out to be, as Montaigne put it in the last redaction of the essay, "a properly matrimonial virtue...of the highest order" for which he cites ancient precedent both Biblical and pagan (Rat, 243; Frame, p.158). In the structure of the essay this solicitude seems to reflect back the steadfast love of their wives that Tupi ethics demanded of husbands.

Thus runs, in outline form, Montaigne's analysis of Tupi ethics; and thus the glimpse of Tupi society that the secondary literature continues to gain from his essay.

⁵ Rat, 240-41; Frame, 156. Similar views of New World constancy and warfare conclude the essay preceding "Of cannibals," "Of moderation." There, borrowing material from Francisco López de Gómara chiefly concerning the Aztecs, Montaigne notes the resoluteness in the face of death of victims chosen for sacrifice (who, by the way, "se presentent à la boucherie" with song and dance, "chantans et dansans") and states that warfare in Mexico was fostered for the exercise of youthful warriors and to gain prisoners for sacrifice. See Gómara, *Historia de la conquista de Mexico*, ed. Juan Miralles Ostos (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1988), 311, 315-16.

Take, for example, De Certeau. He is concerned in his essay on "Of cannibals" with fascinating and important issues he had raised in his earlier essay "Ethno-Graphy," especially the problematic escape of indigenous American speech and body from European texts (to which I will return). But meanwhile de Certeau affirms and extends Montaigne's ethics, writing that "cannibalism... brings to light an ethic of faithfulness in war; and polygamy...reveals a superior degree of conjugal fidelity."⁶

David Quint, for his part, reads Montaigne's essay primarily as a reflection on European society. He sees in Montaigne's analysis of cannibal valor an allegory concerning the Stoic obstinacy that marked, disastrously, the positions of Huguenot and Catholic nobles alike in French religious wars and that condemned European society to "consume itself" in the manner of New World cannibals. But, however European Montaigne's concerns in "Of cannibals" might be, Quint also takes issue with the radical view of another writer, Gérard Defaux, that nothing remains of the Tupi. "It does not follow that *everything* gets lost in the translation," he writes, and indeed he accepts as the starting point for his description of "cannibal culture" the dual logic of valor and love that Montaigne discerned.⁷

Philippe Desan, finally, in his recent book *Les commerces de Montaigne*, perceives in "Of cannibals" the

⁶ See Michel de Certeau, "Montaigne's 'Of cannibals': The Savage 'I,'" in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 67-79, esp. 75; also "Ethno-Graphy: Speech, or the Space of the Other: Jean de Léry," in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 209-43.

⁷ See David Quint, "A Reconsideration of Montaigne's 'Des cannibales,'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (1990): 459-89; see esp. 487, 463, and 469-70. Defaux expresses his views in "Un Cannibale en haut de chausses: Montaigne, la différence et la logique de l'identité," *Modern Language Notes* 97(1982): 919-57.

description of a Tupi economy—or better, as Desan puts it, a “non-economy”—that cannot be dissociated from Tupi society itself; in this “social and economic interdependence” (to which, again, I will return), with its “complex web of symbolic exchanges,” the Tupi subject is defined. But this subjectivity is nevertheless circumscribed in the same dual ethics accepted by de Certeau and Quint: “Two things are urged on the male members of the tribe: ‘valor against the enemy and love for their wives.’... Cannibal ethics rests only on these two cardinal principles.”⁸

My reason for questioning this reinscribing of Montaigne’s Tupi ethics is—let me state it frankly—to gain some clearer impression of Tupi culture at the moment Europeans stumbled upon it. I agree with Quint that Tupi customs do not utterly escape from Montaigne’s text—or, to put the matter more broadly, that non-European perceptions do not simply disappear in the immensely problematic process of their translation and transformation in the writing of early modern Europe. There remains a residue of otherness in such texts that can be sensed as a kind of supplement to their form and substance, slipping through our fingers at the moment we grasp it. That acquisitive and inquisitive moment, that glimpse through the text of others who in complex ways motivated it and are mediated in it, occurs especially when we note tensions in European exposition, torsions that arise from its attempt to fix non-European discourses. These torsions open so many fissures through

⁸ Philippe Desan, *Les Commerces de Montaigne: le discours économique des Essais* (Paris: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 1992), chap. 6 and esp. 191-93; this chapter and the following one, in which Desan argues that a distinction between use value and exchange value is adumbrated in Montaigne’s views of New World and Old World attitudes toward gold, have been reprinted as *Montaigne, les Cannibales et les Conquistadores* (Paris: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 1994).

which oracular others may be faintly heard to speak—or, in the event, to sing.

The recuperation of others that we may hope for in reading such texts is not, to be sure, some representation of distant cultures in a pristine and radiant authenticity. It is after all nothing but a less transparent version of the forms of knowledge we hope to obtain of things nearer to us: of a text's author, for instance, or the more familiar European notions he or she might typically treat. Along with those forms of knowledge it is gleaned from disturbances in the text itself; like them, it is a knowing founded on the awkwardness of textuality. So the portrait of Montaigne's own mind that we habitually extract from the *Essais*, or the European customs we see reflected there, or, in Stephen Greenblatt's reading of "Of cannibals," the otherness of a European underclass that manifests itself in Montaigne's reliance on a servant informant⁹—all these things differ, at a basic epistemological level, in no essential way from the glimpse of a historical Tupi reality discovered in the uneven surface of Montaigne's words. They are, all of them, the product of an intervening writing whose equivocations have concerned historians since before the time of Montaigne himself (think of Lorenzo Valla's complex ideas of textuality); a writing whose limitations inspired the nineteenth-century science of hermeneutics and its more recent outgrowths; a writing whose debilities and opportunities we have now grown accustomed to analyzing with tools offered by Derrida and others.¹⁰

⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 148-50.

¹⁰ I have elaborated this generally Derridean position in another New World context in "Ideologies of Aztec Song," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 (1995): 343-79; see also the secondary literature cited there.

The difficulty with Montaigne's dual Tupi ethics is that, in accepting it at face value, while we may see more clearly the lessons Montaigne would draw from the Tupi for European society, we might also smooth over the rifted surface of his writing, just as in broaching his ethics Montaigne narrowed the yawning distance between himself and the Brazilians. His ethics, in other words, does not fully account for lines of fracture within his own text, and from these might issue voices at odds with his dominant, authorial voice. Among these voices we may hear—as clearly, perhaps, as will ever be our privilege—Tupi voices from the 1550s. In prying away Montaigne's European ethics, shot through with the values of his critique of Stoicism and with Christian conceptions of generosity and dutifulness, we might uncover a different dynamic operative in Tupi society, not so much an *ethics* as an *economy*. (As we will see, it is the signal virtue of Desan's analysis to have cast in bright light the economic aspects of the Tupi.) Around this economy we may build a speculative historical ethnography of Tupi cannibalism and polygamy.



This ethnography takes the form of a historical ethnomusicology, because in "Of cannibals" the fracture line along which it emerges is the demarcation between speech and song. Montaigne's cannibals, as I have noted, *sing*, and sing repeatedly; in the event they sing in connection with the two Tupi customs so needful of European exegesis, cannibalism and polygamy. Moreover, the Tupi repeatedly sing also in the two proto-ethnographic reports on which Montaigne relied most heavily, by

André Thevet and Jean de Léry.¹¹ From the moment of their first inscription, however, these Tupi songs have, I think, been overwhelmed by European practices superimposed on them. This familiarization of the songs has continued through the modern secondary literature on their sixteenth-century sources and is evident even in the writings of de Certeau. This notwithstanding the fact that he certainly comes closest to describing the conditions of hearing them in some other guise: it is he who evoked a Tupi song that “is *heard* but not understood, hence ravished from the body of productive work”—i.e., ethnography—only to return, along the margins of ethnographic knowledge, in the form of “the figure of the other.”¹² This marginal figure undoes comfortable Europeanisms in our ethnographies; in the present case, I suggest, it undoes Montaigne’s ethics of valor and love. But it will not do for us to forget, as de Certeau too often forgets, that this Tupi figure defines the borders of our knowledge not so much by speaking as by singing.

The two Tupi song-texts Montaigne reports concern the two practices that represent his dual ethics. The first is a song about cannibalism. The prisoners to be eaten, Montaigne says,

¹¹ See Jean de Léry, *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*, facsimile of the edition of Geneva, 1580, ed. Jean-Claude Morisot (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1975); trans. by Janet Whatley as *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); also *Les Français en Amérique pendant la deuxième moitié du XVI^e siècle: Le Brésil et les Brésiliens* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), for excerpts from André Thevet’s *Cosmographie universelle* of 1575. For a collation of Montaigne’s text and excerpts from his sources see Bernard Weinberg, “Montaigne’s Readings for *Des cannibales*,” in *Renaissance and Other Studies in Honor of William Leon Wiley*, ed. George Bernard Daniel, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 261-79.

¹² De Certeau, “Ethno-Graphy,” 227.

are so far from giving in, in spite of all that is done to them, that on the contrary, during the two or three months that they are kept, they wear a gay expression; they urge their captors to hurry and put them to the test; they defy them, insult them, reproach them with their cowardice and the number of battles they have lost to the prisoners' own people.

I have a song composed by a prisoner which contains this challenge, that they should all come boldly and gather to dine off him, for they will be eating at the same time their own fathers and grandfathers, who have served to feed and nourish his body. "These muscles," he says, "this flesh and these veins are your own, poor fools that you are. You do not recognize that the substance of your ancestors' limbs is still contained in them. Savor them well; you will find in them the taste of your own flesh."

"An idea," Montaigne adds, "that certainly does not smack of barbarity" (Rat, 242-43; Frame, 157-58).

Next, Montaigne quickly turns his attention to polygamy and specifically to the absence of jealousy among Tupi women and their striving to gain as many wives as they can for their husband. "Lest it should be thought," Montaigne says,

that all this is done through a simple and servile bondage to usage and through the pressure of the authority of their ancient customs, without reason or judgment,...I must cite some examples of their capacity. Besides the warlike song I have just quoted, I have another, a love song, which begins in this vein: "Adder, stay; stay, adder, that from the pattern of your coloring my sister may draw the fashion and the workmanship of a rich girdle that I may give to my love; so may your beauty and your pattern be forever preferred to all other serpents." This first couplet is the refrain of the song. Now I am familiar enough with poetry to be a judge of this: not only is there nothing barbarous in this fancy, but it is altogether Anacreontic (Rat, 243-44; Frame, 158).

For the first of these songs, the song of the prisoner to his captors, Montaigne modeled his text on the earlier accounts of Thevet and Léry. In *Les singularitez de la France antarctique* and later in the *Cosmographie universelle*

Thevet related the song in two slightly different versions. In the first the prisoner sings:

“The Margageas our friends are valiant, strong, and powerful in war; they have taken and eaten a great number of our enemies who, in turn, will eat me some day when it pleases them; but for my part I have killed and eaten the relatives and friends of my captor”; with many similar words.¹³

Léry, for his part, reports the episode not as a song but as a speech, made by the prisoner about to be killed after “he has sung and caroused for six or seven hours.” (The fact that Léry does not specify that the speech itself is sung has its own revelations; I will return to them.) The prisoner, Léry relates,

will boast of his past feats of prowess, saying to those who hold him bound: “I myself, who am valiant, first bound and tied your kinsmen.” Then, exalting himself more and more, with a demeanor to match, he will turn from side to side and say to one, “I have eaten your father,” and to another, “I have struck down and *boucané* [grilled] your brothers.” He will add, “Of you Tupinamba that I have taken in war, I have eaten so many men and women and even children that I could not tell the number; and do not doubt that, to

¹³ Quoted from Weinberg, “Montaigne’s Readings,” 276; trans. by Quint, “A Reconsideration,” 472. The longer version of this song from Thevet’s *Cosmographie universelle* reads: “Ce pendant qu’il est ainsi estendu, ce pauvre captif s’esjouyt et chante telle ou semblable substance de parolles: Noz amis les Margageaz sont gens de bien, fortz et puissants en guerre: ils ont prins et mangé plusieurs de voz parents noz ennemis, et de ceux qui me tiennent pour me faire mourir: mais il vengeront bien tost ma mort, et vous mangeront quand il leur plaira, et voz enfans aussi: quant à moy j’ay tué et mangé plusieurs amis de ce malin Aignan, qui me tient prisonnier. Je suis fort, je suis puissant: c’est moy qui ay mis en route plusieurs fois vous autres couiards, qui n’entendez rien à faire guerre, et plusieurs autres parolles disent-ils, qui monstre le peu de compte qu’ils ont de la mort, et que la crainte d’icelle ne peut en rien esbranler leur plus que brutale assurance.” See *Les Français en Amérique*, 198.

avenge my death, the Margaia, whose nation I belong to, will hereafter eat as many of you as they can catch."¹⁴

What seems to operate at the heart of all three versions of this song—what the Tupi words reported by Europeans seem to be about—is not so much an *ethics of valor* as an *economy of exchange*. Desan, as I suggested, has recognized this point. He has analyzed the differences between, on the one hand, a Tupi exchange that is utterly bound up in the practice and representation of Tupi social relations and, on the other, the impinging European form of exchange, an international (and soon-to-be global) network of circulating capital that overreached individual societies and their practices and could not be strictly bound to them. Most illuminatingly, Desan has brought Marcel Mauss's classic study of *The Gift* to bear on "Of cannibals," suggesting that Tupi exchange, as a social relation, entailed complex reciprocal obligations, that in it individuals were subsumed to the collectivity of the tribe, and that the consumption of human flesh was the literal and regenerative assimilation of individual self into other.¹⁵

This juxtaposition of Tupi exchange and Mauss's analysis is worth pursuing farther than Desan takes it. Mauss realized that the gift-giving systems of what he called "archaic societies" embodied, in their most extensive manifestations, crucial cultural practices: the manners in which power and status were gained and held by their practitioners and the ways in which personhood itself was achieved.¹⁶ Across wide cultural reaches in Mauss's comparative analysis, these systems repeat a

¹⁴ Trans. Whatley, *History of a Voyage*, 122-23; see Léry, *Histoire*, 212-13.

¹⁵ See Desan, *Les commerces*, 186-88.

¹⁶ See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990).

number of basic features. First, Mauss notes the obligatory nature of systems of exchange. Built into the most elaborate and deep-seated of them, systems of "total prestation" like Northwest American *potlatch* or Trobriand *kula*, is a network of obligations not only to repay gifts, but to give them and receive them as well. A larger social, natural, and spiritual order, extending not only through space but through time in the form of past and future generations, is stabilized by fulfillment of these obligations and undermined by their breach (39-43; also 14). Second, preeminently in the case of *potlatch*, Mauss finds that a deep rivalry and even antagonism may be an essential part of complex exchange systems. *Potlatch* can be conceived as a war and, in certain circumstances, carried out in a way that destroys exchanged goods instead of circulating them, thus "killing property," as some clans have it (37 and n.141).

Third, and perhaps most important, time and again Mauss underscores the fact that the things given in obligatory exchange systems are not purely material goods but rather materials bearing in them a part of the giver, things imbued with some spiritual essence of their origins and therefore almost animate. As Mauss put it, "One must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul." The gift, then, takes on extraordinary spiritual powers, powers that guarantee the reciprocity of the exchange: "What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive.... Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to...its 'place of origin' or to produce, on behalf of the clan and the native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it" (11-13; see also 14, 20, 45-46).

The Tupi prisoner's song, in all its versions, seems clearly to reflect a form of exchange similar to those described by Mauss, one embodying all the features enumerated above. It differs from those systems in the simple, momentous fact that in Tupi exchange, *the gift is human flesh*; but the notion of exchange remains paramount. Thus Thevet's prisoner sings that his allies have captured and eaten many of his captors, who in turn will eat him; Léry's elaborates a full circulation whereby those who eat him avenge his own eating of their kin and will be eaten by his allies in order to avenge his death; while Montaigne's adds the conceit that by virtue of the exchange those feasting on him will savor their own flesh.¹⁷

In singing, the captive affirms his place in an intergenerational and intertribal circulation of flesh taken in battle and later eaten. He is a gift to his captors; a gift that repays the obligation entailed in his own consumption of an earlier gift from his captors; a gift that incurs a debt in his captors and obliges them to pay, in the future, with their own flesh. The Tupi warfare for which Montaigne could give no other rationale than "rivalry in valor"—for which he could find no material explanation in the desire to conquer lands and thereby increase possessions (Rat, 240; Frame, 156)—can be seen to be, on one level, a precisely material exchange after all.

Not, however, a material exchange driven by material want: Montaigne, Thevet, and Léry all agree that the Tupi did not subsist on human flesh.¹⁸ Their flesh ex-

¹⁷ As Quint points out ("A Reconsideration," 472-73), the specific conceit of the Tupi tasting their own flesh in the exchange seems to be Montaigne's invention. In Léry's account the prisoner's speech is followed by further "contestations" that underscore the exchange-character of the ceremony; see *Histoire d'un voyage*, 213-17; trans. Whatley, *History of a Voyage*, 123-25.

¹⁸ See Rat, 238; Frame, 155; and, for the relevant passages from Thevet and Léry, Weinberg, "Montaigne's Readings," 274.

change appears instead to be a society-wide system of intercourse among proximate tribes, entailing elaborate ritualized treatment of captives taken. It reveals, during the lengthy period leading up to the consumption of the captive, the stable course of Mauss's obligatory gift exchange. Not one captive in a whole century, as Montaigne tells us, would give in to fear—thereby, we may speculate, disrupting or destroying the exchange.¹⁹

Moreover, Tupi flesh exchange structures the whole of Tupi society according to the honor and prestige due to those who take captives: remember the more numerous wives of powerful warriors. Indeed these individual captors are bound up in just the sort of reciprocal obligations Mauss would lead us to expect as we rethink their captives as gifts received. Montaigne tells us that he interviewed a powerful Tupi warrior who was brought to Europe and asked him what he gained from his superior valor; “To march foremost in war” was the answer (Rat, 245; Frame, 159). From a Maussian perspective the answer might be glossed thus: Abundance of gifts received obliges the receiver to repay with special generosity. The bravest Tupi warrior, having partaken of the most flesh of his enemies, goes first either to receive more gifts or to settle the debt with his own flesh.

Meanwhile, to turn to the second point I borrowed from Mauss, the cannibals' exchange is framed in a violent antagonism of military raids, an antagonism that must have served precise social needs, perhaps with larger cosmogonic ramifications, that are lost to us. Mon-

¹⁹ In his *Cosmographie universelle* Thevet raises the possibility that captives might try to escape, but then goes on to describe their mockery of his suggestion that he might assist them in doing so or that they might fear their impending death; even women and children among the prisoners, Thevet tells us, did not flee when given the opportunity. See *Les Français en Amérique*, 197-99.

taigne's vocabulary was inadequate for such an activity. He could do no more than liken it to the eminently *anti-social* practice of sixteenth-century European "warfare," though in the same breath he registered an awareness of the difference between the two practices by noting that Tupi warfare, unlike the European version, was "noble and generous, and as excusable and beautiful as this human disease can be" (Rat, 240; Frame, 156). Limned here is the contrast between a warfare that upholds complex social structures—a kind of warfare tentatively described by Europeans elsewhere in the New World, for instance in central Mexico—and one that destroys them.

Finally—the third point from Mauss—the gift in Tupi flesh exchange is so far from being inert matter that it can *sing* its spirituality, sing of its capacity to return to its receivers something they had given earlier, sing of its desire to bring in turn some recompense back to its place of origin. This unending circulation of flesh between warring tribes is certainly the most salient theme in all the versions of the song.



But why does the gift sing? Why do Thevet and Montaigne, at least, speak clearly of songs rather than talk, speeches, orations, imprecations, boasts, arguments, disputes, whatever? Here Mauss cannot help us; succumbing momentarily to Eurocentric patterns of thought, he omits the songs and dances that characteristically accompany gift-giving from his analysis, separating them off as so many "aesthetic phenomena" from the exchanges of which they form a part.²⁰ De Certeau instead, as I have noted, comes closest among modern commentators to

²⁰ Mauss, *The Gift*, 3, 38.

answering this question. For him the songs in Tupi cannibalism and polygamy indicate an “economy of speech” for which the body is the price. The songs are “speech-acts” that submit the self-interest of individual bodies, whether the captive’s or the wife’s, to the communal interest of the social body as a whole. (De Certeau goes so far as to say that “The song symbolizes the entire social body.”) In the process, de Certeau says, the individual body “becomes a poem,” by which he means that it takes on the autonomous power of an utterance that effaces its bodily place of origin.²¹

In this, the relation of Tupi body to Tupi song comes to mirror, for de Certeau, the relation of Tupi culture all told to European writing of it. In both cases the first term is an absent presence in the second, an originating and sustaining figure that disappears to the margins of what it engenders: “The savage ethic of speech opens the way for a Western ethic of writing.... If one cannot be a cannibal, there is still the option of lost-body writing.”²² We are back at de Certeau’s ethnography, in which the figure of the other, banished to the margins, conditions and allows our writing and knowledge.

What appeals to me in de Certeau’s interpretation is his emphasis on the efficacy of the Tupi songs. These, for him, are not statements of fact but rather effective utterances, actions that forge specific relations between Tupi individuals and Tupi society. They are performatives, not constatives, to follow through on de Certeau’s intimation of speech-act theory. But we should not continue to call them speech-acts, thus obscuring their sung or chanted nature. Call them, instead, *song-acts*: performatives of a special kind, marked by enough heightening of ele-

²¹ See “Montaigne’s ‘Of cannibals,’” 75-79.

²² *Ibid.*, 79.

ments of vocal production—presumably registers such as intonation and rhythm—and set off, in social circumstance and function, clearly enough from normal speech that even Europeans like Thevet could distinguish them from everyday Tupi discourse.

But can we find it convincing that de Certeau discovers the same Derridean play of remainders that he saw at work in the European writing of Americans also *within* the indigenous situation itself, in the relation of Tupi body to Tupi song? In the Tupi context de Certeau's disappearance of the body from the utterance it sustains seems, on the face of it, too congruent to the larger interaction he perceives between Europeans and Brazilians not to be suspect. Instead, I think we need to understand Tupi songs and bodies as mutually implicated in the flesh exchange I outlined above.

Here anthropologist Webb Keane's recent work in the Maussian tradition of exchange analysis, on Anakalangese ceremonial exchange in eastern Indonesia, seems especially suggestive. This exchange, Keane has maintained, fulfills its social functions by striking up a crucial interdependency of words and things. Objects take on "sign-like qualities" and words "object-like qualities" in their mutual association in the ritual. When this relation is successfully forged, the value of material objects is defined by conventional but flexible utterances; when it is not, the exchange might collapse into other, lower forms of transaction such as barter or sale. The successful exchange complex, made up of thingish words and wordly things, establishes both diachronic and synchronic social connections: "valid speech performance places the speaker in a continuous lineage linking past to future, while successful exchange of objects makes one a node in a continuous chain of contemporaneous partners." In this way words uttered during exchanges are

“critical to the value and efficacy of the exchanges they mediate.”²³

Something similar probably occurred in Tupi flesh exchange. There words sung back and forth between captive and captors—throughout the lengthy period of captivity, perhaps, but no doubt with a culminating increase of ritual pace as the time of the killing neared²⁴—seem to have provided a crucial enunciation of the worth of the gift of flesh. To judge from the song-texts, captives enacted this worth not by expressing an ethics of valor but by voicing an economy of strength measured by past consumption of their captors’ kin. The resistance of the captive to fear, so central to Montaigne’s and Thevet’s *contexts* for the song, seems not to enter into its *text* at all. It stands outside the reported words of the song as a European gloss on them, and the distance between text and gloss opens one of those rifts in European writing I described before.

In addition to expressing the power and strength of the captive as these are reflected in his past consumption of flesh-gifts from his enemies, the words of the song affirm also, especially in the fuller versions given by Thevet and Léry, an unending circulation of flesh originating in the past and continuing into the future. In the history of consumption it embodies, the song asserts the captive’s suitability to repay the earlier gift of his captors’ kin’s bodies; in the process it also captures the present consumers in a web of future obligatory exchange of their own flesh. In this way, rather than by registering a

²³ Webb Keane, “The Value of Words and the Meaning of Things in Eastern Indonesian Exchange,” *Man* 29 (1994): 605-29; see 605, 621.

²⁴ On the ceremonies of the day of the killing, see Léry, *Histoire*, chap. 15 and Thevet, *Cosmographie universelle*, bk. 21, chap. 15 (*Les Français en Amérique*, chap. 14).

courage redolent of the recently revived European Stoicism that so shaped Montaigne's values, the song marks the object—the captive's body—as suitable for exchange, as worthy, and as appropriate for inclusion in the gift-giving cycle. It projects the significance of the exchange both into the past (as repayment made) and into the future (as debt incurred), stabilizing the whole system as an ongoing social interaction.

But this economy of strength depended, I think, on the heightened medium of song, marking off the captive's words from the other locutions around them. In some putative non-ritualized context, first, taunts such as the captive's might well have seemed to claim for him a certain strength, but they would no doubt have brought about a quick death as well. Their ritualized nature, manifested in the act of singing, gained them their efficacy by insuring their immunity from immediate retribution. The validation of the captive's flesh as gift was enabled, then, not only by his participation in an ongoing history conveyed in the meaning of his words but also by the sung medium that cleared a cultural space within which this history could be enunciated. The value of the captive was affirmed, in other words, at a level of cultural practice marked by the medium his utterances employed—the level, again, of song-act—as well as at the level of the meanings his words circulated.

The sung delivery of the captive's challenge may have been basic to the exchange in another way as well. Whatever the linguistic features that marked it, for Thevet and the other Europeans, as song (features now irrecoverable in any precise way), these must have operated in the most general fashion as such features of chanting or singing operate in other times and places: as markers of the boundaries between normal and extraordinary discourse and thus as an index of a special linguis-

tic efficacy they embody. But the specific power of these songs, as in all such cases, was of a kind determined in their own context. In Tupi flesh exchange, bodily intonation and rhythmicization probably were the central features of an utterance that could take on Keane's "object-like qualities," a vocalization that could warrant the worth of a fleshly gift. In their emanation, at the same time, they may have revealed the "sign-like" qualities of the captive body, its more-than-material presence, its conveyance into the exchange of a spirituality linking a societal (and cosmological?) past, present, and future. In this way the Tupi body may have affirmed through song its metamaterial presence—its spirituality, in Mauss's terminology. It was not at all banished to the margins by song, as de Certeau would have it. Rather it was brought by singing to the very heart of social circulation, affirmed by song to be at once palpably material and worthily substantial.

Léry, as I have noted, did not describe as song the cannibals' challenges just before the killing and roasting of the captive. Or rather, I think, he *could not* describe them as song, because in structuring his narrative he put Tupi singing to other uses. Léry reserved song in the *Histoire* to affirm his proximity to the Tupi and the humanity they shared with him. Tupi singing was, for him, a source of wondrous communion with the Americans, as is clear from an important episode in his account that has preoccupied both de Certeau and Greenblatt. Léry took from his experience of Tupi song, first, a marvel and transport that he could not forget and that he tried to convey in European musical notation even twenty years later; he took from it, second, a confirmation that some dim

memory of God's Word persisted among the Americans.²⁵

For Léry to have recognized the connection between Tupi song and cannibalism would have emphasized instead the cultural gulf between himself and the Americans. The only Europeans whom a staunch Huguenot such as he could conceive as near to cannibals were the hated Catholics who had massacred so many of his religious brethren. Léry, in short, could not have it both ways. He could not experience Tupi singing both as a narrowing and a widening of the cultural distance that confronted him in Brazil.

Significantly, Léry demonstrates to us that the intercultural communion-in-song he experienced could operate in both directions. In an incident at the end of the chapter where he relates his wonderment at Tupi singing, the tables are precisely turned. Now he narrates how, while walking through the forest with several Brazilians, he was moved by the natural beauty around him to sing Psalm 104. The Indians were struck with sympathetic wonder at his song, which reminded them of the singing of a tribe allied with theirs. And, according to Léry, their communion with his singing allowed them to appreciate the truth of his psalm's words. When he explained their meaning to them they exclaimed, "Teh! O you *Mairs* (that is, Frenchmen) how fortunate you are to know so many secrets that are hidden from us poor wretches!"²⁶

²⁵ Léry, *Histoire*, 242-50; trans. Whatley, *History of a Voyage*, 140-45; see also de Certeau, "Ethno-Graphy," 212-15, and Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 16-19. Léry's musical notations of Tupi singing are not found in the first editions of his *Histoire* of 1578 and 1580; they first enter the edition of 1585. For a discussion of the significance of this use of European music writing, see Tomlinson, "Ideologies of Aztec Song," 374-77.

²⁶ Léry, *Histoire*, 257-59; trans. Whatley, *History of a Voyage*, 149.

So for Léry singing occupied a cultural space distant from cannibalism. It fulfilled roles not congruent with its use in the Tupi exchange of flesh, and fulfilled them so compellingly that this use was suppressed or even rendered, for him, inaudible. Or all but inaudible: perhaps Léry could not, after all, completely hide the Tupi connection of singing and flesh given as gift. The lead Indian among those who followed him through the forest, having marveled at his psalm and its doctrinal message, closed this episode by saying "Here, because you have sung so well," and making Léry the gift of an *agouti* he had caught and killed.

Meanwhile, Montaigne also avoids the efficacy of the Tupi songs, but in a different way than Léry: he turns them into poetry. The conceit of the captive's song, as we have heard, does not smack at all of barbarity to his ears. And, as for the wife's song, it is in his modest judgment no less than Anacreontic. I have written elsewhere of the effects, in another European-American encounter, of this mapping of the European ideology of poetry onto Native American song.²⁷ It is, above all, a gesture of domestication of others' singing, one almost bound to obscure efficacies unfamiliar to European conceptions and uses of song. The songs Montaigne relates are for him *chansons*, pleasant trifles. Their naive and rustic beauties, as he elsewhere remarks, liken them to European popular songs or *villanelles* and enable them to withstand comparison with

²⁷ See "Ideologies of Aztec Song," esp. 358-62; also Tomlinson, "Unlearning the Aztec *Cantares* (Preliminaries to a Postcolonial History)," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 260-86.

the most artful poetry.²⁸ In this naturalness, the songs are redolent of a grace among the Indians that, in the ethics of Montaigne's argument, must stand opposed, whatever his cultural relativism, to the "barbarous horror" of Tupi cannibalism. He, like Léry if for different reasons, cannot hear songs instead as the very driving force of human flesh exchange.

And what, finally, of Tupi polygamy and the wife's song that reflected it? The evidence here is entirely equivocal. The song is not attested elsewhere in European accounts and could be, after all, nothing more than a fabrication by Montaigne. Any presumption that it mirrors Tupi reality, however dimly, is even more questionable than such a leap regarding the first song.²⁹

If we take the leap, however, the song might enter intriguingly into the economy of flesh I have described. It functions as a kind of magical charm, bidding a serpent stand still so that its flesh pattern might be duplicated on a woven sash or girdle (as Frame translates it) to be worn by a lover. It suggests a magical transferal of flesh that

²⁸ These features also allow Montaigne to incorporate the songs in his complex thoughts concerning the role of human nature in nobility; see Kate van Orden, "Vernacular Culture and the Chanson in Paris, 1570-1580" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1996), chap. 6 and especially 400-8. Montaigne's likening of New World songs to *villanelles*, from the essay "Des vaines subtilitez" (bk. 1, essay 54), is quoted by van Orden on 407; see also Rat, 347; l'rame, 227.

²⁹ Moreover, the gendering of Montaigne's presentation of the song is puzzling, as Carla Freccero has noted. His introducing of it seems to suggest that it was sung by a wife. However, its reference to the giving of the girdle to a female lover—"un riche cordon que je puisse donner à m'amie" (Rat, 244)—instead calls, in the context of the heterosexual relations that the whole passage concerns, for a male singer. See Carla Freccero, "Cannibalism, Homophobia, Women: Montaigne's 'Des cannibales' and 'De l'amitié,'" in *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 73-83. Thanks to Juliet Fleming for bringing this essay to my attention.

accompanies sexual relations; perhaps—if the lure of an encroaching Freudianism can be warded off in hazarding such a guess—it assimilates the serpent to the penis of the singer who presents the sash. The serpent-sash itself, created with the aid of a charm song, marks the value of the adder it resembles: “so may your beauty and your pattern be forever preferred to all other serpents.” By the same token it distinguishes the lover who wears it. A gift validates flesh, facilitating the sexual meeting of flesh, by special means again involving song.

Moreover, the broadening of the economy of flesh exchange to include non-human flesh that is involved in this interpretation of the song resonates with another incident above noted: the Tupi gift of an agouti to Léry for his psalm singing. In the one case a gift of song is reciprocated with a gift of flesh; in the other a seemingly totemic gift resembling flesh and created through song accompanies a fleshly sexual exchange. Both cases, like the broader social and ritual system of anthropophagic flesh exchange in which they occur, present singing as a special enunciation connected to the circulation of flesh.

To pursue this, the most speculative of the speculations I have offered, one step farther: if Montaigne’s second song-text hints at a gynocentric view in which a penis can be accepted as a gift, it suggests that polygamy all told may have been configured by women as an exchange among themselves of male flesh. Polygamy, in other words, might appear as a female point-of-entry into the social circulation of flesh, rather than as anything akin to Montaigne’s wifely selflessness and fidelity.

That Tupi women could link in this way their husband’s flesh to the flesh of enemies consumed may seem improbable. But the possibility of just such a linkage is confirmed in one of the roles women played in ritual

ual cannibalism itself. Léry describes the role, with melodramatic (and very male) horror. He tells us that a male captive, but not a female one, was sometimes given a spouse, who would “treat him well and minister to all his needs” during the period of captivity. Then, as soon as he was killed, his wife would

perform some slight mourning beside the body—and “slight mourning” is just what I mean. For as one says of the crocodile, that having killed a man, he then weeps just before eating him, so too after the woman has made some or another lamentation, and shed a few feigned tears over her dead husband, she will, if she can, be the first to eat him.³⁰

What scant and problematic evidence we have hints, then, at something close to the opposite of Montaigne’s interpretation of Tupi polygamy. It suggests not a view from which a man’s intercourse with several women might or might not arouse jealousy among them, but a perspective from which the union of one man with several women was conceived as a circulation of his flesh, analogous in this circulation to cannibalism. Along the way it distances the Tupi’s wife’s tears from Léry’s perspective: whatever their emotional valence, these were not merely “crocodile tears,” but tears shed in a social context utterly foreign to their European interpreter.³¹ And, finally, this interpretation points up once more the importance of song-acts in defining and even driving the economy of flesh exchange that seems to have been basic to Tupi society.

³⁰ Whatley, *History of a Voyage*, 125-26; Léry, *Histoire*, 217.

³¹ An attempt to analyze the social purport of these tears might start from another ritual described in Léry’s *Histoire*, the greeting of a male guest, in which women gather around, “spouting big tears” and “weeping their welcome.” See Léry, *Histoire*, 283-85; trans. Whatley, *History of a Voyage*, 164.