

TRANS CANNIBALS:
Trans Consumption as Modes of Making
RED
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ABSTRACT

In this writing, cannibalism as a symbol of taboo and villainy are explored alongside trans identities and modes of making. Using examples from popular media such as *Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho*, cannibalism and queerness are vessels to explore how performance is made. When your existence is politicized and your body is a symbol of fear, how does that inform the process of creating art? How can trans artists cannibalize and consume in order to reify and remake new possibilities of performance? To begin, examples of pop culture cannibals are examined and dissected through the lens of trans villainy. Trans identities as inherently villainous or taboo is posited against the taboo around cannibalism. This analysis is enacted in practice via the Brazilian art movement of *antropofagia* from its origins to modern day theatrical interpretations. The liminal space of trans bodies in the digital world is explored in the final chapter, in which the consumption of virtual bodies can be a tool for liberation or continued oppression. Following the essay is a conversation with John Jarboe regarding her performance *Rose: You Are What You Eat* in which RED and John get into the nitty gritty of trans cannibalism.

White this paper is merely a lily pad and not yet a landing place, the question of finding liberation in the taboo is the fulcrum of this writing. What does it mean when we are all cannibals?

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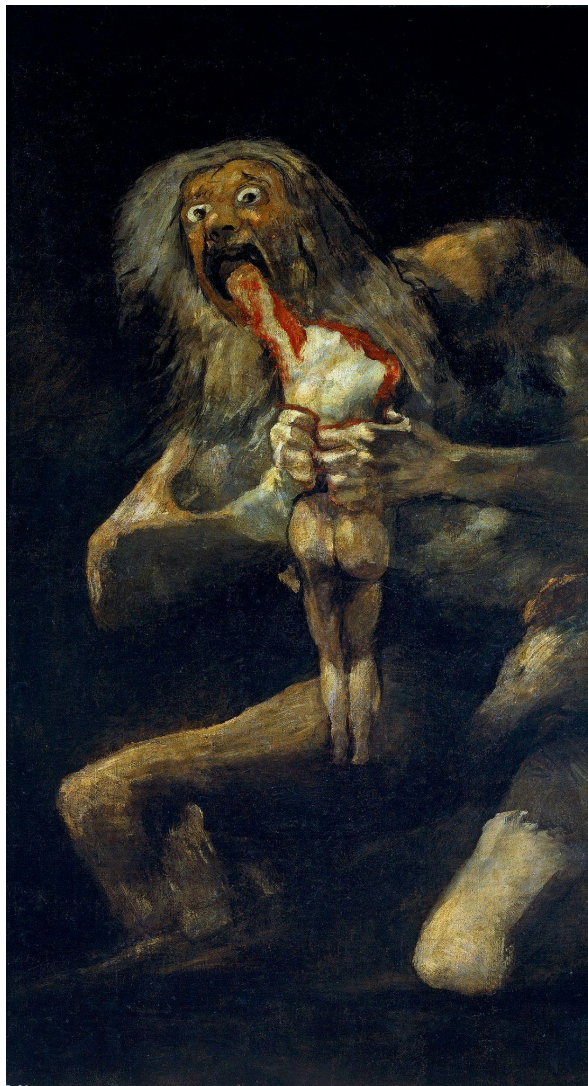
Happy eating.

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Saturn Devouring His Son
Francisco Goya (1820)

“...our eyes stared into each other's with the intensity of serpents'—serpents concentrated in the ecstasy of swallowing each other in turn, as we were aware, in our turn, of being swallowed by the serpent that digests us all, assimilated ceaselessly in the process of ingestion and digestion, in the universal cannibalism that leaves its imprint on every amorous relationship and erases the lines between our bodies...”

Italo Calvino, *Under the Jaguar Sun*

TRANS CANNIBALS: Trans Consumption as Modes of Making

Introduction: Who is a Cannibal?

When you think of cannibalism, what comes to mind? The Black Widow Spider may be the most infamous cannibal of the natural world. With a shiny-orb-like abdomen stamped with an iconic red hourglass, the Black Widow Spider's looks accompany a striking reputation as a sexual cannibal with a venomous bite. In an act of self-sacrifice, the smaller and more drab male Black Widow Spider risks it all to mate with the larger and more deadly female. If he is lucky, he might escape with most of his legs. Otherwise, his *le petit mort*, or "little death", is less of a euphemism and more of a literal event. Despite the male spider's loss, his death feeds and fertilizes the female who in widow-ing herself, creates and produces thousands of tiny spiderlings that will continue on to be cannibalized or cannibals themselves.

Sexual cannibalization is just one kind of cannibalism that occurs in the natural world. Cannibalization can occur between parents and offspring, reproductive partners, and completely unrelated members of the same species. When resources are low, cannibalizing members of the same species not only provides sustenance to the cannibal, but also eliminates competition for food. For mice, eating some of the litter reduces the amount of food that a parent has to find to feed the rest of the offspring. To return to the Black Widow, more patient males will breed with a female after she has eaten a more randy suitor. By taking advantage of the sexual cannibalization of another and her sated appetite, the more patient male manages to mate and keep most if not all of his appendages.

Cannibalism is a prominent behavior that ranges across the full scope of the natural world, yet may be one of the most taboo behaviors in the modern day. Cannibalism has been archaeologically documented via hominid remnants dating as far back as 600,000 years, and remains the most frightening human behavior in the Western world. Movies and TV shows featuring cannibalization such as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*, and *The Hills Have Eyes* have fascinated and terrified audiences for decades. Even commercial theater has experienced the allure of a cannibalization with Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. As Victorian Era barber Sweeney Todd butchers and chops the citizens of London remarking that "the trouble with poet, is/ 'Ow do you know it's deceased?" the audience can laugh at the notion of eating a poet without ever considering they might be capable of such acts.

When you think of the word cannibal – who do you see? Do you imagine the face of Hannibal Lecter eyeing you through the bars of a jail cell, recalling a meal of human liver with a side of fava beans and a nice Chianti? Perhaps, you recall the Donner party and their deadly trip along the Oregon trail that resulted in the cannibalization of members of the trip? If you are really niche, you might find yourself stumbling upon the Berlin Cannibal, who found their willing meal in kink chat rooms. However, not all cannibals are created equal. In movies like *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, a tribe of cannibals is depicted as an isolated group of Indigenous islanders who have taken British-Pirate Jack Sparrow in as a religious deity hoping to free him from his fleshy prison by roasting and eating him. They are depicted as brown skinned folk who are members of a pre-industrial tribe that use hand carved tools and resort to violent action as a method of control. They exist in stark contrast to depictions of white

cannibalism, which in characters like Hannibal and Sweeney Todd are shown to be controlled, intelligent and perhaps even seductive individuals.

Cannibal has been used as a defining adjective by white colonizers of Indigenous populations in the Caribbean, Americas and Pacific for hundreds of years. The word cannibal originates from the name of the Indigenous people that were inhabiting the Caribbean islands in the 1550s: the *kalino* or *karina*, eventually evolving to “Carib” and “Caribale”. As Western European influence shifted and grew across the West Indies, the word “caribales” became “cannibal” and would become congruent with the Indigenous people of the Caribbean and in white-European eyes, a group of people deemed “savages” in need of civilization. Cannibal became a word used to describe Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and provided Western colonizing forces a motive to conquer and violently assimilate, enslave, and/or eradicate. In other words, it became a tool for “othering”.

While the label of cannibalization was used as a motivation for violence, the mode has been repurposed as a tool of revitalization. Cannibalization in hominid communities was not simply for access to protein, but was also practiced in reverence to influential members of the community. Humans have long been consuming in order to reimagine, reinforce and recreate. Today, humans practice a variety of modes of cannibalization. While there are still documented cases of cannibalism of the flesh, the term has broader connotations.

Chapter 1: Cannibalism as an Artistic Tool

I propose cannibalization as a mode of making: a praxis of consumption, taboo and recreation.¹ Pulling from the phenomenological praxis of Glitch, Cyber, and Posthuman, cannibalism will be analyzed as an artistic method. If gender is a continuous performance, as Judith Butler so famously argued, then perhaps in order to continue that performance, it must be consumable, particularly in the era of consumerism and late stage capitalism. This consumption is particularly prevalent in the world of social media. Social media platforms Instagram, Twitter and TikTok have been integral parts of information gathering and spreading, particularly for marginalized communities. I would argue that these platforms are also integral to a digital cannibalization and remaking that are key to liberation and artistic praxis, particularly with trans people. In examining glitch and cyborg feminism as well as historical analysis of relevant artistic practices, I will be examining cannibalism in the digital sphere as a mode of art making for trans identities. Digital cannibalization is made possible by the reification of bodies in the virtual plane through reposting, digital recreation and reification.

This repetition and consumption can be characterized as a phenomenological happening. A multitude of feminist praxis such as Glitch Feminism, Cyborg Feminism, and Posthuman Feminism embrace a multiplicity and removal of individuals from the center of the discussion. For example, in her book *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, the Australian post-human feminist writer Astrida Neimanis examines water as an elemental connector of

¹ I believe that in examining and acknowledging and criticizing the history and anthropological arrival of the word cannibal is imperative in understanding the path of cannibalism as a method of reimagined practice, particularly for those artists who are white and of European descent. Despite my own distance from the Caribbean roots of cannibalism, I note in the work of this movement, a recognition of consumption in order to make and in order to reimagine. I hope to speak to the methods of cannibalism and how it arrives as artistic practice on a larger scale.

bodies, one that removes a sense of individuality and phallocentrism as water moves from body to body. She states: “The bodies from which we siphon and into which we pour ourselves are certainly other human bodies (a kissable lover, a blood transfusion stranger, a nursing infant), but they are just as likely a sea, a cistern, an underground reservoir of once-was-rain (Neimanis 2).” We press atom to atom against each other and reform and reshape with each passing tide. We experience the osmosis of existence.

The osmosis that Neimanis is pointing to raises itself in the inquiries of queer and Trans theater artist John Jarboe in her original work and performance of *Rose: You are Who you Eat* at the Guggenheim museum in March 2022. As a child, Jarboe’s Aunt told her that she committed fetal cannibalism in the womb, which is why she “is the way she is”. Jarboe took that premise and examined the literal consumption of her unborn twin through a musical and cabaret-esque journey. She posed the question of her own arrival into herself through the consuming and embodiment, the becoming of Rose through her infantile cannibalistic act in the womb. She posed the question to the audience - what does it mean to cannibalize another: is it the literal consumption of flesh? Do we cannibalize each other when we kiss a lover and trade saliva and skin cells? Do we cannibalize when we chew our own fingernails?

Jarboe concludes at the end of her musical journey proclaiming,, “Mama, it’s me, Rose!” drawing to mind the iconic line “Here she is, boys! Here she is, world! Here's Rose!” by the character Mama Rose in Stephen Sondheim’s *Gypsy*. In the hit musical, Mama Rose relies on the success of her actress-daughter Gypsy Rose Lee to feed her own need for fame and success. Jarboe turns the narrative around as she arrives more fully into oneself from the maternal form—to have been consumed within and from the fertile body via cannibalization, Jarboe arrives fully

into herself. While Neimas may argue that individualism cannot exist when we are constantly being recycled through each other, Jarboe posits the opposite. We remake, are remade, and are made from, and that is our own unique concoction of self. As Jarboe performs, she performs the alchemy of her mother's body, her twin's amalgamation of cells, and her own continuous reconfiguration through digital and live reification. The audience witnesses the process of cannibalisation unfold in front of them, bringing to mind the question: what happens when we bear witness to the act we unknowingly commit yet fear so deeply?

Chapter 2: *Antropofagia*

One mode of this can be found in Brazil during the Tropicália movement in the 1960s: *antropofagia*. *Anthopofagia*, also read as anthropophagia (the eating of human flesh by other human beings,) was used to describe the cannibalization of European and Western art within Brazilian artwork (Tate). For many artists of this time, *antropofagia* was not only a cannibalization of form, but a reinvention of identity outside of a colonized lens. Anthropofagia was brought into the spotlight of artistic practice by poet, novelist and critic Oswald de Andrade's "*Manifesto Antropofago*" or "Cannibalist Manifesto" in the São Paulo cultural review in May, 1928 (de Andrade and Bary 35). While de Andrade's manifesto on cannibalism was not necessarily a new phenomena, the exploration of duality and forging a new identity from the confinement of colonialism via cannibalization of colonial art was revolutionary at the time and would lay the groundwork for artmaking in Brazil for years to come.

Fast forward to the 21st century and the term anthropophagy has adapted and expanded into a queer and trans art practice that Brazilian artists of a multitude of mediums use throughout

endeavors of anti-colonial expression. This amalgamation is explored in Brazilian trans theater maker Renata Carvalho's solo show *Manifesto Transpofágico* (2021). de Andrade's text from 1920 is re-performed and remixed in an examination and expansion of the cannibalism of material into performance (Leal and Rosa 4). As noted by self-described *transvestite* educator and researcher in Performing Arts, Dodi Leal and actor/dancer/performer/researcher André Rosa in their article "Transgenerities in Performance: gender disobedience and anti-coloniality in the performing arts," cannibalism is not the sole focus of this performance, and that a new creation is made. In taking from the assumptions and binaries of de Andrade's time, his text is cannibalized and repurposed to provide a doorway of Carvalho's making. In order to rearrange oneself out of the current narrative and parameters, one must only slowly peel away the lumber of the house to create passageways that lead to an outside or another room.

Chapter 3: Digital C@nnibal\$

This peeling fuels queer and trans art and continues the process of the reification of the trans and queer body. This reification can be seen most prominently in how we consume and remake art through a digital lens, particularly with digital spaces such as social media, blogs, and other methods of digital replication. While these spaces can hold a multiplicity of existence and modes of operating, there is an inherent violence within the electrical currents of internet culture. Algorithms section and corral bodies into separate modes and hide away others. There is a feeling of being watched and watching - of consuming and being consumed. In order to continue occupying digital real estate, one must consume the algorithm in order to work with it and against it.

An example of this would be tactics sex workers use to avoid Instagram reporting, or getting “Zucked”, such as letter swapping on flagged words or phrases. Switching “sex worker” to “seggs warper” or “porn” to “corn” are only two examples of the many many ways that marginalized individuals work around the algorithm. In order to learn these tactics, one must consume - must stumble upon those who have already paved that path before them. The education to stay in the feed is acquired through relentless consumption of other trans sex worker’s pages and materials. One learns how to survive by taking in another’s virtual body and reimagining it for themselves. This consumption and regurgitation can be a method of safety, but can also be used as remediation of monolithic experiences.

Cybercarnality is the phrase created by Sharif Mowlabocus, a British scholar in sexuality in digital media, which he coins in his book *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men, Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age* (2010). While Mowlabocus’s analysis of digital gay male culture is centered around British gay male culture specifically, his term “cybercarnality” aims to describe a set of forms and architecture that “work at a granular level” within a digital space (Mowlabocus 58). He identifies cybercarnality as working in two specific tropes: “a. A pornographic remediation of the gay male body and b. technologies of self surveillance and corporeal regulation.” (58)

By using pornography as a descriptor or a container for remediation, is the pornographic expression of self a reversal of the gay male identity or perhaps a regression to a more archetypal state? In its attempts to reverse or remediate, does the body further embed itself into the lexicon of gay digital culture by returning again and again within itself? Mowlabocus notes “that within gay porn we witness, to varying degrees, the affirmation of male-male desire from *within* the

culture that both produces and consumes it” and that through porn, queerness, specifically cis-male-male desire, is reified in consuming itself for itself (64). Through digesting and regurgitating imagery in the form of bodies and identities, queerness becomes further embedded within itself as the food chain gobbles up more and more material and fodder.

However, as noted in feminist writer Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020), these bodies not only exist within the circuits and electronics of the internet but then manifest themselves as flesh in bodies beyond the screen. This reification enacts not only a potential for existence but erasure as harmful rhetoric or predominant imagery is manifested and reproduced again and again through shares, likes, clicks, and algorithms. When an algorithm or a user interface is predominantly programmed white, marginalized bodies invariably become lost in the margins. Russell says, “If one can render another body faceless and unrecognizable, if one can pin another as subhuman, it becomes easier for one group to establish a position of supremacy over another (Russell 21).” Dating profile creation ie. having to pick a gender marker, or denoting racial and ethnic identities, feed what is reintroduced and consumed to the algorithms.

“No Fats, No Femmes” has been a discussion in the gay-male community since the emergence of digital chat rooms and apps. Comments and preferences imbued with racism, ableism, fatphobia, colorism, transphobia, and more, have proliferated throughout the digital dating sphere. It is in the recreation of the white male body and recreated white desire, that creates pockets of erasure for other bodies to exist and thrive.

Trans filmmaker and director Fatima Jamal points directly to the discourse and erasure within a culture of “No Fats, No Femmes” in her in-production film of the same name. In her

description of her work, Jamal specifically “considers those [of us] discarded...and disappeared from Black collective imaginings and networks of care (Jamal)” interrogating a specific digital space that erases marginalized identities. While the documentary is still in production, her accompanying performance piece featuring Mark Aguhar’s “A Litany for My Heavenly Brown Body” is used as a direct address to the viewer. Performed by Jamal, in golden stiletto nails, a black t-shirt and short cropped hair (Jamal, *No Fats, No Femmes*), she speaks directly to the camera. A heartbeat, sonically cropped too close to the end of the beat syncs with the repetition of the word “fuck,” underscoring and creating a metronome quality to the spoken text as each new descriptor is introduced, further embedding the rhetoric with each “fuck.” The first interruption begins after Jamal’s line “FUCK that people think I’m a slut” when a short set of two clips in succession: Jamal’s tongue stretched up to her top lip as if to lick her own lips, and a tongue pop that percussively strike against the consistent heartbeat and repetitious “fuck”. This moment is an interruption, an establishment of agency as if the snap of the pop is a cheekish response to the possibility of being thought of as a slut. It evokes a question in response: “people may think I am a slut, but what if I am?” The interruption and disruption of reification perhaps creates an opportunity to examine a fissure in repetition, that when agency over a particular label is claimed that it provides an opportunity to disrupt or glitch a cycle of repetition.

What is particularly poignant about Jamal’s work is the question of care and being seen. In expressing a blessing upon a variety of marginalized and misrepresented bodies now newly accompanying the same heartbeat, three dancers move in a triadic circle, voguing slowly to a beat that seems to only exist for themselves (Jamal, 1:39). With each blessing, the viewer is reintroduced to the bodies and identities that are often omitted and/or ostracized within

white-gay-male spaces. Their queerness is made all the more real as each identifier is spoken into existence in a ritualistic and holy communion, ending the sermon and closing the circle with a final “amen.”

In engaging in the continuous consumption and feeding of the “In the virtual world, queer bodies are always visibly queer (Mowlabocus 71).” states Mowlabocus in *Gaydar*, and perhaps this is true, but what then happens when that queerness is disseminated into the various intersections that we experience and then is attempted to be silenced? They become queerer and louder. In claiming the word “slut”, we witness Jamal’s rejection of white desirability and a celebration and reinstitution of the body that blossoms in the fissures of unimaginative consciousness. Consumption and recreation within a predominantly white and cis algorithm requires radical performance that can range from violent glitch to a soft sweeping and overloading of circuits. As Oswald in “Manifesto Atropofagia,” writes: “Down with Memory as a source of custom. The renewal of personal experience (de Andrade and Bary 43).” Radical re-examination and discovery out of the hegemonies of digital spheres can provide a new range of coding that makes space for those whose bodies are left in the margins.

Conclusion: Scratching the Itch

My analysis of digital cannibalism is only scratching the surface of a trans-narrative discourse and art making. As trans folks become more and more to the front line of social discourse, the more our existence and respectability are brought into conversation. The correlation between visibility and oppression are painfully linked in the current political landscape of Western Society. As we ride the tides of the internet to find each other and consume

and rebirth new understandings of gender and expression, there are oppositional forces that seek to control and snuff out. It is not lost on many that the rise and fascination with fabricated consciousness and genderless AI technology sits antagonistically to the fear garnered around trans bodies. To quote actor and trans-activist, Indya Moore, “We out here humanizing robots and dehumanizing trans folks.” Porn featuring trans women is still one of the most searched categories on sites such as Pornhub, yet each day more and more legislation comes out to further police the bodies and lives of trans people. As this cycle continues and as conservatives repetitively consume and consume trans bodies through the pixels of each image and clip, and continue to take and twist and contort the thing they so deeply fear, I must insist on the reminder:

You are what you eat.

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN JARBOE

The conversation of queer cannibalism was just beginning to crest upon my radar when a colleague of mine recommended the solo performance of Rose: You Are Who You Eat at the Guggenheim's Works in Progress. John Jarboe, of the Philly famed group The Bearded Ladies presented an evening of singing, video, and hunger that was simultaneously embracing queer camp and vulnerable storytelling.

The Bearded Ladies are an experimental cabaret group devoted to exploiting all the possibilities of intimate, homemade theater through beautiful songs, tricked-out costume changes, drag, and virtuosic prop construction. John Jarboe is the founder and artistic director of the group and continues to grow and develop Rose: You Are Who You Eat across multiple genres of theater and art. I had the pleasure of chatting with her about her process, cannibalism, and trans villainy.

RED: Hi, John. How are you doing?

John Jarboe: I'm good. I'm grateful you reached out. It's not everyone who reaches out about queer cannibals. You caught my attention.

RED: Thank you so much, and thanks for taking the time to meet with me. I'm so excited to talk to you about queer cannibalism.

John Jarboe: How can I help and what's going to be useful to you?

RED: I have a few questions about how you arrived at your show at the Guggenheim, *Rose: A True Story*, and cannibalism as a thematic choice and a method of making. My thesis is revolving around cannibalism as a method of art making for trans and queer people, while thinking about consumption theory, cyborg theory, digital spaces, camp, and materiality. Also thinking: do I want to be this person? Do I want to fuck this person? Do I want to eat this person? All of the queer questions of desire and identity through the literal consumption of someone else. I'm thinking about how queer and trans people reify themselves and remake themselves through outside sources, whether that's other trans people, or repurposing and destroying oppressive tactics and remaking them for liberation. Last year, I was thinking about all these things, and my colleague who has seen your work in Philly, was like, "John's doing this production at the Guggenheim. We have to go see it. I think you'd really like it." Then, I saw *Rose* and I was like, "Wow, oh my god." I was so excited to know that there were other queer/trans folks who were thinking about cannibalism and playing with it as a theater making device.

JJ: Yeah, and I'm happy to share and am excited to hear about your work because I'm steeped, I'm steeped in this right now. Pretty, pretty fully. *Rose* was originally conceived as an installation piece with films and I'm in the process of building an installation that will go up at the Fabric Workshop and Museum for six months. It's my first big installation in a professional art space

and that installation is a garden of Rose and is about creating a space that is nourishing for trans folks. It tells the story of Rose and John, me eating Rose, and Rose eating me from the inside out.

RED: How did the story of Rose come about? In the show, you introduced that your aunt said you ate your twin in the womb, and that was why you are how you are. How did you arrive at needing to tell the story?

JJ: I think that moment just stuck with me. When my aunt said that, it was so weird. I was like, this is fascinating. Then, I had some opportunities to write and was interested in shifting into writing original music and wrote the song “Rose: A True Story.” I wrote one verse and it began with “how can I be funny about cannibalism?” I’ve been obsessed with food and eating and eating metaphors for most of my career. I feel like a lot of the work that the [Bearded Ladies] create is about food. I’m often wearing food. I wear costumes that have cupcakes on them that you frost with udders that are hanging down from my arms. I have a picnic table outfit and young folks come and grab all the sandwiches that are on the picnic table and they’re eating my dress. I’ve been very interested in positioning art as a nourishing necessity. It’s something useful and functional in a society that doesn’t see it as such.

I have always had a fascination with *Psycho*. I’m less of a Hannibal kind of person, but you know, there’s some kind of weird fascination with that world of queer villainy. Also, at the same time, I’ve always said my favorite emotion is fuck me, be me. Or, I’m uncertain about if I want to be you or fuck you. What is this feeling? I like this idea of devouring someone. I don’t just want to sleep with you. I want to eat you to become you. I think there have been themes of it in the work that I’ve talked about.

I made a piece in 2019, about problematic heroes. We were commissioned to do a birthday party for Walt Whitman, which was with a bunch of queer composers and I directed and was a lead writer on it. We were like: you are who you eat, you know? So, the idea that it becomes part of the cells of our body. So, it’s really hard when someone’s like, “Whitman’s deeply problematic.” It’s hard to cut out that piece of your body even if you have to sometimes. I had that moment of life experience and then wrote the first verse of the Rose song and was being silly about it. Then, the second verse of that song goes way deeper. It’s like: sometimes I’m passing through a mirror and wonder who ate who. I see you inside me. And even though it still lives in the kind of punny, i.e., “I’ve always been a healthy eater” realm, it really became a window to exploring my transness, which I’m like young in transness. I started using she/her pronouns probably five years ago. It was like, “Oh, she and he, but only she when I’m in the Bearded Ladies and my company.” and young trans people in my life were pleading, “like, when are you gonna, [come out] you know?” I called The Bearded Ladies, The Bearded Ladies 13 years ago, and it was nominative determinism, like, I am a bearded lady and it just took me a while to be comfortable with that, like I used to shave. There’s been some digesting of icons and identities that I have longed for, longed to be and have put on and I’ve taken all their material and have been processing it.

Anyway, Rose turned into the song, and then Works In Process [at the Guggenheim] asked me to do something during the pandemic and I made a video, which went really well. They

were like, “Why don't you go on a residency or writing residency to work on this material?” So, then I went with some trusted collaborators and wrote a ton of material—like wrote letters to Rose every single day, made a whole Rose installation in a little room and then started doing little film projects where I was exploring themes of auto cannibalism. Like the ways in which we're always eating ourselves every single day.

I think some of the material for Rose that you saw came out of that residency but really, I was focused on films and songs. Then we did a second residency where we made a suite of about 10 films that are about 15 minutes of material. It intersects with some of the material you saw and then some of it's a whole remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* shower scene where I'm murdering myself in the shower, like weird, very weird. Some of them are music videos, some of them are art films. The concert was actually because the Guggenheim said “People are coming back to live spaces. Do you want to do a show?” It was like, Well, okay, I'll try. So, we did that performance, which I feel like ended up being less of a lily pad and more of a landing place for me. Like, whoa, this feels important. I want to live in this. At the same time, we got some support to do this big installation in Philly. Now the project is kind of living in multiple genres. It will be an installation, it'll be a show sometimes and it will travel together. Sometimes it will go separately, and [I am] kind of searching for a place for the concert to live so I can meet other little cannibals.

RED: The auto cannibalism was one point that I remember very distinctly and blew my mind: we swallow our own spit, we breathe in our skin cells in a wild recycling of self that happens throughout our daily lives. There's a recycling of pattern of behaviors or recycling of how I was when I was a kid: I used to like run around and dig in the dirt and was very tomboyish and I'm reminiscing on how I used to be: a returning to an authentic self prior to all the bullshit of society and expectations and how I am now. There's something so queer about cannibalism and I'm wondering is cannibalism like an inherently queer thing and not necessarily like, cannibalism is gay, but more along the lines of Jack Halberstam and *Queer Art of Failure*, What are your thoughts on queer cannibals?

JJ: Yeah, certainly that process of recycling that you're talking about: the process of digesting and we're digesting. I feel like queer people are doing more digesting and more processing than other folks. I mean, for me, I do think that we have stronger stomachs. As a community we have to: for composting ourselves. Also, a wild hunger for putting on personas. Like, tasting and trying out other people's identities in what seems like a rabid search to find some self identification. And in that way, queerness could be aligned with cannibalism. I'm also just thinking that villains are so often coded as queer in media all the time. There's an alignment there that's really fascinating.

RED: My mind immediately [went] to Hannibal and *Silence of the Lambs*. We have Hannibal Lecter, iconic cannibal, but we also have Buffalo Bill, who is this trans/queer coded individual who preys on women. There's a weird juxtaposition that happens with a queer villain who is trying to find herself and then Hannibal Lecter, who is ultimately doing the same, but yet is somehow coded as heroic. These two individuals are ultimately doing similar things in the

cannibalization of others in order to fulfill a dietary need or an identity. Yet, one is seen as more villainous than the other. I think what you're speaking to is trans femme villainy, which I think a Western American society is very scared of and reacts to with violence. In exploring *Rose*, were those conversations that came up or threads that arrived?

JJ: I think there's a huge section about shame and "I am guilty. I am the villain." One of the films that I've made is myself as a rose bush. You see me pruning a bush and the rose bush is my head with all of these thorns. "I'm a repeat offender" is the first line and it's kind of like a Beckett monologue about killing a rabbit and being a villain. I remade a ton of *Psycho* even though *Psycho* is not necessarily about cannibalism. It is about queer villainy. I remake the sandwich scene where Anthony—(I'm Anthony Perkins, and Rose is Janet Lee)—I do the whole psychiatrist scene at the end which was the first mention of the word "trans," which I do in the show. That's a huge theme in the work: queer villainy and an obsession with trans problematic material as a source of identity of self identification. I'm remarking that "We're starving. We're so hungry." I'd say that in the show. I'm like, "I'm so hungry, aren't you? Are you hungry?" I'm hungry for who I am, and for seeing who I am. Maybe that's equating that with the stomach and devouring people.

I'm fascinated by what you're doing too because I'm not sure I'm always thinking philosophically about it, necessarily. I talk about it a bit philosophically in the piece but it's really coming from Rose and it continues to be a project where I'm really trying to create from a different place than I might normally. I'm an intellectual kind of maker: What's the idea? What's the theme? With *Rose*, I was like, I'm going to write letters to my dead twin. I'm going to write a letter to the twin that I ate, that I'm still eating, that's eating me. I'm not going to care about linearity. I'm not going to care about form. I'm going to live in many different forms and I'm going to pay attention to the hunger that's implicit in it and just make space to nourish. It's very interesting to hear you talking from a more philosophical place in terms of queer theory. I'm not encountering a lot of people that are writing about queer cannibalism. I am the first person that I've heard say, "I'm a gender cannibal."

RED: I love the term gender cannibal. I think you are speaking to something, at least the way that I've experienced it as a child of the internet, that my transness arrived from experiencing other trans people on social media and having access to them via the Internet. Where I grew up in the suburbs of the Midwest in very Catholic communities, you didn't see a lot of queer people or a lot of trans people, if any. If you did see queer people, it was very heteronormative structures of queerness, like the two gay guys down the way, shacking up and living in a house, which is fantastic for them, but any kind of variance outside of that was non-existent. Then feeling that hunger — "Who am I? I feel off kilter." Then arriving at: this thing is longer working for me, but I also don't know the alternatives, and that hunger for difference and variance — expanding my palate, so to speak.

It's not only as a method of making an identity but as an art making practice: like devouring found materials of these queer villains. One of the things that I keep doing is cannibalizing Taylor Swift, which is strange because Taylor Swift is a straight girl icon, but there's inherent queerness in some of the things that she does—if you reframe it, it becomes

incredibly queer. There's something really exciting about taking these materials and devouring them, regurgitating them up into some sort of queer vomit. That's exciting, and different, and messy, and grotesque. But also filled with glitter and trans garbage realness. There's this mulling over this grotesque process of digesting and analysis that I think is a big part of queerness and transness and learning about who you are. It's a messy process, and we have to have tough stomachs for that, like you said.

JJ: How are you being received as the rare student that's exploring cannibalism and transness?

RED: There were a lot of my classmates who at first were like, "RED is talking about cannibalism again." I learned about the Berlin cannibal my first semester and that lit the flame for me. I was thinking about the etymology of the word, and its use for othering and violence against Black bodies. It brings up an expanse of questions about the cannibalization of "cannibalization", but about conservative thinking. In order for conservatives to continue to rail against trans people, they have to continue to reify us and make us more real, make us more of a threat. In order for them to do that, they have to be taking in trans people a lot, and cannibalizing and devouring us. How do we use that? How do we take that and use that as a tool of liberation, whether that's art making, whether that's through legislative action, whether it's through mutual aid? But, to answer your question, it's been well received!

How did it feel when you were told that you had eaten your sibling in the womb? How old were you?

JJ: It was 2018. It was very, very surprising. One might say shocking and funny. Like absurd, shocking, funny. There was a moment where I could have felt defensive and I decided instead to embrace the mythology that was being given to me and embrace the metaphor, because I don't often feel like I'm trans enough. I know that's a pretty typical feeling for trans folks, especially as someone who has a beard and identifies a bearded lady, enjoys all sorts of drag, and likes lots of different expressions. I think gender cannibal was the closest thing to finding that and being like, "Oh, this is this is mine. This is who I am. I'm a gender cannibal." I'm trans and all these other things that are politicized but, if I were alone in a room, and I didn't have to worry about that, I'd be like, "I'm a gender cannibal. She/her." It felt like a gift. It felt like I was being told who I was. There has been a longing or a hunger for something that's felt missing. Sometimes, I feel like I don't know where I'm going. I don't know when the digestion will stop. There's something about inviting Rose in, in all of her forms, into my life and owning her and that I am her and she is me. It has been really special. You know that feeling?

RED: I do. Do you think everyone is a cannibal?

JJ: Do I think everyone's a cannibal? I don't know. I do say that in the show and we're all kind of like, "Normalize Cannibalism." I do believe that we all engage in the act of cannibalism. I'm not sure everyone is a cannibal. Even if it's just auto cannibalism, we are eating each other all the time. It is messy and we are connected. But for some reason I'm also like, no, not everyone's a cannibal.

RED: I love it.

John Jarboe: And you can quote me on that.
[edited for length and clarity]

Select Queer and Trans Artists Exploring the Fields of Consumption and/or Cannibalism:

ARTIST	LOCATION	WEBSITE
Renata Carvalho	Brazil	https://www.teatromunicipaldoporto.pt/en/programa/renata-carvalho-manifesto-transpofagico/
John Jarboe	United States	https://www.beardedladiescabaret.com/about/
Fatima Jamal	United States	http://fatimajamal.com/
Nancy Grossman	United States	https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/nancy-grossman
Cassils	United States	https://www.cassils.net/
É boylan	United States	http://www.eboylan.com/about-1.html
Carlos Motta	United States	https://carlosmotta.com/projects/
Machine Dazzle	United States	https://www.pomegranatearts.com/artist/machine/
Bárbara Wagner	Brazil	https://www.pipaprize.com/pag/artists/barbara-wagner/
Benjamin J Burca	Brazil	https://iffr.com/en/persons/benjamin-de-burca
Dodi Leal	Brazil	https://www.instagram.com/dodileal/?hl=en
Hija De Perra	Brazil	https://www.instagram.com/hijadeperraoficial/?hl=en
Fake Friends	United States	https://fakefriends.net/about-us

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