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Too Monstrous to Fail? Cannibal Capitalism in the Urban Peruvian Amazon

Japhy Wilson

This paper explores the monstrosity of capital through a surrealist ethnography of the city of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon: an extractivist metropolis that embodies what Nancy Fraser calls cannibal capitalism, and that seems to confirm David Harvey's suggestion that capitalism is too monstrous to survive. But a consideration of the radical art and street culture of the city suggests that Harvey's claim is less self-evident than it seems. The libidinal investment of the subaltern inhabitants of Iquitos in extractive forms of capital accumulation indicates that capitalism may instead be too monstrous to fail. On the other hand, the demonic carnival rituals through which these same inhabitants celebrate their right to a city built on the murderous enslavement of their ancestors, and deliriously subvert their own monstrous pathologization in forms of collective expenditure, suggest that capitalism is perhaps not monstrous enough, in contrast to the ecstatic rebel monstrosity of cannibal communism.

Key Words: Amazon, Cannibal Capitalism, Monstrosity, Peru, Surrealism

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of monsters.

—China Miéville, “Theses on Monsters”

Cannibalism alone unites us.

—Oswald de Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto”

In his recent book *The Anti-capitalist Chronicles*, the eminent Marxist geographer David Harvey (2020, 11) suggests that contemporary global capitalism is “too big to fail, too monstrous to survive.” In doing so, he acknowledges the epochal deadlock of our time: the socioecological catastrophe of capitalism has reached such planetarily perilous proportions that it absolutely must stop now, yet the immense scale and uncontrollable dynamics of the system mean

that it cannot and will not end. This acknowledgement has drawn an aggressive response from certain orthodox Marxists, whose enduring faith in Leninist revolution continues to shield them from confrontation with this deadlock. Jorge Martín (2020), for example, has condemned Harvey's claim as "as incredible argument against revolution with no basis in reality!" Raju Das (2023, 1089) has cited it as evidence that "his thinking is simply inadequate from the standpoint ... of the radical transformation of the current world into world socialism." And Steve Ellner (2020) has dismissed "the fallacy of the 'too big to fail' thesis" on the grounds that "if it weren't for unfavourable political conditions ... one could almost say that capitalism is on its last leg." But these attacks contain a peculiar silence: while they denounce Harvey's claim that capitalism is too big to fail, they have nothing to say about his suggestion that it is too monstrous to survive.

Rather than focusing on the first clause of Harvey's argument, I would like to explore this second, seemingly uncontroversial clause. Harvey (2020, 11) himself makes little effort to demonstrate the unsustainable monstrosity of capitalism beyond passing references to its "monstrous imbalances... incredible class and social inequalities and collapsing environmental conditions," and the fact that this claim was so swiftly passed over by his critics could perhaps be attributed to its apparent self-evidence. But the monster is a powerful and complex metaphor with a long history of deployment in both colonial and critical discourses, and the assertion that global capitalism is too monstrous to survive is not as straightforward as either Harvey or his detractors assume. In this paper, I interrogate this claim through an ethnographic-surrealist study of the city of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon: an extractivist metropolis that embodies many of the most monstrous elements of "cannibal capitalism" (Fraser 2022).

The first section locates my study in the wider literature on monstrosity and sketches my theoretical and methodological approach. The second section describes a surrealist painting by an Iquitos artist that portrays the cannibal capitalism through which the city has historically been sustained—a history that suggests that capitalism, as Harvey claims, is indeed *too monstrous to survive*. The third section depicts a staging of this painting by a performance artist in one of the poorest barrios of Iquitos, which was looted by the audience, illustrating the enthusiastic participation of the local subaltern population in cannibal capitalism while raising the question of whether capitalism might instead be *too monstrous to fail*. The fourth section depicts the demonic carnival celebrations in the same barrio, in which the most marginalized inhabitants of Iquitos defiantly celebrate their right to a city built on the cannibalistic exploitation of their ancestors, and deliriously subvert their own monstrous pathologization. The paper concludes that such forms of collective expenditure suggest that capitalism is *not monstrous enough*, in contrast to the ecstatic rebel monstrosity of cannibal communism.

1. Capital and Other Monsters

Beyond its denotation of diabolical beasts and depraved behaviors, the monstrous can be more broadly defined as “that which calls into question our ... epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us ... to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization” (Mittman 2012, 8). Notably, despite the reluctance of Harvey’s orthodox Marxist critics to engage with his assertion of capitalism’s monstrosity, Marx himself appealed to monstrous metaphors precisely to grasp the unrepresentably excessive aspect of capital (Wilson 2018). In volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx (1976, 302, 353, 342) drew extensively on the gothic imagery that proliferated in the popular literature of his time, describing value as “an animated monster which begins to ‘work’”; depicting the automatic drive toward self-valorization as “a werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour”; and defining capital as “dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour.” More recently, heterodox Marxists have documented the tendency for subaltern populations in South America and sub-Saharan Africa to convey the brutal imposition of capitalist social relations in spectral and demonic forms (McNally 2012; Taussig 2010), and have interpreted the proliferation of zombies and vampires in the contemporary Western culture industry as displaced expressions of the inhuman dimensions of global capitalism (Calder Williams 2011; Shaviro 2002).

Other critical theorists have focused on the ways in which the monstrosity of this system is concealed and legitimated by the framing of its excluded and exploited others in similarly monstrous terms (Defalco Lamperez and McGhee 2017; Giuliani 2021; Halberstam 2020; Mittman and Dendle 2012). Colonial regimes have denigrated restive native populations as cannibals and savages whose monstrosity demanded their civilization and repression, while monstrous framings of oppressed peoples as “human animals” and “children of darkness” likewise function to legitimate apartheid systems and genocidal massacres today (Hawari 2023). Rather than simply rejecting such racist representations of monstrosity, many of these theorists have sought to subvert them by affirming the figure of the monster as a symbol of resistance and rebellious alterity. This, as we will see, is the central message of Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade’s (1991) influential “Cannibalist Manifesto,” published in 1928 as “Manifesto Antropofago,” which affirmed the identity of the cannibal ascribed to the Indigenous peoples of Brazil as the basis for a new form of subaltern modernity in which it is not as workers but as cannibals that the colonized peoples of the world must unite. The novels of the highly unorthodox Marxist China Miéville (2012) likewise stage spectacular conflicts between monstrously corrupt political and economic systems and hallucinatorily mutated hybrid rebel beings, as allegories of a world in which the history of class struggle plays out as a history of struggles between real and imagined monsters.

These literatures raise intriguing questions about the monstrosity of capitalism and of its subaltern populations. Such questions, however, are anathema to orthodox Marxists (Miéville 2002), who implicitly adhere to the bourgeois principles of realism and utility, with the corollary that “the notion of ‘the excessive’ is often treated as something to be reduced, contained, or ‘secured’” (Pawlett 1997, 94). The question of capitalism’s monstrosity can be more creatively approached from the perspective of the heretical Marxist and dissident surrealist Georges Bataille, who regarded the dogmatic iteration of dialectical materialism as a form of idealism, to the extent that it projected its own ossified ontological and teleological assumptions onto the world instead of being attentive to the formless and untamable dynamics of the world itself. Bataille countered this idealist materialism with his own form of “base materialism” (Noys 1998), which he defined as “a crude liberation of human life from the imprisonment and masked pathology of ethics, an appeal to all that is offensive, indestructible, and even despicable, to all that overthrows, perverts, and ridicules spirit” (Bataille 1985, 32). Scorning the normalizing project of the rationalist social sciences of which Marxist orthodoxy is a part, Bataille proposed “heterology” as a counterproject embracing deviancy, transgression, and excess against “any homogenous representation of the world ... The goal of such representations is always the deprivation of our universe’s sources of excitation and the development of a servile human species, fit only for the fabrication, rational consumption, and conservation of products” (97).

This paper takes Bataille’s iconoclastic brand of surrealist Marxism as an inspiration, in an exploration of the urban monstrosity of Iquitos, based on extensive field research conducted in that city between 2019 and 2023.¹ For Harvey’s Leninist critics, the value of such research would apparently be measured by its contribution to the organization of “a Marxist working class party” (Das 2023, 1085), which will lead a triumphant “socialist revolution ... when workers take political power and with it control of the means of production ... to fulfill the needs of society” (Martín 2020). But as Ana Tsing (2015, 2) has noted, in her ethnographic study of everyday life in the ruins of capitalist development, “The specter that many try not to see is a simple realization—the world will not be ‘saved.’ If we don’t believe in a global revolutionary future, we must live ... in the present.” By replacing the orthodox Marxist faith in revolution with an ethnographic attentiveness to our apocalyptic planetary present (Wilson 2023b, 2023c), “We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours” (Tsing 2015, 3). This implies neither an abandonment of subaltern struggles nor a betrayal of the proletarian perspective. On the contrary, as Alain Badiou (2010, 95) insists in *The Communist Hypothesis*: “We have to get back to the immediate and reflexive life to all those who live in this world. If we get back to that, we can unflinchingly observe capitalism.” Given the

1. Historical and literary forms of urban monstrosity are explored in Defalco Lamperez and McGhee (2017).

normalizing powers of both capitalist ideology and orthodox critique, in contrast to the profound strangeness of the world produced by cannibal capitalism, this project requires an “ethnographic surrealism” of the kind proposed by Bataille (Clifford 1981; Wilson 2025): a surrealism that seeks to dislodge established patterns of thought from the well-worn grooves of scholarly convention, and which operates “by way of estrangement effects, via procedures that make the everyday appear as it truly is: bizarre, shocking, monstrous” (McNally 2012, 6).

2. Anthropophagous Accumulation

The body of a young Indigenous woman is draped across a table, her breasts and thighs arranged among jungle fruits and fishes like the meat at the center of a feast. The white men in suits sitting around her laugh about their latest profits and corruptions, inhaling the sweet scents of the fruits and puking their fine whiskeys onto their half-unbuttoned shirts. The woman returns the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer, challenging us to acknowledge our anthropophagous complicity with the men preparing to gorge themselves upon her.

This is the scene portrayed in *The Banquet*, a painting by the Iquitos-born artist Christian Bendayán (see fig. 1). *The Banquet* echoes Méret Oppenheim’s *Cannibal*



Figure 1. *The Banquet*, Christian Bendayán (2012; oil on canvas)

Feast: a controversial piece of performance art, staged at the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris in 1959, in which food was eaten by the audience from the body of a naked woman (Stronciwilk 2023). In *The Banquet*, Oppenheim's commentary on the hypocrisies of bourgeois European culture mutates into a critique of the violence and obscenity of cannibal capitalism on the peripheries of the planetary system. The painting was part of an exhibition of Bendayán's work held in Iquitos and other Peruvian cities in 2012, entitled *The Devil's Paradise* (*El Paraíso del Diablo*), in reference to the book that revealed the crimes of the rubber boom, which had been published under the same name a century before (see Hardenburg 1913). Driven by burgeoning demand for rubber in the industrial capitals of Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century, the rubber boom rapidly transformed Iquitos from an anonymous hamlet into a prosperous modern city (Wilson 2023a). By the turn of the century, the city center was adorned with the ostentatious architecture of the European *belle époque*, and Iquitos had been reinvented as "a coquette Iberian city ensconced in the heart of Amazonian darkness" (Buntinx 2019, 22).

The opulence of Iquitos concealed the genocidal violence of the surrounding rubber stations on which its wealth was founded. In the Putumayo region, on the border with Colombia, the enslavement of local Indigenous peoples was enforced with systematic torture, rape, and murder, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 30,000 members of the Huitoto and Bora peoples: "They are tortured by means of fire and water, and by tying them up, crucified, head down ... They are cut to pieces and dismembered with knives, axes, and machetes" (Hardenburg 1913, 185). Their exploitation was justified as a civilizing act in response to their alleged cannibalism (Taussig 1987). But as noted by Roger Casement (quoted in Wylie 2013, 99), who traveled to the Putumayo in 1910 to investigate these atrocities, the true cannibalism was that of the surplus value extracted through their enslavement, and the British investors who financed these operations would "enjoy the taste of their dividends, for at every meal they sit at a cannibal feast."

The primitive accumulation of capital in Iquitos provides a stark illustration of the dominant contemporary mode of accumulation, which Nancy Fraser (2022) has called "cannibal capitalism." Like Casement, Fraser documents the history of oppressed peoples being framed as cannibals to legitimate the violent imposition of capitalist social relations by colonial regimes, before turning this accusation against capital itself. But as this mode of accumulation has evolved and its crisis tendencies have intensified, Fraser argues that its cannibalism has taken a new and intensified form such that capitalism is now consuming its own social and ecological conditions of existence "like the ouroboros, the self-cannibalizing serpent that eats its own tail" (xiv).²

2. Commentaries on cannibal capitalism in recent art and literature include Zhu Yu's *Eating People* (see Teo 2012) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (see Dominy 2015).

The history of Iquitos since the rubber boom has followed this pattern through a further series of extractive booms and busts: precious timber, exotic furs and skins, barbasco, oil, gold, cocaine (Espinoza 2016; Santos Granero and Barclay 2015). Fed by this spasmodic influx of extractive commodities based on the unregulated ransacking of the surrounding jungle, and functioning as an immense money-laundering machine for the illegal industries on which much of its wealth is based, Iquitos has mutated into a metropolis that embodies the accumulative logic of cannibal capitalism identified by Fraser (2022, 24), to the extent that it “devours the very supports on which it relies” and “cannibalizes its own conditions of possibility.” Meanwhile, the Putumayo has become the latest illegal logging and gold-mining frontier and a zone of narcotrafficking and paramilitary violence comparable in its brutality to that of the rubber boom (Wylie 2013). The region is still inhabited by the descendants of the victims of that boom, who speak of monstrous forces at work in the surrounding jungle: gringos in flying saucers who remove peoples’ faces with laser beams; a laboratory extracting “human oil” from Indigenous captives trapped in glass tubes; a team of murderous foreign scientists in search of a red orchid that grants immortality (Wilson 2024). Describing an encounter on one of the rivers of the region with “a corpse with its face peeled off and its heart torn out,” a local writer attributes the mysterious crime to the agents of cannibal capitalism: “Those perverse individuals who, as we know, in these times of modernity have done what they wish with this zone” (Daza Tananta 2010, 27).

3. Cannibal Metropolis

Beneath the art nouveau arches of a derelict pavilion in an impoverished periphery of Iquitos, a young mestizo woman in a thin white dress reclines upon a wooden pyre. Its terraced levels overflow with mangos, pineapples, passionfruit, watermelons, papayas, and cakes covered in glittering icing of soft pink and baby blue. People gaze at the delectable spectacle in silence from the humble stalls of the surrounding market. A child reaches out and takes a piece of fruit. Another carries a pink cake carefully away. The entire market descends on the pyre. The woman gets to her knees and smashes herself in the face with chunks of fruit. The people around the pyre scramble over and under one another in their haste to grasp the evaporating loot. The prim ironwork of the pavilion casts delicate shadows on the cannibalistic feasting of the crowd.

This performance was titled “La Glorieta”—the name of the ruined rubber-boom-era pavilion in the barrio of Bajo Belén where it was staged in 2019. “La Glorieta” was conceived as a critical interpretation of Bendañán’s *The Banquet* by the performance artist Kay Zevallos (2019), who like Bendañán was born in Iquitos. The purpose of the performance, as explained on the artist’s website,

was to “highlight the cannibalization of peoples and lands.” But Zevallos had not anticipated the audience’s response. Her intention, as she later explained, had been to “inform the public over these vicious practices of power ... I honestly imagined that the people were not going to do anything; that they were going to sit down and look.”³ Instead, the subaltern inhabitants of Bajo Belén gleefully looted the luxuriant *mise-en-scène*, leaving the woman performed by Zevallos lying buried in the ravaged remains (see [fig. 2](#)). Christian Bendayán had attended the performance and was struck by the disturbing new meaning that the audience had imposed on his painting in their symbolic revelation of subaltern complicity in the wanton violence of extractive capital. As he observed at the time: “The Amazon and its resources are laid out to eat as if they were a banquet. And we are like cannibals who do not realize that we are feasting on ourselves.”⁴

The unexpected looting of the staging of *The Banquet* poses an apparent problem for Fraser’s framing of cannibal capitalism and for Harvey’s claim that capitalism is too monstrous to survive. Like Harvey, Fraser (2022, 152) understands cannibal capitalism as a parasitic system that feeds upon and is resisted by an impoverished global population yearning and struggling for a more socially harmonious and environmentally sustainable world, based on “the nurturing of people” and “the safeguarding of nature.” But this was not the message delivered by the inhabitants of Bajo Belén in their subversion of Zevallos’s performance. Instead, the looting communicated a libidinal desire to participate in the destructive orgy of cannibal capitalism to which they and their ancestors had been historically subjected. Indeed, such participation is central to the social reproduction of the *barrio* in the form of occasional employment in the oil industry and more plentiful work in the illegal gold, timber, and cocaine trades on clandestine crews operating many days’ journey upriver from Iquitos in the roadless and lawless outer reaches of the Peruvian Amazon.

Those reluctant to acknowledge proletarian complicity in the monstrosity of capital might seek to explain the widespread subaltern participation in cannibal capitalism as a reluctant response to economic necessity. But that would overlook the rebellious utopian dimension of such endeavors, located in the persistent promise of a big haul, the brief pleasures of big spending, and the relative freedom of a life improvised on the margins of wage labor and the law (Gasche Sues 2014). This dimension was ultimately embraced by Zevallos in her performance of *The Banquet*. The exploited woman depicted in the painting initially repudiated the pillage underway around her, but she ended up joining the cannibal feast, forcing the flesh of the fruit into her mouth and squeezing the juice until it was pouring down her arms. In Zevallos’s words: “In the end, as much as you are part of the wealth, you also exploit it, and you also need it ... Or maybe it was an

3. Kay Zevallos, author interview, 15 January 2022, Paris, France (via Zoom).

4. Christian Bendayán, author interview, 20 December 2019, Iquitos, Peru.



Figure 2. Kay Zevallos, “La Glorieta,” performance in Belén (2019; photo by Japhy Wilson)

act of rebellion on her part. She chews the fruit because she realizes that the whole world does the same.”⁵

4. Carnival Monstrosity

Carnival Sunday in Bajo Belén: I get to the port of Pueblo Libre at around midday. A gang of masked dancers are drinking *aguardiente*. One of them passes me the bottle and tells me what the devil means to him: “I believe in him. He’s a cool guy. The devil sorts you out.” He asks for the devil’s help “to keep me working

5. Zevallos, author interview, 15 January 2022. A film of the performance can be seen at Zevallos (2021). The performance also has an important feminist dimension, which the artist emphasized in response to my interpretation. In her words: “In my performance the woman questions the audience, protects her fruits ... and there is a kind of complicity with the women present, because contrary to Bendayán’s painting, women are not submissive in the face of the onslaught. Bendayán places the woman at the center of a banquet, with three men taking advantage of that banquet. My performance is a woman who reminds the public that in the structures of power there is always someone taking advantage of someone else. That’s why my performance is called ‘La Glorieta’: a small [exploitative] glory that can have great consequences. Like the entire history of the exploitation of the Amazon, its natural and intangible resources, and the human body that is both part of and resistant to those structures of power” (Kay Zevallos, personal communication, 28 November 2024).

instead of stealing.”⁶ He’s been dancing for ten years now and has two more to go. All the masked dancers of Pueblo Libre pledge to dance for twelve years in honor of the devil—six dressed as a demon and six in drag accompanying the demons along with trans women from across Iquitos, who also participate in the festivities.⁷ Those dancers who break their pledge are said to die soon after. But the devil they venerate is not the evil devil of the Christian faith but the morally ambivalent *supay* of precolonial Amazonian tradition, with whom the Christian devil was combined by missionaries eager to colonize Indigenous minds and discredit Indigenous beliefs (Reátegui 2020). Unfortunately for the missionaries, in Iquitos the carnival and its devil have escaped ecclesiastical control and mutated into a depraved fiesta. The devils of Pueblo Libre stage the wildest party of all, which is feared and criminalized by the Iquitos bourgeoisie as a threatening expression of “the numerous elements or social forms that homogenous society is powerless to assimilate: mobs ... impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule” (Bataille 1985, 142).

Soon the port is filled with hundreds of debauched dancers who storm through the slum toward a concrete warehouse in which they change into their costumes. Most have replaced the masks of Indigenous tradition with the latex Halloween merchandise of Westernized consumer culture. But this is not just another case of the erosion of local customs by the homogenizing forces of global capitalism. Instead, the masks have been grotesquely modified in accordance with their wearers’ own heterogeneous tastes and imaginations, contributing to a cannibalistic fusion of multiple cultural forms. This fusion epitomizes the process of subaltern cultural anthropophagy celebrated by Oswald de Andrade’s (1991) “Cannibalist Manifesto,” which can be read as a more radical and nuanced decolonial critique of cannibal capitalism than Fraser’s own rendering of the concept.⁸ Fraser challenges colonial representations of cannibalism by arguing that it is capitalism, not its colonized peoples, that is the true cannibal. But as we have seen, the division between the two is far less distinct than Fraser’s framing would suggest, and there is a utopian dimension to the lust with which capital’s victims participate in the cannibal feast. The “Cannibalist Manifesto” endorses this dimension by embracing the accusation of cannibalism leveled against the Indigenous

6. Informal conversation with an inhabitant of Bajo Belén, 19 February 2023, Iquitos, Peru.

7. Iquitos has had a strong trans community since the early 1990s when trans women migrated to the city along with homosexuals, sex workers, drug addicts, and petty criminals, all of whom were collectively framed as “undesirables” and murdered or expelled in ethnic-cleansing campaigns operated by terrorist groups in other parts of the country in the context of the Peruvian civil war (Jaúregui 2018; López 2016).

8. Andrade’s manifesto predates Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), which are frequently cited as foundational texts of postcolonial studies. As such, given its widespread influence and its foregrounding of key postcolonial and decolonial themes, Andrade’s text has a strong claim to a similarly foundational status (Andrade Tosta 2011; García 2020).

peoples of Brazil and the rest of the colonized world and drawing out its subversive potential. Rejecting both the imposition of Western models and the romanticization of the noble savage, Andrade affirms the delirious cannibalization of Western cultural forms and their surrealist fusion with Indigenous symbols and practices in new mutant configurations epitomized by the Belén Carnival: “Cannibalism. The permanent transformation of taboo into totem ... We were never catechized. What we really made was Carnival ... We already had communism. We already had the surrealist language” (40).

The masked dancers change in the dark so that the crowds outside will not know who they are when they emerge or which one among them is the real devil. They say that Lucifer himself joins them in this room and slips out alongside them undetected as the warehouse door is flung open and they rush into the light. Purple skeletons, red-eyed apes, decomposing clowns. A dissolute rabble of leprous demons escorting a luscious retinue of transgender courtesans (see [fig. 3](#)). They fling themselves around the nearest *húmisha*—one of countless palm trees hacked out of the surrounding jungle each year in preparation for the carnival, adorned with plastic household goods and erected on every street corner of the slum. This palm will be felled with the rest and stripped of its wares at the carnival’s conclusion. Now it is surrounded by a throng of monsters flailing to a mutant mashed-up modern version of the traditional carnival flute and drums fed through a distorted sound system to become a heavy electronica. The leader gives a sharp whistle, and the swarm of motley beings seethes on to the next *húmisha*, buckets of river water hurled upon them from the upper floors.

The air is thick with the sickly scent of marijuana. Haggard trolls gyrate with rampant werewolves. Gaggering gimps cavort with slaving simians. We drink



Figure 3. Masked dancers, Belén carnival (2023; photo by Japhy Wilson)

bowls of *masato* and cups of *aguardiente* distributed for free from barrels by the roadside, and scrabble for handfuls of candy chucked from makeshift balconies. Fat goblins slowly kick and stamp at the center of the circle while trans women kick off their heels and sprint around its outer limits. Firecrackers explode under the dancers' feet. Wooden phalluses and rubber dildos are thrust and waved. A werewolf throws his partner onto her back and mounts her, turning his blindly lolling snout toward the leering crowd. Masks are torn off and thrown around like decapitated heads. There is no more circling in homage to the *húmisha*. Just crepuscular monsters raving in the dusk.

As I stumbled home that night, I drunkenly wondered what we could learn from the masked dancers of Pueblo Libre. There was no explicit politics to their performance. Yet it delivered a powerful message of anarchic autonomy. The police stayed well away, and candy, alcohol, and music were all laid on for free. The transgressions of the disguised demons and trans women were a collective statement of emancipation from Church and State. And their performance of monstrosity can be interpreted as both an affirmation of their marginalized and pathologized identities and an implicit critique of the monstrosity of capital inscribed into the foundations of Iquitos by the genocidal crimes of the rubber boom on which its initial opulence was based. In the masked dance of the devils of Pueblo Libre, this "devil's paradise" of extractive capital is inverted in the utopian recuperation of an impoverished corner of the city by the descendants of the Indigenous workers enslaved, tortured, raped, and murdered in the extraction of the wealth on which this once prosperous city was built. Not "utopian" in the sense of the socialist fantasy of a harmonious future cleansed of the aberrations of cannibal capitalism, but in the sense of the wild collective embrace of this diabolical inheritance: a thousand rebel monsters leaping from their urban tomb in the triumphant form of the stubborn undead.

Conclusion

This essay has provided an unconventional response to David Harvey's controversial claim that capitalism is too big to fail and too monstrous to survive. Rather than focusing on the first clause of this claim, which has been the cause of the controversy and has provoked furious denunciations by orthodox Marxists who remain convinced of the imminent realizability of Leninist revolution, I have focused on the second clause, which these same critics have treated as uncontroversial. And rather than exploring this clause at the level of rationalist conceptual abstraction favored by such Marxists, I have done so through a surrealist ethnography of the city of Iquitos in a grounded engagement with Fraser's concept of cannibal capitalism. This ethnography has revealed a concatenation of anthropophagous allusions in the historical geography of Iquitos, in the radical local artworks commenting on this extractivist inheritance and in the everyday lives and

street celebrations of the subaltern inhabitants of the city. These include the transposition of Méret Oppenheim's Parisian performance of *Cannibal Feast* into the Peruvian Amazon in *The Banquet*; the colonial evocation of the specter of anthropophagy to justify genocidal violence and extractivist enslavement during the rubber boom; the multiple forms of extractivism through which the resources of the surrounding jungle are being ravenously exhausted by global capital and local populace alike; the monstrous carnival celebrations of Bajo Belén; and the gluttonous looting of the performance of *The Banquet*, through which the inhabitants of Bajo Belén subverted the power of state and capital portrayed in the painting, not by resisting cannibal capitalism but by becoming cannibals themselves.

The case of Iquitos thus suggests that, far from being too monstrous to survive, cannibal capitalism may be too monstrous to fail, in the sense that its blind drive toward endless accumulation regardless of all social and ecological consequences aligns with powerful libidinal drives that push humanity in the same direction (Pohl and Tomšič 2021; Ware 2023; Wilson 2018). As Tsing (2015, 274) has noted in a different context, it is "as if everyone were taking advantage of the end of the world to gather up riches before the last parts are destroyed ... It is hard not to see all our enterprises in this same apocalyptic light." Rather than responding to this catastrophic deadlock by appealing to "a representation of revolution as a redemptive light rising above the world"—which Bataille (1985, 34) dismisses as giving "free rein to cheap utopian blindness"—the ethnographic approach taken by this essay suggests that utopian and revolutionary potentials can only be sought in the corrupted world itself. And if the monstrosity of capitalism is not an obstacle to its survival, then such potentialities can only lie in the seemingly outlandish possibility that cannibal capitalism is not monstrous enough.

This possibility is hinted at by the Peruvian art critic Gustavo Buntinx (2019, 25), for whom the subaltern art and culture of Iquitos give expression to "a hedonistic apocalypse ... a twilight world in festive self-consumption, eating itself out, devouring its own entrails." This apocalyptically utopian dimension is captured by Bataille's (1985) concept of expenditure. According to Bataille, production and accumulation are ultimately only means to the end of expenditure, which "instead of locking up life as money is locked in a safe, spends it without counting" (82). Expenditure is not an ideology or a mode of production but the spontaneous squandering of surplus in destructive and orgiastic excess, which permeates the whole of existence, from social rituals of carnival and potlatch to the superabundance of the jungle and the limitless outpourings of the sun. Bataille insists on the utopian potential of expenditure, which "cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for. It is only by such insubordination—even if it is impoverished—that the human race ceases to be isolated in the unconditional splendour of material things" (128). It is through such insubordination that the monstrosity of capital fleetingly mutates into what might be called cannibal communism, in

which proletarians “tear themselves away from the domination of those who ... lead them on to poverty and the slaughterhouse” (166).

Cannibal communism gouges its utopian spaces out of the apocalyptic dynamics of cannibal capitalism itself and feasts on whatever can be salvaged from the carnage of its contradictions. It emerges in moments like the Belén Carnival, when the Indigenous apocalypse on which the primitive accumulation of capital in Iquitos was founded is restaged and replaced by a collective orgiastic celebration of heterogeneous monstrosity performed in its reclaimed ruins by the historical survivors of those genocidal crimes. As such, cannibal communism internalizes and overcomes the monstrosity of cannibal capitalism in the performance of its dialectical inversion, which takes the form of an apocalyptic utopia that “for the same reason as violence, excess, delirium, and madness ... belongs to what Georges Bataille calls the heterogeneous thing supposedly charged with an unknowable and dangerous force” (Abensour 2016, 34).

The wild utopian energy of cannibal communism is conveyed by Christian Bendayán in a recent painting called *Anthropophagous Indians* (fig. 4), which follows the “Cannibalist Manifesto” in subverting the colonial slur referred to in its title by staging “a reinvented cannibal dream that is voracious in its exuberant digestion of all glories and disgraces” (Buntinx 2019, 12). A line of naked “cannibals” moves through gloomy jungle alongside a sullen river, their flesh marked with the tattoos of the Bora tribe. The Bora had been marched along the trails of the Putumayo, under the weight of their extracted rubber, from their immolated villages, past their decapitated children, toward the stations that would send the rubber to Iquitos and on to Europe and the United States while those who

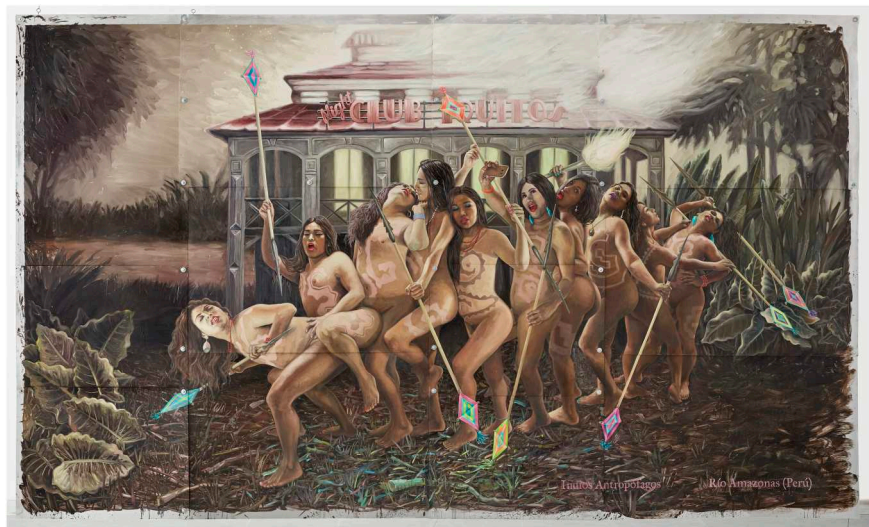


Figure 4. *Anthropophagous Indians*, Christian Bendayán (2019; oil on metal)

brought too little were flogged and left in stocks to eat the maggots writhing in their own wounds (Hardenburg 1913). In the painting, however, instead of rubber, these “Indians” bear spears tipped with psychedelic diamonds that transform the decaying matter of the forest floor into filaments of neon light. They are voluptuous, androgynous, transgender. They are not marching but touching, kissing, fucking. One holds a flaming torch with which she has just ignited one of the finest mansions of *belle époque* Iquitos, abruptly transposed into the bone-strewn jungle on which the city’s wealth was founded, and which its ornate architecture had sumptuously repressed. Now this violence returns in the inverted form of an uprising performed with hedonistic vitriol by the descendants of its systematic rape, pointing to the utopian potential for subaltern expenditure to exceed the monstrosity of capital in “a scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeoisie will be chopped off” (Bataille 1985, 8).

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