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“The Sea Is Slavery.” “The Sea Is History.” “Maybe the Sea Is Endless.”¹ The Sea as a Confluence of Horror and Memory in Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*

Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) relies on a historical event, the *Zong* Massacre, which has remained one of the most disastrous records of the Transatlantic slave trade. This essay intends to look into the way in which this fictional account opens up a confluence of horror and memory in the intertwined fields of history and fiction. The image of the slave ship as a circumscribed space of inhumane confinement will be examined first. The essay will subsequently focus on the sea as the representation of suspended space and time, a “non space” that could be coextensive with an unending Middle Passage. Finally, the novel will be analysed as a sea of (his)story/stories, a “road of bones” which leads to a re-routing of history. By writing about the silenced slaves who drowned in the sea, D’Aguiar makes sure that their stories are remembered and that their past is re-membered.

We were all sea swallow’d, though some cast again;
And, by that, destined to perform an act,
Whereof what’s past is prologue; what to come,
In yours and my discharge.

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, II, 1

Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* is a fictional account relying on well-documented archives: the story of the *Zong*, known as the *Zong* Massacre, has remained one of the most disastrous moments of the Atlantic slave trade, the slave ship being viewed as emblematic of the inhumanity and shame surrounding such a means of personal and collective enrichment. During a Transatlantic crossing in 1781, and on the occasion of the outbreak of disease on board, Captain Collingwood decided to throw overboard 131 African captives, most of them allegedly sick or dying, but not dead, in order to claim insurance money on his return to England, since the loss of slaves was assimilated to the loss of cargo. This event was publicized in Britain because of the trial that was to ensue, but also because these facts were used by famous abolitionists to exert pressure and put an end to the slave trade. William Turner’s *The Slave-Ship. Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840), painted some sixty years later, shows how enduring this event was in the eyes of the public,² and the controversy introduced by Ruskin’s interpretation of the painting has also contributed to its lasting impact.³

D’Aguiar’s fictional account of the *Zong* Massacre both remains faithful to historical facts and moves away from them: the historical figure of Captain L. Collingwood is renamed Captain Cunningham, while the spelling of the first mate’s name is only slightly altered in the novel.⁴ The major change brought about by D’Aguiar at story

1. These lines are respectively from Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History” (364), Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (3), and Edwidge Danticat’s short-story cycle *Krik? Krak!* (15).

2. This painting has been the subject of much debate as shown in Ward 97-104.

3. See Walters, Chapter 5, “‘Object into Subject’: Michelle Cliff, John Ruskin, and the ‘Slave Ship,’” in which the author engages with “two readings of J. M. W. Turner’s 1840 painting, *Slave Ship* [...], one by British Victorian art historian John Ruskin, and the other by contemporary Jamaican novelist, Michelle Cliff” (Walter, “Introduction,” 8-9; see also Ward 103-4).

4. In *Feeding the Ghosts*, the first mate’s name is Kelsal, thus echoing the name of First Mate Kelsall in Captain Collingwood’s crew.

level concerns the introduction of the surviving female slave, Mintah, instead of a male character (Low 106-7), while the novel's fictional discourse is affected by the author's decision to adopt Mintah's perspective at times, thus introducing a subjectivity not authenticated by historical fact. D'Aguiar's novel, then, is both to be viewed as hinging on, as well as expanding from, what is known as "the archives of the Black Atlantic" according to Wendy Walters (8, 101-21). Re-writing from historical facts is a position the novelist has claimed as his own because he has always viewed this historical past – slavery – as being part of his personality and of his present (D'Aguiar, "Last Essay"). We can therefore wonder to what extent *Feeding the Ghosts* can be viewed as a narrative that attempts to reconcile the respect for historical fact with the need to come to terms with slavery's lasting emotional impact: the fields of history and fiction interconnect in order to allow the reader to revisit the past in the present through D'Aguiar's poetic "re-visioning" of the historical past.

This essay will tackle this aspect by first looking into the image of the slave ship as an enclosed space of inhumane confinement, and then by considering the sea as the representation of a suspended space and time in the form of an in-betweenness – a "non space" that could also be synonymous with an unending Middle Passage. The sea can also be seen as a space of imagination, a space where the voices of the past can be both heard and reappropriated through acts of creative remembering. Finally, the novel will be analysed as a sea of (his)story/stories, a "road of bones" (*Feeding* 37, 213) re-routing history by expressing historical facts through new narrative devices, while preserving history and allowing it to endure.

"The sea is slavery"

In the "Prologue" to *Feeding the Ghosts*, Fred D'Aguiar states that the sea is slavery, echoing and paying homage to the poem by Derek Walcott quoted in the epigraph. This is a pervading theme in the novel, although in the narrative the sea representing history and slavery has been replaced by the image of the ship through a metonymic shift. The slave ship crystallises all the horrors of slavery and of the Middle Passage in its confined space, where all the negative impulses of humanity seem to have flowed together. Indeed, because of the awful living conditions and the outbreak of disease, the slaves have very little hope of survival, let alone of returning: the voyage is a one-way journey for them. Detained below deck, with no space to move around, the slaves are confined in the overcrowded space of the slave ship now turned into a jail. They form one shapeless and tight mass of beings (19) and the absence of sanitary facilities makes the air around them thick with the smells of sweat, vomit and faeces (19, 104).

Life aboard the ship is also characterised by physical violence as the enumeration of binding instruments, or of different forms of torture shows (72-4). Some women are sexually abused while others have no choice but to consent to sexual relationships in exchange for a piece of bread and cheese, or even "other or similar inducements: rum, biscuits, a slice of lemon or lime, bits of beef, even a trinket or two" (74). The enumeration points at the paltry compensation received. The ship is a closed space echoing with moans, pleas, shrieks and screams, as when the sick slaves are thrown overboard, and even more so when the victims of the captain's folly are children:

Mothers shouted to children [...] to struggle and scream. Men banged their chains on the decks and shouted in Yoruba, Ewe, Ibo, Fanti, Ashanti, Mandingo, Fetu, Foulah, at the

crew to leave the children and take them instead. Mothers pulled out their hair, fell into dead faints, wished for death to take them now, now, now, since life could never mean a thing after this. And cried with dry eyes and hardly a breath left in them. (39-40)

The cumulative effect produced by the various enumerations (of verbs expressing movement or noises, of different African languages) adds to the violence and chaos experienced aboard the ship. Mintah's story itself is the epitome of such violence: she is silenced for daring to call Kelsal's name and forced to dance to the captain's whip (30). She is beaten by Kelsal until she falls unconscious (33). She is gagged before being threatened with having her tongue cut out (40), and she is finally thrown overboard in retaliation for her insolence (48).⁵ The captives are also the victims of a less tangible form of violence, owing to the mercantile motivations of the traders: the slavers reduce the Africans to the status of mere commodities transported for their commercial value. As illustrated by the trial taking place in England in Part Two, the slaves are not human beings but "cargo," and "stock" (166), or even "horses" (140, 156; see also Walters 166, and Low 107). The letter of the law does not make any distinction between slaves and goods:

Here is the clause in question, clause 2, section 3 and I quote, "Any necessary action can be taken by the captain concerning livestock if the said action aims at the preservation of said stock." (166)

The trial is not a trial for murder, but a hearing in which the ship's investors hope to obtain a judgment granting them compensation for the slaves thrown overboard, and in which the insurers are determined to prove that the jettisoning of the slaves was not necessary. While the captain's ledger is examined as a detailed record of his economic losses, Mintah's clandestine book, produced as a piece of evidence of what truly happened on the ship, is discarded as "a fabrication by the insurers" (168), and even as a "book [...] penned by a ghost" (167). This explicitly stands as a further negation of the slaves' existence since they are denied a right to write, speak, or testify to what they witnessed – an obvious illustration of colonial erasure, of the prevailing of the British historical archive over the personal testimonies of the slaves. Thus Mintah's written account is dismissed as if it were a tissue of lies, instead of a testimony accounting for the truth of experience. Discredited as a ghost, Mintah is given no credibility as a writer and a narrator; her existence is reduced to that of a nonentity, one of the ghosts evoked in the title of the novel:

The drowned slaves are consigned to the murky depths and rendered anonymous and untraceable by the devouring current. Unlike the *Zong's* captain, whose existence was recorded in court proceedings and newspapers, and so remains a visible and verifiable presence in historical accounts, details about the slaves are scant – the number of slaves jettisoned is the extent of the information. (Ward 157; see also 160, 180-90)

The inhumanity and horror that can be encountered aboard the ship does not affect the slaves only. The sailors' situation is not much better since they, too, have to live in dreadful conditions.⁶ The crew themselves are submitted to bad treatment, as is illus-

5. This obviously shows that Mintah is forced into silence and that any form of rebellion will be suppressed.

6. Speaking of the ship *Brooks*, Marcus Rediker clearly explains what violence, even "barbarism," amounted to, insisting that the captain's violence was overtaken by that of "his employer, the merchant. [...] The merchant's violence was two-fold, practical and conceptual" (Rediker 338 *et passim*). See also Rediker's explanations in his introduction (6-8) as well as his comments on Captain Jackson's and John Newton's violence in the section entitled "The Savage Spirit of the Trade" (217-21).

trated by an apparently minor character, Simon – the cook’s help – who is constantly shouted at, insulted, slapped and beaten by the cook. Even the sailors are physically and psychologically exhausted: they have to obey the captain’s orders, although they sometimes consider these as morally wrong and although their growing discontent becomes more and more explicit (98-9).

Kelsal’s physical attitude is also, in a way, the expression of his moral burden, of his inhumane actions. His stooped shoulders and bowed legs are illustrations of his guilt, not only for throwing sick people overboard, but also for remembering his shameful past when he had first met Mintah at an African mission (131-2). Having to face death constantly on the ship is another element which alters the sailors’ judgement and acts as an insidious form of moral violence. The ship seems to have become a hellish, ghost vessel steered by madness. This was already suggested by the episode when Mintah cried out Kelsal’s name: her shouts were intended as a sign of recognition, a means of reminding Kelsal of his past and of their previous meeting. But once aboard, he considers this as an act of rebellion and subversion, based on reversal: “Now she had come and reversed things” (131).

Similarly, Captain Cunningham’s deadly accounts in the ledger are associated with a reversal of normality, sanity and order, as if the world had been turned upside down and the ship had capsized:

Only three days ago it had seemed that keeping them alive and healthy was the whole reason for this profitable undertaking. Things had become topsy-turvy. They had been at sea too long. The *Zong* no longer sailed towards land but must have been spun around in the dark, an about-turn while they slept, so that although it maintained the same forward movement, it was in fact describing a huge circle in the middle of the ocean and facing back to front, with a corresponding switch in the minds of all on board from reason to madness. (128)

The captain’s actions and calculations introduce chaos, and his computations become those of a dark magician, playing with other human souls and presiding over their destinies:

[I]n his long cloak, his elaborate hat and with his attention trained on his book, pen like a wand in his hand, he resembled a magician whose intention it was to bring streaming off the page every stroke that he’d recorded of these people dumped into the sea, all of those lost in this expansive burial ground into which they’d been thrown alive by his command, given up for dead, murdered, every man, woman and child, to bring them back with a bang and a puff of smoke before everyone’s eyes, without a hair out of place, unshackled, smiling and in perfect health. (126)

He is responsible for their being thrown into evil and hell (128-9). Without a reasonable captain at the helm, the *Zong* seems to have deviated from its course, both spatially and symbolically, thus becoming a ghost ship recalling the *Flying Dutchman*, condemned to perpetually sail the seas, never reaching any shore.

“Maybe the sea is endless”⁷

In *Feeding the Ghosts*, the vessel, like most ships, is introduced as an enclosed world representing both movement and enclosure (Gilroy 4). For the detained slaves, the crossing

7. See Danticat’s short story “Children of the Sea” (14-5). Although the context is different (Danticat’s story is not about the Middle Passage but about migration), the ship seems lost in the middle of the sea and is left unsteered, as if

is a one-way journey, with no hope of returning to Africa, and with very little hope of surviving. A cultural, social and political self-contained world characterized by perpetual movement,⁸ the ship is also a place of confinement where sailors and slaves can sense how fragile they are when facing the elements. Detained below deck, with no place to move, the slaves are helpless and utterly powerless, they fall prey to the storm, wind and rain as much as to the seamen's violence in an endless voyage. Like the migrants in Edwidge Danticat's story, "Children of the Sea," they feel as if they had been left adrift on an unfathomable sea, while being constantly threatened by the elements storming around them. A parallel is established between the violence of the ocean and the almost dehumanized space of the ship.

In D'Aguiar's novel, the sea is at first described as rather peaceful, as a space which silently engulfs the slaves' bodies and is paradoxically depicted as having a healing power, relieving them of their worldly miseries: "Salt washes wounds on those bodies instilled by the locks, chains, masks, collars, binds, fetters, handcuffs and whips of the land, washes until those wounds belong to the sea" (3). The term "washes" is ambivalent. Its repetition insists both on the sea's power to erase the pain and suffering caused by the Middle Passage, but also on the negative power of oblivion, the slaves' predicament being soon dissolved in water and forgotten. This ambiguous status of the sea, as both potential threat and source of solace, is present throughout the novel.

The sea is often to be considered an enemy, even for the captain, who thinks it is "shifty, ambiguous, unfathomable" (74). He is both fascinated and frightened by it, since it has become a hellish space, dominated by the hostility of the tempest. The sound made by the boat, initially compared to that of "perfume being slapped on to a just-shaved face" or a "rocking chair over loose floorboards" (9) – both of which can be read as reassuring, though unexpected, domestic similes – is gradually replaced by the hum, whistling and howling of the wind as the tempest rages. The slaves' voices, their moaning and shouting, seem to be amplified by the incredible clamour of the elements which threaten them with shipwreck (26). The established parallel suggests that the tempest is feeding, as it were, on the slaves' shrieks, thus becoming the expression of their despair, since they are aware that "their destination was not a beginning but an end without ending" (27).

The vessel appears to be sailing an uncharted sea, like "someone blindfolded" (111), or as if no one were presiding over its course. Synonymous with an impending death, the sea morphs into a monster about to devour its prey:

The sea leapt up the sides of the ship *to claim* them. *Losing patience* with them for taking so long to *deliver themselves up* to it. *Surrender* to its depths. Find its secrets. Become loose-limbed like water. As boneless. [...]

The sea *lifted into the air* and *dived* at the ship *for the next man, woman or child* to be dumped into it. (117, 126, emphasis added)

the migrants would never manage to reach a shore: "Sometimes it feels like we have been at sea longer than the many years that I have been on this earth. The sun comes up and goes down. That is how you know it has been a whole day. [...] At times I wonder if there is really land on the other side of the sea" (14-5).

8. "The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion, is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. [...] Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs." (Gilroy 4)

Once the bodies have been thrown overboard, the sea seems becalmed and satisfied, slowly digesting the slaves it was fed, reminding us of images of sacrifices (99), or even of a Holocaust, an aspect Paul Gilroy has discussed from a perspective that goes beyond D'Aguar's novel (Gilroy 213-6).⁹

For Captain Cunningham, too, the sea is not unlike the furnace of Hell, and he views himself as a High Priest sacrificing slaves to try and repel death, the sea being the realm of infernal shadows. He is driven to insanity by his own greed and by the sea, here viewed as the expression of his own madness ruling the ship:

On the *Zong*, he had defied death. He had refused to lie and wait for death to come and take him and everyone on his ship. He had *fed* death with the sick *as if death were a furnace*. Death must have thought that the work of *claiming* the *Zong* was being done by others, that everyone on it was *hurrying* to death, but in actual fact death was being robbed of the entire crew and stock by being *fed only a portion of the latter*. (164, emphasis added)

Here internal focalisation, through the use of free indirect style, highlights how delusional he has become, how his consciousness has been altered. The italicised words show that the captain sees himself as the agent of death, trying to satisfy its monstrous appetite.

The sea outside the ship can be seen as a place of imaginative investment, a fluid world shaped by perception. The sea itself becomes the space where chaos is brought about by the tempest, where what is viewed as normal is being reversed. When Mintah is thrown overboard, the sea is on that occasion compared to a world turned upside down: "Mintah revolved in the current and saw how the rain reversed its flow and became the sea falling upwards [...]" (51). As a child she had seen the "good side" of the sea (52), but as a slave locked in the hold of the ship she had witnessed "[i]ts other side, the one at war with all the world [...]" (52). With the storm the sea becomes a negative, undetermined "non space," an alien dimension beyond the reach of humanity, on the brink of Hell, haunted by ghosts and the hellish figure of the mad captain.

The sea, as a result, lies outside the space and time occupied by humans, as "the sea is nowhere and everywhere" (26), as if its very liquid nature placed it beyond human reach, outside man's control. "Sea does not stop at death," says the narrator in the prologue, adding that it "is oblivious to time" (4), which inscribes it in a timespan beyond human understanding. As a realm of imagination and fantasy, it is also a place that the spirits of the dead slaves keep haunting, breathing in the sea's howling noises and voice (3, 54-5). Mintah, after falling into the water, is tempted by "the thought of letting go and falling back into the sea," for she hears "the voice above the wind and the rain and the sea crying 'Let go, Mintah!'" (54). She is in a sense tempted by the voices of other slaves that she hears calling to her in the sound of the sea. The sea can thus be seen as a space where past and present come together, precisely because, being outside time, it has become the vault, the echo chamber, for the voices and presences of slaves lost at sea.

The voices in the water, which can be heard through the clamour of the tempestuous sea, contribute to giving this space the forbidding because immeasurable dimension of a middle place, because it is situated far from the Africans' place of origin – the land of Africa and its forests – but it is just as remote from the unknown destination where they

9. Ward also draws upon research on the Shoah "to explore an area which has, on the whole, been neglected by those writing about Britain's involvement in slavery" (101).

will start a new life (37). The transition between these two places, this Middle Passage, could last forever, the sea keeping them in its embrace (27, 35). The endless, ever-moving sea seems to offer no perspective, no future: "The sea was the beginning and end of everything" (112). As it does not allow for any fixity, all personalities and personal histories dissolve at sea and are reduced to nobody and nothing:

The sea was endless. Because it kept the horizon at a distance or else so close that both seemed the same, Mintah believed they were adrift on it rather than heading toward land. [...] She would not know what it meant to measure her destination against a landscape again. In the dark [the sea] made each lurch of the *Zong* seem like the last. But there was always another so close to the one just experienced that it erased the former immediately, making it seem that only one movement ever occurred, that rather than being a succession of jolts there was just the one unending action. [...] Instead, she was lost. At sea. Lost to her name. Her body. She felt cold or else numb. Soon she would feel nobody at all. Truly lost. (112)

Seen from the *Zong*, the sea is utterly different from what it appeared to be from the shore: observed at low tide from the African shores, it seemed "quelled, tamed, untroubled, recumbent" (52). It looked like glass or planed wood, thus appearing benign (51), utterly different from the hungry monster which nobody can expect to escape from, except perhaps "a witch" (58), or a goddess (63, 93). The novel thus introduces a clear distinction between the wild sea and its opposite element, the land, with its related images of forests, wood and grain. The land belongs to the slaves' past, it is a space where everything is stable, measurable and under control. Contrary to the sea, the land is associated with hope which, to Mintah, means being able "to feel soil, mud, stone, rock, clay, sand, loam, pebbles, boulders, grass. Then wood" (115). For wood is what saves her life when she manages to get back aboard the ship, and what links her to her own past. Her memories of carving wood "with the gentle pressure of a father and teacher's hand at her elbow to guide her plane and chisel" (52) allow her to see the "grain" in the wood of the ship's side, "there but buried" (53) and therefore to resist the temptation of falling back into the sea.

Land, wood, and grain are the exact opposites of slavery, its chains and irons (122 for instance). Feeling the grain of wood allows Mintah to recover her past (41-2) and when she is left unconscious and nearly mad (129) she comes back to life when she can sense that she is also, symbolically, made of the grain of wood (134). It is only after she has realized that wood is part of herself, or herself is part of wood, that she can utter her own name again (134). According to Marco Sievers,

[i]n contrast to the sea, whose constantly changing geography mirrors instability and chaos, land has a fixed [geography] which can be mapped and studied. [...] Grain basically symbolises the personality and individuality of humans. In the novel, it is connected with childhood memories [...] and consciousness [...]. Grain finally epitomises consciousness, personality and individuality, and detecting grain mirrors self-discovery and self-knowledge. (11, 14, 18-9)

Therefore, the sea is described as a liminal zone between lands where the slaves are taken to their hellish destinations, either as uprooted, alienated people, or as drowned bodies. The Middle Passage is a journey through horror and madness – in a word through inhumanity – which is not without recalling another crossing, the Kala-Pani, with the threat for Hindus of losing caste and perpetually wandering across the ocean (Mahabir 143). The sea is the realm of ghosts, and their voices can be heard to haunt it when the

winds blow, thus bearing their History and their stories. The sea is the place where all the slaves' voices can be heard again and where their forgotten stories can be listened to again. Their transformation into new creative stories can, in their own turn, alter the colonial vision of History.

A sea of (his)story(ies)

The events depicted in D'Aguiar's novel stand worlds apart from the wonders found in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. In Rushdie's tale, "the Ocean of the Streams of Story" is a metaphor referring to stories that are

held in fluid form [and] retain the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of yarns. It was not dead but alive. [...] Nothing comes from nothing, no story comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old – it is the new combinations that make them new. (72, 86)

However distinct Rushdie's and D'Aguiar's texts may initially appear to be, their authors' underlying intentions may not be very different. D'Aguiar's nod to Walcott's poem, "The Sea is History," has an ambivalent effect, as the epigraph refers both to History as an official and institutional record of past events, and to Walcott's more subjective reading of History, which reinterprets Biblical history in terms of the Middle Passage, making the sea the repository of the past of slavery. Walcott's biblical allusions suggest that historical events, preserved in the sea which engulfed the bodies of so many slaves, are in fact to be viewed as a new Genesis made possible by a creative re-imagining of the history of the Caribbean. They present a myth of creation, a myth involving the origins of a people which was forced to accept its own Exodus. This aspect of the novel emphasizes the difference between History and story, between official records and subjective storytelling.¹⁰ By capturing the haunting voices of the slaves drowned at sea to give them a new impetus in his own narrative, Fred D'Aguiar does not only re-write History from another angle of perception. He also remodels official History to include more personal and subjective stories, thus preventing them from being engulfed by oblivion forever. By quoting from Walcott, D'Aguiar makes these voices resonate through an intertextual web of Caribbean writers.

The links between the archive and subjectivity have been examined in a well-documented volume by Wendy Walters, in which she shows that the *Zong* Massacre was highly popularized in the nineteenth century and that the trial that ensued left its mark on its British audience (100). Historical archives are the basis for fictional reconstructions of history and, as has been pointed out, the *Zong* remains well-known for being a real vessel under the command of a Captain Collingwood and a Mr Kelsall, his First Mate. Following Andrew Lewis's research, we also know that Captain Collingwood "had died in Jamaica, shortly after landing," but that his logbook, "which would almost certainly have revealed more [...], has never reappeared," that a trial for fraud took place in 1783, but that "in the absence of the *Zong*'s log, the story of what happened on board the ship could only be told via Kelsall's deposition, and the eyewitness testimony of a passenger, Robert Stubbs" (Lewis qtd. in Walters 104). The conclusions reached are that "the sta-

10. George Didi-Huberman proposes an interesting analysis of the ambivalence of "haunted" places in his essay *Génie du non-lieu*. For him a reciprocity can be established between the haunted place and the haunting presence (55).

tements of these two English men became all that the court could consider as evidence, but today scholars consider it evidence that is compromised by the vested interest each man had" (Walters 105). Therefore, the objectivity of historical documents can be questioned, thus raising the issue of authority and reliability.

Historians have also shown that the *Zong* case was used by abolitionists to convince people of the need to put an end to the slave trade, as illustrated by Granville Sharp's position on the matter. They have also revealed that Sharp relied on indirect testimonies for his campaign (Walters 103). Modern readers can consequently observe that, although some historical archives do exist, there also remain many "intervening troughs and disappearances into darkness,"¹¹ showing that history itself cannot be exempted from accusations of subjectivity: "something is always left out while something else is recorded. There is no perfect closure of any event, however one chooses to define the boundaries of that event" (Trouillot qtd. in Walters 101). The dark zones of silence found in the archive are essential to writers who can expand on them to construct their own vision of the past, to propose their own subjective re-vision of History. For instance, by changing the captain's name, D'Aguiar lets the reader know that what he is interested in is not History as recorded by the British, but rather his own Caribbean retrieval and rewriting of the same,

as the novel [...] exceeds the known archival documentation of what happened on board the *Zong*. D'Aguiar invents several documents, highlighting the legal fetish of the logbook and our own historiographical reliance on it, undermining its power, and questioning its status as evidence. The novel also presents us with a dream archive, a journal authored by an African survivor of the *Zong*, [...] Mintah. (Walters 101)

D'Aguiar therefore effects a transposition, from History to story, placing subjectivity at the heart of the process of telling and writing fiction, as well as at the heart of the process of reading and interpreting.

For *Feeding the Ghosts* does not introduce the reader to one form of truth only, to one unique vantage point while aiming at evoking the full horror of the slave trade. By elaborating dialogues between the captain, his officers and the sailors, the narrator voices all the nuances to be found in the points of view of the slavers: the captain's excessive authority and blunt inhumanity in his search for profit, the sailors' greed but also their growing disgust at carrying out their ghastly task, the ambiguous positioning of British judges and the biased laws that transform actual murder into an economic loss of cargo, to mention but a few.

The novel also voices the slaves' perspectives, notably by adopting Mintah's vantage point. When she asserts her identity by shouting her name, she claims this survival for herself but also for all the slaves who disappeared during the crossing. She can then be viewed as the spokesperson for the 131 other people who were jettisoned, and for the unknown number of other slaves who had died before. Calling out their names is a significant act which enables the slaves to escape nothingness and to be remembered as well as re-membered (126-7). The sentence "I am Ama" (127) sounds like another assertion of existence over death, as in the circular statement – it is almost a palindrome – the name "Ama" sounds like a paronomastic inversion of "I am."

11. This expression was used by V. S. Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival*, then referring to history in a different context: "[...] history here, where there were so many ruins and restorations, seemed to be plateaux of light, with intervening troughs and disappearances into darkness" (50).

By becoming the one who speaks for the slaves, Mintah assumes the role of storyteller. Her memories need to remain faithful to reality so as to help people remember what truly happened. While her written testimony in the shape of the book produced at the trial is rejected as material evidence, she herself embodies all the slaves' deaths (and therefore all their lives), as is shown by the litany of horrors which is punctuated by the repetition of her name (212): many slaves shouted her name while committing suicide, as if doing so could have redeemed them (213).

Mintah is the only person who can hear and remember their voices (4). Only she can exhume their bones turned to dust by sea salt. This explains why she becomes the autodiegetic narrator in Part III. At that point, her voice is reasserted in its new independence and universality. She has become the voice of all the wooden carvings she has created as another expression of her acts of remembering. Mintah reminds us that through her carvings, she "told [the slaves' story] in wood" (219). It is thus significant that she should view her hands as stumps, out of which "soon someone would come along with a chisel to carve the secrets out of her" (225). Just as the wood has allowed her to shape stories of the past, she herself will become the material in which someone else will read the past. When the wood she is made of finally burns in the fire consuming her home and her body, she retrieves her past experience of being thrown into the sea (226). Though distressing and deeply paradoxical, this ending suggests that Mintah has returned to the elements from which she was formed and that her experience may eventually be retrieved by someone else with an imagination as powerful as her own.

Similarly, the role of D'Aguiar's omniscient narrator is to excavate history and the stories of all the Tundes and Amas Mintah meets when sailing across the sea (126-7, 135). Indeed, the narrator takes his own part in the polyphony which can be heard in the narrative. Bénédicte Ledent insists that such polyphony is essential; it is a mark of modernity leading us away from traditional slave narratives:

[T]he original slave narratives are formally monophonic and their narrator remains the only consciousness through which the events are sifted (even though, as in Olaudah Equiano's narrative, there is some interaction between his younger and older selves). D'Aguiar's and Phillips's versions, by contrast, almost flaunt their multi-voicedness. They do so in their ostentatiously fragmented structures framed by a prologue and an epilogue, even if the introductory and closing sections of their novels are not always presented as such. [...] A similar choric quality exists in the prologue of *Feeding the Ghosts*, though expressed more obliquely. [...] The rest of the book is expected to contain the echoes of [the slaves'] ghostly voices. (283-4)

The novel's polyphony, however, is not limited to the multiplicity of voices collected in it. Commenting on Phillips's novel *Crossing the River*, Ledent states that it is also part of the narrator's (or novelist's) general strategy and role, which is "to orchestrate all the individual voices, close and distant that his novel contains, into a concert of voices" (287), a symphony of voices in what she calls the novel's "inner dialogism."¹² When she highlights the "outer dialogism" or intertextuality found in *Feeding the Ghosts*, Ledent also refers to the echoes that can be established between *Feeding the Ghosts* and Turner's

12. "By joining the characters into a kaleidoscope of ever shifting, diverging, but nonetheless harmonious voices, this musicality partakes of what I would call these novels' inner dialogism. But there is also a form of 'outer' dialogism at work in the four novels whereby their narrative voices are made to interact with voices from other texts, whether explicitly or not. This intertextuality [...] constitutes [...] yet another form of polyphony, which was already present in some earlier slave narratives" (Ledent 288).

famous painting of the *Zong* “which has inspired other Caribbean writers, among whom David Dabydeen and Michelle Cliff,” or the epigraph from Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History” (289).

It seems important to add that, within this narrative polyphony, the reader must also make his voice heard by interpreting both History and story/ries, since their meanings often remain implicit, caught in an intermediate space open to multiple readings. Following an interesting expression in French used by Oncins (19-27) and Godeau (79-95) with a slightly different meaning, this space is that of the “inter-dit,”¹³ or what can be understood from the interval lying between different discourses. In “The Last Essay about Slavery,” Fred D’Aguiar recognizes that the reader’s contribution is essential in slave novels:

Whereas in the slave narrative the life of the slave is the subject of the story that the reader is privileged to overhear, in the slave novel that life is rendered in such a way that the reader becomes the subject, no longer able to sit outside it as witness but put in its place. The reader becomes both the “thing” doing the talking and the “thing” talked about in slave novels: not a single entity but splintered, not in one fixed location or vantage-point but shifting. (qtd. in Ledent 290)

By way of conclusion, I would suggest that the narrator’s role in *Feeding the Ghosts* is to remember the past, to propose a partial revision of the dominant institutional history of colonialism – “the received historical remembrance” of the past (Ward 136) – by voicing all vantage points, by avoiding manicheism. Finally, the narrator’s voice is an all-encompassing one, almost a universal one, which can collect all the other voices and express their perspectives. The final narrative voice, which is not grounded in a particular time scheme or space, turns out to be expressed by an “I,” the synthesis of all the other grammatical pronouns to which the “I” gives voice (230).

By creating a narrative composed of multiple voices, including his own, D’Aguiar’s narrator offers the slaves’ ghosts a discursive place to rest (230). This transforms Walcott’s lines, “but the ocean kept turning blank pages / looking for History” (365), into a story of multiplicity and relation where the narrator’s personal voice can also be heard, as is the case in the epilogue. The sea, then, does not simply appear as a space that “has locked them up” (Walcott 364). The page in a novel is a solid testimony to the slaves’ lives as opposed to the liquid repository offered by the sea, in which their bodies dissolved. Hence the ambiguous meaning of creation in this novel where it is both a means to try and forget the trauma of the Middle Passage, and a means to remember what happened, as Mintah tries to do when she carves wooden figures and when she writes: “Writing can contain the worst things. So I forget on paper” (196). Stories will have to go on being told, recurring forever like the sea, not only to act as monuments to the dead, but also to enable them to live again. As D’Aguiar says,

I have tried to imagine without success a last poem, a last play, a last novel, a last song about slavery: final acts of creativity in this given area that would somehow disqualify any future need to return to it in these forms. The will to write such a thing is itself a call for slavery to be confined to the past once and for all; for slavery’s relevance to present anxieties about race to come to an end; to kill slavery off. (“Last Essay” 125)

13. This French expression could be translated as what lies “between the lines,” but it obviously echoes the French “interdit” (what is forbidden).

As long as people remember and tell their story/stories, even in ways that do not fit in conventional History, the ghosts of the *Zong* will not be forgotten and they will be heard in innumerable ways, as in the *Zong!* poems by Marlene NourbeSe Philip, which focus less on voicing and hearing than on visual maiming and spatial dismemberment, by scattering words and sentences on the page like as many bodies washed by the sea and reduced to dust.

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