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The Department of Western Languages and Literatures and the Department of Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University are pleased to announce the launching of a new journal: METAFOR: The Boğaziçi University Journal of Literary Studies.

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In Search of the Ghosts of Postcolonial Gothic: Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*

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Abstract

This article offers a reading of the British-Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) as a postcolonial Gothic text, which is the name given to texts that make use of Gothic motifs to address the unresolved conflicts and traumas of the colonial past. The purpose of this article is to show that *Feeding the Ghosts*, which presents a fictional retelling of a real atrocity that took place on a British slave ship in the late eighteenth century, employs the Gothic motif of the ghost in order to explore the haunting legacy of slavery. The novel focuses on a slave woman called Mintah who remains haunted by the ghosts of her fellow slaves that are ruthlessly killed during the Middle Passage, i.e. the voyage between Africa and the Americas. This article argues that the ghosts that haunt Mintah represent not only her own traumatic past, but also the past of slavery in general. In *Feeding the Ghosts*, the relationship between the past and the present, the dead and the living is depicted as a haunting that emanates from the cultural trauma of slavery whose reverberations continue to the present day. This article also undertakes to show that the novel's emphasis on the persistence of the past within present, which is actually one of the defining characteristic of the postcolonial Gothic, is in line with Jacques Derrida's theory of hauntology, which stresses that there cannot be a living present that is not haunted by the traces of what has gone before as well as what is to come.

Keywords: Postcolonial Gothic, ghost, slavery, cultural trauma, Middle Passage, hauntology

Fred D'aguiar'ın *Feeding the Ghosts* Romanında Postkolonyal Gotiğin Hayaletleri

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Özet

Bu makale Guyana asıllı Britanyalı yazar Fred D'Aguiar'ın *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) romanını, kolonyal geçmişe ait travmaları ve çatışmaları Gotik motiflerden yararlanarak dile getiren postkolonyal Gotik bir metin olarak ele alıp incelemektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, on sekizinci yüzyılda Britanyalılara ait bir köle gemisinde yaşanan gerçek bir katliamın kurgusal anlatımını sunan romanın köleliğin süregelen etkilerini irdelenmek amacıyla Gotiğe has bir unsur olan hayalet motifine başvurduğunu göstermektir. Roman, Ara Geçiş adı verilen Afrika ile Amerika kıtası arasındaki yolculuk sırasında acımasızca katledilen köle kaderdaşlarının hayaletlerinden ömrü boyunca kurtulamayan Mintah adlı köle kadına odaklanır. Bu makale, Mintah'a musallat olan hayaletlerin sadece kendi yaşadığı travmatik deneyimleri değil, kölelik tarihindeki bütün travmaları temsil ettiğini öne sürer. Romanda geçmiş ile şimdi, ölü ile diri arasındaki ilişki, hayaletlerle ilintili bir kavram olan “musallat olma” haline benzetilir ve köleliğin sebep olduğu kültürel travmanın etkilerinin günümüze dek sürdüğü vurgulanır. Böylece *Feeding the Ghosts* postkolonyal Gotiğin belirleyici özellikleri arasında yer alan geçmişin şimdinin içinde varlığını sürdürdüğü fikrinin altını çizer. Bu makale, romanın bu yönüyle geçmişin ve geleceğin izlerini taşımayan bir şimdinin olamayacağını vurgulayan Jacques Derrida'nın musallat-bilim kuramıyla uyum içinde olduğunu göstermeyi de hedefler.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Postkolonyal Gotik, hayalet, kölelik, kültürel travma, Ara Geçiş, musallat-bilim

“*The past is never dead. It’s not even past.*”¹

The Gothic and the postcolonial both share an interest in the haunting legacies of the past that continue to exert their hold on the present. Like the Gothic, which evolved in eighteenth-century Europe and told chilling tales set in haunted, feudal castles overshadowed by dark family secrets involving past crimes, the postcolonial is characterized by a logic of haunting. Since postcolonialism denotes the period after colonialism, postcolonial experience is inevitably haunted by the colonial past, or by what John Thieme aptly calls “the Gothic trace of colonialism.”² More often than not, postcolonial narratives portray the present as haunted by the traces of a history characterized by colonial violence, loss, pain, humiliation, dispossession and exile. This tendency is nowhere more evident than in postcolonial Gothic, where Gothic horror intersects with the horror of colonialism. Postcolonial Gothic, which “has become increasingly prevalent since the early 1980s,”³ can be defined as a type of postcolonial writing that makes use of Gothic motifs, such as ghosts, haunted ruins, mysterious and uncanny events, in order to address the unresolved conflicts and traumas of the colonial past.⁴ As Punter and Byron put it, postcolonial Gothic narratives “deal with the impossibility of escape from history, with the recurrent sense in Gothic fiction that the past can never be left behind, that it will reappear and exact a necessary price.”⁵

The Gothic motif of the ghost, in particular, holds considerable appeal for postcolonial writers who, in their attempt to reconfigure the Gothic in such a way as to suit their own agenda, tend to deploy the ghost as a means of addressing such themes as the lingering presence of pre-colonial cultural heritage, colonial oppression and the unspeakable crimes perpetrated by the colonialists that return to haunt the present. Thus, as if in confirmation of the claim that “[h]aunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony,”⁶ in postcolonial Gothic, ghosts emerge as the natural byproducts of colonial oppression. As a general rule, the ghosts of postcolonial Gothic have a mission to fulfil, which usually consists in notifying us of undocumented instances of colonial violence that are rendered invisible under dominant cultural discourses, hegemonic ideologies and official

¹ William Faulkner, *Requiem For a Nun* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 69.

² John Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-texts* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 91.

³ David Punter and Glennis Byron, “Postcolonial Gothic,” in *The Gothic* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 54.

⁴ For more information on postcolonial Gothic, see Punter and Byron as well as Wisker.

⁵ Punter and Byron, “Postcolonial Gothic,” 55.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 46.

histories. The British-Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar, who, along with Caryl Phillips and David Dabydeen, belongs to the younger generation of black British and Caribbean authors, "is in line with other postcolonial writers who invoke spectres and ghosts to represent the devastating effects of colonization and slavery."⁷ This article, which offers a reading of Fred D'Aguiar's 1997 novel *Feeding the Ghosts* as a postcolonial Gothic text, undertakes to show that D'Aguiar's novel makes recourse to the Gothic motif of the ghost as a means of foregrounding the persistence of the past within the present and of the dead within the living in such a way as to shed light on the haunting legacy of slavery.

Slavery is a subject rarely addressed by the older generation of Caribbean and black British writers, not least because Britain's involvement in the slave trade has generally been obscured owing to the fact that "unlike the United States, Britain has never had slave societies in the 'motherland'" since "Britain's slavery took place in the Caribbean."⁸ Yet, the transatlantic slave trade between Africa and the Americas, in which Britain played a leading role in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, figures prominently in D'Aguiar's writings. As a writer of Caribbean descent born in London to British-Guyanese parents, D'Aguiar seems to have an acute awareness of his slave ancestry: "My first awareness of history was of my place in it as the descendant of slaves."⁹ As a matter of fact, "D'Aguiar's texts expose his profound struggle to suggest ways of remembering slavery,"¹⁰ which also holds true for *Feeding the Ghosts*, where the notorious voyage of a British slave ship in the eighteenth century provides the starting point for exploring the horrors of slavery. *Feeding the Ghosts* is the fictional account of a real event that took place in 1781, when the Captain and crew of the British slave ship *Zong* massacred 131 slaves by throwing them into the ocean over the course of three days.

It is worth noting that such atrocities as killing captured slaves by throwing them overboard were by no means uncommon practices at the time, particularly in order to quell the threat of insurrection. In fact, such practices were not legally defined as murder because slaves did not have the legal status of human beings; they were nothing other than chattel, or cargo. Nonetheless, the *Zong* massacre gained notoriety due to the sheer number of the slaves massacred and helped focus public attention on Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade, showing it in a very unflattering light. During the court case that followed, the Captain of

⁷ Justin D. Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 119.

⁸ Abigail Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2011), 3.

⁹ Fred D'Aguiar, "Further Adventures in the Skin Trade," quoted in Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar*, 131.

¹⁰ Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar*, 133.

the *Zong* claimed that he had resorted to this drastic measure as a necessary precaution against the outbreak of contagious disease among the slaves, but it was much more likely that the greed for profit rather than necessity had led the captain to such a horrendous undertaking. According to the British law in effect at the time, the death of slaves by natural causes including disease was not covered by insurance, but if the slaves were killed in order to preserve the health and safety of everyone on the ship, the insurers were liable for the damages. So, “the court case was concerned with assessing whether or not the captain was correct to jettison his property – it was not a murder trial.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the *Zong* massacre served to “galvaniz[e] abolitionist support and a parliamentary bill was passed in 1790 which ruled out insurance claims resulting from slave mortality.”¹²

In *Feeding the Ghosts*, D’Aguiar makes a point of stressing that what drove Captain Cunningham,¹³ the captain of the *Zong*, to throw the sick slaves overboard was his intention to increase profits by collecting insurance money rather than his concern over the outbreak of disease. “Do you not see my solution as manifest economic sense?”¹⁴ the Captain asks his first mate Kelsal, who initially seems unwilling to carry out the Captain’s orders. However, it does not take the Captain very long to convince the crew that dumping sick slaves into the sea is the more profitable option, for even if they survived the voyage, ailing slaves would not fetch a good price at the slave market anyway. The Captain is sure that he can slaughter as many slaves as he sees fit with impunity, for “[u]nder English law it was stated that every slave bought and sold in the trade was categorised as stock. As such, an owner could do with his stock whatever he pleased.”¹⁵ Most of the crew have no qualms about carrying out the Captain’s orders, for they, too, look upon the slaves as “stock, cargo as delicate as horses and calves but chattel all the same.”¹⁶ D’Aguiar’s novel demonstrates that the Chief Justice who presides over the trial, which is described at length in the second part of the novel, also regards the slaves in a similar light. In fact, the Chief Justice seems more concerned with what he will have for dinner than with the case before him and is already inclined towards ruling in favour of the investors and the Captain of the *Zong*.

¹¹ Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D’Aguiar*, 156.

¹² Gail Low, “The Memory of Slavery in Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*,” in *Post-Colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon*, ed. Deborah L. Madsen (London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 1999), 107.

¹³ D’Aguiar has changed the Captain’s name from Collingwood to Cunningham probably because the latter name contains a play on the word “cunning.”

¹⁴ Fred D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Granta, 2014), 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

Bracketed by a prologue and epilogue that establishes a link between the past and the present, *Feeding the Ghosts* focuses on a fictional character named Mintah, the one hundred and thirty-second slave thrown overboard the *Zong* who miraculously survives by climbing back into the ship. Mintah is a slave girl¹⁷ around the age of eighteen who is literate in English, having been educated at a Christian mission near her hometown in Africa. Unlike the other slaves, Mintah is not thrown overboard because she is sick, but rather because – as the only slave who can speak English – she cannot help expressing her outrage at the barbarity of the crew as she witnesses her fellow slaves, including women and young children, being “grabbed and hurled overboard, each one struggling and shouting to no avail.”¹⁸ So, it is Mintah’s insubordination that causes her to be dispatched along with the sick and the infirm. After climbing up the side of the ship by catching hold of a dangling rope, Mintah manages to avoid capture for some time with the help of a friendly crew member, i.e. the cook’s young and simple-minded assistant Simon. When her attempt at staging an insurrection by freeing the rest of the slaves fails, Mintah is recaptured and severely punished. By the time of the trial, Mintah has already been sold into slavery in America, but not before she has entrusted Simon with a journal that she has secretly kept on the *Zong*. Mintah’s journal bears witness to the fact that the Captain’s actions were unnecessary since the slaves were not as sick as the Captain claimed and could have recovered with a little care. However, Mintah’s journal is not admitted as evidence and dismissed by the court as a fabrication because it is deemed impossible that a slave could have written it.

Feeding the Ghosts makes use of the notorious case of the *Zong* to bring about a confrontation with the violent history of slavery which has been systematically suppressed in Western history and subjected to historical amnesia. “The sea is slavery” declares the narrator in the opening sentence of the prologue referring to the Atlantic Ocean, the main slave trade route between Africa and the Americas which has become associated with enslavement, pain, death and the unspeakable horrors of the Middle Passage, forming the basis of what Paul Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic culture.¹⁹ During the notorious transatlantic voyage known as the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans in chains and shackles were heaped onto slave ships, where many of them perished due to overcrowding, starvation, disease and maltreatment. The novel presents a

¹⁷ As noted by Abigail Ward, in reality, “it was a male slave who managed to climb back into the ship,” which shows that “D’Aguiar does not limit his story by conforming to historical accuracy” (156).

¹⁸ D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 46.

¹⁹ As Paul Gilroy asserts in his book *The Black Atlantic*, the Atlantic Ocean plays a pivotal role in the formation of black cultures all over the world, including both African and black diaspora cultures. See Gilroy.

realistic portrayal of the appalling conditions of the slaves stacked in the ship's hold, which is described as a dark, overcrowded place permeated with death and the unbearable stench of sweat, vomit, urine and faeces. The slaves, who have hardly enough room to lie on one side, are chained wrist to wrist and ankle to ankle in twos so that "[a]ll seem one miserable, tangled mass of humanity [...] indistinguishable from one another."²⁰ On top of everything else, female slaves are under the constant threat of rape by the ship's crew who are in the habit of "descend[ing] into the female slaves' partition armed with loaves of bread and chunks of cheese" to bribe them into sex. The women know that "if they refused they would be taken by force anyway."²¹ No less devastating than the physical and sexual abuse is the psychological impact of the slaves' violent uprooting from their home and loved ones.

Feeding the Ghosts elucidates the ways in which "the Middle Passage was crowded with ships full of ghosts, some still alive, some already drowned, some no doubt passing through those contortions of mind and body that Harris describes as the 'limbo gateway.'"²² Accordingly, the *Zong* is portrayed as a ship full of ghosts – some in the throes of illness, waiting their turn to be dumped into the sea; others suspended in a psychological limbo, lost in dreams of their long-lost homeland. It is implied that even those slaves who can make it to the new world will be condemned to a ghostly existence for the rest of their lives: "they would be lost forever but not dead, lost but never to be found."²³ Throughout the novel Mintah herself is recurrently referred to as a ghost, first by her fellow slaves on the *Zong*, who mistake her for a ghost that has returned from the dead after her miraculous survival. Initially, the slaves assume that it is "her spirit on board roaming the ship."²⁴ Only when they get a chance to touch Mintah are they convinced that she is made of flesh and blood. Mintah's journal is described more than once as a ghost-book "penned by a ghost."²⁵ However, what makes the *Zong* "a true 'ghost ship' of mythic proportions"²⁶ are undoubtedly the 131 slaves who are dumped into the Atlantic ocean, whereafter their restless souls are stuck in the Limbo with no chance of finding peace:

So, it is from the sea that all 131 souls are to be plucked. [...] One hundred and thirty-one souls roam the Atlantic with countless others. When the wind is heard it is their breath, their speech. The sea is therefore home.

²⁰ D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 19.

²¹ Ibid., 74.

²² David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), 67-8.

²³ D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 27.

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 169.

²⁶ Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar*, 155.

[...] They would lie in unsanctified ground, ground untrodden by any ancestor, not laid to rest but left in limbo. Each spirit would have to find its way home over this sea, over a scattered road of bones.²⁷

According to Mintah, the dead slaves cannot rest in their graves, for they have no graves. Consequently, their spirits are doomed to roam the sea until they find their way back home. It is stressed in the novel that the ghosts of the 131 graveless slaves condemned to roam the Atlantic Ocean without ever finding peace are merely a small fraction of the unrecorded millions who perished at sea during the Middle Passage and that the Atlantic Ocean is a sea full of dead Africans: "The *Zong* rose and dipped over their bones, and the sound of the sea was the bones cracking."²⁸ Thus, D'Aguiar uses Gothic imagery to stress that "the genealogy of the Black Atlantic is filled with ghosts. Mintah, then, speaks not only for herself, and the victims of the *Zong*, but also for the many other Africans who were lost in transit or in the aftermath of slavery itself."²⁹

The third part of the novel, which is set almost fifty years after the *Zong* massacre when Mintah is living as a free woman in Jamaica in 1833, the year when slavery was abolished in the British colonies, shows that Mintah has been haunted by the ghosts of the dead slaves throughout her life. Thus, in *Feeding the Ghosts* "the relation between the dead and living is conceived of as a haunting, the living will have to be a witness again to the middle passage."³⁰ Such a conception of the haunting of the living by the dead resonates strongly with the ideas put forward by the poststructuralist theorist Jacques Derrida, whose 1993 book *Specters of Marx* established him as the ur-theorist of spectrality, or "hauntology" as Derrida calls it. Derridean hauntology, which contains a play on the words "haunt" and "ontology," is a theoretical framework centered upon the figure of the ghost that serves to deconstruct the binary oppositions between "presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life."³¹ For Derrida, the ghost's liminal status as a figure suspended between life and death, presence and absence, past and present, signals a new way of thinking that takes into account the invisible, the lost and the disappeared that go unacknowledged within scientific-rationalistic paradigms. In a way that accords with Derridean hauntology, *Feeding the Ghosts* shows that the drowned slaves continue to live on as a ghostly "trace," which is a term used by Derrida to refer to the residual, spectral presence of an absence. Survival or living on are important concepts for Derrida, who stresses that there cannot be a living present that is not haunted by the traces of what has gone before as well as what is to come. Derrida defines

²⁷ D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 4, 37.

²⁸ Ibid., 176.

²⁹ Edwards, *Postcolonial Literature*, 123.

³⁰ Low, "The Memory of Slavery in Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*," 112-3.

³¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 13.

hauntology as a “being-with specters” that is also “a politics of memory, of inheritance, of generations.”³² So, Derridean hauntology is also associated with the concepts of responsibility and justice in that paying attention to ghosts is necessarily a question of responsibility to the dead:

If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of justice. [...] no justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.³³

In a way that is in keeping with Derridean hauntology, *Feeding the Ghosts* demonstrates that paying attention to ghosts is a moral responsibility inextricably linked to the question of justice. From the outset, Mintah feels burdened with the responsibility of remembering the victims of the atrocious massacre that she has witnessed. Indeed, what grieves Mintah most is that no trace of the slaves will remain once they are dead, not even a name to remember them by. The dead slaves will vanish from history without a trace except for the 131 strokes in the Captain’s ledger. “Your name! What is your name?” shouts Mintah to a woman who is dragged to the side of the ship, about to be hurled into the sea. “Why? How will it save me?” asks the woman, whereupon Mintah replies: “I will remember you! Others will remember you!”³⁴ Remembering the injustices that were suffered by the victims of social violence is our foremost duty to the dead according to Derrida, who stresses that our responsibility is not limited to those who are living in the present but extends to those that continue to haunt the living present as specters.

That Mintah feels a strong obligation to fulfil her duty to the dead is evident not only from her wish to remember the names of the massacred slaves, but also from her attempt to produce a written record of the massacre by keeping a journal. In the third part of the novel we are told that every moment of Mintah’s life has been dominated by the memory of the drowned slaves, who have not ceased to monopolize her thoughts even fifty years after the massacre. For instance, Mintah

³² Ibid., xviii.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 126-7.

says that when she played an active part in the Underground Railroad³⁵ by helping fugitive slaves escape North to freedom, she liked to imagine that she was saving the souls of the dead from the bottom of the sea: “For every one thrown to the sea I multiplied by two in Maryland when I acted as guide. [...] I imagined those men, women and children rising from the sea into air.”³⁶ In fact, the ghosts of the dead slaves are like hungry spirits feeding on her life, and Mintah has devoted all her life energy to trying to placate these ghosts: “Ghosts needed to be fed. She carved and wrote to assuage their hunger.”³⁷ In order to placate the ghosts, Mintah has carved small wooden figures in the shape of men, women and children. There are 131 of them in total, each representing a slave lost at sea:

The shape of each piece is pulled from the sea of my mind and has been shaped by water, with water’s contours. People say they see a figure of some kind, man, woman or child reaching up out of the depths. I keep them in my home like guests who will not leave and whom I eventually cannot bear to part with. [...] From their shapes they appear to breathe like me. Each has a name, a likely age [...] They named themselves through me.³⁸

Hence, by carving these wooden figures, which “house the souls of the dead,”³⁹ Mintah seems to have taken heed of Derrida’s injunction to learn to live with ghosts. In point of fact, Mintah’s living with ghosts can be likened to the state of melancholia⁴⁰. For Derrida, melancholia has an ethical significance in that it entails maintaining a sense of responsibility to the dead whereas mourning is a means of effectively relegating the dead to forgetfulness. Derrida, who claims that “to remain haunted is to remain partial to the dead,”⁴¹ regards completed mourning as not only undesirable, but also impossible, since it would mean exorcising the present of the ghosts of the past – a virtually impossible undertaking. In effect, Mintah’s haunting by the ghosts of the dead slaves can be

³⁵ Underground Railroad is the name given to a secret network of abolitionists who helped fugitive slaves escape to freedom in the US in the nineteenth century.

³⁶ D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 209.

³⁷ Ibid., 222.

³⁸ Ibid., 208-210.

³⁹ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁰ Melancholia is defined by Sigmund Freud as a kind of failed mourning that stems from the inability to deal with loss. In contrast to Freud’s definition of mourning and melancholia as normal and pathological processes respectively, Derrida valorizes melancholia, investing it with a positive meaning while denouncing mourning.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, “Foreword,” in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxxi.

interpreted as a metaphorical rendering of what Derrida calls “mid-mourning,” i.e. an interminable, inconclusive mourning process which is not geared towards the acceptance of loss.⁴² Mid-mourning can never be completed and thus is equivalent to being perpetually haunted by the ghosts of the past.

It can be questioned to what extent Mintah’s learning to live with ghosts is actually her own choice, given that her haunting by the dead resembles the symptoms manifested by trauma survivors in the aftermath of trauma. Indeed, the traumas that Mintah suffers on board the *Zong*, which include attempted rape, violent beatings, and above all being a witness to the massacre of her fellow slaves, and being thrown into the ocean herself, leave Mintah traumatized for life. Traumatic memories keep returning to Mintah in recurrent dreams even fifty years after the massacre. Sometimes she sees a phosphorus glow on the river which she takes to be “the spirit of a slave thrown into the sea,”⁴³ at other times she feels as if the winds from the sea are carrying the spirits of the dead to her door. Nevertheless, *Feeding the Ghosts* is not so much a novel about Mintah’s personal traumas and their psychological aftermath as about the haunting repercussions of the cultural trauma of slavery. Cultural trauma, which can be defined as “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion,”⁴⁴ results from violent histories like slavery, war, genocide, colonialism or state terror. Just as psychic trauma is subjected to repression, violent histories associated with cultural traumas tend to be suppressed in collective memory even though their repercussions still continue to be felt like the barely perceptible presence of a ghost. Thus, cultural traumas pave the way for “cultural hauntings,” which is a term coined by Kathleen Brogan to describe those ghost stories that “share the plot device and master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another.”⁴⁵ Indeed, in the novel, the *Zong* massacre functions as the traumatic core that generates a cultural haunting whose reverberations continue not only throughout Mintah’s life but up to the present day. As David Punter notes,

[t]his is not a voyage that can be consigned to the sea of history, that can be placed neatly within a sequence of historical facts. It has to be seen more in the uncompromising terms of trauma, as a kind of epicentre from

⁴² Jacques Derrida, “Freud’s Legacy,” in *The Postcard From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 335.

⁴³ D’Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 206.

⁴⁴ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African-American Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 2.

⁴⁵ Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 6.

which implications, memories, forgettings, continue to ripple out, to reverberate through the present and, no doubt, the future too. These ghosts, the slaves themselves, the captain and crew, even the participants in the long trial scene that comes towards the end of the book, all of these are reincarnated in the pages of the novel. But there is, again, more to it than that. The ship *continues* to sail; its voyage, like the sea, is unending.⁴⁶

In *Feeding the Ghosts* D'Aguiar successfully interweaves individual and cultural trauma, deploying ghosts as metaphors for a traumatic past which refuses to go away and is doomed to repeat itself over and over again. In her writings on trauma, Cathy Caruth draws a parallel between the personal and historical dimensions of trauma with her claim that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is symptomatic of psychic trauma, "is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history," adding that "the traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess."⁴⁷ Thus, it can be argued that Mintah, too, carries an impossible history within her, as she is haunted by ghosts which represent not only her own traumatic past, but also the past of slavery in general. In the end, Mintah's attempts at placating the ghosts by feeding them into wood fails, and we are left with a haunting without end. Even when Mintah's house burns down at the end of the novel along with her in it, the ghosts are not exorcised; instead, the spirits housed within the wooden figures fly into the woods.

Feeding the Ghosts ends with an epilogue narrated by an unidentifiable narrator who states that:

We were all dead. The ship was full of ghosts. [...] The *Zong* is on the high seas. Men, women and children are thrown overboard by the captain and his crew. One of them is me. One of them is you. [...] There is only the fact of the *Zong* and its unending voyage and those deaths that cannot be undone. [...] The ghosts feed on the story of themselves.⁴⁸

Thus, in the epilogue, the *Zong* is presented as a ghost ship that still keeps sailing on while the trauma of the *Zong* massacre is endlessly repeated. The narrator addresses us directly for the first time, telling us that we are all caught up in this endless cycle of repetition. It is implied that even telling their story does not put the ghosts to rest, for as long as its memory continues to live on, neither the *Zong* nor slavery can ever be a thing of the past. "How can [slavery]

⁴⁶ Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings*, 67-8.

⁴⁷ Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1995), 5.

⁴⁸ D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, 229-230.

be over,” asks D’Aguiar “when it lived, still lives, in me? And not just in me. In the names of streets, in the graveyards, in the literature of public and private libraries...”⁴⁹ Thus, the haunting legacies of slavery, epitomized by the unending voyage of the ghost ship *Zong*, result in what Derrida calls “a disjuncture in the very presence of the present,”⁵⁰ by effacing the distinction between the past and the present, the dead and the living.

To conclude, in *Feeding the Ghosts*, D’Aguiar employs the rhetoric of haunting and the Gothic motif of the ghost in order to explore the unacknowledged history of slavery which continues to influence the present even though it has been systematically rendered invisible in the Western imagination. In the end, we are left to ponder over the image of a ghost ship that sails on a sea full of dead Africans whose ghosts demand a reckoning.

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⁴⁹ Fred D’Aguiar, “The Last Essay About Slavery,” quoted in Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D’Aguiar*, 151.

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 29.

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