

Reimagining the Atlantic: A Blue Humanities Reading of Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*

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Abstract

While Fred D'Aguiar's Feeding the Ghosts has received considerable critical attention for its engagement with memory, trauma, and the legacies of slavery, comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining the sea through the framework of Blue Humanities. Drawing on key insights from Blue Humanities scholarship, this paper explores how D'Aguiar's Atlantic functions as a haunted space that preserves the memories of the Middle Passage, disrupts linear histories, and continually resurfaces suppressed voices. Rather than serving merely as the setting of the Zong massacre, the sea emerges as an active archive that bears witness to the violence of slavery while enabling acts of remembrance and resistance. The paper argues that the Atlantic occupies an inherently ambiguous and transformative position, functioning simultaneously as a space of death and survival, forgetting and remembrance, and confinement and resistance. By foregrounding the ocean as a dynamic and meaning-bearing presence, Feeding the Ghosts challenges dominant historical narratives and reveals how the memories of slavery continue to resonate across time and space.

Keywords

Blue Humanities, Black Atlantic, Middle Passage, Zong Massacre, Fred D'Aguiar, Feeding the Ghosts, oceanic literature, memory, slavery, trauma

1. Introduction to Blue Humanities

Since time immemorial, human beings have shared a unique relationship with the seas and oceans around them. This relationship has long fascinated writers, who have imagined the ocean as a space of adventure, danger, mystery, and transformation. From Homer's *Odyssey*, where the sea tests Odysseus's courage and endurance, to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, where it appears as a vast and unknowable realm, the ocean has occupied an important place in literary imagination.

The origins of what is now known as "Blue Humanities" can be traced back to 2009, when Steve Mentz first coined the term "Blue Cultural Studies" in his essay "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature." This marked a significant shift in the humanities by drawing attention to the sea as a subject worthy of study in its own right. Over time, Blue Cultural Studies developed into the broader field of Blue Humanities, an interdisciplinary approach that places oceans, seas, and other water bodies at the centre of cultural, historical, and literary inquiry.

For Mentz, "blue cultural studies" does not view the oceans "simply as bodies to be crossed, but as subjects in themselves" (Mentz 997). This shift in perspective encourages us to view the sea as more than a route between destinations as it becomes a vital presence in human history and imagination. Blue Humanities places water at the centre of inquiry, recognising its importance in shaping culture, environment, and human identity. Whereas earlier scholarship often treated oceans as

passive channels for discovery, exploration, and colonisation, Blue Humanities highlights their active role in shaping historical events, political structures, and cultural experiences. It also offers a valuable framework for examining how oceans and other water bodies are represented in literature. This ocean-centred perspective is particularly useful for reading Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, which reimagines the 1781 Zong massacre - a horrific episode in maritime and colonial history in which more than 130 enslaved Africans were thrown overboard so that their owners could claim insurance money. Through a Blue Humanities lens, the sea in the novel emerges as a witness to atrocity, a carrier of submerged histories, and a space where human actions and the power of the ocean intersect. The sea's presence in *Feeding the Ghosts* is marked by ambiguity, contradiction, and transformation, making it central to the novel's exploration of slavery, memory, and resistance.

2. The Zong Massacre

The transatlantic slave trade remains one of the darkest chapters in human history. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, millions of Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean and subjected to the brutal conditions of chattel slavery. Among the most notorious incidents associated with this system was the Zong massacre. In August 1781, the British slave ship Zong departed from the west coast of Africa carrying approximately 442 enslaved Africans, far exceeding the vessel's intended capacity. During the voyage, disease spread rapidly among those on board, and Captain Luke Collingwood ordered that 131 enslaved Africans be thrown into the sea.

The decision was closely tied to the economic logic of the slave trade. Since enslaved Africans were legally regarded as cargo, ship owners could claim insurance for those jettisoned under certain circumstances, whereas deaths resulting from illness were generally not covered. Collingwood later justified his actions by citing a shortage of drinking water, although subsequent evidence suggested that rainfall had replenished the ship's supply and undermined this defence. The massacre therefore exposed the extreme commodification of human life within the transatlantic slave system, where financial calculations were allowed to outweigh moral considerations.

As James Walvin observes, "The Zong was not only a horrific occurrence, but a nascent step in the origins of the campaign to bring the British slave trade to an end. It struck a chord, then as now, finding a niche in popular memory, and maintaining a resonance right down to the present day" (Walvin 10). Although the massacre contributed to growing abolitionist sentiment, it also stands as a stark reminder of the immense suffering endured by enslaved Africans and the lasting historical trauma produced by the slave trade.

3. *Feeding the Ghosts*

Born in 1960, Fred D'Aguiar is a Guyanese-British writer whose works often engage with slavery, migration, and the enduring impact of historical trauma within the Black Atlantic world. Through a blend of historical fact and creative imagination, he recovers marginalised voices and reinterprets forgotten histories, a concern that is central to *Feeding the Ghosts*.

Published in 1997, *Feeding the Ghosts* is inspired by the real-life events of the Zong massacre of 1781. The novel grew out of D'Aguiar's encounter with an exhibit on the slave ship Zong at Liverpool's Slave Gallery. Reflecting on this experience in an interview with Joanne Hyppolite, he recalls feeling disturbed by the limited information available about the tragedy and wanting to imagine the lives behind the historical record. As he explains, the novel emerged from "an absence of facts" (Hyppolite 4).

D'Aguiar attempts to fill this absence by reimagining a history that was recorded largely from the perspective of the perpetrators. The story centres on Mintah, a young Fetu woman aboard the Zong. When the ship's captain decides to throw sick enslaved Africans into the sea to claim insurance for lost

“cargo,” Mintah questions the crew's actions and is cast overboard. Against all odds, she survives and returns to the ship, becoming a witness to the violence unfolding around her. Through Mintah's voice and experiences, the novel challenges the reduction of African lives to mere commodities and restores a human dimension to a history marked by erasure and silence.

As Susanne Pichler observes, D'Aguiar “refreshes the past through acts of memory,” making audible voices that had previously been unheard (Pichler 5). Through Mintah's testimony, the novel not only recovers a forgotten history but also presents the Atlantic Ocean as a powerful space of violence, memory, loss, and survival. The sea is therefore not merely the setting of the narrative but a central presence that shapes the novel's engagement with slavery and its enduring legacies.

4. *Feeding the Ghosts* through the lens of Blue Humanities

Critical studies of *Feeding the Ghosts* have largely focused on memory, trauma, witnessing, and the recovery of silenced histories. Critics such as Susanne Pichler have explored the relationship between memory and the body, while Kathie Birat and Stef Craps examine the novel's engagement with historical remembrance and the continuing legacies of slavery. Although a small body of scholarship has considered the symbolic significance of the sea, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the Atlantic through the theoretical framework of Blue Humanities. This paper therefore, reads the ocean not merely as the setting of the Zong massacre but as a dynamic presence that functions as grave, archive, witness, prison, and site of transformation.

4.1 The Sea as Grave, Archive, and Witness

In *Feeding the Ghosts*, the sea is far more than the setting of the Zong massacre. From the opening pages of the novel, D'Aguiar establishes a powerful connection between the Atlantic Ocean and the history of slavery. The statement “sea is slavery” (D'Aguiar 3) immediately transforms the ocean from a geographical space into a historical and symbolic one. The Atlantic is not an empty body of water separating continents, but is rather filled with the memories of those who suffered and died during the transatlantic slave trade.

This idea is reinforced in the prologue, where the narrator describes the drowned slaves as having “their lives written on salt water” while “the sea current turns pages of memory” (D'Aguiar 4). Although the sea swallows bodies and leaves no visible graves, it refuses complete erasure. The dead remain present within its waters, turning the ocean into a living archive of loss and remembrance. Such a portrayal resonates with Elizabeth DeLoughrey's concept of “heavy waters,” which she describes as a metaphor for the material and emotional residue of Atlantic slavery. For DeLoughrey, the Atlantic is a “cathected space of history” because it carries the weight of those who perished during the Middle Passage (DeLoughrey 704). D'Aguiar similarly presents the sea as a repository of memory where the dead continue to haunt the present.

The novel's representation of the ocean also echoes Ian Baucom's argument that the violence of the Zong cannot be confined to the past. Baucom contends that “history is not 'history,' not a property of the past but the property the present inherits as its structuring material” (Baucom 330–31). In *Feeding the Ghosts*, the Atlantic becomes precisely such a space where history accumulates rather than disappears. The sea functions simultaneously as grave and witness, preserving traces of lives that official historical records attempted to reduce to mere cargo.

4.2 The Sea as Prison and Site of Resistance

While the sea preserves memory, it is also a space of confinement. For Mintah and the other enslaved Africans, the Atlantic represents separation from home and the impossibility of escape. Surrounded by water, they are trapped aboard the Zong with no refuge from the violence inflicted

upon them. Reflecting on her captivity, Mintah longs for land because it offers the possibility of movement and freedom: "Land. If only she was on land. She could run in one direction away from these people and hide" (D'Aguiar 61). To Mintah, the sea appears endless and empty, suspending her between a lost past and an uncertain future.

Yet D'Aguiar refuses to limit the sea to a single meaning. The same ocean that imprisons also becomes a site of resistance. What was intended to be Mintah's watery grave instead becomes a site of survival and defiance. Her return to the ship unsettles the authority of the crew and inspires resistance among the enslaved. The sea thus emerges as a contradictory space, simultaneously associated with death and survival. It is at once a space of confinement and resistance, violence and possibility. Through this instability, D'Aguiar challenges readers to see the Atlantic not simply as a setting for historical events but as a force that participates in them.

Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic is also useful here. Gilroy argues that the slave ship serves as a crucial symbol for understanding modernity because it reveals the violent histories that underlie Western progress (Gilroy 17). The *Zong* is precisely such a ship. It represents a system in which African lives are transformed into commodities and measured according to profit. Yet D'Aguiar refuses to allow the enslaved to remain mere objects within this system. Through Mintah's survival, testimony, and acts of remembrance, the novel restores agency and humanity to those whom the logic of Atlantic modernity sought to reduce to cargo.

4.3 The Sea Between Memory and Forgetting

One of the most striking aspects of D'Aguiar's portrayal of the sea is its simultaneous association with memory and forgetting. At times, the ocean appears to erase. Mintah describes it as "a sea of forgetting" (D'Aguiar 196), suggesting its power to distance individuals from their homes, identities, and histories. The vastness of the Atlantic threatens to dissolve the dead into anonymity, mirroring the historical erasure experienced by many victims of the slave trade.

At the same time, however, the sea repeatedly becomes a catalyst for remembrance. Throughout the novel, Mintah struggles against the possibility that those who died aboard the *Zong* will be forgotten. Her diary serves as a powerful counter-narrative to Captain Cunningham's ledger. Whereas the captain's records reduce enslaved people to economic units, Mintah's writing restores individuality and humanity. Her promise to remember those who are thrown into the sea becomes an act of resistance against historical erasure. When another enslaved woman is about to be cast overboard, Mintah asks for her name and declares, "I will remember you!" (D'Aguiar 127). The act of naming becomes a form of memorialization that challenges the dehumanising logic of slavery.

The relationship between memory and forgetting recalls DeLoughrey's observation that representations of "heavy waters" disrupt linear notions of history and progress (DeLoughrey 704–05). Rather than allowing the past to disappear, the sea continually returns it to the present. In D'Aguiar's novel, the Atlantic becomes a living archive whose memories persist long after the voyage has ended. The ocean itself remains silent, but through Mintah's testimony, its hidden histories are brought to the surface.

4.4 The Sea as Transformation

Despite its association with violence and death, the sea ultimately becomes a site of transformation. Throughout the novel, it remains an ambiguous presence, embodying both suffering and survival. Although Mintah never fully escapes the memory of the *Zong*, her understanding of the sea gradually changes. What once appeared solely as a space of trauma begins to acquire new meanings.

This shift is reflected in her interpretation of the wooden figures she carves in memory of the dead. Initially, the figures seem to embody terror and suffering. Later, however, Mintah sees them differently: "They were dancing not struggling. Ecstatic not terrified" (D'Aguiar 218). This moment does not erase the horrors of slavery. Rather, it suggests the possibility of reclaiming meaning from loss and preserving the humanity of those who were denied it.

The sea's transformative power is most clearly visible through Mintah herself. Although it initially appears as a space of death and erasure, it paradoxically enables her survival and allows her to bear witness to the suffering of the enslaved. Through her diary, the stories of those who perished are preserved and transmitted beyond the confines of the Zong. In this sense, the sea becomes more than a grave; it becomes an archive of memory and a medium through which silenced voices continue to speak. Mintah's survival transforms the ocean from a symbol of annihilation into a space where remembrance and resistance remain possible.

By the end of the novel, the sea remains a grave and a site of historical violence, but it also becomes a space of remembrance, resilience, and renewal. Through a Blue Humanities lens, D'Aguiar's Atlantic emerges not as an empty backdrop to history but as a living presence that continues to carry the memories of trauma, survival, and resistance that shape the Black Atlantic world.

5. Conclusion

Feeding the Ghosts demonstrates the value of reading the Atlantic through the lens of Blue Humanities. Rather than presenting the sea as a passive backdrop to the Zong massacre, D'Aguiar transforms it into a dynamic and contradictory presence that shapes the experiences of the novel's characters. The ocean emerges as a space of death and survival, memory and forgetting, oppression and resistance. Through Mintah's survival and testimony, the novel recovers voices that history attempted to erase, revealing the sea not only as a grave for the enslaved but also as a repository of memory and witness.

By placing the Atlantic at the centre of the narrative, D'Aguiar challenges conventional histories of modernity that overlook the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. The sea remains haunted by the lives lost within it, yet it also becomes a space through which remembrance and resistance are possible. *Feeding the Ghosts* therefore invites readers to see the ocean not as an empty expanse separating histories, but as a living archive that continues to shape how those histories are understood and remembered.

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