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## **“Keeping my slave side well versed”: Fred D’Aguiar’s Use of *Ottava Rima* in *Bloodlines***

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This article explores Fred D’Aguiar’s use of *ottava rima* in his novel in verse *Bloodlines*. It considers poetry as a minority genre within postcolonial writing and *ottava rima* as a minority form within the genre of poetry. D’Aguiar’s choice of this long narrative form can be examined in relation to his subject, which is the rape of a black slave by a white man, the love that follows the rape and the consequences of their relation. The article approaches the form of the poem from two perspectives. Firstly, it contends that the deliberate foregrounding of form emphasizes the literary connection to the past, using figures of rhetoric to express the paradoxical nature of slavery; second, it calls upon the concept of voice, used in psychoanalysis as a notion covering both sound and sense, to show how D’Aguiar mobilizes the resources of sound and rhyme to allow a poetic form from the past to become the vehicle for exploring the emotional impact of his story.

Keywords: Fred D’Aguiar, Caribbean poetry, postcolonial poetry, *ottava rima*

In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, Jahan Ramazani points out that “there are remarkably few studies of postcolonial poetry” (2017, 5), a comment that he had already made in *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001). He attributes this seeming lack of interest in poetry to what he sees as a tendency in postcolonial studies “to be less savvy about form than are other areas of literary study, except for macrolevel considerations, such as the links between nation and narration” (6). The minority status of poetry among postcolonial genres, at least from a critical point of view, would then be seen as a reflection of the particular difficulties related to a form which the critic sees as involving “deliberate artifice, and literary self-consciousness” (5). This assessment would seem to be borne out by certain studies of even well-known postcolonial poets like Derek Walcott. In an article devoted to Walcott’s use of the couplet in *Tiepolo’s Hound*, Jim Hannan confronts critics who have tended to see the poet as “seek[ing] refuge in art that distances itself from its historical conditions,” presumably as a reaction to “the

traumas of history and the failed promises of postcolonial politics” (559-560). Thus what is perceived as the primacy of form seems to make poetry “less amenable to the historical and political imperatives of postcolonial studies than more seemingly documentary or socially mimetic genres” (Ramazani 2017, 5).

While the failure to take full account of the importance of poetry in postcolonial studies could be seen as a blind spot on the part of critics, Ramazani himself admits that the relatively small number of studies devoted to poetry is partly related to the general status of poetry in the twentieth century. In a work devoted to the relationship between poetry and other genres such as the novel, song and prayer, Ramzani raises this question explicitly:

Over the course of the twentieth century, especially with the waning of the privilege accorded poetic iconicity, complexity, and ambiguity in practical criticism and New Criticism, poetry lost still more literary and academic prestige. And whatever its cultural capital, its popularity was considerably less than prose fiction’s. (Ramazani 2014, 16)

Given the situation described by Ramazani, it would seem clear that paying close attention to the formal practice of poets writing within a postcolonial context would contribute to a better understanding of the generic pertinence of poetry as a specific approach to the dilemmas related to postcolonial contexts. However, as Ramazani’s studies show, it would also help to integrate postcolonial poets into the study of poetry as a genre, reducing their minority status by revealing “their profoundly important contributions to literature in English” (2017, 1).

The novel in verse *Bloodlines* (2000) by the Guyanese-born poet Fred D’Aguiar underlines the role of poetic form in ways that make it particularly pertinent to an understanding of the importance of generic choices in dealing with postcolonial themes. While D’Aguiar, who began his writing career by publishing poetry in the 1980s has also published novels (*The Longest Memory*, 1994; *Dear Future*, 1996; *Feeding the Ghosts*, 1997;

*Bethany Bettany*, 2003; *Children of Paradise*, 2014), he has continued to write poetry throughout his career. Yet the “intergeneric dialogue” evoked by Ramazani in *Poetry and its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (2014, 9) is a salient feature of his work. *The Longest Memory* contains sections written in verse, while the “poetic patterning and lyricism” (20) that Ramazani associates with what he calls the poeticization of the twentieth-century novel can be found in all of his novels. However, in spite of what might appear to be a fluid relation between poetry and fiction in D’Aguiar’s work, *Bloodlines* is not simply another example of “poetry’s hybridization with the novel” (20). By adopting the *ottava rima* form in order to tell the story of a love affair between a black slave and the white son of a slave owner in pre-Civil War America, I would argue that D’Aguiar places the generic specificity of poetry at the centre of his attempt to deal with the subject of slavery in America, suggesting that only poetry can capture the core of that experience in certain of its psychological and social dimensions. Rather than adapting to his purposes a form borrowed or developed from indigenous Caribbean or African American forms, as David Dabydeen does in *Slave Song*, he chooses an elaborate form dating from the Italian Renaissance and made popular in English by nineteenth-century poets like Byron.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, he might appear to be reinforcing the minority status of his work, choosing a “minor” form within a minor genre. However, in order to understand D’Aguiar’s choice of form and its pertinence to his aesthetic and thematic concerns, it is necessary to give proper attention to the chosen form. It would make sense to ask oneself, as Ramazani does in his comparison of Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* with Christopher Okigbo’s poetic sequence “Fragments out of the Deluge,” how D’Aguiar’s poem “digests some of the same material” as novels dealing with the effects of slavery while “insist[ing] on its specificity as poetry” (2014, 25).<sup>2</sup>

From a practical point of view, the method adopted in this paper will examine the use of the *ottava rima* form in *Bloodlines* from two perspectives. The first will consider the form

in its overt intertextual relation to the use of *ottava rima* in the past. This will permit a consideration of the role played by its foregrounding of form in the creation of a link with the world of slavery and in particular with the question of interracial rape in the context of slavery. The second approach, meant to be complementary to the first, will look at *Bloodlines* from the perspective of voice, using this notion in all of its connotations. Starting from Mladen Dolar's study of the ambiguities of voice in *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006), the analysis of the poem will examine the ways in which the formal structure, in its use of complex forms of rhyme and other auditory effects, attempts to use sound in ways that reach beyond the confines of explicit meaning, suggesting the unconscious desires hidden in the voices of the poem's narrators.

### **D'Aguiar's Use of *Ottava Rima***

In an article devoted to the use of *ottava rima* in the writing of novels in verse, Catherine Addison discusses the adaptability of the form to novelistic discourse in English. She explains that the *ottava rima* originated in the "Italian oral tradition of the *cantastorie*" and that it "could not have originated as an English oral form, for it requires too many rhymes for this rhyme-poor, relatively uninflected language" (2004, 133). It uses what she designates as a "heroic line" (in English iambic pentameter) and a rhyme scheme of ABABABCC. From the point of view of its adaptability to narrative, she points out that the rhyme scheme displays "some fluctuation between telling the story and reflecting upon the story as its unfolding discourse pulsates between alternate and couplet rhyme" (134). She explains that in Byron's use of *ottava rima* in poems like *Don Juan* the stanza "is the matrix in which Byron's famous mobility finds its perfect medium" (139). Although Addison briefly discusses D'Aguiar's use of *ottava rima* in *Bloodlines*, comparing it with Walcott's adaptation of *terza rima* to verse narrative in *Omeros*, she focuses mostly on the use of "imperfect rhymes, run-on lines and midline pauses" (143) and does not evoke the broader issue of the relation between the form

and the subject of D'Aguiar's work.<sup>3</sup> The very title of D'Aguiar's verse novel suggests, in its pun on "lines," which can be read in both a genealogical and rhetorical perspective as lines of descent or lines of poetry, that the novel will explore the tension between violence and verse. Thus the "mobility" to which Addison refers in speaking of Byron, the capacity of *ottava rima* to blend "serious, comic, and satiric attitudes" (Brogan 1994, 215) is an important dimension of D'Aguiar's use of the form.

A brief description of the narrative line of the poem is necessary to grasp what is at stake in its formal treatment. The narrator of the poem is the son of Faith and Christy, one a slave and the other a young white man from a neighbouring plantation. In the ten sections of the poem he tells how his mother was raped by his father, then fell in love with him and how the two attempted to escape from the south with the help of the Underground Railroad. When the couple is recaptured, Christy is forced to witness the rape of Faith by six men, then is sold as an indentured servant while Faith is sold as a slave to a Mrs. Mason. Faith dies at the birth of her son, who is raised by the Masons. Christy, after the end of the Civil War, goes in search of his wife and son but finds only his wife's grave and no trace of his son. The story is told from different perspectives, giving it a polyphonic quality. In the opening and closing sections the narrator speaks directly, designating himself as "I and I." Faith and Tom, the man who saves the couple, speak in their own voices, while Christy's life as a wrestler during his indenture is told by the narrator. The sections "War" and "Peace" evoke the Civil War through the perspective of Tom and his wife Stella, the section "Peace" imagining their desire to return to Africa. In the concluding section "I and I" mulls over the numerous paradoxes of slavery and its aftermath and proclaims his identification with all people affected by slavery: "My brains soak in Slavery and, for the rest / of time, that past promises to preserve / me as long as slave conditions persist" (D'Aguiar 2000, 155).

The most important formal aspect of D'Aguiar's adoption of the *ottava rima*, signalling the poem's relation to its literary forbearers, is his use of a self-assertive narrator who, like Byron's in *Don Juan* "interject[s] and philosophize[s] at every possible opportunity" (Addison 2004, 139) and produces variations in tone and style that contribute to demonstrating the poet's overtly literary relation to his subject. While such a playful use of intertextuality could be perceived as posturing and be taxed with trivializing a serious subject, it should perhaps not be dismissed as creating a distance between the subject and its treatment. More fruitful to an understanding of D'Aguiar's deliberate choice of form would be an examination of the multiple ways in which these explicit borrowings from *ottava rima* signal the difficulty for the poet of finding a form appropriate to his subject. Such a study would place the seemingly minority status of the poetic form at the centre of D'Aguiar's search for an expression of what Toni Morrison has called "unspeakable things unspoken."<sup>4</sup>

Beyond simply pointing to the use of a borrowed voice, the explicit interventions of the narrator suggest the necessarily discursive and literary nature of his enterprise. In the final section of the poem, the narrator declares, in what could be seen as an allusion to W. B. Yeats: "I am the singer and the song-- / lest you forget—wrong-doer and wronged" (153). These lines echo Yeats's famous interrogation concerning the impossibility of "know[ing] the dancer from the dance."<sup>5</sup> However, they also suggest that in spite of his deliberate adopting of a rhetorical stance that places him outside the poem (as in his direct addresses to the "Dear reader" [6] or his hesitation to describe the gang rape—"This is not for the faint hearted" [37]) the narrator does not entirely control the representation of his mother's rape and its relation to his own life and the lives of all those descended from slaves. The borrowing of lines and attitudes from other works sets up a self-reflexivity that transforms the poem into an endless mirroring of the relation of poetry to its subject, thus suggesting that the connection of *Bloodlines* to its themes and historical context is at least partly a literary one. This literary link

between his status as narrator and representation of the life of his parents is made clear early in the poem when the narrator declares [ ... ] From my time to theirs / I climb a library ladder and reach for a top shelf” (3) thereby clearly asserting that only the resources of the library can give him access to their lives.

The first section of the poem, in its overt reliance on rhetorical devices, needs to be read as an exercise in styles and voices that sets the stage for what follows. A clear example of the oscillation between parody and poetic emotion mentioned by Addison can be found in the treatment of the motif of birth. The first presentation of his birth by the narrator relies on the type of exaggeration associated with mock-epic births:

Had she hidden from him or he ignored her,  
instead of neither giving way that night or day  
on those proverbial tracks, I would not be here.  
I'd be a figment in your mind, a Mandalay  
(I looked it up) or wraith, if its ghosts you prefer [ ... ]  
not this body with two bloodlines in its veins,  
nor this death-in-life cause by those two trains. (2)

The second presentation of his birth dramatizes the death of the mother at the birth of the son and the narrator's emotion is expressed in terms of the paradoxical relation between her death and his life: “She died that I might live. A mother's gift / of life to her son doubled from one life to two:/ the end of hers, the start of mine” (44). The following three stanzas take the form of an apostrophe to his seventeen-year-old mother which, through the images evoked, resembles a love poem:

I want to press my ear to your soft chest  
and, even if I heard nothing, I'd give thanks  
that we were united in death and able  
to honour a love that wasn't negotiable. (44)

The most important function of the highly visible rhetorical devices in the initial section, as the first quotation relating to his mother's death shows, lies in their expression, as formal



devices, of the relations of parallel, contradiction and paradox which underlie the institution of slavery. All of the figures of parallelism and contrast, such as anaphora, anadiplosis, antithesis and chiasmus are used to entwine and confront the characters, their colour and status as slave or free. The following passage, describing the flight of the lovers, illustrates the functioning of a combination of these figures:

The river bared its back to the keel  
making its incision. The river knew,  
as the keel made its cut, that it would heal,  
heal without a scar, heal and renew,  
cure and remember how the wood feels  
hard as stone, and how a stone is reduced  
by water to dust, then less than dust;  
that's why water turns the other cheek for us. (31)

In this passage, a combination of anadiplosis -- the repetition of "heal" at the end of one clause and at the beginning the following one, same structure with "stone" --, anaphora -- the repetition of "heal" at the beginning of two clauses -- and epistrophe -- the repetition of "dust" as the end of two clauses -- , in addition to the use of alliteration and internal and end rhyme produces a complex reflection on the relation between sound and meaning. Underlying this passage, and others built on the same figures, is a sense of the instability of words. Polyptoton is also used for the same effect, as in the following lines: "her heart's the one thing she can call her own. / For she is owned by others" (15). The narrator's play with words is not just posturing; in the world of Faith and Christy, people's fates can be turned around as rapidly as the letters of the alphabet. The chiasmatic structure underlying the poem, linked to the paradoxical relation of the two protagonists, expresses itself even at the level of the letter: "[ ... ] afraid of what they saw / and who they saw doing it, knowing what it was" (13).

The narrator's explicit interventions and remarks to the reader, like the apostrophe to Fortune in the following lines, express the effort involved in linking the poetic form to the context and to the reality in which the lovers live:

They both began to cry. They sat on roots  
spiralling above ground from that oak tree,  
the tangled roots of their confusion if the truth  
be told ... Fortune lend a hand. Intervene for me. (19)

The exaggeration involved in the elaborate extended metaphors also serves to underline the paradoxes of the poem. In a passage reminiscent of Donne's metaphysical conceits, the narrator describes the way his parents slept in a closet during their flight:

If listening in darkness is a kind of muscle,  
say an eyelid, as theirs surely must have been,  
then it relaxed slowly over those corpuscles;  
if it is skin that creeps over a fingernail unseen  
that you keep pushing back to expose more cuticle,  
then in that musty space, eyelids and skin  
slid over wary eyes and fingernails,  
as surely as dust settled on their nostrils. (26)

The complex relation between a literary approach to the delicate subject of rape in the context of slavery and the attempt to explore inner states of mind can be observed in the way in which the narrator describes the rape. In a stanza in which he describes the first contact between Faith and Christy, he links his reactions to those he imagines in Faith's mind through images of light:

A simple walk from the fields to the house  
along a path twisting into a grove of alders  
that comes to a sudden clearing whose  
light seems pooled there, for bathing, like solder  
in a flame, the blue part a phoenix might choose  
to plunge in, not me or you for all the

tea in Hong Kong, though on occasions I  
have swept my finger through a candle's eye. (5)

Five stanzas later, in evoking the actual rape, the narrator once again imagines Faith through images involving light:

She kept her eyes open, allowed the light  
to bathe them; sun rays sunk in that grove  
concertinaed through her eyes' bright  
shine into her brain, already an oven  
turning on a slow, steady burner the sight  
of him to ashes, her hate burning to love.  
Don't ask me how the worst moment she knew  
switched on the best thing life can give you. (6)

The images of light and flame that the narrator shares with Faith in the first of the quoted stanzas, extending his experience of light to imagine hers, is used in the second quoted stanza to evoke the paradoxical transformation from hate to love that is taking place in Faith's mind. A mood is created in which the polyptoton involved in "burner" and "burning" and the internal rhyme with "turning" suggest the ways in which poetry transforms experience through the use of sound and a fascination with words. The mood is then broken by the couplet in which the narrator admits, through the use of the unpoetic word "switched" – which nonetheless ties in with the reference to "burner" and "oven" -- his inability to explain the transition from love to hate that occurs at the crucial moment of the rape. Such a "switching" of tones is consistent with the *ottava rima* form as it has been used in the past. However, in the context of D'Aguiar's poem, it also draws attention to the complex nature of the subject of interracial rape, for the narrator simultaneously attempts to use poetry to identify with the experience of his mother and admits his inability to do so.

### **"My Vestibular Ear" : Sound and sense, sound beyond sense**

In his review of *Bloodlines*, Bruce King expresses regret at D'Aguiar's failure to maintain in his novel in verse the sensitivity "toward language and sound" that characterizes

his earlier poetry (2001, 95). However, it can be argued that the *ottava rima* form, by its use of a tight rhyming pattern over an extended number of stanzas, provides the poet with an opportunity to give particular weight to sound. While the repetitive nature of the form may appear to be a constraint, it also, like all such forms, offers the occasion for a balancing of repetition with variation not only through the use of both exact and slant rhymes, but also through the different types of relation established between words placed in rhyming positions.<sup>6</sup> A particularly cogent example of this play on rhyming position can be found in the stanza in which Christy's father admonishes him for loving a slave (17): the word "love" occupies the "b" rhyming position in lines 2, 6, and 8, thus drawing the reader's attention to the absence of the normal type of variation based on identical sounds found in different words, but by the same token alerting him to the different connotations that the same word acquires in different contexts. "Falling in love", love itself and the idea of Negroes loving – "Negroes love / like us and fuss like us [ ... ]" -- are placed in counterpoint though this unexpected recurrence of the same word in a rhyming position. D'Aguiar uses many different types of rhyme (true rhyme, half-rhyme [only the end consonant is repeated], slant rhyme [only the consonants repeated], apocopated rhyme [plan with plan / tation], mosaic rhyme [one compound ending and one normal ending as in "date" with "copulate"] even backward rhyme ["saw" with "was"]). He also uses eye-rhymes as a way of underlining the tension between visual similarities and differences in sound ("soft as ash risen from a fire, that winds / back down to earth having ridden the winds." [11]). All of these different types of rhyme rely on the use of sound as a way of fulfilling or frustrating the expectations generated by the overall pattern imposed by the form. The Russian formalists have studied the complex patterns underlying the tension between sound and sense that is the very essence of poetry. In his essay "Linguistics and Poetics," Roman Jakobson describes the importance of sound in its relation to meaning in poetry:

No doubt, verse is primarily a recurrent “figure of sound.” Primarily always, but never uniquely. Any attempts to confine such poetic conventions as meters, alliteration, or rhyme to the sound level are speculative reasonings without any empirical justification. The projection of the equational principle into the sequence has a much deeper and wider significance. Valery’s view of poetry as “hesitation between the sound and the sense” is much more realistic and scientific than any bias of phonetic isolationism. (1981, 38).

Such approaches to the formal dimension of poetry have brought to light highly complex interactions between formal and signifying structures. Keeping this aspect of poetry in mind, I would like to examine D’Aguiar’s use of sound on the basis of Mladen Dolar’s discussion of the concept of voice as it is used in linguistics, philosophy and in particular, psychoanalysis. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Dolar teases out the consequences of viewing voice as a dimension of the body, standing as he puts it “at the intersection of language and the body, but this intersection belongs to neither” (2006, 73). Dolar’s study reveals the many ways in which voice resists being reduced either to its participation in the construction of meaning or its rooting in the body. In “The Metaphysics of Voice” he points out a dimension of the ambiguous status of voice that is particularly important to the study of literature dealing with trauma in a postcolonial context, for he talks about the danger implicit in traditional views of voice:

If the entire metaphysical tradition “spontaneously” and consistently espoused the priority of the voice, it was because the voice always presented the privileged point of auto-affection, self-transparency, the hold in the presence. The voice offered the illusion that one could get immediate access to an unalloyed presence, an origin not tarnished by externality, a firm rock against the elusive interplay of signs which are anyway surrogates by their very nature, and always point to an absence. (2006, 37)

There is an understandable temptation to view poems about slavery from the point of view of their capacity to generate voices that appear to emanate from “an origin not tarnished” by the externality of slavery, as a way of restoring both body and soul to wholeness. This temptation feeds partially on the ambiguity surrounding the use of the word voice, which has many connotations from a structural, semantic and physical point of view. In narrative fiction, there is, in particular, a tendency to confuse the “voice” of a character, as the bearer of meaning, with his narrative status in Genette’s terminology, and with the specific characteristics of his manner of speaking, in Bakhtin’s dialogical approach (Birat 2008, 98-100). In talking about poetry, it can be useful to look at the speaking voice, the persona, in terms of Dolar’s positioning of voice between sound and meaning. From this perspective, the use of sound can be related to the physical dimension of the voice and provide interesting insight into the relation between sound and meaning. In D’Aguiar’s case, it can point to ways in which the poet anchors his speaking voices in dimensions of sound that are consistent with the historical and imaginative context from which they emerge, but that allow sound to acquire qualities that carry it beyond the strict limits of that context. In *Bloodlines*, sound counterbalances the overtly literary aspect of the poem by producing effects of orality that demonstrate the role played by an oral culture in dealing with a hostile world. While this aspect of orality is sometimes simply alluded to (“Older women taught her to respect, / cherish and obey the signs of her body. / What she knew she grasped only barely, unable to put it into words this early” [20]), at other times it becomes the narrator’s mode of expression: “You can tell from the thunder in its belly / whether lightning fooling or hungry really” (21). The rhyme and rhythmic pattern of these lines reflect the role played by repetitive sound patterns in the retention of proverbial statements of this type.<sup>7</sup> The role of orality is integrated into the concern about concealment and escape that lies at the centre of the poem in Tom’s remarks to the lovers:

The old man spoke above the rain and thunder  
adding his voice to the lightning until element  
and man were indistinguishable under  
tarpaulin, yet they heard what he meant  
them to understand making words redun-  
dant. ‘Let’s say for the sake of an argument,  
you’re on a train that no one off it can see.  
what’s to stop us driving till we are free?’ (22)

Like the thunder referred to in the preceding stanza, the presence of the Underground Railroad that will take the lovers to freedom must be deciphered on the basis of the codes used to signal its presence. Tom’s voice takes on the force of the elements. The assonance of “thunder,” “under” and “redundant” links the rumble of the thunder to that of the invisible railroad, perceptible only in the coded language of those like Tom who participate in it. Furthermore, the apocopated rhyme produced by the splitting of “redundant” conceals the meaning of the word, which can only be understood in the context of the complete sentence of which it is a part, thus mirroring the oblique relation between sound and meaning in Tom’s words to the lovers. Without belabouring the point, one can say that the use that Tom makes of his voice, linking his words to the situation in which he finds himself, is given concrete expression in sound. The following stanza uses the assonance of “worshipped,” “Spirit,” and “lips” to emphasize the way in which Tom links prayer, speech and action through a spirituality that sustained the efforts to free slaves:

Prayer can be catching. Christy and Faith  
found that out. The old man always worshipped  
alongside some task so that his life, awake  
or asleep, was one long devotion to the Spirit.  
He did not talk about it. He would take  
his time thinking so that when his tight lips  
separated something wonderful bound to jump  
out and please people, or leave them stumped. (25)

While the repeated vowel sounds draw attention to the linking of spirituality to speech, the use of enjambment produces a narrative flow that reinforces the sense that the spiritual is also an integral part of the man's life and action. This represents a highly effective use of the *ottava rima* form as a vehicle for the expression of a historical context quite far from that, or those, often associated with the use of the form.

This particular use of sound as an expression of the voice at the juncture of sound and sense serves as a springboard for taking the suggestive dimension of sound much further, into the realm of desire. In his discussion of the role of voice in the writings of Freud and Lacan, Dolar points out that if, in the unconscious, "speech is the medium of unconscious desire," the voice is "precisely the element which eludes the signifier and cannot be pinned down by its [the signifier's] logic" and "which is the rest, the leftover of the signifying operation" (2006, 130-131). He recounts a case described by Freud in which a woman involved in an illicit affair hears a mysterious noise which becomes the kernel of a fantasy in which she imagines that her lover has arranged to have someone photograph her in the process of making love. In this case a "contingent and insignificant external noise" is internalized by the subject. The sound which Dolar describes as the kernel of a fantasy provides a clue as to the functioning of sound in poetry. While the choice of sounds can to some extent be explained in terms of the meaning intended by the poet, the sounds nonetheless constitute what Dolar calls a "leftover of the signifying operation," an excess which is ultimately irreducible to meaning, but which also serves as a seed to the elaboration of fantasies related to the inner lives of the characters who speak in the poem (in particular through interior monologue). D'Aguiar's use of sound becomes particularly clear in this perspective if one considers the ambiguity surrounding sound in poetry. This is an aspect of sound and its relation to the context of his story which D'Aguiar puts to particularly effective use. The apparent relation between two words linked by rhyme may be a mere illusion hiding the desire for an impossible bridging of the gap



between world and desire — in this sense the love between Faith and Christy becoming a synecdoche for freedom. The rhyming couplet describing the rape of Faith can be seen in this way: “the knife threatening to break her skin, / so she had to, she had to, let him in” (6). If one considers that it is the poem’s principal narrator, Faith’s son, who is speaking, the linking of “skin” and “in” suggests the son’s desire to reconcile the difference in race with his father’s desire. However the two lines, in their total configuration, belie this possibility, which hovers over the lines as an acoustic fantasy. An isolated example of this type may appear to be an interpretative fantasy. However the importance of rhyme in the *ottava rima* form multiplies the relations between sounds and increases the possibility of freeing sound from its semantic and logical links with story and context.

The image of the “vestibular ear” quoted in the subtitle suggests ways in which D’Aguiar places hearing and mishearing at the centre of the poem, pointing to the centrality of sound and hearing without limiting or constraining its possibilities:

Mother spoke to me all the time I languished  
in her belly, a voice felt underwater  
and through flesh and in bone: her burnished  
voice; my ear grown vestibular. (50)

If, as Dolar explains, the mother’s voice, being “the first representation of the dimension of the other” conveys both “the fantasies of a primary fusion” and “paranoiac fantasies of ‘entrapment’,” (2006, 41) then the echo of “ear” heard in the word “vestibular” makes audible the narrator’s need to go beyond sound, to give the ear the power to overcome the obstacles of distance and separation. The hypallage involved in the image of the mother’s “burnished voice” likewise seeks to grasp the paradox of the voice by representing it in a medium which will make it visible, while the slant rhyming of “burnished” with “perished” – used in the following line -- threatens this image by suggesting the possibility of loss and death. The vowel sound of “burnished” reappears two stanzas further on:

So she spoke. Her voice, a drum that vibrated  
down her spinal column to mine, songs heard  
through cotton wool; light brittle as school slate,  
bending under water; dented light that's hard,  
viscous, pliable; a stick flexed out of shape  
when submerged but emerging undisturbed.  
My life's a brick house for death to demolish;  
stories from a brick a day cannot be abolished. (51)

Beyond the suggestion that the mother's voice is a drum, a metaphor consistent with the African American cultural background of the poem, the sounds and visual images of the stanza work together to suggest a relation with the mother based on everyday experience. The sounds (the repetition of /t/, /n/, /l/ and /u:/) and the hypallage of "light brittle" transform these images, giving them a greater evocative resonance that culminates in the restorative power of sound suggested by the repetition of the /ɜ:/ vowel sound in "submerged," "emerging," and "undisturbed." The emphasis on sound is pursued throughout the poem, coming to a climax in the final section, in which the disembodied voice of the narrator evokes both the consolations of sound -- "The Mighty Sparrow sings me to sleep" (145) -- and the suffering it brings:

I hear so much I do not care for.  
I live beside a stream whose whispery  
twists and turns, ups and downs, murmur  
about a life much like my own misery. (154)

I have examined two ways of approaching Fred D'Aguiar's use of the *ottava rima* form in *Bloodlines* that suggest possibilities for looking beyond a simple dichotomy between subject and form. The study of poetry, especially in the wake of the writings of the Russian formalists, has found many ways of moving beyond assumptions about the lyrical voice of the poet and its relation to the world that would seem to rely on what Michel Collot calls the self's claim to mastery of the word and of the world and that he sees as the consequence of an

overestimation of “interiority of the lyrical speaking subject” (1996, 114-115, my translation). Linguistics and psychoanalysis have shown that language is not simply a tool to be grasped by the “sovereign speaking subject” (Collot 1996, 114, my translation) but is rather the very substance of his individual and social identity, inseparable from it. Approaches to poetry that take into account the complex relation of the speaking subject to language must inevitably see the poet as “the point of encounter between inside and outside, between world and language” (Collot 1996, 117, my translation). From this perspective, Fred D’Aguiar can be seen as using an unusual and seemingly outdated form to draw attention to the difficulty of representing certain encounters “between inside and outside” related to the postcolonial situation and the aftermath of slavery. The audacity of the choice is related both to the relatively rare use of the *ottava rima* in contemporary literature and to the formal constraints involved in the form itself. Far from being simply an experimentation with an unusual poetic form, *Bloodlines* constitutes a test of the relation between form and meaning in the treatment of the traumatic subject of rape in an interracial context. The narrator’s explicit evocation of the literary nature of his undertaking invites the reader to interrogate the role of genre in the expression of the effects of slavery. The exploration of sound in its complex relation to meaning, particularly in an extended narration, allows the poet to solicit the reader’s inner ear in ways that show how the suggestive use of sound in poetry can extend the possibilities of what appears at first sight to be a minority genre, revealing its adaptability to a complex subject.

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<sup>1</sup> This remark should not be interpreted as implying that Dabydeen makes a nostalgic use of forms like the work song. While his poems suggest indigenous forms, he explains in the postscript to the collection that while writing the poems he was “taken by the muscularity of the northern alliterative language as he had been reading “Sir Gawain/The Pearl etc” ([1984] 2005, 67). His use of the pastoral form in “Guyana Pastoral” creates a tension between form and theme similar to what is found in *Bloodlines*.

<sup>2</sup> Ramazani compares Achebe’s novel and Okigbo’s poetic sequence in terms of “the literary representation of the British colonization of Igboland” (25). He points out, among other things, that while a reader might take Achebe’s novel for “a mirror held up to history,” poetry’s “more formal contrivances” will enable the reader to see “the affective and social worlds” that they embody (30).

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<sup>3</sup> Ramazani also discusses the trend toward writing novels in verse, mentioning for instance Vikram Seth's use of Onegin stanzas in *The Golden Gate* (1986), although he does not refer to D'Aguiar's novel. He sees them as somewhat imperfect forms of hybridization in which "their plots and characters seem like prosaic scaffolding erected to enable poetic construction, or to switch metaphors, novelistic hooks on which to hang poetry" (2009, 21).

<sup>4</sup> This is the title of the Tanner Lecture given by Toni Morrison in 1988, published in 1989 in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (1): 1-34. In a passage in which D'Aguiar's narrator hesitates to describe the rape of Faith by six men, he explicitly refers to "unspeakable acts" (37).

<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to the final line of the poem "Among School Children": "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (Yeats 1956, 214).

<sup>6</sup> Slant rhyme (also called off-rhyme or near-rhyme) "substitutes *similar* sound for identical sound" (Turco 1986, 41).

<sup>7</sup> In her analysis of a passage from *Bloodlines*, Addison points out that the couplet form of the *ottava rima* underscores "the proverbial quality of the utterance" often found in the final lines (2004, 143).

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