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## **“Taak prappa”: Voice, Orality and Absence in David Dabydeen’s *Slave Song*”**

**Kathie Birat**

**Université de Lorraine**

[Kathie.birat@univ-lorraine.fr](mailto:Kathie.birat@univ-lorraine.fr)

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### **Résumé:**

David Dabydeen’s collection of poems *Slave Song* (1984) represents the Guyanese poet’s attempt to compensate for the silence surrounding slavery and the absence of a significant body of poetry in Creole. In a series of 14 poems written in Guyanese Creole and accompanied by illustrations dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as explanatory notes and translations in standard English, the poet evokes the lives of plantation slaves and modern-day peasants through forms that both imitate folk poetry and evoke European genres like the pastoral and the elegy. Through an analysis of this intertwining of local and European forms and of the use of Creole in *Slave Song*, this article examines the collection as an attempt on the part of the poet both to generate presence and to recognize the impossibility of filling the gaps left by a painful past.

Dans son recueil de poèmes *Slave Song* (1984) le poète anglophone d’origine guyanaise David Dabydeen tente de répondre au silence qui entoure l’esclavage et de compenser l’absence d’une poésie composée en créole. Dans une série de 14 poèmes en créole guyanais accompagnés d’illustrations datant du dix-huitième et dix-neuvième siècle, mais également de notes et de traductions en anglais standard, le poète évoque la vie des esclaves dans les plantations, ainsi que celle des paysans au vingtième siècle. Sur le plan formel, les poèmes mêlent formes folkloriques et modèles européens. Par une analyse de ce métissage de formes locales et européennes et de l’utilisation du créole dans *Slave Song*, cet article propose de regarder le recueil comme la tentative du poète pour générer une présence et en même temps reconnaître l’impossibilité de combler les lacunes du passé.

Kathie Birat is emeritus professor of English at the University of Lorraine. She has published extensively on subjects related to American, African American and Caribbean literature, with particular emphasis on the writings of Caryl Phillips, Fred D’Aguiar and Sam Selvon and on subjects related to voice and orality. A recent article on the influence of oral forms in Hawthorne’s writing of his tales was published in *Cahiers de littérature orale* (No. 75-76,

2014). She edited with Brigitte Zaugg *Literature and Spirituality in the English-speaking World* (Peter Lang, 2014).

Kathie Birat est professeur émérite d'anglais à l'Université de Lorraine. Elle a publié de nombreux articles consacrés à des auteurs américains, afro-américains et caribéens, en particulier, en ce qui concerne la Caraïbe Anglophone, Caryl Phillips, Fred D'Aguiar et Sam Selvon. Elle s'intéresse également aux questions de voix et d'oralité. Un article récent sur l'influence de l'oralité sur l'écriture des contes de Hawthorne a été publié dans *Cahiers de littérature orale* (No. 75-76, 2014). Elle a édité avec Brigitte Zaugg *Literature and Spirituality in the English-speaking World* (Peter Lang, 2014).

In an essay entitled “Teaching West Indian Literature in Britain,” (1997), the poet, novelist and essayist David Dabydeen deplores the tendency of what he calls “postmodernist theories” to “valorize ‘absence’, ‘aporia’ and ‘kenosis’” (*Pak's Britannica* 46).<sup>1</sup> Taking exception with what he sees as a tendency to “dismiss ‘presence’ as a kind of metaphysical conceit,” he proposes Olaudah Equiano as a counter example, insisting that for Equiano, “his central concern was with textual presence – placing himself before the audience, asserting his humanity [...] at the height of the slave trade [...]” (46). Dabydeen’s essay is a frontal attack on what he calls “Western theories” as tools for interpreting literature from the West Indies. In spite of its apparent virulence, it is a plea for the need to develop a West Indian approach to literature and to take into account aspects of the culture of his native Guyana which have been ignored by critics, namely the Amerindian and Asian populations. In other essays and interviews, the poet has evoked the most important dimension of silence affecting populations belonging to the African diaspora, their absence from historical accounts of the past. In an interview with the poet, Clarisse Zimra asked Dabydeen if he was familiar with “Toni Morrison’s own position about the willed re-creation of an absent past,” (*Pak's Britannica* 142), to which he replied that, while he was not familiar with Toni Morrison’s arguments as developed in her book *Playing in the Dark*, he agreed with the idea, “because it means that one can actually write about black history with a kind of freedom to re-imagine the possibilities of history [...]” (142). In spite of Dabydeen’s reluctance to accept the validity of

critical theories focussing on presence and absence, there is much to be said for approaching Dabydeen's aesthetics through the perspective of absence. A preoccupation with the effects of slavery, indentureship and colonisation on the Amerindian, African and East Indian populations of the Caribbean lies at the heart of his literary production, as it does for so many writers from the region. Beyond this awareness of the historical weight of absence and loss lies a sensitivity to the presumed absence of a cultural and literary tradition, as evidenced by remarks made in his essay "On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today" (1990):

To write in creole was to validate the experience of black people against the contempt and dehumanizing dismissal by white people. Celebration of blackness necessitated celebration of black language, for how could black writers be true to their blackness using the language of their colonial masters. (31)

To treat Dabydeen's first collection of poems, *Slave Song* (1984) through the perspective of absence, seen as the principle informing his aesthetics, does not mean emptying out the heart of his poetic endeavour through an act of unconscious cultural domination based on the use of "Western" theories centred on presence and absence. On the contrary, such an approach can make it possible to read his poems as an aesthetic response to a historical absence, as a complex attempt to create presence out of absence, or rather to balance absence with specific forms of presence. This will involve a consideration of the structure of the work, the poet's use of an introduction, notes and translations of the poems to draw attention to the problematic status of the poet, who cannot count on a well-worn tradition and informed readership to assure a proper interpretation and contextualization of his work.<sup>2</sup> It will also address the crucial question of orality and the use of Creole as a way of generating a vocal presence.

In its form and structure, *Slave Song* can be seen as a response to the many forms of absence underlying the slave culture and colonialism that characterized the Caribbean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the end of the introduction to the volume, Dabydeen explains that "very little Creole poetry exists – a handful of folk-songs mostly"

(15). The titles of the poems themselves can be seen as a response to this. Of the fourteen poems in the collection, six are called “songs,” and appear to reflect a folk tradition.<sup>3</sup> Sarah Lawson Welsh has pointed to the significance of Dabydeen’s sensitivity to “the continued close relationship between music and word” in Caribbean poetry (30). However, beyond the importance of music, one can detect a preoccupation with generic categories as indicators of cultural hybridization. Two of the poems bear the names of European forms: “Guyana Pastoral” and “Elegy.” The poem “Men and Women” recalls the title of a collection of poems by Robert Browning.<sup>4</sup> While the revival of folk forms could be seen as a desire to generate a presence capable of reflecting authentic experience, the reworking of European forms reveals a recognition of the lack of a local tradition. This complex positioning of the poet, demonstrating a desire for authenticity and an awareness of the weight of absence and silence, is an important aspect of the collection and has been the source of much commentary, on the part of Dabydeen himself as well as the critics who have discussed his work.<sup>5</sup> The explanatory and critical apparatus surrounding the poems in the introduction, notes, translations and postscript (to the 2005 edition) attests to the impossibility of separating the role of absence, reflected in the difficulty of access to a series of poems written in Guyanese Creole, and that of presence, seen in the use of folk forms and of a language which is, in the poet’s words, “intensely kinetic” (*Slave Song* 13). An element adding a further complication to the formal dimension of the collection is a series of illustrations, several of which appeared in John Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana* (1796). The presence of the illustrations both complicates and enriches the reading of the poems. They do not so much “illustrate” the poems as comment on the ways in which the colonial experience was represented in the past.<sup>6</sup>

The reader’s approach to the poems reflecting European models is influenced by the suggestive dimension of the titles. In reading “Guyana Pastoral” and “Elegy,” his/her

expectations will be influenced by the moods associated with two common forms of English poetry. In the reading of “Guyana Pastoral,” the underlying assumptions about pastoral poetry are disrupted by the violent nature of the subject and its treatment, which Dabydeen in his notes describes as “the rape and murder of a young girl, told in hard, brutal rhythms [...] (43):

Under the tambrin tree wheh de moon na glow,  
Laang, laang, laang, she lay, laang, laang  
She cry, but de wind na blow  
An dem wraang an straang  
An dem wuk an dim bruk till fowlcack-crow.  
Who see who hear when she belly buss, when she mout splash blood?

Only de jumbie umbrella dat poke up e white eye from de mud.

Under de tambrin tree wheh de sun na shine  
Dem tek up spade, dem dig deep hole, dem hide she from deh mine.  
She puppa look bush, how he hack, how he halla!  
She mumma call priest, kill calf, pray Krishna, Christ, Allah!  
Nine mont since dem saach an dem shout, East, West, Naat, Sout.  
Who know wheh she lass, who know wheh foh fine?

Only de cush-cush ants dat lay dem white egg in she mout. (21)<sup>7</sup>

The reader is apt, and certainly meant, to be shocked by the way in which nature is represented in the poem, through the “jumbie umbrella” and the “cush-cush ants,” especially if his/her expectations are based on what Paul Alpers has called the “idyllic” aspect of the pastoral landscape, “charged and privileged by its responsiveness to desire” (459).<sup>8</sup> If elements of the landscape and of nature are evoked (the tambrin tree,<sup>9</sup> the moon, the sun, the wind) they in no way contribute to an idealization of the rural scene. The “hard, brutal rhythms” to which the poet refers are reinforced by the use of harsh consonants in words like “wuk” and “bruk,” the repetition of “dem” and the evocation of frenetic movement associated with the burying of the girl’s body (“Dem took up spade, dem dig deep hole...”) and her

parents' search for her ("how he hack, how he holla!"). The poet's use of the pastoral frame emphasizes his unwillingness or inability to reproduce a view of the world that corresponds to generic expectations, suggesting that pastoral is absent from, or inconsistent with local tradition. Beyond this intertextual dimension lies the absence of the girl, who neither speaks nor becomes the object of an idealized representation. The absence of women as speaking subjects in *Slave Song* has been the object of much critical comment (Jenkins, McIntyre, Plasa, Klintworth). The presence of the Guyanese world and its natural context appear only from a negative perspective. However, beneath this grim view lies a tension between the Guyanese world and its poetic representation that expresses itself in terms of a reliance on patterns derived from folklore. The poem uses devices involving rhythm, repetition and question and answer patterns that are common in folk forms. The use of repetition is a mnemonic device meant to facilitate the retention of a series of verses built on the same pattern. In this case, the recurrence of the reference to the tambrin tree and of the question formulated in the final line of each stanza stands metonymically for this type of repetition. The enumeration of the actions involved in the search for the girl as well as the reference to "East, West, Naat, Sout" also imitate the ways in which folk forms use repetition and enumeration to scan the known world, thus emphasizing the collective possession of that world. In his notes, Dabydeen describes the poem by saying that "[t]he rape and murder of a young girl, told in hard, brutal rhythms, signify the violent aspect of Guyanese existence" (43). However, although the use of the word "pastoral" in the title raises the question of the appropriateness of the idea within the Guyanese context, the reader should not limit his view to the poet's remarks. Another poem in the collection, "For Ma," although it is not called a pastoral, describes a woman observing "the bustle of a peasant household at daybreak" (59), offering a different vision of the possibility of pastoral in the Guyanese context.

In order to measure the effect of Dabydeen's integration of European forms into a collection of poems written to express "the uniqueness of the people" (15) of Guyana, it is useful to observe patterns that transcend the boundaries of individual poems. Beyond the conventions and usages that have allowed the emergence of specific expectations with regard to the pastoral or the elegy, one can identify an emotional or affective orientation in such types of poetry which is more pertinent to a reading of Dabydeen's poems. While an "elegy" is, in terms of its etymology, a lament for the dead, this definition has been broadened in a variety of ways. In her introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Karen Weisman asserts that elegy as a form "establishes a space for reflection on cultural continuity" (5). Erik Gray, in an article in the same volume devoted to elegy in the Victorian era, points out that "some of the finest elegiac poems of the Victorian era are not strictly elegies, since they lament the passing, not of an individual, but of the age itself" (282).<sup>10</sup> Dabydeen's "Elegy" seems to be related to this facet of the genre; it is a lament for the loss of the past and of friends, focalized on an old man being observed by the speaker:

So you lean over landing, early cole maaning  
 Old man, yu sick? Is wha do yu? Wha wraang?  
 An yu haan weak, tremble, an yu mout move  
 But word na deh, an yu eye stare out at de field, laang, laang,  
 But yu na see calf stri an struggle for suck  
 An yu na hear high from jamoon tree bluesaki saang –  
 Is old yu old ... is dah wha mek ... (30)<sup>11</sup>

The following stanzas evoke the old man's friends, designated by nicknames like "Snakeneck" and "Fisheye" and the things that they will no longer do:

Is whch dem deh? All lay up dem net, all put dung dem cutlass, all let dem sheep  
 loose,  
 All dead!  
 (And where are they? All laid up their nets, put down their cutlasses, all let their  
 sheep loose / All dead![54])

The final lines of the second stanza evoke his wife Jasmattie:



An Jasmattie beating claat on de rivebank – tump! Tump! Tump!

Tump! Tump!

How she haan straang an she back straight an she bubbly

Sweet sapadilla-brung!

(And Jasmattie beating clothes on the river-bank – thump! thump! thump! thump!  
/ How her hands are strong, and her back straight and her breasts sweet sapidilla-  
brown! [54])

Dabydeen's elegy brings to mind Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," on account of its evocation of the life of simple people. However, there are two differences between the two poems that are pertinent to an understanding of his aesthetics. First of all, the speaker, rather than musing on the departed in a country churchyard, is reflecting on the thoughts of a man he is watching; the speaker's thoughts and questions reflect his own fears and regrets and at the same time his connection to the "old man," whose life can be seen as similar to the speaker's, since they share the same language. Secondly, the old man's life is evoked in precise sensory detail, through references to sight, sound, appetite ("Roast crab"), and sexual desire ("Yu memba when yu fuss see how yu troat lump?"). This sensual dimension and the vivid evocation of sensation through sound represent a striking contrast with Gray's:

Along the cool sequester'd vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (Thomas Gray, "Elegy" lines 75-76,  
37)

As in "Guyana Pastoral," the presence of traces of a folk form anchors the poem in popular forms of expression, creating an interaction between the local context and the literary frame. The lines evoking the man's friends – "Snakeneck, Fisheye, Badman, Rich'ed, / Young yesterday, all a dem baais, Tiefman, Blackbattie, Goose," – echo a well-know nursery rhyme "Tinker, tailor," which exists in many English and American versions and which, in the English version, goes "Tinker, Tailor / Soldier, Sailor / Rich man, Poor man / Beggar man, Thief." (Opie and Opie 483).<sup>12</sup> In this case, the echo of a popular form reinforces the specificity of the experiences evoked in the poem, in particular through an affirmation of their

collective dimension.<sup>13</sup> Unlike the situation encountered in “Guyana Pastoral,” the tone and mood of “Elegy” are in keeping with the spirit of the model, revealing its appropriateness to the Guyanese context, while at the same time calling attention to the specificity of that context.

Although it does not specifically reflect a European genre, the poem “Brown Skin Girl” also expresses a mood that is melancholy and nostalgic. While “Guyana Pastoral” and “Elegy” explore the Guyanese context by looking at it through a formal lens that is European, “Brown Skin Girl” suggests a foreign presence through its theme and the position of the speaking subject, whose girlfriend is contemplating going to America:

Gwan, gwan America brung skin gyal,  
Meet white maan.  
Yu go laan  
Taak prappa, dress, drive car,  
Hold knike and faak in yu haan;  
De mud, de canal, de canefield gaan  
An me wid ricebowl drinkin mar  
Me wid ricebowl tinkin far.

Gwan, gwan America brung skin gyal,  
Mek money, mek pickni,  
Move smood, stand tall:  
Cackroach, krekete, h,  
Maskita na deh-deh  
Fo bruk yu life fo mek yu crawl,  
An me wid fishnet waitin tide  
Dreams like bleedin deep inside. (35)<sup>14</sup>

For all its apparent simplicity, this poem is the most concise expression of the numerous forms of silence and absence that define the poet’s Guyanese world. The situation evoked prolongs the sexual exploitation of black women by white men that characterized the period of slavery; the black man is still incapable of satisfying the material needs of black women.

The illustration that accompanies the poem, an engraving made by William Blake for John Stedman's volume on his expedition to Surinam, is entitled "A Surinam Planter in his Morning Dress" and shows in the foreground the white planter wearing a broad-brimmed hat and smoking a pipe, his feet planted wide apart in a posture of ease and assurance. In the background, a black girl, naked to the waist, is pouring a drink for the planter, her bearing as graceful as that of a dancer. Taken together, the poem and the illustration reproduce the triangular relation between white man, black woman and black man. However, the black man's absence from the illustration reinforces the frustration expressed by the poem. On the other hand, the woman in the illustration constitutes an ironical comment on the idea of "taak[ing] prappa, dress[ing], driv[ing] car."<sup>15</sup> Further complicating the reading of an apparently simple poem is Dabydeen's reference to the folk version by which it was inspired, a poem in which the roles are reversed and the black man, on his way to America, tells his girlfriend to "Throw away the damn baby" (62). The poet explains in his notes that his poem "depicts the Guyanese male at the receiving end of such cruel desertion and sexual disdain" (62). Faced with so many para- and intertextual elements, the reader may wonder whether the poem itself is capable of functioning outside the frames that both explain and contain it. The question becomes that of the autonomy of the Caribbean speaking subject. Sarah Lawson Welsh has addressed this question directly:

Indeed, illusion and fantasy run through the collection as organising motifs, but the ultimate irony is that the 'autonomy' of Dabydeen's creole-speaking personae and his poetic use of creole itself are also illusory, fantastical. They are contained, challenged, even silenced, by the translation and notes in Standard English provided by Dabydeen at the end of the collection. (35)

However, while she stresses the fact that there are no "originary voices" in *Slave Song*, "only reconstructed, represented, mediating ones" (37), she also suggests the importance of seeing the notes, like T. S. Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*, as a parody of "the reductive scrabbling for significance which characterizes much Western critical practice" (38). The consequence of

this “scrabbling,” according to Sarah Welsh, is a tendency to “underprivilege the internal logic of the poem’s own syncretic movement toward greater understanding [...]” (38).

If one examines the functioning of the poem, it is possible to discover an internal tension that is not simply a mirror image of the elements suggested by the illustration and notes. The repetition of the first line at the beginning of each stanza suggests, once again, the patterns of repetition that characterize folk verse. Beyond its mnemonic function, this type of pattern, as it is used in folk poetry, may contribute to the humorous or satirical treatment of a character or a situation. This is not the intention in the poem, but it generates a background that stands in counterpoint to the more philosophical reflection suggested by “tinkin far” and “bleedin deep inside.” Many of the verbs are in the imperative form (Welsh 28), pushing the woman toward a world imagined only in the most stereotypical terms (“Taak prappa, dress, drive car” or “Mek money, mek picni, / Move smood, / stand tall”). In contrast to this imagined future, the world she will leave behind (like the world evoked in “Elegy”) is seen in vivid detail – “de mud, de canal, de canefield” – or “Cackroach, krekete, / Maskita [...].” The final lines of each stanza leave the speaker suspended in time (as expressed by the form of the verbs “drinkin,” “tinkin,” “waitin” and “bleedin”). While the woman is viewed in terms of action, the speaker seems cut off from this world in movement, even if it is only imaginary. These elements generate a paradox for which the poem proposes no solution. Between the specificity of the speaker’s evocation of his immediate environment, however unpleasant it may seem, and the vagueness and distance of his girlfriend’s American dream, the poem can find no middle ground. Like “Elegy,” it struggles to express an emotion which seems inappropriate to its folk form and Caribbean grounding, but which is threatened with dissolution in its attempt to escape that frame. This paradox is encapsulated in the expression “taak prappa,” which reflects the irony of the situation, since the speaker can only express the idea of proper speech in his own Creole medium.

Dabydeen's use of a series of masks (Mcwatt) in the presentation of *Slave Song*, accompanied by notes and translations has been the subject of extensive commentary. Sarah Lawson Welsh considers that "its different voices (Creole, standard, slave, poet, critic) reveal the paradoxical nature of power and subjectivity to be never truly autonomous, always determined" (36). The analyses proposed in the present article so far view this structure as a way of exploring the different facets of absence that haunt a series of poems designed to affirm the presence of Caribbean voices. They function on the assumption that there is no symmetrical relation between presence and absence in the poems, but rather a complex geometry relying on shifting positions of proximity and distance. The poet's use of Creole and his invention of a Caribbean voice are important dimensions of his attempt to generate a presence capable of counterbalancing so many forms of absence. His criticism of the theories of Jacques Derrida is, from this point of view, a reminder of the importance of the notion of presence in any philosophy of language. Yet the imitation of a voice speaking Creole cannot guarantee a presence capable of compensating for the silence to which Dabydeen himself refers in evoking the "hand-full of folk songs" that represent Creole poetry (15).

Laurence Breiner has discussed the artistic use of Creole by Caribbean poets, emphasizing in particular the contributions of Louise Bennett (Jamaica) "the first to use what is still perceived as dialect to make explicit claims for the dignity of nation language" (172) and Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), whom he identifies as "the most uncompromising reproducer of speech among the major poets" (179).<sup>16</sup> Breiner points out that the use of nation language cannot be dissociated from the forms of what he calls "daily verbal behavior" (178) and that poets following Brathwaite have been preoccupied with "getting poetry *off* the page – not only of realizing it in a reading, but of conceiving poetry as a form of vocal performance, rather than as a form of inscription" (185). This points to the connection between vernacular speech, oral forms and the contexts in which they were originally used. The creative use of

Creole involves a re-imagining of the relation between language and the world. While this is partly an attempt to revisit the past without distorting it, it is also a desire to create a present and a presence in which Creole can be used to establish a connection with readers and listeners belonging to distant contexts.

Behind David Dabydeen's use of Creole in *Slave Song* lies an illusion of presence, of the possibility of generating presence, that constitutes the mainspring of the use of effects of orality in literature. An understanding of the poet's approach to language necessitates an awareness of the functioning of orality as a cultural practice, in its traditional and modern forms. The cultural background against which Dabydeen creates his poems is not one of primary orality, but is characterized by certain of the elements identified by Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy*. In a chapter entitled "Some Psychodynamics of Orality," Ong identifies some of the dimensions of orality that shed light on its specificity in relation to writing. He emphasizes the "situational nature" of orality as opposed to writing, pointing out that "oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld" (49). In discussing the agonistic aspect of oral cultures he explains:

Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. (43)

Ong also mentions the collective dimension of orality, the way in which it implies a "close, empathetic, communal identification with the known" (45) and its "verbomotor" aspects:

Much in the foregoing account of orality can be used to identify what can be called 'verbomotor' cultures, that is, cultures in which [ ... ] courses of action and attitudes toward issues depend significantly more on effective use of words, and thus on human interaction, and significantly less on non-verbal, often largely visual input from the 'objective world of things.' (67)

Finally, but significantly, he refers to sound as "an event in time," (75) a dimension of orality with important implications for the use of Creole, with its unfamiliar sounds, in poetry.

In the Introduction to *Slave Song*, Dabydeen describes the Creole he uses in ways that echo Ong's description of orality:

However the language is primarily oral and the following pieces are meant to be spoken aloud, not read silently, for the tone of them to come through, not merely the abstracted meaning. In an oral language tone creates meaning. Creole is intensely kinetic, and gestures naturally and spontaneously accompany oral delivery. (13)

The poet's words reflect Ong's insistence on the interactive (67) dimension of orality, its intimate connection to "the human lifeworld" (quoted above). This can be seen as the source of a writer's capacity to generate presence through the use of effects of orality. However, in the case of Dabydeen, this presence is to some extent illusory, not only because of the complex structure discussed above, but also because the difficulty, the strangeness of the Creole he uses introduces a gap between the reader and the text, thus problematizing the presence and proximity suggested by a context of orality.

To understand Dabydeen's use of Creole, it is important to study it in relation to the poems themselves and their positioning in the collection, for the use of Creole is closely connected to the contexts and situations of enunciation evoked in the poems. The collection opens with the poem "Song of the Creole Gang Women," a poem that uses Creole vocabulary and syntax in ways that make it difficult to understand. This explains the extensive notes and commentary provided by the poet (37-8). The poem, although it refers to a situation involving a post-slavery context, reflects the traditional work songs that helped the slaves carry out hard physical labour by establishing a collective rhythm for their gestures. The collective context thus reinforces the coherence of a language that is foreign to the reader, making it seem appropriate although inaccessible. Several of the poems at the beginning of the collection suggest a similar relation between context, language and form. "The Servants' Song" provides a narrative context, creating a link between the strange sounds of the language – "White hooman haad like hassa-bone stick in yu gum / Cassa pelt from she eye when se stare an

scaan yu,” (22) (White woman hard like fish-bone stuck in your gum / Cassava pelts out from her eyes when she stares at us in scorn [45]) – and the story, which revolves around the revenge on the white woman achieved by the slave boy Peta, described as “chupit in e ead since e bin young baai when e fall dung coconut tree” (22) (Stupid in his head since he was a young boy when he fell down a coconut-tree [45]). In this case, the familiar narrative pattern of a child who manages to outwit the white mistress helps clarify the unfamiliar sounds and language. The reader does not need to know that “hassa” refers to a local fish (the poet himself translates it as “fish-bone”) in order to grasp the negative connotations of the description of the mistress, an effect which is reinforced by the alliteration in [h] used in words the reader may not identify immediately. The unfamiliar expression “chupit in de ead” does not prevent the reader from understanding the situation, which becomes clear in the boy’s triumph and his recognition – “An all bady seh, ‘Aweh use to mock yu Peta, now aweh go laan.’” (23) (And everybody said – ‘We used to mock you Peter, now we’ll learn.’[45]). That the poet relies on the reader’s capacity to connect the situation to other more familiar narrative patterns can be seen in his commentary, in which he describes the poem as “an example of Guyanese peasant humour, simple and bawdy in a Chaucerian way but more crude” (44). “The Canecutters’ Song,” like the first poem, implies a collective situation. The poem is preceded by a paragraph which sets the scene, describing the speaker accompanied by “the slow throbbing of a drum” and the dancing of the men who surround him (24). This poem is important for the way that it defines the relationship between language and context. It ends on the word “baigan-chokey,” referring to a “special preparation” of aubergine that no uninitiated reader could understand without the poet’s notes (46-7). This word rhymes in the final stanza with “pokey,” meaning “womb”:

Baai yu ever dream she drawsie-down!  
 Baai yu ever wuk she wid yu tongue!  
 Baai yu ever taste she pokey



Saaf an drippy like baigan-chokey! (25)

(Boy have you ever dreamt her with her drawers down / Boy have you ever worked her with your tongue / Boy have you ever tasted her womb: Soft and dripping like baigan-chokey! [48])

A number of other words like “bamboo-flag,” “Shanti,” “starapple,” “patacake,” and “malabunta” also require definition. In addition to this, the representation of Creole pronunciation in words like “hooman” ([w] pronounced as [h]), the dropping of final consonants as in “gold-duss,” the replacing of [ð] with [d] in “dan” (than), the use of “k” for “t” in “friken” and the use of “deh” for “there,” are just a few of the specificities of Guyanese Creole speech that oblige the reader to pronounce the words at least in his mind in order to recognize the Standard English equivalent that is masked by the unfamiliar sounds.<sup>17</sup> In spite of the strangeness of the language, the reader cannot fail to understand what is at stake; the reference to “An flesh mo dan hibiscus early maan, white an saaf an wet / Flowering in the panty” (And her flesh, more than the hibiscus of early morning, soft and white and wet / Flowering in her panties [48]) leaves no room for doubt. Yet if the reader consults Dabydeen’s comments, he discovers that the context is Hindu (“The hibiscus (line 5) is a lovely white-petalled flower of religious significance to Hindus [...]” [46]) and that the relation of the poem to that context requires considerable explanation, even if, at a more general level, the poem concerns the effects of the social pressures exerted on slaves and indentured servants and the brutality of the work they do. Seen in this way, the poem is curiously double-voiced, speaking both to an initiated audience through its references to Hindu culture and religion and to a much broader readership through its explicitly sexual theme. Just as the narrative context of “The Servants’ Song” facilitates the understanding of its language, the brutal sexual theme of “The Canecutters’ Song” makes its language more accessible to the reader, partly through the use of rhythm and onomatopoeia. The fact that the poem needs explanation by the poet for its relation to the Guyanese context to be understood can be seen as a way for him to demonstrate the close relation between orality and context

that Walter Ong defines as “situational.” The poem thus relies on a complex relation between an overt sexuality which could be seen as a stereotypical representation of the people involved and a desire to use that sexuality as an expression of a specific response to a brutal context: “The savage imagination of the canecutters is the correlate to the physical savagery of their work” (47).

By relying on narrative, formal and thematic aspects of his poems to facilitate the understanding of the Creole language in which they are written, Dabydeen is creating a space of communication within which the reader is no longer a total stranger. Bill Ashcroft, in talking about language variance in postcolonial texts, insists on the idea that “the use of these words creates a distance from the reader of the English text that installs cultural difference. The ‘different’ words become metonymic of that difference” (*Caliban’s Voice* 139). While this is true, these very same words can be seen as creating a bridge toward an understanding of that different world through their functioning within the total context of a given text.<sup>18</sup> As Sarah Lawson Welsh points out:

The use of Creole in this way renders the physicality or immediacy of a moment with particular intensity [...], but it also ‘speaks the dislocations and oppressions of its history’ (Parry) as a linguistic form. (34)

In the poems that follow “The Canecutters’ Song,” Dabydeen no longer furnishes a collective folk or narrative frame in which the reader can situate the poem. “Slave Song,” which echoes the title of the collection, is spoken by a man who, like the canecutter, dreams of sexual revenge. However he speaks alone, drawing the reader into a dialogic situation in which he dares her/him to “Tie me haan up / Juk out me eye” (26). The “situation” of the poem becomes more problematic, suggesting both a direct implication of the reader, seen as the opponent, and the absence of a specific frame.<sup>19</sup> In the first stanza Creole is associated to verbs and nouns emphasized through metrical stress:

Tie me haan up.

Juk out me eye.  
Haal me teet out  
So me na go bite.  
Put chain rung me neck.  
Lash me foot tight.  
Set yu daag fo gyaad  
Maan till nite – (26)

(Tie my hands up / Pierce my eyes / Haul my teeth out / So I'll not bite./ Put chains around my neck / Lash my feet tight / Set your dogs to guard / Morning till night -- [50])

This aligning of Creole sounds with brutal movement or strong rhythms is characteristic of several of the poems and can be seen as a reflection of the “agonistic” nature of orality to which Walter Ong refers. The reader becomes, in a sense, the slave’s torturer even as he pronounces the lines: “Whip me till me bleed / Till me beg” (26). Thus the type of relation established through Creole between the speaker and the reader can be of different types; here it is oppositional. The shift to another tone in the third stanza is only a mask, as suggested by the comparison of the sexually satisfied speaker with the “black crappau” and the camoudie. Carl Plasa, in his analysis of this poem, emphasizes the fact that “it positions the (imaginary) rape of the white woman as an act of revenge for the pain endured by the enslaved male rather than female body,” (116) because of the fact that unlike the white woman’s rape, which is a fantasy, black women were in reality subject to their white masters’ whims. Although he analyses the brutality of the final lines:

Is so when yu dun dream she pink tit,  
Totempole she puss,  
Leff yu teetmark like a tattoo in she troat!

(It’s so when you’ve done dreamt her pink nipples / Totempoled her cunt / Left your teeth mark like a tattoo in her throat![50])

showing how the slave becomes the very “cannibal” his master has accused him of being, Plasa does not look at the final lines of the poem:

She gi me taat

She gi me wife  
So tear out me liver  
Or stake me haat  
Me still gat life!

(She gives me thought / She gives me wife / So tear out my liver / Or stake my heart / I'll still have life. [50])

The use of metrical stress to emphasize physical violence is once again present in the lines “So tear out me liver / Or stake me haat.” However she (the white woman) has become the grammatical subject of the first two lines. The “taat,” while standing in the same end position as “tit” and troat” in the preceding stanza, is not an object, a part of the woman’s body, but an abstraction, an unexpected effect of the strange fantasized encounter. Like the “tinkin far” of “Brown Skin Girl,” it places the ending of the poem on a contemplative note, suggesting a different relation with the reader, who may also be given “taat” by a poem evoking a strange and foreign context. The use of the Creole form for the standard English “thought,” like the expression “taak prappa,” suggests both the possibility for the speaker and the reader to share the notion of “thought” and the impossibility of their giving exactly the same meaning to the word. The Creole thus faces in two directions, marking the difference between two worlds while suggesting the possibility for the poem to establish a bridge between the two.

Dabydeen’s use of Creole in *Slave Song* may, depending on the poem involved, mobilize words, sounds or syntax, or all three dimensions. The interplay of these three dimensions can be observed in a poem like “For Ma,” which, as mentioned above, suggests a pastoral frame.

Roll roti! roll roti! roll roti! roll roti!  
Curry cookin in de karahee  
Bora boilin wid de bagee  
Woodsmoke sweet in me nose like agarbattee –  
Ayuh wake up wake up ayuh pickni wake up ayuh man  
Wid de sunshine in yu eye an de river a flow  
An brung doves burstin from de trees an de kiskidees

An de whole savannah swimmin green an a glow!

Wata foh fetch battam-house foh daub fresh bucket foh

Mend clothes foh beat

Wake up ayuh pickni wuk na dun wuk foh duh

Cutlass foh shaap wood foh chap fence foh build dat bull

Bruk dung

Is wha da maan a stretch e haan an yaan foh!

Hear a cow baal in de yaad how dem wel wid milk-fraff

Goat a groan dem want go graze an sheep a caff-caff –

Ayuh wake up wake up time na deh foh cry time na deh foh laff

Hen a lay an cow a drap time na deh foh stap! (33)<sup>20</sup>

The kinetic dimension of Creole referred to in the introduction plays an important role in this poem; the rhythmic patterns, repeated even within single lines as in “Wid de sunshine in yu eye an de river a flow” accompany the movement and activity evoked. The pre-verbal aspect marker<sup>21</sup> found in “river a flow” (“and the river flowing”), also found in “a glow,” “a stretch,” “a groan,” “a caff-caff,” “a lay,” and “a drop,” contributes to the repetitive rhythm, linking the speaker’s perception, suggested by “a glow,” to the activities she observes or imagines. The [i] sounds, spelled “i” and “ee,” found in words like “roti” and “kiskidees” give a cheerful tone to the picture of morning activity being observed by a woman preparing breakfast. In the second stanza, the Creole syntax imposes its own rhythm in the series of actions “Cutlass foh shaap wood foh chap fence foh build dat bull bruk dung / Is wha da maan stretch e haan an yaan foh!” While the creole syntax using “foh” is not too far from the standard English “to,” the last two lines include an expression which draws attention to itself through its divergence from standard English syntax: “time na deh foh cry time na deh foh laff [...] time na deh foh stap!”, translated by Dabydeen as “there’s no time to cry, there’s no time to laugh [...] there’s no time to stop” (60). Time seems to become an object that is either present or absent, like the animals, the hens and cows. In a poem with a simple intention, the use of Creole vocabulary and syntax foregrounds the specificity of a world, of “the uniqueness of the people, the

particularity of their being.” Dabydeen himself proclaims in the introduction, with reference to “The Song of the Creole Gang Women” that “the English fails where the creole succeeds [...]” (14). However, it is not really success or failure that is at stake, but the poet’s ability to use Guyanese Creole to modulate the relation between the multiple absences that lie behind his poems and the presence created by language. The use of Creole contributes in important ways to the construction of a world that the poet characterizes as “a reconstruction, a private fantasy,” (10) but which offers important clues to the nature of the lost world to which it points, however obliquely.

In her essay “Experiments in Brokenness: The Creative Use of Creole in David Dabydeen’s *Slave Song*,” Sarah Lawson Welsh describes the collection as “one of the most innovative contributions to a growing body of creole poetry” (32). In an article entitled “Lyrical Liberation: David Dabydeen’s *Slave Song* and Turner,” published in *Caribbean Quarterly* the same year as Sarah Welsh’s essay, Karen McIntyre comments on the poet’s use of Creole by saying, “Informing Dabydeen’s poetry is the notion that Creole can reflect aspects of a culture but not its entirety” (21). In her analysis of Dabydeen’s use of Creole, she, like Sarah Lawson Welsh, underlines the complexity of the poet’s project and the ways in which, in his use of language, he is not “privileging one language over the other,” but rather “drawing attention to their similarity and mutuality [...]” (21). In more recent critical studies, the poet has been approached from an ideological angle (Plasa, Klintworth), in particular a feminist one. While David Dabydeen himself seems to fear the generalizing aspects of Western theory, the tendency in postcolonial criticism to read literary texts through questions of identity, trauma, dislocation and dispossession, all of which are broad categories, is also a threat to the individual responses to which all literary texts invite the reader. The poems of *Slave Song* can be read in relation to a number of forms of absence – historical, social, linguistic, cultural – that characterize writing in postcolonial contexts. They do not generate a

presence, be it literary or linguistic, capable of counterbalancing so many gaps in knowledge and understanding. They offer rather a number of different forms of presence – auditory, visual, verbal and emotional – with which the poet confronts the absences that haunt the collective past of his country.

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<sup>1</sup> The poet refers specifically to two well-known European figures who are present in current critical approaches to postcolonial literature, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan: "Yet the West Indian teacher, with a minor and vulnerable status in the Western academy, knows with what his bread is buttered. And it's French butter. Instead of devising a West Indian poetic in which to read West Indian literature, the teacher reaches for brand names and market leaders – Lacan, Derrida et al." (45). For both Derrida and Lacan, the notion of absence, seen from a linguistic, philosophical and psychoanalytic perspective, is central, presence appearing as an illusion, albeit a driving force behind the search for expression and fulfilment.

<sup>2</sup> This statement is not meant to minimize the importance of a poetic tradition based on what Laurence Breiner calls "the specifically literary project of enabling West Indian people to be seen and heard in poetry, unimpeded by the filter of Europe," (141) the beginning of which he locates in the 1940s (146). Many poets, notably Claude McKay (Jamaica), Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), Louise Bennett (Jamaica) and Una Marson (Jamaica) contributed to theorizing and practicing a poetry based on Caribbean experience and language before David Dabydeen began publishing poetry. However the difficulty these poets encountered in establishing the critical credibility of their endeavours, particularly in the use of Creole, suggests that Dabydeen's aesthetic approach in *Slave Song* can still be seen as innovative and therefore, in some respects, subject to controversy.

<sup>3</sup> In his essay "On Not Being Milton," Dabydeen explains that "[i]n writing *Slave Song* I had no Caribbean literary models to imitate, since I knew none. Apart from my early childhood in Guyana, I was brought up in England and no Caribbean literature was taught in schools. So I was wholly ignorant of the creole poetry of Edward Burns" (22).

<sup>4</sup> Dabydeen does not make any reference to this connection, either in the notes to the poem or in other writings. However intertextual echoes in a writer's work are not always explicit or identified. This poem also suggests a connection with two famous poems, Pierre de Ronsard's "Quand vous serez bien vieille," and William Butler Yeats's "When You are Old." Read against the background of these poems, the speaker's evocation of what he imposed upon the woman is all the more striking.

<sup>5</sup> His relation to indigenous and European forms is evoked in his essays, notably in "On Not Being Milton," "Teaching West Indian Literature in Britain" (1997) and "From Care to Cambridge" (1998) as well as in the notes and postscript of the poems. This dimension has been addressed by critics dealing with the collection, notably by Lee M. Jenkins in a chapter entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent of David Dabydeen" in his collection of essays *The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries of Expression* (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Dabydeen is interested in art and visual representations of slavery, as evidenced by his comments on art in his essays and in interviews, in particular in an interview with Lars Eckstein, in which, in answer to Eckstein's question "How did that interest in the visual come about?" he mentioned "the absence of the visual in terms of the fine arts in Guyana" (164) and talked about his discovery of the paintings of Paul Klee. He has written a book on *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth century English Art*, a novel entitled *A Harlot's Progress*, revolving around Hogarth's prints, and a long poem entitled *Turner* inspired by Turner's painting *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*. His discussion of Hogarth's painting *A Scene from the Tempest*, in his essay "Hogarth and the Canecutter" (2000), in which he comments on "[Caliban's] prominent and exaggerated ear" reveals his sensitivity to the interplay of sight and sound, which helps to explain the role of the illustrations in *Slave Song*.

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<sup>7</sup> Under the tamarind tree where the moon doesn't glow / Long, long, long, she lay, long, long / She cries but the wind doesn't blow / And they're wrong and strong / And they work her and they break her till fowlcock's crow / Who sees, who hears when her belly bursts, when her mouth splashes blood? // Only the jumbie-umbrella that pokes up its white eye from the mud // Under the tamarind tree where the sun doesn't shine / They take up spade, they dig deep hole, they hide her from their minds / Her father searches the bush, how he hacks, how he's hoarse with calling! / Her mother calls a priest, kills a calf, prays to Krishna, Christ, Allah! / Nine months since they've searched and they've shouted, East, West, North, South / Who knows where she's lost, and who knows where to find her? // Only the cush-cush ants that lay their white eggs in her mouth. (Poet's translation 43).

<sup>8</sup> In "What is Pastoral?" Paul Alpers reviews some of the ways in which critics over the years have defined pastoral as a mode of expression: "we are told that pastoral 'is a double longing after innocence and happiness'[reference to Renato Poggioli's *The Oaten Flute* (1975)]; that its universal idea is the Golden Age [W.W. Greg, *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama* (1906)]; [...] that its fundamental motive is hostility to urban life [K. W. Grandsen, "The Pastoral Alternative" (1970)]; [...] that it is 'that mode of viewing common experience through the medium of the rural world' [John Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (1960)]" (437-8).

<sup>9</sup> The "tamrin tree" is the tamarind, a type of tree found in the West Indies that produces edible fruit. The reader is unable to know whether the tree has specific cultural connotations or whether its presence in the poem is simply an element of the local landscape.

<sup>10</sup> Erik Gray, "Victoria Dressed in Black: Poetry in an Elegiac Age." It is interesting to note that Gray refers to elegies written by Thomas Hardy after the death of his wife. In his essay on the writing of *Slave Song*, "From Care to Cambridge," Dabydeen talked about the authors he read while at Cambridge: "I dwelt mostly on Hardy, Lawrence, Strindberg and medieval poetry reading practically all I could, including the very obscure books (Hardy's play for mummers, for example, more or less forgotten by all" (63). In evoking Hardy, he went on to say, "Hardy's peasant people and country realism reminded me, sentimentally, of back home, and I liked too, the fact that he was scorned socially by eminent gentlemen like Sir John Galsworthy for having muddy boots" (63). This remark sheds interesting light on the way Dabydeen uses the elegy as a frame for his own "country realism."

<sup>11</sup> So you lean over the bannister, early cold morning / Old man. Are you sick? What's the matter with you? What's wrong? / And your hands are weak, trembling, and your mouth moves / But there're no words, and your eye stares out at the field, long, long / But you do not see the calves stir and struggle to suck / And you do not hear the blue-saki's song high in the jamoon tree -- / It's old you're old, that's what it is. (54)

<sup>12</sup> This counting rhyme exists in many versions and has been reproduced intertextually in numerous ways, as in Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695) and A.A. Milne's *Now We Are Six* (1917). In Dabydeen's poem, the trochaic metre of the line echoes the nursery rhyme.

<sup>13</sup> "Tinker, Tailor," is a counting rhyme used in children's games. Thus its evocation in the poem suggests the importance of the nicknames that characterize the man's friends and the participatory and collective dimension of their lives and activities.

<sup>14</sup> Go, go to America, brown skin girl / Meet white man. / You will learn / To speak properly, dress, drive car / Hold knife and fork in your hand: / The mud, the canal, the canefield gone / And I with ricebowl drinking mar / I with ricebowl thinking far. // Go, go to America, brown skin girl / Make money, make children / Move smooth, stand tall: / Cockroach, krekete / Mosquito, there's none there / To break your life, to make you crawl / Nor I with fishnet waiting tide / Dreams like bleeding deep inside. (63)

<sup>15</sup> This poem has been read from a feminist perspective as being shaped around the absence of the woman's voice, but also as expressing the personal biases of the poet: "However his personal and emotional biases are also ever-present due to his inevitable closeness to the 'voice' he seeks to explore in this collection. There is an implied judgement in his account of Guyanese women who 'willingly give themselves to the white man in a new kind of prostitution (quotation from notes p. 68)" (Klintworth 3). Likewise, Carl Plasa considers that Dabydeen's criticism of the scandalous power of white men over black women during the period of slavery "finds no echo in the poems to which the statements are attached: these are more evasive, unwilling or unable to accommodate within themselves the historical truth of the black woman's sexual suffering" (119).

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<sup>16</sup> Laurence Breiner quotes a comment made by Dabydeen on Kamau Brathwaite's use of language in an interview: "David Dabydeen, looking back in 1990 on Brathwaite's use of nation language, calls it 'polite' and 'conventional' because it does not 'take the language to the very edge of the boundaries of expression'." (179).

<sup>17</sup> For a presentation of the phonetic representation of the sounds of Guyanese English Creole, see Rickford 7-9.

<sup>18</sup> One of the most striking examples of this can be found in Sam Selvon's use of Creole in *The Lonely Londoners*. As his narrator tells the story of trying to understand and adapt to London, his language, struggling to embrace a new world, becomes a synecdoche for the process of assimilation.

<sup>19</sup> Marc McWatt has shown how the context of the poem is further complicated by the speaker's reference to his penis being "happy as a Hottentot," which "does not seem an image that would be native or natural either to the slave in Guyana or to the aloof translator [ ... ]" (18).

<sup>20</sup> Roll roti! roll roti! roll roti! roll roti! : Curry cooking in the karahie / Bora boiling with the bagee / Woodsmoke sweet in my nose like incense / Wake up, wake up the lot of you, wake up you children, wake up you man / With the sunshine in your eyes and the river flowing / And brown doves bursting from the trees, and the kiskadees / And the whole savannah swimming green and glowing! // Water to fetch, bottom-house to daub afresh, bucket to mend, clothes to beat / Wake up you children, work's not done, work's to do / Cutlass to sharpen, wood to chop, fence to rebuild that the bull broke down, / What's that man stretching his hand and yawning for! / Hear how the cows bawl in the yard, they're swollen with milk / The goats groan, they want to graze, and sheep keep coughing, / Wake up you lot, wake up, there's no time to cry, there's no time to laugh / Hens are laying, cows are bearing, there's no time to stop! (59-60)

<sup>21</sup> John Rickford discusses what he terms "nonpunctual aspect markers like *a* and *doz*—which are used to describe events as continuative/progressive or iterative/habitual processes rather than occurrences at a single point in time [...]" (126).