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Fluidity of the Feminine: An Exploration of Womanhood and Water

For centuries, women of mythology and lore have been depicted and described emerging from the water, as bringers of life and death, creation and destruction, healing and injury. It is no coincidence that we encounter the paralleling of the feminine and the fluid in dramatic literature as well. Water plays a prominent role in much of the theater of the African diaspora that we have encountered this semester, and is particularly notable in Eisa Davis's *Bullrusher* and Winnie Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues*. In these two plays, water becomes a source of healing, catharsis, clarity, and release. It serves as an almost human character in *Bullrusher* while Pinnock's characters are silently influenced by the water's presence in a more unconscious way. In discussing the ways these plays are telling the stories of Black women coming to terms with who they are, what they are, and how they interact with the world they live in, I will investigate mythological reference points rooted in the Yoruban deity Oshun. I will examine the water present in both texts and the forms it takes, how the water serves a healing purpose to the plays' female protagonists, and interrogate the heightened language that appears in both texts exclusively around water. I will focus on the aquatic engagements of *Bullrusher*'s titular character and *Talking in Tongues*' leading lady Leela, as well as briefly discuss Sugar's prologue. The ever-presence of water in these texts reveals its ties to the women of the stories, and arguably, women at large and femininity in general. Davis and Pinnock both weave water directly into the lives of their protagonists to the point where, without it, their journeys of self-discovery would be impossible.

Oshun: Clairvoyance, Self-Love, and Unabashed Fluidity

Across the globe, water has been represented by the female form in all modes of storytelling, from the creatures and goddesses of ancient mythologies to contemporary poetry. Yoruban folklore is no exception, but is particularly relevant to Davis and Pinnock's plays due to the intricacies and multitudes contained within the figure of one of their water deities: Oshun. While it isn't explicit that either playwright is interested in actively addressing the Yoruban spirituality, Oshun's specific qualities are too present to ignore as coincidence. Oshun's power lies in her unpredictability and her self-assurance. She is both "warrior as well as peacemaker" and the one who "dances to take the crown without asking" (Murphey 6). Oshun is empowered and empowers women through water—a trope seen through the lenses of these plays.

Clairvoyance and the ability to "read water" (Davis 12) is an important theme in *Bullrusher*, and directly tied to the legacy and powers of Oshun. The deity is "indispensable to the process of divination," specifically of the form *Eérindínlógún*, which is "widely practiced by women" contrary to other modes of future telling in Yoruban tradition (Murphey 2). *Bullrusher* has the ability to touch water and see into the lifeline of the person who last touched it, seeing a section of their life, typically in the future, but she is not in control of when she sees. When reading Madame's water, she is asked whether or not she can see into the past. Her response was that "Water has a current. I follow where it goes" (Davis 61). This explicit connection of the continuation and set nature of life and the current of water is within the realm of Oshun's domain

because water (and therefore, she) makes life possible and becomes the through-line of every being's past, present, and future (Murphey 2).

Though Bullrusher is connected to the river in a more concrete and tangible way, Vera's character is also tied to Oshun by Davis's clever insertion of her lesser known attributes into the dialogue and plot. Oshun is not only the deity of the river and divinity, but she is also the goddess of beauty and fertility which enter the story through Vera. In physical renderings and representations of the goddess, she is often pictured with a mirror, with beautiful hair, often in braids, and with a comb (Murphy 7). These three images of Oshun play a role in Vera's coming to terms with her Black, queer womanhood as demonstrated by the conversation she has with her uncle as he does her hair and her final interaction with Bullrusher. As she gets her hair combed and braided, Vera discusses with her uncle what it meant to be Black in his town as opposed to her experience in Alabama, explaining that Bullrusher being the only other Black woman in town wasn't a huge deal given that "Indians are the colored folk [there]" (Davis 32). While this moment didn't happen on the banks of the river or with water in sight, the conjuring of the image of Oshun through the comb and braids can be connected with this moment of self-recognition and worldly identification. The mirror, however, does appear by the riverside after an intensely intimate moment between her and Bullrusher that takes place in the water. After the two of them make love in the water, Vera reveals that she

Wanted to kiss [Bullrusher] from the moment I met you. I don't know why. Never felt like that about a girl, ever. But then when we do kiss it's like—it's like you said. It's cold, like I'm pressing my lips to a mirror, like it's just me again and again, over and over (Davis 66).

In this moment, Vera is bringing a clarity to their relationship that both women felt but has finally been articulated by one of them: there is the recognition of self in being each other's "mirror", an understanding of what they are by seeing it in the other. It is curious to consider, with the compilation of Oshun-relevant imagery and the beauty, love, and literal life she brings into the play through her pregnancy, whether or not Vera could be considered a stand-in for the river goddess in this story. Perhaps she could be a manifestation of the goddess coming to heal Bullrusher's ignorance after years of using the river as "[her] diary, [her] church, [her] everything" (Davis 45).

Talking in Tongues utilizes Oshun style imagery in a more abstract way, tapping into her healing and soothing powers, which will also be later discussed. Sugar's prologue, and later the cathartic moment with Leela, describes a style of possession. The characters affected lose control over their own thoughts and express something else through physicalized and vocalized release. Be it pain, gratitude, or mutual experience it is clear based on the actions of the women around those affected in the play that, regardless of whether or not you understand what is being communicated, there is a shared understanding between women of how to support one another through these possessions. In Yoruban ritual practice, it is common to communicate with the gods through embodiment. It is the responsibility of those around the possessed individual to take care of and protect the vessel through which their deity has appeared to them. It is women that most often invoke Oshun (Jeffries), and so it is women who support each other through the embodied experience as demonstrated in Pinnock's prologue. When Oshun is present, she is the "orisha who heals with cool water...felt to bring lightness and effervescence to illness, want, and gloom" (Murphy 8). This is the seeming effect that the orisha has on Dum Dum at the river for whatever undisclosed reason, and Leela at the seaside to ease her "anger" and her "hate"

(Pinnock 196). The healing powers of water will be further developed later in the essay with more emphasis on the element itself as opposed to its relationship with the Yoruban goddess.

Bodies of Water: Gendering the River and Ocean

In literature, it is common to see elements of nature gendered in the feminine. Resources that could be consumed and conquered were feminized, and water is no exception. However, there is a distinction made between the *kinds* of water referenced as submissive and passive enough to be female. According to Munteanu, bodies of water have been divided between the binary genders, placing “the feminine principle in the static water, and the male principle in the foamy waters of the ocean” (Munteanu 1102). In thinking of the verbs we associate with the aforementioned types of water, this distinction fits with any existing gendered tropes: the masculine ocean churns, rages, and surges all with aggression and force while rivers, ponds, and other calmer bodies of water remain at the will of the wind, they flow and ebb, carried along by the current and are otherwise passive. The gender association of the waters engaged with in *Bullrusher* and *Talking in Tongues* actually seem to play a role in the way that the women interact with them—however I believe there is argument to be made about the Caribbean Sea in Pinnock’s play being more characteristically feminine than masculine.

The first moment we meet Bullrusher, she is “reciting her first memory” which is effectively the story of her birth: not a literal birth through a human mother but the beginning of the maternal relationship she has developed with the river she was found on, where her life truly began (Davis 7). Immediately, through this bizarre and poetic monologue, the river is endowed with feminine corporeality. It is given stretch marks and (breast)milk, as well as a violent labor through the “sharp bank” and “high shams” bearing the child into her new world. She describes the water as “holding her” when she was born and continues to feel held in the face of fear throughout her life by the water (Davis 45). This sense of maternal love from a gentle body of water effectively utilizes aspects of femininity to distinguish this water as safe.

On the other hand, we discover that the ocean is a source of anxiety and anguish for Bullrusher, calling it “the mother I refuse,” insisting she will “live, and live, live, and live, without the terror of [its] love” as she attempts to “tame the ocean” (Davis 72). In her groundbreaking article *Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic* Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley deals with the ocean as a space of Blackness and Queerness intersecting, but her work can also be used to think about how gender comes into play around this massive body of water. She explains that “Oceans and seas are sites of inequality and exploitation...and diasporic communities, heterogenous trajectories of globalizations, and other racial, gender, class, and sexual formations” (Tinsley 192). This complicates the gender identity of the sea. While its aggression and vastness may imply the “masculine principle” of Munteanu, Tinsley indicates that in reality the ocean is a conquered, colonized space much like freshwater under the power of the white, male patriarch on the mainland. Perhaps the ocean rages and seethes under the tyranny of those who use its power to perpetuate violence against people and nature. Perhaps it’s the return to the sea that can inspire the unequal and exploited to rise up and eradicate the structures of oppression imposed on them. For Davis’s *Bullrusher*, the ocean is the site at which Bullrusher’s true lineage is revealed, adding a new layer to her identity and effectively re-identifying her as she receives a new name. Though the ocean is never given maternal qualities like the river, it has similarly healing and revealing qualities as all of the other water in play, gifting closure and answers—however received—to the women closest to it.

In Pinnock's play, the ocean is a silent companion to Leela's journey of self-reflection and discovery. She uses it to escape the men of her life back home in London and the complications of the men on the island as well, opting to be "alone yet alone" with the beach and the water (Pinnock 172). In this space, the ocean is calm and inviting and serene. None of the violent qualities of masculinity are displaced into the water, making it a safe and feminized space for Leela to seek healing. It is not as explicitly gendered in this play as the other, but it does become a very different space when there are only women around as opposed to when the men in the play are present. As in *Bullrusher*, the ocean only helps those who come to it in search of something, but doesn't necessarily provide the same answers they came in search of. For Leela, she came to the island in search of peace and what the ocean revealed to her was the anger that she had pent up inside of her. The ocean gives answers to questions never asked, as opposed to the river who soothes and comforts upon request.

The Healing Powers of Water: Restoration of Mind and Body

Returning now to the healing powers associated with water when it is used by and surrounding women, I turn back to Tinsely's work on the Atlantic. She describes the ocean "as space that expands the horizons of black consciousness" (196). I think it is important to recognize, before I continue, that the Blackness of these stories and the ways in which water is encountered is not accidental or coincidental. The Black relationship to water has an extremely loaded history at work, deepening and filling out every reference in each of these plays to Black women and water. Tinsley's work emphasizes this point when she says that "ocean waters themselves [are] an archive, an ever-present, ever-reformulating record of the unimaginable" things that have occurred within them historically (Tinsely 194). This "ever-presence" is an important part of the healing qualities of water, given the feeling of catharsis and release that accompanies water-based healing in these contexts. Without the weight and burden of history, the release felt by the women would not feel as explosive, but it would also be incomplete. Healing through water starts a journey of healing: it is the beginning of a process, as opposed to a singular event. At no point in *Bullrusher* or *Talking in Tongues* do any of the women who find release with the water leave fixed or completely saved from their internal wounds and traumas. But the water brings newfound understanding or recognition that jumpstarts a process of healing that is clear in both plays.

I want to focus on the sexual release brought to both Vera and Bullrusher as a moment of catharsis for both, while maintaining a sense of incompleteness, after having sex in the river for the first time. Munteanu asserts that "the woman, especially the feminine lover exists due to her similarities with the aquatic element," and I think the water operates as another feminine body in this interaction. I think it is important that they are literally in the river, and that the water is a third party to their intimacy. I want to once again introduce the orisha of Oshun back into the discussion as a harbinger of latent or unexpressed sexuality appearing in this moment and participating through the river:

Oxum's irrepressible and abundant sexuality that bubbles up through the constrictions of race, class, and sexual hegemonies to celebrate sexuality and affirm her children, gay and straight, who express it (Murphy 8).

Through this lens, the sex becomes less of an expression of love between the two women, but more an expression or release of love for themselves and for the parts of them they hadn't previously been privy to or understood could exist. The healing is less through being with one

another or the coming together of bodies, but through the recognition of the self and the other as worthy of giving and receiving love, wherever it comes from.

The important part of the scene is not the sex, but the aftermath. Once they are clothed and out of the water the first topic of conversation is the subject that was once one of the biggest secrets in the play: the father of Vera's baby. It takes few pleasantries at their reuniting to get to the discussion of her rape and, subsequently, both of their sexualities (Davis 63). The intimacy of engaging with each other in tandem with the water opened the floodgates, so to speak, of the topics that were formerly too sensitive to bear discussion. They are able to talk about race, sexuality, and politics for the first time with a frankness that is surprising. The water didn't bring healing so much as it brought a newfound clarity in the role that each of the women could play for one another in their lives. The healing here comes in the admission of feelings that neither necessarily wants to admit: Vera's slight compassion for her rapist, Bullrusher's violence, each of their queerness but lack of physical connection with each other, Emmet Till's reality in relation to their own in the world, etc. The water acts as a key, unlocking the gate to healing by clearing the way towards self-knowledge.

The women's healing in Winsome Pinnock's play takes a much more physicalized form. Leela's body is physically held and released by some unnamed, unknown power that allows her express and relax in a way she couldn't back home in London nor to her friend. In both descriptions of these kinds in the play—Leela's at the end and Dum Dum, from Sugar's memory—the body begins to indicate the oncoming explosion before the woman does. Leela begins to "tremble" as she finally vocalizes in plain words the feelings that "she has repressed for so long" before ending, "exhausted" in a collapsed state, supported by Sugar and told to "rest now" and an assertion of safety (Pinnock 196-197). Dum Dum's release is described as follows:

Dum-Dum, the silent woman, was in the middle, she start to sway and rise up on her toes like there was something inside her, pulling her up... Them start to tremble and make little jump till they was jumping around like them didn't know where them was. Then all of a sudden the silent woman stand very still like her body seize up and lift her head to the sky...She lift her fist and strike out one more time. After, she collapse, but the other women catch her before she fall. She just lie there, like she sleeping, and the other women finish washing her clothes for her (Pinnock 124)

The physical accompaniment to this release is expressed with energy and emotion, and always ends in rest, as if the one experiencing the release has never felt the calm and relaxation of sleep in the same way they experience it post-episode. I am purposefully excluding the extremely specific language that gets used in tandem with water-based catharsis in this play because it is so specific that I want to deal with language on its own terms later in the essay, and think about the way in which the body acts independently in these moments. The bodily suspension described in these moments can be read as if the women were floating in water. Though their feet are in the gully, I am supposing that the swaying and bobbing and thrashing of Dum Dum can be read as if she were, in some metaphysical way, becoming surrounded by water or a fluid substance.

Translating the Self: Communicating with Water

Tinsley also cites the water as place of "translation" (Tinsley 192), a place in which communication occurs in ways outside of a Western conception of possible conversing or correspondence. This kind of verbal communion with the water is present in *Bullrusher* and *Talking in Tongues* in very different ways. While Davis utilizes the artful form of poetry and

verse as the method through which Bullrusher speaks to her river, Pinnock keeps the language of the water veiled to any reader (or audience member) who hasn't encountered tongues in their own lives, leaving a mystery of what is being said to those unfamiliar with this kind of spiritual experience. It is important also to acknowledge that never, in either play, do men even attempt to engage with water in the way that the women do. This is an instance in which the feminine tie to water becomes more tangible, because "between water and woman, there is a wide range of correspondence by which the two become inseparable entities" (Munteanu 1106).

Language always changes in *Bullrusher* in the presence of water, and not necessarily in a consistent way. When Bullrusher communicates with the water, she speaks lyrically, often with natural words standing in for people, feelings, and ideas. For example, when she is conversing with the river while she is in it with Vera, she explains the way she feels with imagery of the way that she interacts with nature and natural resources:

Monkeyflower and jackrabbits
 A roll dipped in apricot jam,
 Fresh cream turns to butter in the churn.
 I swing, swing, over the poppies,
 The scrub pine: I'm a meteor, its trail,
 Hold a star on my tongue (Davis 62).

While abstract, it is simple to infer based on context that these transitional images of pleasuring experiences that she can comprehend are being used to explain or translate for (through?) the river the experience she is currently having. However, it is also indicated that "Vera cannot hear her" despite their close physical proximity (Davis 62). This references a concept described by Tinsley, in which the water engenders a kind of communication in "languages that escaped the trappings of sound" (Tinsely 201). So while, for legibility's sake, the audience gets the aural satisfaction of hearing Bullrusher communicate with the river, I wonder how we would read this story if we could not hear or understand what she gets from the river, or how she engages, or the kinds of things she communicates about. How much of the poetry is for us, as observers, and how much of it is for the character?

In a separate vein, communion with a new kind of water in this story requires the revelation of a new kind of language. When Bullrusher gets to the ocean she attempts to use her river language to ask to be hidden (Davis 72). When the water doesn't respond as she expects it to, it is unclear if the ocean cannot understand her or if it is merely ignoring her words, as we are primed to believe the ocean is a malevolent force due to her combativeness with it. However, the ocean does bring forth the Pomo language to Bullrusher through the interaction she has with Madame. She is introduced to a new language and a new identity through her seaside meeting that exposes the way that her mother talked to the river, and adds a new vocabulary to aquatic dialogues.

In *Talking in Tongues*, as in *Bullrusher*, the water is a necessary part of expressing the unwritten language of tongues for the women who experience it. The common thread between the two instances of the language's appearance can be summed up by Munteanu: "the feminine spirit of water can be experienced not through action but more through meditation, which is more feminine in nature" (Munteanu 1108). In both plays, but especially in Pinnock's, communion with the water can only occur under the conditions of meditative, contemplative solitude. To clarify, I mean solitude in a cognitive sense as opposed to a literal sense, meaning that they don't have to be alone in the world but alone in their thoughts. It is in this situation that the women are exposed and vulnerable enough to allow the transformative experience of this full body take over

to occur. I think that is why Sugar cannot have the experience that Leela and Dum Dum have, because she rejects the opportunities to self-reflect that the other two seize on, whether intentionally or not. In the prologue, after recounting the story of Dum Dum in the gully, Sugar quickly changes the tone of the scene, saying “Me, I just go walk down by the beach, lift weight, jog, take aerobic exercise. No need to go down to gully, eh?” (Pinnock 125). She uses physical action to avoid the opportunity to release, perhaps due to the fear and confusion surrounding the event that she witnessed. We see her experience that fear again when Leela is succumbing to the possession, but Sugar knew from experience watching the gully women and, more likely, a feminine connection, how to aid in Leela’s coming down from such a physically and emotionally trying experience.

Additionally, both of the women who are possessed in the play are lacking in language in some way. Dum Dum is described as a woman who never spoke and her release, it becomes clear, comes at the gully when she releases all that is unsaid through tongues and her body. Despite listening to Leela talk throughout the play, her final monologue before her grand release is all about lacking language. She describes herself, and by extension Black women of the diaspora who feel lost no matter where they are, as “Invisible people... That’s what happens to people who have no language—they disappear. Only your feelings tell you that you exist, so you cling on to them even if they’re not nice” (Pinnock 196). The feeling that there is no way to say or express the things thing you feel, that there are no words to match the emotions, is what prompts this corporeal explosion of feeling, sound, and motion. However, the ability to reflect on that idea and be able to express that feeling of wanting/lacking can be attributed to her proximity to the water.

Conclusion

Eisa Davis and Winsome Pinnock crafted worlds in which water and womanhood are deeply connected, lacing their protagonists’ stories in and out of the currents of rivers and oceans and seas across the globe. From the Pacific to the Atlantic, these women describe the lives of Black women trying to find out who they are in communities that make them confront their identities in ways they never expected. Leela leaves her home in London in Act I to escape a cheating husband who rejects her for a white woman, only to go to Jamaica to discover that she doesn’t feel particularly at home there either. She comes to terms with what it means to be a woman without a place, without roots—diasporic. But it is the sea that brings her to feel all of these feeling that have been accumulating, unexpressed, throughout this tumultuous story. Bullrusher, as the sole Black woman in her tiny town, not only encounters race significantly for the first time, but also queerness, rape, hate crimes, and even her long-lost mother over the course of play, mitigating the flurry of feelings that accompanied these realizations through communion with the river that provided her comfort, belonging, and power since she could remember. Through framing devices like the Yoruban goddess Oshun, the gender constructions and conceptions of different kinds of bodies of water, the fluid and unending power of healing, and the different dialects for communicating with water, the playwrights give a layered and nuanced understanding of Black women through their characters’ journeys of self-exploration and used water to enhance and contour their experience.

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