Water and Liminality in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters of the Dust*

Carmen López Atencia

*University of Málaga 2016*

According to scientific arguments, life was created with and within water. Existence is now possible as a result of the appearance of this element in Planet Earth more than four million years ago, once the collision of galactic “dust” compacted in an enormous rock that is today recognized as Planet Earth. Vapours were emitted to the yet non-conformed atmosphere. These vapours dispersion began its dynamics and cyclic flow on contacting the Globe’s incandescent surface. Time elapsed (during millions of years), and the planet’s cooling down promoted the appearance to the third state of matter, non-existent up to then, known as “liquid”. Geodynamics thus, gave way to an energetically active planet with multi-interactional convective flows between the different representations of “matter” over all the “stratum”. However, it was not until electric discharges of energy produced by atmospheric thunder, straight into this fluid, which scientists colloquially named “the original bouillon”, containing a mixture of various chemical components, that the first forms of life began to develop. Life as it is established nowadays has been the result of a yet unidentifiable number of physical interactions of these “mixed up waters’” energy exchange with the physical and aerial spaces surrounding them, affecting every single biological kingdom’s multi-cosmos.

Mankind *hurting the rivers* has led to the alteration of waters’ paths, streams and boundaries. Water had always been present in this planet, playing an important role to human consideration and needs, with regards to its multi-interactional implications in micro and macro-ecosystems, inasmuch as African-American diaspora writing and performance have. The rhetoric of Pauli Marshall’s novel “Praisesong for the widow” (PW, from now on) and Julie Dash’s film “Daughters of the Dust” (from now on, DD) provide different perspectives through their rhetorical techniques. Their stain, running through their works, is an analogue
example of how different waters’ interact in both. Instances of these great disturbances in water as well as in women can be observed in DD, by the grasshopping sequences of scenes, where the characters’ stories are individually treated, fostering, perhaps, the impression of lacking logical connections with the previous or next scenes, although they may make sense as a whole when considered in communion. The multiple interactions of these African-American women would have never been possible had it not been for the mandatory necessity of water.

Absence of water implies absence of life, though it also paradoxically means absence and presence of death for African diaspora of the Gullah and Gee-Chee cultures found in the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, drawing great importance to the one binomial capable of creating life, namely women. According to the statements related to this fact, the influence of water in these geographical areas, Satya P. Mohanty states that “water images evoke both the unremembered dead of the Middle Passage and the power of giving birth” (Mohanty 2006:49), and traces of this images are found and gathered in Marshall and Dash’s works. Avey’s perception of Aunt Cuney’s presence, in PW, who used to take her every summer to the Sea Island of Tatem while she was a child, starts appearing in Avey’s dreams making her uncomfortable in the midst of a cruise by the Caribean Sea. A clearer example may as well be found in Eula, one of the main traumatized characters in DD’s film, fostering life after having being raped by one of the white town’s men. Eula’s images of a glass filled with water, which transparencies make the viewer appreciate the contents of several little flowers, that she places underneath her bed every night in order to invoke her mother’s spirit via her dreams. Another example could be the immersion of Nana (Eula’s Grandmother and matriarch of the Peazant family in DD) into the seawater to call on their unremembered ancestors. An additional characteristic is that water images appear in its different forms in nature, containing human implications attached to its geo-dynamism.
Even though two third parts of the Globe’s surface is covered by water, the “two third part water-constituted organisms” populating Earth (greatly emphasising human beings) had always been curious about how water behaves and interacts in the Biosphere. Different considerations and meanings were attached to this element by the various different cultural communities. Lakes, rivers, seas... have not the same dynamism, nor the same internal energies, therefore, quiescense and movement shape the constructive or destructive powers of water, which science had and is being able to elucidate. However, for african descendants of Gullah and Gee-Chee communities, represented in Dash´s DD and Marshall´s PW, water takes a consideration different to just a mere physic phenomenon of geo-dynamics. These two cultures understand water as the element attached to myth, symbology and spectrality, being these key concepts orbiting the element.

It is a fact universally acknowledged that a culture lacking logic and scientific formalities needs myths and legends to create sense and meaning for and from their lives. The specific regions of the Gullah peoples according to Silvia Castro’s comments --on Dash’s DD in her work “Motherlands and Gendered spaces”-- put great emphasis in the recurrence of myth in these Southern Sea Islands where oral transmission, storytelling and beliefs survived in the living African American descendants of African slaves, as supporters of a logocentric faith, focusing in “Ibo-landing” as the nucleus of these cultures and from which other stories and beliefs spring (Castro, Ugarte 2007:165). Sandra Richards also argues in her essay “Space, Water, Memory” that water acts as the carrier space of Ancestor’s information including Marshall and Dash among other authors, as cultural and historical transmitters of these legends with references to Ibo-Landing (Camp quoted by Richards 2009, 21(3): 262). Another supporting example for this mythical evidence is the conversation maintained between Julie Dash and Bell Hooks in their conversation about the film’s cultural settings and Dash’s astonishment at the so many Ibo-Landings found in several different islands of the
Gullah and Gee-Chee countries of the Southern Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, strongly emphasising the powerful beliefs in this myth by their peoples. Le’vi-Strauss commented as well, quoting Shanklin, “on the ubiquity of two kinds of water in South American myths, creative water of celestial origin and destructive water of terrestrial origin” (Le’vi-Strauss, 1995). Myth and legend together with symbols are essential to these cultures, finding different representations when analysing these two masterpieces.

Several african religions believe that their dead live under river beds and lakes, being these teared out slave ancestors from their Motherlands who imported these physical representations to these islands (Creel quoted in Richards 2009:262). Apart from the symbolic entire journey, Marshall’s novel contains three significant symbols: The “brogan”, which is a specific waterproof shoe, possibly been interpreted as the rejecting and refusing attitude from Avey to change or alter her present state; the “scrubbing” actions that take place in the novel, which could be interpreted as the cleansing spiritual rituals she would need to experience in her journey; and the “pure salt-water Africans” with a dog collar, where Donna Haraway’s viewpoint—in her work “the Companion Species Manifesto”—tries to explain the historical relationship between dogs as human’s companions, using as contrasting references “emerging ontologies” of African cultures, whose practices are different to general knowledge, “lacking cultural relativism” nurtured in postcolonial divided worlds (Haraway, D. 2003:5). The image of African slaves wearing a dog collar is also displayed in DD (min. 70’47”), with a semi-floating/semi-sinking sculpture of a man with a dog collar. Dash not only exemplifies symbology in an emotionally disrupting manner, but she displays other symbols containing an agentive charge.

Other water related symbols included in DD would be the abovementioned “glass filled with water”, placed underneath Eula’s bed, used to communicate with her ancestors; “Indigo dyed (blue) hands” amongst the elder relatives of the Peazant family, representing
oppression and exposure in their early generation, having to dive their hands into poisonous
tinted waters. Nevertheless, the injection of hope is appreciated by the uses of different blues
in contrast with the black and white tones kept as the basic canvas in DD’s film; “St
Christopher’s necklace”, patron saint of travellers and some of the sea islands of the
Caribbean, worn by Yellow Mary (Peazant relative, who was raped in the past and after being
used as a servant she became a prostitute) when travelling by the swamp to visit the isolated
Islands together with her girlfriend and Viola, her Christian missionary cousin. The last
generation of children playing with “soap bubbles” evokes an innocent and playful
atmosphere around these islands, that might be hoped “a cleaned multi-shaded” generation
ready to develop; The “shell-decorated totem” could also be interpreted as an allusion to Esu-
Elegbara, the trickster god of caos and order, and liminal crossroads in many African
traditions. According to Gates Jr., Esu-Elegbara is also considered “the phallic god of
generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the
divine world from the profane” (1989:6). These interpretations, symbologies and
mythologies are preceded and promote “the silence that you cannot understand” (Nana
Peazant opening speech in Julie Dash’s DD), a collection of spectral attachments infused in
African American cultures, evident in their literatures’ dialogics.

The following lines from Marshall’s novel: “The back pain she suffered with
occasionally was threatening to flare up with all the bending and hauling. She closed her
mind to it.” (PW:10) are an image example of ghosts from the past, an inherited scar present
in these cultures that were dominated and physically exposed to unbearable violence. Three
types of haunting and spectral tropes (Edwards, J. 2008) could be detected in both works and
even though there is a two or three generation gap between both works’ timeline periods,
these ghosts have remained implicit. The focus of concern surrounded by these ghosts were
aimed to the female characters exclusively, as a consequence of little attention (though not
less worthwhile) been paid to them, who, as water, have always been taken for granted and utilized by virulent stalkers, regardless of any sort of consideration, by neglecting and marginalizing them. Each of these ghosts appears in each phase of the (re)generation process whose developmental catharsis occurred at the contact with water.

Marshal and Dash’s female protagonist characters suffered a crisis in their lives, which were the catalysts for the appeal to these ghosts (although this culture’s strong sense of community together with the different sorts of trauma, make the task difficult on where to draw distinctions amongst them). On the one hand, PW portrays Avey Jonson’s vast amount of time left for herself, followed by the death of her husband, together with the contact (or presence) of water around her, unconsciously recalling Aunt Cuney’s spirit, who would drill her granddaughter’s reluctance to accept what she is. On the other hand, Eula invokes her dead mother with water, in order to be able to talk to her in her dreams and help her gain strength after the rape by “the white man”. Simultaneous to Eula’s experiences, Nana asks the ancestors, via ritual baths inside sea waters, to send an illuminating being to the Peazant family, materialized by the unborn child Eula carries in her womb (full of water) in Dash’s case. In the cases of Eula and Nana, Castro explains that these emblematic spaces (Gullah and Geechee Islands) contain a stronger sense of encouragement for their ancestors’ re-memory and re-ligion, in its primitive sense of “re- ligure” (link again), developed by the only capable perpetuators of these co-existing cultures and communities, naming them thus “Motherlands” (Castro, Ugarte 2007:159). In addition to these resulting ghosts, an older and deeper inside phantom would come to show and develop the singularity of these traumatized women societies, who carry a transgenerational luggage full of encrypted secrets from the past as referenced by Abraham and Torok (Davis, C. 2005:377).

The myriad of haunting and ghosts that sprouted from these women’s crisis, became a scar that cannot be seen but that can be sensed and transmitted from generation to generation.
The inherited historical phantom of slavery and horrors suffered by the Iboes and the massacres and pains occurred in the Middle Passage, wherein water was involved, were parallel in both works. For instance, Dash uses words in her film as Aunt Cuney retells in the novel:

And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power-to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead. Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. [...] (1st ellipsis from orig.) do you know what the Iboes did? [...] (2nd ellipsis from orig.) They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em-" [...] (3rd ellipsis from orig.) and walked on back down to the edge of the river here. Every las' man, woman and chile. And they wasn't taking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and those Iboes was stepping! And they didn't bother getting back into the small boats [...] (4th ellipsis from orig.) They just kept walking right on over the river [...] (5th ellipsis from orig.) Now you wouldn't thought they'd off got very far seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that iron on'em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened 'round the necks like a dog collar. 'Nuff iron to sink an army. [...] (6th ellipsis from orig.) they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. Left the white folks standin' back here with they mouth hung open and they taken off down the river on foot. (PW:38-39).

This spectral luggage that these female protagonists carry with them following the crisis of unexpected events, provoke an identity clash at the contact with water pushing them into the liminal zone where “stilled waters begins to move” (Treavathan, K. 2013): “...there
was the Bianca Pride lying huge, serene and intact out in the deep water, Yet, as she turned away the retina of her eye held on to both images for a long moment, and one seemed as real as the other” (PW63). Liminality, as understood by Heidegger in his attempts to explain existential aspects, belongs to the deeper spiritual areas of the human existence, basically impossible to reflect except for “in the original place of human sight, where the eyes have their blind point, where the optic nerve penetrates into the retina” (Heidegger quoted in Frankl 1999). Graphic examples can be seen in the “absent unfocused looking eyes” in Dash’s film:

Figure 1: Eula, up left. Nana, up right. Yellow Mary, down left. Viola, down right, retrieved from the film adaptation “Daughters of the Dust” by Julie Dash, 1990.

The moment that human existence is questioned by the own self, and this psychosomatic discoordination is reflected in the sight of these women, they enter into an ecology of water dynamics, and bouncing in and out the liminal zones, beginning a process of decolonization of their human mind and soul. This idea is also supported by Richards when she quotes that “[the protagonists of PW and DD] must undergo transformative encounters with family -particularly with the healing powers of the Mother- as a prerequisite...” (C. López Atencia: Water and Liminality 8
Brondrum quoted in Richards 2009:265). Mohanty also supports that “cultural decolonization often involves an interrogation of the epistemic and affective consequences of our social location, of historically learned habits of thinking and feeling” (Mohanty, Moya 2000:63). However, I would include in this concept the most important fact from where this process fires out in these women: the exposure of their most intimate (re)ligious quality, which as well as love, is protected by the feelings of shame. What is more, the complete realization of uncovering shame, causes not only the hybridation cultural quality acquirement but also the enriching experience of transcendental wholeness with the help of the other women. Dash’s scene of Eula’s speech (DD:95’-99’) is parallel to the following fragment from PW, providing evidence of Water as the space where liminal zones and hybridation processes take place:

... the swollen waves that could be seen charging the schooner from all directions over a wide area of the sea sent it reeling and pitching again, and her entire insides erupted. She vomited in long loud agonizing gushes [...] (1st ellipsis from orig.) There would be the strange moment with her face lifted to the sky beyond the canvas awning. And then she would be hawking, crying, collapsing as her stomach convulsed and the half-digested food came gushing from her with such violence she might have fallen overboard were it not for the old women. They held her. [...] (2nd ellipsis from orig.) (They themselves were surprisingly unaffected by it, which was also true for everyone else on board, including the children.) Their lips close to her ears they spoke to her, soothing, low-pitched words which not only sought to comfort and reassure her, but which from their tone even seemed to approve of what was happening.” [...] (3rd ellipsis from orig.) (Lebert Joseph) He kept frantically repeating something about a channel and currents and a little rough water: ”... Is only the channel I
tol' you about, oui. The channel with the two currents! We gon' be soon past it ... " [...] (4\textsuperscript{th} ellipsis from orig.) Sunk in her misery she even failed to hear Lebert Joseph who, standing directly in front of her, was telling her in a loud voice that the rough water was finished, they were through the channel.

(PW:204-206)

This particular women’s society, represented in this paper, becomes self-conscious of their “wider identity”. Irigaray argues about the post-modern (re)turn to body, dissolving Aristotle’s models’ fixations --of body-specific boundaries adopted in their fitting surrounders-- deepening and expanding these body-specific boundaries beyond the known universe (Wautischer, E. 1999). All hybrid female characters in both works exercise the search of their identity, understood as that wholeness which is not found in our conception of material, formal or structural. This identity search has an intertextual attachment in DD’s character Viola, who metaphorically reflects the identity dilemma of twin brother and sister, split by the sea--suffered by Shakespeare’s Viola from his play “Twelfth Night”--using the same means for their identity search with the image of a boat trip to find her other half. Marshall also inserts an allusion to Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” (PW:255), brilliantly reflecting the supernatural, uncanny visions of their world and the task and responsibility to transmit them to further generations. By this exercise, as Shakespeare’s Viola, Marshall’s Avatara and Dash’s Viola and Yellow Mary became inmersed into the cyclic universal laws of homeostasis and harmony.

Return to equilibrium would only be achieved by a circular but evolutionary recycling process, where experiences and self-evaluation of double constituted female genotypes are requisites, challenging the phenotype biologic formula where the genotype is a hybrid one, if applied this to the ultimate identity. For African-American diaspora, this formula would apply because had it not been for the strong ayahuasca\textsuperscript{1} metamorphosis. Avey Johnson’s soul
experiences where water trips and rituals were involved changed her life, preventing her from ending as an old miserable lady rotting in her house in *North White* Plains in PW, ut promoting a recurrent *agency*. A similar case happened perhaps to those characters coming to visit the Islands in DD, both cousins, opposite extremes with a mutual *thread*, could have chosen to go back to their lives as prostitute and missionary instead of choosing to stay in the Island and live to develop their “agentive identity” (Mohanty, S. 2006). Hence, it can be said that these female protagonists who are in the recycling stream, chose to respond to their lives with the acceptance of a double infused identity, helped by a logo-therapeutic process, only possible via water.

These two African American works canvas the historically affected genre and their self responsibility in life, recurring to logo-therapy as an answer to their double life’s co-existence. These characters decided to answer life with life itself as described by Frankl --in his work “Man’s search for the ultimate meaning”-- as the responsible existential realization via experience, utilizing water to construct their authentic *self* (Frankl, V. 1999). The African-American trope of “wholeness”, making reference to Mohanty’s analysis of Marshall and other authors, is assimilated to Frankl’s conception, crossbreeding experience and identity in their ecologic cyclic dialogics (Mohanty, S. 2006:178). Water is the canvas of African-American women where their *selves* are depurated, washed and recycled, ready to continue a centrifugal spreading of their cultural identity, as quoted by Dash, “growing older, wiser and stronger” (ending lines on DD’ film).

These two postcolonial masterpieces beautifully reflect the transcendental multicultural multiplicities of these African-American diasporic women, where abridgement of their double *self* intersect by their agentive response to life, as resumed in the following line: “When they realized there wasn’t nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn’t giving ’em no trouble they got so tickled they started in to singing.” (PW39).
Recycling processes with water as the environment of the reformulated Phenotype formula would only be the means to reach a psychosomatic equilibrium, mediated by the discovery and acceptance of their two co-existing selves. Eco-expansion takes place simultaneously to ego-expansion, making water trips and rituals, connected to their mythologies and symbologies, flow from their yield to find themselves. (Re)considering their “past”, present and “prologue”, these women overcome and surpass inherited scars and reiterating traumas, becoming part of a unique universal love, unperceivable and ignored by imperialism. Water is, thus, the necessary element, the main stream force for these transcendental and culturally richer human beings, whose aeonian dynamism provides a metamorphic iridescence of their colourful hybrid inner richness, over and through the different sorts of water. If a conclusion should be drawn, I would use Coleridge and Shakespeare to cross a hybrid line: “Water, water everywhere nor any drop to drink, so if music be the food of love play on” (“Rhyme” and “Twelfth Night”).
Works Cited


