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Magic Water: The Symbolic and Healing Nature of Water in Black Children's Literature

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Abstract: Water, particularly in the lives of Black Americans, has historically been characterized by its danger, offering up notions of fear, horror, and death. Ironically, Black children's schooling experiences regarding "literature" have been described similarly. Throughout this essay, I take up Sharpe's (2016) wake work and King's (2019) black shoal as I detail my own experiences with water alongside my reading journey. I explicate how both reading and water can and have served as sites of trauma *and* healing and what that can tell us about how, as educators of Black children, we might more meaningfully think about the texts we select for students and how we teach them. I conclude with three texts and accompanying questions that may provide educators with an entrée into discussing the healing nature of water with Black students.

Keywords: wake work, diverse children's & young adult literature, curriculum, diversity, identity & perspectives



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For the larger part of my life, I have had two loves: reading and water. Although distinctly separate, the two have overlapped, causing me to think about their connections, ruptures, and just what each might tell me about the other. As an English teacher educator, I acknowledge the importance of critical self-reflection and use this essay to invoke water as a metaphor to discuss my reading journey. In doing so, I explicate how both can and have served as sites of educational trauma *and* healing and what that can tell us about how, as English educators, and especially as educators of Black children, we might more carefully think about the texts we select for students and classrooms.

Reading & Water: A Love Story

To begin, my community instilled a love of reading in me before I was born. Among many other things, my mom passed down her love of learning and began reading to me in her womb. When I was born, bedtime stories became a part of our nightly routine, and I am told that as a toddler, I would walk up to anyone who entered our home, book in hand, and demand “read,” as I escorted them to our couch so they could begin the task at hand. With the help of my godmother, who shared my mother’s love for children’s books with Black protagonists, my mother built me a children’s library that was unmatched. Together, we read the works of Virginia Hamilton and Ezra Jack Keats; listened to talking eggs (San Souci, 1989); explored faraway lands of princesses and magic (Steptoe, 1987); and reveled in the connections between the Masai and I (Kroll, 1992). I got to visit faraway lands in the books I read. They taught me of the beautiful lives and experiences of Black people across the diaspora; I never wanted to stop learning. When it became time for preschool, my parents decided it would be best to send me to a Montessori school and I saw no reason to depart from the scholarly traditions I had already been reared in. When my teachers presented new books in the

reading nook, I would opt for books with characters that looked like me and my teachers encouraged my choices. Reading felt like a place of solace. Until it wasn’t.

Similarly, I have been fascinated by water for as long as I can remember. Its waves, its sounds, its depth and its breadth have always taken my breath away. Somewhere in my parents’ archive of pictures, there’s an image of me with my father in our neighborhood swimming pool. I couldn’t have been more than three months old, and as he holds and looks lovingly at me, my gaze is fixed on the surface of the pool as it sparkles and dances with the sun. I began swimming lessons as a toddler, learning all of the magical things my body could do in the water, like float, and tread, and flip. When my family moved from Pennsylvania to New York for a short stint, I would often get scolded for running from our pool to the shower and back again several times in one day. Years later, for my twenty-first birthday, I would go on a cruise with some of the most important women in my life, my mother included. Someone in the group captured a picture of the two of us as we held hands and waded in the shallow shoreline of the Atlantic Ocean, our eyes seemingly set on the great expanse. For all of its unknowns, water was a comfort to me. Until it wasn’t.

A Disturbance in the Water

At the top of 2018, just two days after the New Year, I boarded a flight to Ghana with several of my graduate school classmates. We would be going abroad, primarily to understand higher education in the Ghanaian context. However, as a Black American whose ancestors were kidnapped from the coasts of the African continent and enslaved on stolen land, this trip meant something more to me (Hartman, 2008). I was going to Ghana to learn about the Transatlantic Slave Trade from a Ghanaian perspective and to learn more about the history of my ancestors. One of our excursions included a trip to

Assin Manso, an ancestral slave river site. Said to have been one of the largest markets for selling enslaved Africans, this is where kidnapped and chained Black people were taken to be roughly washed with palm fronds by their White captors. When we reached the river, our tour guide invited us to take off our shoes and join him in the water. “The water has healing properties,” he said as he beckoned us. I watched as the other Black women in our group gently placed their shoes on the soil and walked down the stairs into the water. But I could not. My body froze and I lost control of my legs. My feet became frozen, my breathing shallow, and tears streamed uncontrollably down my face. I was stuck.

As I reflected on my experience in Ghana, I realized that this stuck feeling was not new, but rather occurring in a different context. It was around middle school that I began to feel this same sort of stuckness towards my relationship with reading. Scholars of children’s literature have long discussed the notion of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990), and although for the larger part of my life I had been provided with all three, around middle school, that began to change. My teachers opted for books like *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder, 1932), *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1986), and other texts that were nothing like the stories my parents worked so hard to introduce me to. Around ninth grade some of my homegirls began to read street literature (see Greene, 2016). I was immediately drawn to the stories of Black girls who looked like me. However, while I appreciated those texts because they offered me some form of a mirror, I often felt distressed as I read stories of Black pain and trauma and had no adult to turn to as I processed what I read. Years of the wonderment I associated with reading encountered the historical and contemporary curricular violence familiar to so many Black youth in classrooms across

the nation (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Baszile, 2017; Jones, 2020). It was in school that I first encountered the death and erasure of the contributions of Black people from the pages of textbooks and novels (Brown & Brown, 2015; Griffin & James, 2018); it was there that my fluid movement through the water of learning was first interrupted, feeling instead choppy and belabored. I began to struggle just to keep my head above the surface as I feigned interest and waded through disengaging or confusing literary waters. School had stolen my solace from me. I needed to heal, and the very thing that caused a disturbance would soon wash me anew.

The Black Shoal & Wake Work

“School had stolen solace from me. I needed to heal, and the very thing that caused a disturbance would soon wash me anew.”

Christina Sharpe (2016) defined a wake as “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship” (p. 17). It is a disturbance, a ripple in the water that deters it from following its natural state of movement. For African Americans, this disturbance was enslavement. As I’ve noted

elsewhere, “the history of US enslavement set the precedent for Black people to be perceived as distinctively nonhuman and thus to be recipients of seemingly justifiable neglect, surveillance and violence” (Griffin & Turner, 2021, p. 2). Our current positioning in the US is evidence of what Hartman (2008) deems *the afterlife of slavery*. Schooling is but one site where Black suffering persists, and as Dumas (2014) noted, it is not just a site of suffering, “it is the suffering that we have been least willing or able to acknowledge or give voice to in educational scholarship” (p. 2). In the spirit of acknowledging this suffering, I situate schooling, more specifically school-based literacy learning, as the black shoal in my own life (King, 2019).

King's (2019) notion of "the black shoal" provides a framework for understanding these "until they weren't" moments in my life. She explains that "[a]t its surface, the shoal functions as a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of structure between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other" (King, 2019, p. 4). Historically, literary curricula have been thought to be sealed off from a history of enslavement (Griffin & James, 2018), however, I adduce water as a metaphor to bring enslavement directly into conversation with the history and possible future of literary curricula. To do so, it is necessary, as Sharpe (2016) explains, to develop an unscientific method that allows Black folks to contend with a "past that is not the past" (p. 31). She refers to this method as "wake work," and through it seeks to track the ways "we resist, rupture, and disrupt that imminence and immanence aesthetically and materially" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 32). In essence, wake work is how we heal.

Thus, I take up the notions of the black shoal and wake work to contend, through metaphor, with a past that is not the past. In my own life, I came up against my black shoals when what I had known and loved met the unfamiliar, the harmful, and even the traumatizing, creating a "moment of fissure between the past and present" (Brand, 2002, p. 17); both reading and water—things I had once loved and found solace in—began to develop crevices when met with the ills of white supremacy and the history of brutal and dehumanizing enslavement in the U.S. Decades of adoration for both water and the literary came face to face with the reality that for Black Americans, the two are associated with literal and material death. In what follows, I present an argument for teachers to more carefully select texts by, for, and about Black youth that acknowledge the

historical legacies and contemporary impacts of harm towards Black communities. I present my own wake work and the ways it facilitated healing for me in my feelings both towards water and literature.

Healing: A Charge to Educators

On my final night in Ghana, I called one of my closest friends to tell him about my experience at Assin Manso. After listening to my words, he fell silent. Then, after a moment of reflection, he breathed in and began to speak, his words slow and measured. "Autumn, you have to make peace with the water." Although I hated it, I knew he was right. We hung up, and I walked down to the beach, the sound of the waves growing louder with each step forward. I

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arrived at its edge and stared, as I reflected on all I had learned and experienced during my time in Ghana. The waves, though they roared like an unfed monster hungry for its next victim, seemed less intimidating the closer I got. Reaching the shoreline, I removed my sandals and allowed the sand to blanket my toes, closing my eyes and

hearing the words of our tour guide once more, "the water has healing properties." As his words replayed in my ears the salt water from the ocean began to mix with the salt water on my face as I allowed myself to engage in wake work and be healed by the fluidity of the water as it washed over my feet.

Returning to and extending King's (2019) framework, I revisit the metaphor of water, noting how once the water breaks at the shoal (the point of interruption) it is rough only for a moment before it tempers out again; the water, once disturbed by the shoal, returns to its peaceful state in its own time. The very water that was interrupted and made rough by the disturbance has within it the ability to bring healing,

to restore, to yield life, and to foster hope. Upon my return to the U.S. I began to partake in literary wake work, diving deep into texts that taught me the history my teachers had purposefully omitted. I read the words of DuBois, Smitherman, Nkrumah, Lorde, and others who taught me my history and reminded me of my worth. And as I read, I began to heal.

Recently my studies have drawn me to consider the ways authors of children's and young adult literature have engaged in their own literate wake work (Sharpe, 2016), facilitating similar healing processes through their uses of water as a metaphor for healing.

The stories Black students encounter in schools have the power to heal or to harm; to restore or to ruin; to traumatize or transcend. While we are responsible for passing down Black histories, we must make sure they are accurate and nuanced, introducing students not only to hardship and heroes, but to the many faces of humanity Black people encompass. We must not limit these narratives to stories of the past, but to stories that begin to disrupt limited imaginaries (Thomas, 2019), allowing Black children mirrors into their current worlds, and the opportunity to dream imaginative and creative futures while engrossed in stories that exist in books, on computer screens, and in playlists, albums, movies, and TV shows (Griffin, 2020; Kohn, 2010; McKittrick, 2021; Quashie, 2021). In what follows I offer three stories - *Julián Is a Mermaid* (Love, 2018); *The Proudest Blue* (Muhammad et al., 2019); and *Children of Blood and Bone* (Adeyemi, 2018) as examples of those that lend opportunities for

educators to begin their own exploration of narratives that provide young Black readers with pathways towards healing, specifically as they examine an element that has proven extreme both in its abilities to heal and harm. Within each of these stories, the protagonists are confronted with water as a site of harm and/or healing. I provide a brief summary of each story as well as a description of the protagonist(s)' encounters with a shoal and the wake work in which they engage.

Julián Is a Mermaid: Queerness and Black Joy

“While we are responsible for passing down Black histories, we must make sure they are accurate and nuanced, introducing students not only to hardship and heroes, but to the many faces of humanity Black people encompass.”

Julián (they/them¹), a young, Afro-Latinx child who lives with their abuela, loves mermaids. The illustrations in the first half of the book depict Julián riding the train with their abuela and reading a book; as the book floats away and they go deeper into their imagination, Julián becomes engulfed by water and surrounded by sea creatures until they are transformed into a mermaid. As they approach the door to their home, Julián

declares, “Abuela, I am also a mermaid,” and while abuela is taking a bath, Julián transforms everyday household items - a plant and window curtains - into their own mermaid costume. When Abuela comes out of the bathroom to find Julian all dressed up, there is a moment of pause, as the narrator proclaims “uh-oh,” and we see a scowl across Abuela's face. However, rather than scold Julián, Abuela hands them a string of pearls to complete their costume, takes their hand and walks with them to the Coney Island Mermaid Festival. The final illustration in the text depicts a parade on the beach with Julián and

¹ In the second book in this series, *Julián at the Wedding*, Love uses they/them pronouns to refer to Julián. Thus, I've chosen to honor Julián's pronouns in this paper.

Abuela leading the pack. In this story, the moment of pause, the black shoal, is the moment we are unsure of how Julián's abuela is going to respond to their costume. The wake work takes place in the water—in Julián's imagination, Abuela's tub, and on the beach. It washes away our worries as we see Julián immersed not only in it, but also in a celebration of their own Afro-Latinx and queer identities. Teachers might ask students to point out all the times water appears in the text and ask them to describe why Julián might feel safest when in or near water.

The Proudest Blue: Black Muslim Girlhood

The proudest story is a story written by Ibtihaj Muhammad, a 2016 Olympic medalist in fencing. As the first day of school approaches, Asiya and her younger sister, Faizah, the narrator, go hijab shopping with their mother. It's Asiya's first year wearing hijab to school and she picks out a bright blue one that Faizah describes as "the color of the ocean if you squint your eyes and pretend there's no line between the water and the sky" (n.p.). Throughout the day, Faizah fields questions about her sister's hijab with pride. When students attempt to laugh at or make fun of Asiya, Faizah says,

"Asiya's hijab isn't a laugh.

Asiya's hijab is like the ocean waving to the sky.

It's always there, strong and friendly." (n.p.)

Later in class, Faizah draws a picture of herself and her big sister having a picnic "on an island where the ocean meets the sky" (n.p.). Faizah's repeated reference to the ocean in comparison to her sister's hijab is not something to gloss over. Here, the color blue and the references to the ocean represent the power of the girls' faith practice in their own lives and the grace with which both are able to turn negative commentary and misconceptions about Islam on their head, instead highlighting the beauty of hijab-wearing and the ocean. The sisters encounter a shoal each time a character asks a microaggressive question

and engage in wake work each time they draw on the water to gracefully glide past it back into the fullness of the ocean. Teachers might ask students *Why is the color of Asiya's hijab so important?* or *Why does Faizah keep referring to the ocean when describing her sister's hijab?*

Children of Blood and Bone: A Story of Black Sisterhood

Children of Blood and Bone is a fantasy novel inspired by West African cultures and traditions. A ruthless king orders all magi to be killed, leaving Zélie, a protagonist of the novel, motherless. In her quest to bring magic back and fight against the monarchy, Zélie and the rogue princess to the throne, Amari, are required to kill the prince (Amari's brother), who is determined to get rid of magic for good. Although Zélie and Amari are required to work together on their quest, their relationship starts out rocky, as the two are natural enemies; Zélie despising Amari for her naivete and perceived weakness and Amari questioning Zélie's motives and loyalty. One night, upon a boat they've apprehended to carry them along the final leg of their journey, Amari braids Zélie's hair and the two engage in a vulnerable moment as Zélie recalls the days before magic disappeared and her fear of Amari's father:

The pressure builds, pushing against all her emotions, all her pain. When she can bear it no longer, the sob I know she's been holding back breaks free.

"I can't get him out of my head." She squeezes me as hot tears fall onto my shoulder. "It's like every time I close my eyes, he's wrapping a chain around my neck."

I hold Zélie close as she sobs into my arms, releasing everything she's been trying to hide. My own throat chokes up with her cries; it's

my family who's caused her all this pain. (p. 483-484)

In this scene it is not only the water the young women are surrounded by, but the water spilling from Zélie's eyes that prompt the healing. Zélie's tears and vulnerability represent the wake work; they facilitate an opportunity for Amari to gain a deeper sense of empathy for Zélie's feelings towards Amari's family as well as a chance for Amari to display her humanity and loyalty for Zélie and the magi. Further, the fact that this healing takes place on a boat lends an opportunity for educators and students to discuss the importance of the setting of this scene. Although many West Africans did not experience enslavement on the continent, they no doubt felt the sting of colonialism as family members and friends were ripped from their shores on ships. Educators might ask students to engage in a close reading of this passage to make sense of all water represents.

Conclusion

The protagonists in each of these stories experience a moment of rupture, and find deliverance as they engage in wake work, making peace with the water and their experiences with it. Each of the authors uses water as a metaphor for identity development, healing, and rebirth and we witness the characters as they come to understand what it means to explore, to be, and to heal. It is my firm belief that as students read these stories and others like them, they will come to realize that "they don't have to wrestle with the contradictory possibilities of [blackness] as an outside force" (Tinsley, 2018, p. 156-157), but rather that they will be washed with the renewed sense of possibilities healing provides. It is my hope that this piece provides educators with a map towards expanding text selection to include texts not only written for, by, and about Black young people, but also to include literature that acknowledges the past, and allows students to engage in acts of identity development, healing, and rebirth.

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