



# 'A Chain of Creation, Continuation, Continuity': Feminist dramaturgy and the matter of the sea

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## **'A chain of creation, continuation, continuity': Feminist Dramaturgy and the matter of the sea**

Water is closely entwined with femininity in the Western cultural imagination, having been described by Toril Moi's as: "the feminine element *par excellence*" (2002:117). In contrast to the solidity of masculinity – most overtly captured in the image of the phallus that is always erect, rigid, stiff; femininity is viewed in terms of liquidity that is supposedly formless: passive and malleable. No liquid environment evokes this feminine formlessness as precisely as the sea – a seemingly endless, amorphous expanse that stretches into the horizon and beyond; 'solid ground is masculine, the sea is feminine' (1979:74) Mary Ellman concludes in her inventory of feminine stereotypes. Likewise, the pregnant body, which provides a watery environment that is always in danger of breaking, allowing water to spill over and forth like a high tide, is often viewed as particularly oceanic. Both the sea and the womb are fantasised as plentiful, benevolent places before the (paternally-coded) rupture that propels the subject towards language and culture. This nexus of associations has, unsurprisingly, garnered critique from feminist scholars since it runs the risk of naturalising women as passive receivers; mute, fluid matter incapable of giving shape to discourse – as they are shapeless themselves - thus always in need of man to contain their liquescent minds and bodies.

Moreover, this description of the maternal body in terms of liquid formlessness can be read as an attempt to erase its creative potential: Luce Irigaray's far-reaching analysis of the phallic bias in culture, for example, suggests that liquidity is typically equated with 'impotence' (1993:64). By occluding the possibility of separation into discreet units it stands outside the patriarchal discourse of the singular creative subject. Far from decrying and rejecting the association of maternity and fluidity, however, Irigaray suggests that this imaginary link might be used strategically to undo the patriarchal value system that places them both outside of culture. Astrida Neimanis similarly contends that there is a current of water that 'flows through feminist enquiry in many diverse ways' (2013:38) as feminists seek to theorise how an aquatic imaginary might disclose an alternative to 'the

Enlightenment project that named Universal Man as the hegemonic subject' (2014:13) while also revealing the creative potential of watery substances that have been neglected in favour of solids. This will also be my strategy here. I would like to investigate what remnants of the imaginary link established between the maternal and the sea might still be useful in feminist performance practice and theory. In doing so I wish to follow Judith Butler's hopeful assertion that terms that have been historically used to tyrannise and subjugate women might 'stand a chance to be opened up' (1993:29), to come to signify in new ways. What I hope to do then is to suggest that the maternal – envisioned as the creative potential of femininity while at the same time cast out of 'proper' cultural production – together with its imaginary link to the sea can be instated as a figure that gives shape to another vision of cultural production.

While water and its liquidity have been made useful to feminist theory, less attention is paid to how water might inform a performance practice, which is my goal. Taking off from Chandler and Neimanis's analysis of what they term water's gestationality, I will suggest that the lingering association between the sea and maternity can be generative for feminist performance works. To unfold this argument I will discuss a practical research experiment I undertook in 2013. In this piece I drew on Hélène Cixous's theorisation of how what she terms 'femininity' is expressed in prose writing through a liquification of ordering structures. Her ambition is not to essentialise and reinforce stereotypes of women, but to excavates the layers of meaning and cultural logics attached to the term femininity in order to revalue them, positioning them as a counter design to the hegemony of the patriarchal organisation of culture.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the association of water and femininity, Cixous describes this *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) in an abundance of aqueous images, it manifests as 'waves' and 'floods' (1976:876), flourishing in watery habitats. Playing on the homophony between *mer* (sea) and *mère* (mother), she draws on the analogy between the maternal body and the sea, insisting on both as creative, life-giving environments (1984). Neimanis points out what is remarkable about Cixous's move: she not only asserts the potency of maternity but also of the sea by '[underlining] the materiality of water as *literally* gestational and creative' (2013:103). The concrete materiality of the sea

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<sup>1</sup> Cixous's strategy may be likened to Butler's in many respects. Just as Butler proposes that we may use the term woman 'tactically even as one is... used and positioned by it' (op.cit.)

then inflects and informs her reading of the maternal and vice versa, one is thought through and with the other. In the following I shall also attempt to investigate how thinking the sea and the maternal body together might, firstly, inspire a performance practice on the level of dramaturgy and then secondly discuss how this connection might be envisioned as a feminist performance mode.

### **A Hydro-Logical Dramaturgy: The Shape of Waves and Oscillating Ocean Time**

Cixous identifies the productive and creative aspect of seawater with the composition of 'feminine' writings. These are texts that refuse to solidify as the reader is submerged in constant swells and surges of images, recalling the disorientation of being at sea without land in sight. Her articulations on watery forms are most prominent in her writings on novelist Clarice Lispector's experimental work *Água Viva* (*Living Water*, [1971]) that is composed of a single stream-of-consciousness. According to Cixous, there is 'no narrative order' to be found in the text, only an 'organic' one (1990:15). Like seawater carrying an abundance of organic particles, Lispector's novel provides a fertile habitat for myriad motifs to grow, intermingle and decay. The effect of this is a formal structure that renders experience, in Lispector's own words, as a 'flash of instants' that never ends 'but continues on in a constant improvisation, creating always and forever the present which is the future' (1989:78). Cixous echoes Lispector when she attests that a feminine text is not stoppable, it is composed in such a way that it 'goes on and on and at a certain point the volume comes to an end but the writing continues' (1981:53) since it sets the reader off on an endless hermeneutical spiral, tracing the repetition and transformation of the various motifs. As such the text at large becomes a 'metaphor itself' (1990:17), a metaphor for the dynamism and creative powers of living water while simultaneously being more than a metaphor as the text performs a chain of transformations. It enacts what Veronica Strang notes as the 'endlessly transmutable' (2005:98) quality of water that, both on the sea's surface and at its molecular level is in constant motion, never standing still, not finding a final, solid form even if it is given shape by a vessel – a vase, a riverbed, a coastline. Similarly, Lispector's text does not solidify into a rigid form, it has 'no exterior border' (1990:15), evoking a sensation of 'perpetual overflowing' (ibid.:16). Lispector's text in Cixous's reading presents a formal hydrologic that goes beyond a mere rhetoric of liquidity by performing the transformational and enlivening powers of water.

Whereas an approach to prose writing that performs an oceanic structure within a feminist context has then been identified through Cixous's efforts, a similar endeavour in relation to performance composition is lacking. My intention is, through documenting and theorising a performance work I created in response to Cixous's writing on water, to explicate a hydrological dramaturgy that might also be conceived of as feminist. Specifically, I will suggest that a dramaturgy modelled on the form of waves enacts a gestational logic that reappraises the creativity of both the ocean and maternity through their analogic association. As such my approach to the sea will necessarily be partial. By laying my emphasis on the sea's capacity to facilitate creation, I will not be able to speak to the destructive and threatening force that it can easily become – a reality all too real for us through rogue waves and tsunamis, nor attend to its capability to transform into solid ice or disappear into vapour. In doing so, I do not wish to domesticate or romanticise the sea but unfold how one oceanic logic amongst many might be worked through in performance practice and theorised in relation to feminist politics.

By focussing on the *form* of the sea moreover, I hope to be attentive to Iris Marion Young's proposition that a fluid's lack of 'definite borders ... does not mean that [it is] without pattern' (1990:192). In this I move against the assumption that the sea and, by association, the maternal is entirely without shape and structure, thus beyond symbolisation. Rather, I would like to assume that it might be possible to identify a grammar of seawater and maternal patterns, even if any such proclamation must be treated as temporary, necessitated and conditioned by a particular moment in history.

What might then a performance dramaturgy that is shaped on the patterns of water be? And how might such patterns speak to feminist performance theory and practice?

Collaborating with dancer Vanessa Henry, actor Victoria Beesley, poet Calum Rodger and sound designer Joshua Payne, I set out to develop a dramaturgical form that would similarly perform the creativity of seawater on a structural level. Building upon Lispector's description of her novel as a constant improvisation that allows her to render living water on the solid page, the performance used improvisational strategies. Based on a few sentences drawn from Cixous's novel *The Book of Promethea* (1991), in which she explores images of female creativity through the myth of Prometheus, each artist created a set of responses. Vanessa, for example, developed an array of gestures in reaction to the words

and images, while Calum created what we came to call a poetry machine, a custom-made software that retained the basic sentence structures while randomising verbs, nouns and adjectives. In the public sharing these sentences, projected on to a wall, served as raw material for the other two performers: Victoria spoke them into a microphone; varying pitch, speed, volume and timbre, she turned them into a musical texture. Joshua subsequently used Victoria's voice, captured by the microphone, to create a live soundscape composed of sound fragments layered and superimposed onto each other. The performance as a whole had no predetermined rhythm, each performer responded to a collective pulse as it morphed from one moment to the next.

In order to capture some of the intricate rhythm of the piece, I offer the reader the following piece of writing that I composed from in response to the documentation of the event:

A single human silhouette illuminated by a spotlight and encircled by the light-absorbing walls of a black-box theatre. She looks like a strange deep-sea creature-cum-bird caught in the flash of a camera, craning her neck, shoulder blades pumping, arms beating the air. Words emerge on the wall behind her. The eye only catches glimpses of them since they dissolve as quickly as they appear / *A miraculous feeling word.* / like glittering shoals of fish momentarily flashing up in the spotlight. Presently a voice appears from the depths of the darkness, only syllables, sounds, textures at first. It seems to be travelling to us through a resistant medium – water maybe – from far away. The human voice transmorphed into indecipherable whale song. / *You can write me into waters and liquidate me.* / The single voice becomes many as fragments and words are layered upon each other. The words in the back cascade now, one sentence follows the next rapidly. / *Try me. Deliver me. Flow me.* / Meaning settles momentarily when a gesture – flapping, pecking – syncs with a constellation of words – *A free bird.* An unexpected moment of stillness is superseded by a new wave of gestures, sounds and words. / *A throbbing gill* / A throbbing rhythm: ebb – flow – ebb – flow. A back and forward of morphing rhythms and signs. Elements noticeably begin to repeat but they are always changing, mutating, as new constellation of signs wash away what was there before, like footprints in the sand carried away by foaming waves. An aquatic rhythm governed

by an unpredictable current. A maelstrom. / *Be the fin* / It swells again, / *You, the shore* / like the gathering of a rogue wave, / *I shall swallow you* / followed by an eerie calm. One last wave rolls in, / *How can one be tearing apart and gushing?* / then silence, the dancer collapsed on the floor. / *I, the human being, she the water* / All is still. The tide has come in.

Although there was a rough shape, a container, into which the ingredients were poured, how they worked together was constantly shifting and changing. What emerged was akin to ripples and waves: successions of increasing and declining intensity followed each other without moving towards a resolution. Common dramaturgical features such as the arc of suspense and closure were absent. In their place there was a ceaseless repetition of elements – gestures, words, sounds – that returned over and over in different, unpredictable constellations. Just as ‘waves do not so much overtake and succeed/supersede one another’ but rather ‘transmit energy in complicated ways’ (Wylie 2006:173), there was no linear progression but a constant circulation of elements. A temporality developed akin to what Stefan Helmreich calls ‘oscillating ocean time’, which he defines as the copresence of two temporalities: ‘long *durée* processes’ such as ocean circulation and the ‘rapid changes’ of the tide and waves (2006:no pagination). These parallel temporalities were manifested through the rapid and to the onlooker unpredictable changes in rhythm as moments of calm were washed away by flurries of activity that again gave way to stillness. At the same time, and in keeping with the longer, more unbroken rhythm of ocean currents, the piece as a whole seemed – as an audience member proposed – to envelop its onlooker in ‘a flow, a continuation’ that washed over them. The effect of this was a wave-like dramaturgy in which intense moments unpredictably swelled and subsided, while at the same time the constancy of the movement washed over the audience, encircling them.

### **The Gestational Logic of *Mer / Mère***

How might a dramaturgical form that does not address feminist politics directly, but produces a pattern that evokes the movements and temporal processes of the ocean be conceived as a feminist practice? I would like to suggest that it might be seen as a reevaluation of the creative capacity of the maternal via its analogic relationship with the sea that is typically erased in Western discourse by performing what Chandler and Neimanis

identify as the gestational logic of water: its capability to act as a (re)productive environment. In doing so, this kind of dramaturgy can, I argue, be seen as refiguring patriarchal notions of ontology due to the challenges it poses to the self-sufficient Cartesian subject, a subject that is inevitably imagined as masculine. By recasting being as a liquid state of becoming without ever arriving at a final destination the masculine-coded understanding of creation as origin myth, an act of *genius ex nihilo*, is reimagined as a co-creative and processual activity.

The denial of the creative potency of femininity is most overt in how the pregnant body is classically pictured as passive matter, a receptacle filled with active, masculine form.<sup>2</sup> The womb is, as Irigaray analyses, imagined as ‘sterile’, and the maternal body is ‘castrated of that impregnating power which only belongs to the unchangeably masculine’ (1985a:179). Jacques Derrida similarly points out that the notion of the genius has historically been the preserve of the phallogocentric subject: it is coded masculine culturally and, in French, also grammatically: ‘we have always kept [the noun *le génie*] for the masculine as well as the singular’ (2008:5). He suggests, however, that it is possible to imagine a plural, feminine creativity that is not predicated on the masculine subject with its totalising, violent associations; that instead creativity might simply be conceived as ‘what happens’ (78).

This re-orientation towards another vision of creativity is also at the heart of Chandler’s and Neimanis’s concept of gestationality that they model on ‘water’s facilitation of inception, repetition and proliferation of life’ (2013:62). Water’s creativity is facilitative rather than interventionist, collaborative rather than autonomous, challenging the ‘sovereign ontology’ (ibid.) of the masculine subject as creation is reconceived as co-creation. Rather than an active intervention by a wilful subject, creation is reinterpreted as ‘providing the conditions for unpredictable plurality to flourish’ (ibid.). The choice of the term gestation insists on an analogic association with the maternal body, which nourishes the ‘other-within, before and independently of the control of mind’ (ibid.:67).

In establishing a connection between watery gestationality and maternity, Neimanis and Chandler seek to intervene in the anthropocentric and androcentric biases that govern

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<sup>2</sup> Butler delivers an extensive overview and analysis of this – particularly in relation to Platonic philosophy – in the first chapter of *Bodies that Matter* (1993).



discourses on creativity and being. This connection also underpins my argument for a feminist politics of the performance. I would like to suggest that it enacted a gestational model of creation through its structural use of improvisation, particularly in the intersection of time and repetition. While repetition may at first glance appear to be the opposite of improvisation conceived as creation *ex nihilo* – untamed, unique and unrestricted, Robin Moore points out that improvisation is not free, instead it is better likened to ‘other creative and yet culturally structured behaviours’ (1992:66). Derrida also suggests that improvisation is in many ways ‘impossible’ since it is always predetermined by already extant patterns: ‘one can’t say what ever one wants, one is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse’ (cited in Ramshaw 2013:9) since the sign systems that render one’s improvisation intelligible in the first place, precede the improviser. Cixous holds that what Derrida regards as impossible is, in fact, inevitable: the ‘infernal repetition’ (1986:72) of the same is undone as the effects of *différance* inescapably take hold.

This is what happened on the structural level of the performance: through a finite number of elements, which appeared over and again, meaning settled occasionally and momentarily but was succeeded by new constellations of sounds, words and images. It exploited the creative force of repetition that derives from time: since time changes repetitions, they develop towards the unprecedented. In this it performed a structure akin to seawater, ‘constantly emerging as difference, shaped by different rates, speeds and pathways of flow, but also by the different mixtures of particulate matter... along for the watery ride’ (Neimanis 2013:31) The sea acts as a conductor allowing the different bodies contained within it to assemble in ever new, different ways, meaning that ‘each materialisation [of water] produces something new’ (ibid.). Through the use of improvisation my performance equally provided a gestational milieu in which creation was facilitated but not controlled by a singular creative genius; it simply happened.

While this view of improvisation still rests on the notion that, as its etymological roots suggest, it ushers in the new, it debunks the myth of creativity and innovation as a unique and discrete act undertaken by a singular, wholly agential subject. In doing so the gestational, improvisatory dramaturgy challenges the patriarchal value systems of the genius in cultural production. By figuring creativity as a series of waves; creation from repetition, *ex tempore* instead of *ex nihilo*, the performance’s dramaturgy eroded what

Cixous terms the 'masculine myth' of origin: man 'always needs to know where he comes from' (1981:83) and as a result institutes a static ontology in which all things are taxonomized, immobilised and submitted to a single telos. Femininity, in contrast, is figured as repetition – 'the rib, the second' (2001:96) – as Rebecca Schneider notes and thus thwarts any attempt to identify a singular origin. Luisa Muraro's analysis of the erasure of the mother's role in philosophy comes to a similar conclusion: while the father is imagined as the 'true author of life', 'maternal work' is presented as 'a copy (and many times a bad copy)' (cited in Wilson 2014:210). However, since it is only through this facsimile that the first can be confirmed, it threatens to topple the first from its privileged position. When creativity is conceived as creation from repetition the second (and the third and the fourth...) displaces the presumed origin further and further. Creativity figured through the sea and the mother revels in multiple beginnings and departures instead of designating origins while effecting no closure. Such a notion of genius activates creative forces that lie dormant in the rule of the selfsame: striving towards the new and the unknown by letting things happen, by improvising over time and space without arriving; ever becoming. The maternal body, like the sea, is no longer imagined as sterile or as 'immobility/inertia' (Cixous 1981:44) but is reinstated as a productive and creative.

This kind of creativity is not realised through intervention into and mastering of form but instead it is envisioned as the facilitation of a continuous emergence of the new. In this it replaces an ontology that seeks to designate origins in order to fix the present, with a notion of being that never exhausts itself, that never becomes fully present and actualised. In as far as spectators were willing to let themselves go in the conductive milieu, being swept up in the tide of signs, losing sight of solid ground, even at the risk of drowning, the dramaturgical structure cultivated a facilitative mode of being that is operative in the both the figure of the maternal womb and in the gestational aspect of water. A dramaturgy that figures creativity at the intersection of the sea and the mother might be seen as giving space to a feminine ontology in cultural production that is frequently repressed. Doing so can be conceived as vital to feminist goals as Rosi Braidotti proposes:

In a phallogocentric system where the Name-of-the-Father provides the operative metaphor for the constitution of the subject, the idea of a 'feminine symbolic

function' amounts to a revindication of the structuring function of the mother. It attempts to invest the maternal site with affirmative, positive force. (1994:181)

My attempt here is to argue that a hydrological dramaturgy might perform such a feminine symbolic function by emulating the facilitative environment associated with the mother and the sea. This revindication is made possible by drawing on the shape and logics of the sea as it provides an alternative 'operative metaphor' for how we describe the creative act and imagine our being-in-the-world. In place of the static – solid – ontology of phallogentrism, the sea/mother allows us to conceive a different ontology wherein being is transformed into an enduring state of becoming, in which the self and the world are figured as emergent works in progress.

### **Combinatory Chains: Figuration and Matter**

The suggestion that dramaturgical forms that put into practice a gestational logic – as exemplified by my production – might provide us with an alternative 'operative metaphor' for how we imagine the creative act is intended as a timely and temporary provocation rather than a new prescriptive model of thought or mode of production. It is necessarily temporary since replacing the paternal image and its logic of solids with its opposite – the maternal fluidity of the ocean – runs the risk of replicating the heterosexist, binary paradigm that feminist criticism seeks to explode. Rather, in the spirit of gestationality, I suggest that provisionally adopting the image of oceanic maternity allows us to produce alternative ways of expressing how we inhabit the world in the here and now while opening them up towards an unpredictable, uncontrollable future. Nonetheless, even under these conditions there is still a danger that metaphors return us to the paternal mechanics of solids as the very structure of metaphors is immobilising; they are 'quasi solids' (1985b:110) Irigaray proposes. Since, as Katherine Binhammer analyses, there is always 'identity and sameness implied by metaphor' (1991:75), they resist difference and change. Instead, Binhammer recommends turning to a different way of working with figuration, one that is 'along the lines of living water': the metonymy (ibid.:74).

While not wanting to succumb to a binarisation of the two terms, Binhammer proposes that the metonymy might be read as a metaphor 'that is not a metaphor' (ibid.). Rather it works – to quote Cixous – 'with a countermetaphor "with"' (1990:17). Since the metonymy

functions through contiguity it preserves difference while allowing one term to be coupled with the other. This is maybe closer to how my performance manifest the sea/mother nexus. Neither term was represented or indeed presented but the dramaturgical structure, the rhythm and architecture of the event, evoked this nexus through contiguity: the dramaturgy of the piece *recalled* the wave patterns of sea, it *corresponded* to the temporal processes of oceans, it *suggested* the productive environment of the womb. Crucially, Binhammer sees metonymies as anchored in history since 'the combinatory chain relating the two terms to each other must be determined within a specific historical and social context' (op.cit: 76). As such metonymies are always open to flux, whereas metaphors put on the appearance of ahistorical eternity. A dramaturgy that figures an alternative notion of creativity through a 'combinatory chain' then amounts perhaps not so much to inventing an operative metaphor but to employing a provisional metonymy that displaces the structure of metaphor as such.

What is more Binhammer suggests that metonymies are anchored in the material world, they are what happens when 'anatomical bodies invade the space of metaphor' (ibid:73). Put differently, to call something a metonymy is to acknowledge that our embodied experiences shape the way we figure the world. In this a metonymic approach to imagination recalls Gaston Bachelard's proposition that we have a 'material imagination', that is that our imaginative capacities 'stem directly from matter' (1983:1). By this he does not mean that our poetics are limited to representations – 'the faculty for forming images of reality' (ibid.:16) – but that our sensory engagement with matter provides the conditions through which we come to imagine ourselves and the ways we inhabit the world. Although Bachelard's view is limited by a static approach to matter – for him matter often seems to be before and out of history, I think his notion of a material imagination might still be useful as it places the genius outside of human control. It recognises that culture is not solely generated through human paradigms but that other materialities also play a part in shaping a creative process. Basing a dramaturgical shape of the matter of seawater and its particular logics then might be read as a twofold attempt on the hegemony of patriarchal culture: through its associative link with the maternal body it revalues the creative potential of the feminine while at the same time allowing the generative capacity of the more-than-human to play a role in performance practice. It recognises then that creation is not an originary act

undertaken by an autonomous subject but something that happens to and through us: gestationally, co-creatively, constantly.

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