

---Commentary---

# MERMAID-AS-DEVICE: TOPONYMY, LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

[Received October 13th 2021; accepted November 11th 2021 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.145]

Joshua Nash

University of New England <jnash7@une.edu.au>

Nearing the end of my editorial to the thematic section on island toponymies in *Island Studies Journal* vii n2 (Nash 2016a, b), I asked: *do island toponymies really exist?* It is heartening to witness with this *Shima* special section dedicated to mermaid place names that this question relating toponymy (place-naming) and terrestrial-aquatic studies remains relevant and pertinent. Indeed, there is encouragement to see that some five years later, specific traction is beginning to develop which focuses explicitly on naming, toponymy, and language in and of place, and how folklore studies and history related to island and aquatic studies can be mediated and brought closer through toponymy. Moreover, blending the capital 'L' Language slant, the philosophical idea that language is key to the human condition, and linguistics, the study of ways of speaking as analysable systems, made available to island and aquatic studies through the vessel of toponymy is tantalising. Toponymy has a kindred relationship with more formal realms of place name etymology, geographical location ma(r)king, and the sport of historicising place through language, linguistics, and Language, especially the self quality of emplacement in the world through naming. This is definitely noble work – bringing island and aquatic studies, linguistics, and toponymy closer together.

I have focused some of my toponymic work on how toponymies clash and conflict with each other and within and outside of language domains (Nash, 2014) and the role of skirmishes in arbitrating several shadowy and edgy regions of nominal language in actual and mythical position-place (Nash, 2016c). Surely mermaids, those mythical sea creatures of lost memory, legend, and lore, have a place in the developing annals of coastal and island toponymic research? It is to several of these elements the authors of the present articles turn, with specific attention given to how some of the technical aspects of mermaid place names can be inculcated into domains of language. Young (2021a: 3) makes us aware in his catchily-titled 'Mermaids, mere-maids and no maids', "[l]inguistic continuity does not, of course, guarantee folklore continuity." How apposite-apr.

As Hayward (2021) notes in his introduction to this issue, mermaid place names could reflect a broader aquapelagic imaginary inscribed in language. That is, mermaid-derived and mermaid-characterised names promulgate documented and even spoken fable between land and the depth of sea. Mermaid lore inscribed is "wet language" in "fluid ontological space" (Steinberg and Peters, 2015), listed and mapped potentially poetically. Graziadei et al.'s 'On sensing island spaces' and their introduction to the spatial practice of island-making and island poetics "emerge through sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch (and frequently a confluence of these sensory experiences) or they are

(re)conceived through the movements across and/or interaction with their topography” (2017: 239). The list of keywords to their article – island narratives, island poetics, perception, phenomenology of islands, and spatial practice – is poetic in itself. That “swimming, circumnavigating, and landing can be seen as central spatial practices for the emergence of a specifically insular contact zone between land and an all-surrounding sea” (Graziadei et al, 2017: 246) in the specific descriptions of poetics and spatiality inculcate the aquapelago and the wet – mapped and aqueous – uttered. Here mermaids and even the thought of the melusine, the freshwater mermaid-like figure from European folklore and all things siren-like, are brought to bear on actual recorded toponymic data. The terrestrial meets the aquatic. Myth encounters truth. Linguistics and language meld with island and aquatic studies and semblances of self.

I put forward four graphic representations as ideational possibilities and production motifs that can generate toponymic and linguistic form within the mermaid-as-device concept and are generated by mermaid-as-name/language interacting within disciplines. I use the equilibrium symbol common in chemistry to embody the tension between opposing sides on respective spectra with the trope above being the tension-creating medium driving and precipitating the contradiction below. While these four depictions are lofty speculations, they are concrete in that, as the articles in the special section demonstrate, a number of actual place names dedicated to and resulted from the significance of mermaids and place have been documented.

		<i>Mermaid names</i>	
I.	Terrestrial spaces	⇌	Aquatic spaces
		<i>Mermaid trope</i>	
II.	Folklore, myth	⇌	Truth
		<i>Mermaid names &amp; place language</i>	
III.	Linguistics, language	⇌	Island/aquatic studies
		<i>Mermaid-as-device</i>	
IV.	Old(er) languages	⇌	New(er) languages: pidgins, creoles, dialects

I. Although they may be few and far between (Allan 2021), mermaid place names do exist in both aquatic and terrestrial datasets in this issue and elsewhere. This is not surprising because although these creatures are largely associated with the sea, their terrestriality cannot be ignored as they are often represented ashore in visual, literary and filmic representation. Nine of the 14 mermaid toponyms Young (2021b) documents are inland. The inland names Mermaid Gulch in Colorado (USA), Mermaid Mountain in Queensland (Australia) and Mermaids Pool, New South Wales (Australia) plus the ubiquitous mentions of place names like Mermaid Hill in Scotland and the one-off Mermaid Roundabout in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) validate the terrestrial-aquatic crossover of mermaid-as-device adjudged through place-naming behaviours.

The query of whether mermaids can inhabit terrestrial spaces for long periods of time may give rise to the possibility of the existence of earthbound place names. While

mermaids are semi-aquatic, which means they venture to land every so often but spend the majority of their lives in the water, these beings mostly rely on marine ecosystems for survival. Wetness versus dryness and associated naming and location leads to the requisition and querying of mermaidian fact or falsehood.

II. Regarding the aquapelagic imaginary inscribed in language, Hayward (2021) mentions in his introduction to this issue, mermaid-as-abstract and as concretised concept facilitates well the contradiction between lore/myth and semblances of truth. Toponyms can often at best be renditions and precipitates of storied language in landscape. The truth value of, for example, the island toponymies on which I have worked—Pitcairn Island, Norfolk Island, and Kangaroo Island—can be wobbly at best and opaque at worst. The opacity of certain place names could be elevated by the self-driven position of island peoples and thus their toponymies that they think they are different, distinct, and disparate from mainland/terrestrial peoples and place-naming histories. As several of my informants queried next during my second stint of fieldwork on Norfolk Island in 2008, “The old folk must be bullshitting you a lot about place names and what they mean?” While I appreciate from where these island people’s questioning and sentiment is derived, my experience of truth-told-through-toponymy was different. (Island) people tell the truth when they trust their interlocutor and when they believe what the writer is documenting is worthwhile.

Where Pitcairn Island place names like Ugly Name Side of unknown origin, Norfolk Island’s Pop Rock, possibly labelled as such because this is where boys would ‘pop’ the marriage question to girls, and Kangaroo Island’s Moan a Tree, purportedly named either because the tree made a moaning noise when wind passed through it, or because people stopped by this tree once and started moaning about how far they had walked in the heat, all exude elements of possible intergenerational bullshittery through lore, myth, storytelling and truth-bending, mermaid place names might even be wonkier because of their generic nature and their locations. Where mermaid is culturally supernatural, the names Mermaid Orchard, Mermaid Cove, Mermaid Lake, and Mermaid Mountain are far from toponymically paranormal. How these names came about is anyone’s guess—folk etymologies abound, and I would be hard pushed to believe any story of how Mermaids Cave in Blackheath, New South Wales, high in the Blue Mountains and more than 100 kilometres from the ocean, was named anything but fancifully.

III. The linguistic and language domain of island studies (e.g. Ronström, 2021) and languages spoken on islands (e.g. Schreier, 2008, 2010) emphasise isolation, insularity, and the possibility for language isolates (Nash et al. 2020 found surprisingly, though, that there is *not* a marked tendency for such spoken isolates to develop on islands). As regards the role of mermaid place names in language development, their role in opening and closing gaps between disciplines like dialectology, linguistics, and present and empty spaces on maps, Young writes:

*The list of mermaid place names that have formed the backbone of this article ... are a result not just of the evolution of folklore, but also of the evolution of language and dialect. (2021b: 19)*

Mermaid place names exist like toponymic homeopathy. By presenting in small numbers, they may make a larger linguistic splash (pun intended). While we know little about the languages mermaids speak, nor should we really, as extraordinary beings, mermaids-as-device and their name-place relationships offer potential intervention and reconciliation for linguistics and language studies with island and aquatic studies. Mermaids are philosophically po(i)sed as contradictions; they are half human-half animal, sea-based but able to be on land, provided they do not dry out, mythical yet at the same time made-realable, and conceptual feasible through their ability to conjure up possibilities in how we talk (language), think (one aspect of linguistics), and write (as listed place names) of islands, wet spaces, and fluid-solid place. If we could conduct fieldwork with mermaid informants, when considering language-place-being, I bet they would:

*endorse not merely the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also to propose a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world ever on the move.* (Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 248)

IV. Mermaids are old. Humans and fish are older. Chinese is old. Chinese Pidgin English is newer than both Chinese and English. Having to adapt to new situations at least conceptually, which mermaid-as-device does, creates a space of encounter:

*This place of meeting is an intensely creative zone, where the negotiation becomes crystallized into new linguistic formations. The creative fusion produces the languages of pidgins and creoles, hybrid languages which embed the vocabulary from both source languages to form new and creative ways of communicating.* (Bowring, 2016: 32)

Regarding the mixing, adaptation, and creolisation from African and European sources of the mermaid myth and word *mermaid* in Surinam and Guyana – Watramama – and Mami Wata in a number of West and Central African societies, van Stipriaan brings another linguistic and old versus new lore perspective to mermaid thinking:

*The other element, which is quite important from the viewpoint of creolization, is the arrival from the sea of European vessels with impressive figureheads of mermaids and other mythological figures, and the stories told by the sailors on board these ships, for whom mermaids, sirens, water-nymphs and other supernatural creatures from the water formed part of their daily world-view* (2003: 324).

Chang (2016: 53) takes us further:

*Religious in its appearance, Mami Wata is the result of socio-cultural encounter among African, European and Asian diaspora. Mami Wata is basically rooted in West African belief systems in which local people maintain an idea of river people. Folklores in West Africa tell that a specific group of aqueous animal in a shape of half-human and half-animal abode in rivers or sea, and has tremendous influences over the life of people.* (2016: 53)

Like pidgin languages which embody encounter, melding, mixing, and adaption, one take on the mermaid trope as regards place names is that it exudes the quintessence of the unfolding of pidgin as named language happenstancing on new physical terrain. Bowring (1995: 56) labels this process 'pidgin picturesque' and claims this concept expresses how an aesthetic outcome "shares the qualities of two languages - the imported language of the picturesque and an indigenous language based in the natural environment." The pidgin aspect of mermaid-as-device reveals how the mermaid is almost an active event striving to adapt through lore, truth, and language-name domains into semi-anthropomorphised, toponymic product. Mermaid place names are hybrids.

Mermaid as emblem. Mermaid as heuristic. Mermaid as pinprick into imaginaries. Mermaid as toponymic alcove-cum-recess/resting point. Mermaid as productive inspirer of emplaced language. Mermaid as mediator between spoken and written *realis* and *irrealis*. Mermaid as possible expanded pidgin potentially becoming creolised through nativisation. Mermaid as symbol for-of change. Mermaids are hybrids. They ooze human-animal, land-sea interaction, and change. Their being as myth and existence as conversion are as promising as islands-seas offer provocative assistances to island languages being synonymic with contact. Considering mermaid as heuristic device and method enables the possibility to integrate and consider not only phenomena between, within, and across toponymic contexts, but also consider what these contexts actually mean. A terrestrial-aquatic studies arbitrated by mermaidhood inculcating toponymy, language, and linguistics now seems more available. I invite linguistic and island and aquatic studies scholars as well as those half human-half fish to continue this thinking.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Allan, V (2021) 'Few and far between: The distribution of mermaid, siren and *sirena* place names across the United States of America', *Shima* v15 n1: 235-238

Bowring, J (1995) 'Pidgin picturesque', *Landscape Review* v2: 56-64.

Bowring, J (2016) 'On loanwords and calques: where the language of design meets the language of geology', *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* v36 n1: 32-41

Chang, Y (2016) 'Making of Mami Wata: diasporic encounter of African, European and Asian Spirits', *Asian Journal of African Studies* v39: 53-70

Hayward, P (2021) 'Introduction: Mercultures 2', *Shima* v15 n2: 1-2

Nash, J (2014) 'A clash of toponymies, or toponymic conflict on Phillip Island, Norfolk Island Archipelago', *The Globe* v75: 11-15

Nash, J (2016a) 'Do island toponymies exist?', *Island Studies Journal* v11 n2: 339-342

Nash, J (ed) (2016b) 'Island toponymies', Guest edited thematic section of *Island Studies Journal* v11 n2: 339-430

Nash, J (2016c) 'Toponymic skirmishes and marine encounters', In *Seas and islands: connecting people, culture, history and the future: Proceedings of the 22nd International seminar on sea names*, Seoul: The Society for East Sea, 207-208

Nash, J, Bakker, P, Bøegh, K et al (2020) 'On languages on islands,' *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* v52 n1: 81-116

Ronström, O (2021) 'Remoteness, islands and islandness', *Island Studies Journal*, online ahead of print:  
<https://islandstudies.ca/sites/default/files/ISJRonstr%C3%B6mRemoteness.pdf>

Schreier D (2008) *St. Helenian English: Origins, evolution and variation*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins

Schreier, D (2010) 'Tristan da Cunha English' In Schreier, D, Trudgill, Schneider, E.W and Williams, J.P (eds) *The lesser-known varieties of English: An introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 245-260

Steinberg, P & Peters, K (2015) 'Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* v33 n2: 247-264

van Stipriaan, A (2003) 'Watramama/Mami Wata: Three centuries of creolization of a water spirit in West Africa, Suriname and Europe', *Matatu* v27/28: 323-337

Young, S (2021a) 'Mermaids, mere-maids and no maids: Mermaid place names and folklore in Britain', *Shima* v15 n1: 176-201

Young, S (2021b) 'Mermaid toponyms in the West Indies: Traditional and non-traditional names', *Shima* v15 n1: 202-220