

THINKING WITH MERMAIDS HERE & NOW

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ABSTRACT: This research note offers a reflection on my 2015 monograph, *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England*, and examines how the mermaid allows us to explore aspects of literature and culture in Renaissance England that might feel unfamiliar to a 21st Century audience. It then places the concepts employed in the book alongside the work of 21st Century scholars and artists who engage with the mermaid, and other watery creatures, in a variety of contexts in order to offer afterthoughts on how the mermaid continues to be a useful figure to think with here and now.

KEYWORDS: Mermaid, early modern, epistemology studies, representation

When I was invited to reflect on my 2015 monograph for this theme issue, my first thought was that, from its inception, my book was bound by location and time period. Mermaids, and figures like them, appear in a wide range of global contexts. For the purposes of my work, however, I was interested in the uses to which the mermaid was being put in early modern England and what these uses could show us about how knowledge categories (especially categories pertaining to gender, sexuality, and the human) were being constructed. When I was working on this project in graduate school, Frances Dolan, whose scholarly work (2003, 2008) carefully attends to the contingencies of time and place,¹ did me the favor of noting that mermaids were proving to be tremendous figures for me to “think with.” I still appreciate Dolan’s turn of phrase, because it captures the epistemic value of the mermaid, as well as the figure’s ability to highlight how cultural knowledge is produced. Thinking with early modern English mermaids has allowed me to see the ways that conceptual divides are both formed and dismantled. Furthermore, thinking with mermaids that manifest in a time period so different from my own opens up possibilities for meaning that have the potential to be unexpected for a 21st Century audience.

Unfamiliar and unanticipated representations are, I argue, what make the mermaid instructive; at the same time, they may make the mermaid difficult to see. When I began this project, I was perplexed by why so little had been written about early modern English mermaids. I certainly didn’t have to stretch to find examples or artifacts to examine. Mermaids, it seemed, were everywhere. They were used to decorate Protestant churches and painted onto handicrafts and goods sold in the emerging proto-capitalist marketplace of early modern London. They appeared in royal portraiture, in travel narratives, in curiosity cabinets, and in anti-Catholic propaganda. Mermaids gave their names to taverns, they

¹ Dolan’s books (2013 and 2008) on evidence in 17th Century England and the legacy of early modern marriage and violence provide just two example of this practice.

featured as players in elaborate outdoor performances during royal progresses, and they were invoked with regularity in the poetry, prose, and drama of some of the most famous writers (Shakespeare, Milton, and Marlowe to name just a few) of the time.

The range of examples I have listed only begins to illustrate how pervasive this figure was in early modern England, and in order to make sense of the sometimes diametrically opposed representations I encountered, I was required to challenge my own understanding of what a mermaid “was.” After all, I brought with me a contemporary understanding of the mermaid that had become highly commercialised. Representations like Disney’s Ariel or Edvard Eriksen’s statue of the little mermaid in Copenhagen dominated my thinking and initially provided barriers to exploring some of the more varied or unexpected representations that I was encountering.

In early modern England, mermaids took on a wide range of forms and meanings. One way to illustrate this point is to note that, in Renaissance literature, the term mermaid is arguably interchangeable with the term siren. For example, Nicholas Udal, in his translation of Erasmus, notes that Ulysses faces the sirens who are “in englishe [called] mermaids,” (Vredeveld, 2001: 849) and Arthur Goldings’ translation of Ovid, from 1567, describes “Vlysses feat against the Mermaydes song” (ibid: 852). Furthermore, while mermaids were most often hybrid creatures, the form of their hybridity was more complicated than we might assume. For example, the writer Thomas Browne, who expresses dismay that images of mermaids were proliferating, notes that some mermaids lacked a “fishy composure” and were instead “made up of Man and Bird,” with the commonly associated human half “placed not only above, but below” (1672, chapter XIX). I point to these examples, not to claim that the term “mermaid,” as it is often understood today, is meaningless. Rather, I wish to illustrate that the figure should be thought about in terms of its historical specificity. I suspect that one reason so few scholars have looked at the early modern English mermaid in a sustained way is because they assume that the mermaid’s meaning is transparent or obvious. However, one historical moment may open up possibilities for meaning that are not common or legible in another, and the mermaid is a valuable figure precisely because she offers us an opportunity to examine how frameworks for meaning are constructed.

Because the mermaid appears in such a wide range of contexts within early modern England, my practice in my book is not simply to identify the presence of mermaids in various locations and demonstrate a stable interpretation. Instead, I posit that what is so useful about the mermaid is that the figure cannot easily be “locked down.” As I note in the introduction to my study:

My goal is not to help us arrive at a clearer understanding of what a mermaid specifically is. Rather, I argue that the richness and import of this figure only emerges within a practice of reading that resists this goal and holds contradictory possibilities in tension. (2015: 15)

With this interpretive practice in mind, my book examines various manifestations of the mermaid in early modern England and emphasises the important opportunities the figure offers to read familiar locations and moments in unfamiliar ways. For example, in the afterwords to my book, I examine the depiction of mermaids in early modern cartography. Meri Lao (1998: 102) notes that the phrase *hic sunt sirenae* was often invoked by Renaissance cosmographers to depict uncharted waters. It probably comes as no surprise that watery hybrids were frequently associated with the emerging culture of travel, expansion, and colonisation that dominated the early modern world. The idea of mermaids being associated

with uncharted oceanic depths and expanses may then seem rather predictable for a culture that was encountering new territories, animals, and people that were challenging their ideas of how to categorise the world around them. What may be more surprising is the fact that mermaids also appeared on maps of local English counties. *Poly-Olbion*, by Michael Drayton (1622), for example, attempts to chart the history of the English countryside by combining verse with topographical maps, and throughout he depicts hybrid women of the rivers who rise from the depths to tell the history of the land. In this work, figures often associated with distant locations and unexplored waters also become aligned with the lands that make up “home.” The familiar and the strange blend together, and the reader is offered an opportunity to consider how that which they thought they knew may actually hold as much mystery as that which they thought of as distant and unexplored. My point in using this one example is to illustrate that there is richness and value in considering what the mermaid might teach us when she appears in locations we might not expect. This in turn may offer opportunities to see hidden mermaids in our own culture or think about representations that deviate from the norm. As we attempt to unlock the past, we may also make ourselves open to seeing the unexpected in the present moment.

Although I am not a scholar who studies contemporary literature and culture, I see no shortage of instances where the mermaid offers opportunities to surprise, delight, and challenge the understanding of an individual in the 21st Century. The mermaid is, I argue, still a valuable figure to keep thinking with, precisely because her meaning remains elastic and unstable. In other words, there is room, even in this present moment, to return to the stories that we seem to know best and consider how the mermaid may be relevant to readers and viewers in a host of unanticipated fashions. I would like to illustrate what I mean by pointing towards just a few recent ways in which the mermaid is being mobilised to challenge more dominant depictions. For example, scholars who apply a critical disability studies model have offered reassessments of literary representations of the mermaid that allow readers to explore normative forms of embodiment, as well as how cultures punish bodies that do not conform to expected standards. Lori Yamato’s examination of “surgical humanization” in Andersen’s ‘Den lille Havfrue’ (‘The Little Mermaid’) (1837) provides one illustration of this practice as she argues that a mermaid should not be seen merely as an incomplete human being. “A mermaid is a different life-form,” writes Yamato, “not a mere perversion of humanity” (2017: 304). Andersen’s story leaves room for this interpretation since, in spite of the many transformations that the mermaid undergoes in the text, “the divisions in her nature are preserved and the injuries that the mermaid’s body sustains in her self-sacrificial, quixotic quest to become human haunt the text” (ibid: 308). Furthermore, this haunting allows the reader to question what wholeness and humanity actually mean. As Yamato suggests, “the disruptive body’s inability to settle into a normative shape, even in death, goes so far as to ask whether the notion of humanity itself—that supposed fusion of body and soul—holds water” (ibid: 308). Likewise, Skye Anicca finds value in bringing crip theory² together with Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of the border as she examines Valerie Martin’s short story ‘Sea Lovers.’ For Anicca, the mermaid offers an opportunity to explore the way societies are structured by both those who sanction the borders created through promoting normative embodiment and those who dissent with and challenge those borders.

² Robert McRuer describes crip theory as “emerging from a cultural studies tradition that questions the order things, considering how and why it is constructed and naturalized; how it is embedded in complex economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be changed” (2006: 18). One goal of this work involves highlighting the “critically disabled and queer perspectives and practices that have been deployed to resist the contemporary spectacle of able-bodied heteronormativity” (ibid: 20).

In this reading, the mermaid functions much in the same way as Anzaldúa's *mestiza*,³ a hybrid figure who works against a simple dualism to "create a meaningful multiplicity" (ibid: 395). In this tale, Anicca argues, "the pluralistic subjectivities situated within a social system" (ibid: 396) become highlighted as the mermaid challenges easy understandings of appropriate embodiment.

Critical disability studies scholars are not the only ones who currently find the mermaid useful to think with. Jessica Love's beautifully illustrated picture book, *Julián is a Mermaid*, gives a nod to the way that the mermaid has become increasingly marketed as a figure of childish fun; simultaneously the text challenges some of the most familiar ways the mermaid has been packaged for a 21st Century child in western culture. Instead of reinforcing the mermaid's relevance for little girls, Love depicts a mesmerized "boy named Julián" (2018: 1) who encounters three dark-skinned women dressed as mermaids on a subway ride with his *abuela* (grandmother). Julián is so enchanted by the encounter that he imagines himself rising from his subway seat, slipping from all but his least restrictive clothing, and floating through a sea of green. As he transforms beneath the water, Julián's curly hair unfurls and flows. He smiles with contentment, and his body bobs peacefully before he is caught up in a school of brightly colored sea creatures (fish, octopuses, jellyfish, and stingrays). Unlike in many narratives of the mermaid (Andersen's for example) Julián appears to find contentment and belonging not on land but in the imagined, watery depths.

Throughout the rest of the book, Julián continues to envision himself as a mermaid, and he is met with an approval that is not always afforded to little boys who embody gender presentations that are non-normative. At one point, Julián plucks the fronds of a potted fern to create long, flowing tresses, which he punctuates with purple and red flower blossoms. He puts on lipstick and pulls his *abuela*'s lace curtains down from one of her windows to fashion a mermaid's tail that will trail behind him as he plays. His *abuela* does not scold him for his non-conforming gender play or for his acts of petty household destruction. Instead, she adds to his look by offering him a string of pearls and takes him out in his new attire to find the mermaids that had inspired him. As the book ends, Julián's grandmother encourages him to join the mermaids who are "like you, mijo"⁴ (Love, 2018: 29) as they march towards the sea. This book unapologetically allows Julián to see himself in the mermaid. In doing so, it challenges notions of the ways bodies and identities *should* manifest. The book does not suggest that Julián has chosen his figure of admiration incorrectly or attempt to steer him towards more socially sanctioned or expected manifestations of fantasy for boys (a merman for instance). Instead, the book states unequivocally that Julián is a boy *and* that Julián is a mermaid. The figure of the mermaid is capacious enough to make room for Julián.

The representation of the mermaid in *Julián is a Mermaid* likewise highlights the way the mermaid, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has tended to be depicted as racially unmarked or "white." Mermaid-like figures abound across cultures, but the rapid commercialisation (especially in North America) of a mermaid who is both white and conventionally feminine is telling in a historical moment and location that continues to address issues of race and gender so poorly. There is, therefore, tremendous value in representations of the mermaid that resist such totalizing practices. Philip Hayward (2017: 45-50) points us towards African-American performers who have transformed Disney's rendering of Andersen's "Little Mermaid" in the first chapter of his book. In addition, the

³ Those wishing to learn more about the *mestiza* and borderlands theory should consult Anzaldúa (1987).

⁴ Literally "son" but also used as a less specific term of endearment, particularly in Mexican Spanish.

film *Ten-cent Daisy*, which is subtitled “a lost mermaid tale,”⁵ offers viewers an opportunity to engage with a mermaid who has fled the Caribbean after facing an assault and landed in California. As Cree B. McClellan notes, the film “encompasses both the beauty of origin and the struggles of displacement—all while providing a platform of recognition in a white-dominated genre” (2017: online). Likewise, Gabrielle Tesfaye’s (2018) stop-motion film, *The Water Will Carry Us Home*,⁶ situates the mermaid as part of the narrative of the Middle Passage. After presenting the viewer with historical renderings of slave ships, the film depicts a ship’s crew throwing pregnant individuals from the vessel. As the women descend into the watery depths, however, they are transformed into mermaids, thus also transforming their ontological trajectories. In turn, Nettrice R. Gaskins’ recent critical examination of Mami Wata (‘Mother Water’) spirits, common to Western and Central Africa, highlights the way that aquatic figures continue to be refigured by 20th and 21st Century artists, as “an ongoing process of creating new realities” (2018: 196). Among the many examples she examines, she notes that the Detroit musical duo Drexciya “imagined an underwater world inhabited by the pregnant descendants of West African women forced from slave ships and lost at sea during the Middle Passage to America” (ibid: 199). Examining this work, and numerous others; Gaskin offers “insight into the many ways that African-descended people remain connected, and the diverse forms that mermaids take in their collective imaginations” (ibid: 199). By raising these examples, I am not attempting to be comprehensive, nor am I attempting to make a case for the range of meanings that the mermaid holds in each instance. Rather, I wish to ask us to consider the way the mermaid is able to transform to represent an array of identities and historical contests.

Those who have been working with mermaids for any length of time are likely familiar with many different responses to their work. Mermaids are captivating, and most people have something to say about them. At the same time, I am still often surprised by how firm and unbending people can be in their understanding of who and what the mermaid “is.” Mermaids make predicable appearances in our current cultural moment, but their greatest value lies precisely in the fact that they cannot (at least in a sustained manner) be overdetermined. The mermaid’s meaning continues to shift, and their boundaries are not always easy to trace. I argue that we shouldn’t wish them to be otherwise, for as we open ourselves up to new kinds of mermaids, new frameworks for understanding become possible. My book on mermaids in early modern England proceeds from this premise. In the present day, I am still delighted by the way this figure transforms and continues to hold relevance. Mermaids remind us that interpretation itself is not fixed and that the very categories we use to make sense of the world are often products of frameworks that we are always in the process of building and dismantling.

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⁵ See the website for the film at <https://tencentdaisy.com/> – accessed 23rd June 2018.

⁶ Online at: <http://www.gabrielletesfaye.com/the-water-will-carry-us-home/> - accessed 1st June 2018.

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