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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Of mermaids and monsters: Transgender history and the boundaries of the human in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain

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Abstract

The figure of the monster has long been used by trans and intersex scholars, artists and activists to articulate their sense of being in a world dominated by binary, cisgender norms. Yet what does it mean to embrace 'the monstrous' and how might that embrace inform the construction of transgender history? This article examines the specificities of 'the monstrous' in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and empire by focusing on two figures at the boundary of the human: 'the mermaid' and 'the hermaphrodite'. In doing so, it asks what the histories of these two marginal figures might tell us about the construction of 'the human' and argues that an alignment with the monster might enable trans historians to ally themselves with a vision of the future that goes beyond anthropocentrism.

> The monster is one who lives in transition. One whose face, body and behaviours cannot yet be considered true in a predetermined regime of knowledge and power.[1]

In his 2020 address to the École de la Cause freudienne's annual conference, Paul B. Preciado aligned himself, as a transgender person, with the figure of the monster. Challenging the psychoanalytic profession to rethink the very foundations of their field, he argued that to exist outside of the gender binary was not pathological but liberatory. In embracing monstrosity, Preciado's address added another voice to a growing number of transgender, non-binary and intersex scholars and artists who use the monster and monstrosity to articulate trans, intersex and gender non-conforming experiences and positionalities.[2] For many of these scholars and artists, claiming the monstrous is a means of refusing the abjection imposed upon them by transphobic, and particularly transmisogynist, commentators who have used the label 'monster' against them. As Susan Stryker notes, transmisogynists have long

characterised trans women as 'monsters', likening them particularly to the 'unnatural' 'abomination' that Mary Shelley conjured in *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).[3] Stryker's essay, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage', is a response to that dehumanisation. Likening her own sense of 'unnaturalness' to that of the Creature's experience of learning about its creation, Stryker identifies with the rage that the Creature feels at its status as an outcast, beyond the pale of humanity.[4] More recently and much like Preciado, Kat Gupta, Ruth Pearce and Iggi Moon see in the figure of the monster the possibilities for liberation, for 'holding on joyously and stubbornly to the power that comes with strangeness and difference'; they argue for an 'epistemology of monsters' that would open up the space to rethink the 'human experience'.[5]

In this article, I consider what it would mean for historians, particularly historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imperialism, to take seriously transgender claims to kinship and identification with the monstrous and non-human. How might an 'epistemology of monsters' inform the research and writing of trans history? This question is part of a larger project thinking about what transgender history could look like if we positioned its emergence not only in the context of increasing global attention to trans lives in the wider media and political landscape, but also in relationship to another insurgency: that of climate catastrophe. Critical to this project is the questioning of what it means to be human and the role of capital-H History in configuring a certain version of 'the human' into which transgender history must insert itself if it is to become legible. In the small but rapidly growing body of transgender history, humans sit at centre stage as both the manufacturers and transgressors of gender. Given the ongoing attempts to *dehumanise* transgender people by refusing or stripping away rights and recognition, this focus on the human is understandable. Trans historiography has been consistently and explicitly aligned to the wider struggle for liberation, conscious of the role that history can play in claiming legitimacy, recognition and space in society.[6] In *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (2020) for example, Jen Manion situates their history of the people who 'transed' gender as a response to 'traditional approaches to the past that render LGBTQ history invisible while nonetheless claiming to be objective and politically neutral' and as inspiration and hope for the future.[7] Jules Gill-Peterson makes an adjacent move when she begins *Histories of the Transgender Child* by naming some of those trans people, primarily trans people of colour, lost to transphobic violence in 2017 as the preface to a project that rakes through the violence of the medical archives in order to find a history of trans children and childhood.[8]

In the current political climate, naming people and practices as 'trans' – in both the past and present – is an important act of refusing erasure and of claiming legitimacy in a present that repeatedly hails transgender people as 'novel' and 'new', a fad. Yet, as environmental historians have long pointed out, there is also an urgency to thinking beyond anthropocentrism, to understand how 'humans' and 'nature' interact and change each other, and thereby break down the boundary between 'human' and the 'non-human animal', the agential versus the 'natural'.[9] Sujit Sivasundaram, for example, calls for 'multi-species' and even 'trans-species' histories that illustrate the way life forms come together to generate historical change.[10] Trans scholars have already begun this work, showing how trans itself is a process 'through which thingness and beingness are constituted' that allows us to think beyond the human, to the ways in which we become configured or denied as 'human' in relationship to non-human animals.[11] In a special issue on Early Modern Trans history, for example, both Colby Gordon and Holly Dugan show how literary and material culture bound different life forms together, making meaning – including gendered meaning – across species boundaries.[12] Examining the 'binding' across life-forms in a seventeenth-century manuscript (itself the product of imperial encounters), Dugan argues that it illustrates the way 'encounters with animals and animal matter provided a salient way to unfold discourses of dominance in order to transform and manipulate them into new iterations of meaning'.[13] Similarly, Emma Campbell uses the figure of the hyena in medieval bestiaries to show how animal bodies were used to depict what can be understood as 'transness' before the existence of 'transgender'.[14] This article builds on this work to ask how as historians – as storytellers bound by the constraints of archives and evidence – we can imagine trans history otherwise and beyond 'the human'. Critical to this imagining is a mapping of the ways that the status of 'human' is itself

contingent upon a racist and ableist hierarchy in which Black and/or disabled people in particular have been denied the status of 'human'.[15]

To build an 'epistemology of the monstrous' for trans history is, I argue, a project of reckoning with the racialised and gendered specificities of 'the monstrous' as it was configured in relationship to the construction of 'the human'. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in and across European empires are particularly generative moments for thinking through this relationship; I focus here on the British empire. Indeed, many trans and intersex invocations of the monstrous rely subtly on the particular form that the monstrous took during this period. Preciado, for example, situates the 'monstrous' formation that he embraces in relationship to the 'ascent of Western reason' that he locates in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century processes of European colonial classification.[16] A closer look at the multi-layered nature of British-imperial discourses of monstrosity and the non-human during this period, however, reveals the uncertainty of how exactly 'the monstrous' and thereby 'the human' were understood. There was no consensus, even amongst eighteenth-century natural scientists, physicians and philosophers of the Royal Society, of what exactly constituted the 'monstrous'. 'Monsters' frequented the pages of *Philosophical Transactions* throughout the period and included conjoined twins, anecephalic infants, foetuses with fatal anomalies, 'hermaphrodites', 'monstrous' lambs, calves, cat, pigs, turkeys and sheep. The thoughts and beliefs of the lower orders of people are more difficult to discern, but handbills for popular 'freak' shows oscillate between wonder and curiosity, between 'superstition' and 'science'. As Anita Guerrini has argued, the line between 'popular' and 'learned' engagements with the question of 'monsters' was porous; the multiple editions of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* throughout the eighteenth century illustrate the coming-together of different and often contradictory ways of understanding the world.[17] This ambivalence around the meaning of 'monsters' in relationship to 'the human' is itself a fruitful space from which to imagine the possibilities for trans history. This article looks at two examples of the changing discourse of the monstrous in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain, to explore the ways in which debates over uncategorisable bodies reveal the process of configuring the boundaries of the human. Drawing on Hil Malatino's concept of 'queer corporeality' – 'bodies that don't cohere according to cis-centric, sexually dimorphic, ableist conceptions of somatic normalcy' – I ask what it would look like to put this history of the human/non-human boundary during the period of British colonial expansion into dialogue with transgender history.[18]

In this article, I focus on two figures of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought and interrogation that were located in different ways on the boundaries of the human and non-human – 'the mermaid' and 'the hermaphrodite'. These two were by no means the only figures that circulated in the freak shows and exhibition halls, as well as in the letters pages of newspapers and in the journals of philosophical enquiry, of Europe. Indeed, they were accompanied by a myriad of other bodies – from the babies of both human and non-human animals born with two heads, to electric eels, albino Africans and Ethiopian satyrs – whose bodily forms appeared to defy and disrupt the 'natural'.[19] Not all these characters were deemed to be 'monstrous', some were referred to as 'creatures' and/or 'wonders of nature'. All, however, posed a spectre of what Gupta, Pearce and Moon refer to as 'strangeness and difference'. I focus here on 'the mermaid' and 'the hermaphrodite' because whilst there are many differences between them, there is also a lot that these two figures share in common. Both had a place in classical literature as sexually alluring and simultaneously deceptive characters; indeed, it was partly this long heritage that made them sources of fascination to eighteenth-century British scholars and popular audiences alike. The display of 'mermaids' and 'hermaphrodites' in freak shows is evidenced by their advertisements in newspapers and handbills and it was often these exhibitions that alerted 'scholars' to their existence. To varying extents, both 'the mermaid' and 'the hermaphrodite' provoked interest and voyeuristic fascination because of their sexual ambiguity, ambiguity that raised questions amongst natural scientists about generation in human and non-human animals alike. Finally, both the existence of 'mermaids' and 'hermaphrodites' had been debated by European male scholars, who denied their existence repeatedly, and each time definitively, only for the topic to resurface in response to the appearance of a 'mermaid' or 'hermaphrodite' in popular culture.

This article is based on letters and newspaper reports of mermaid sightings, handbills advertising the display of both mermaids and 'hermaphrodites' and contributions to debates over mermaids and particularly of 'hermaphrodites' that were published by physicians and members of the Royal Society. Although few contemporaries discussed 'mermaids' and 'hermaphrodites' together, in both popular and elite discussions they occupied a similar fascination as 'wonders' and 'anomalies' of nature. If there is much that these two figures have in common, however, their historiographies diverge dramatically. Historians of mermaids during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually position their discussions in relationship to Enlightenment debates about natural history. Vaughan Scribner has argued that debates over the existence of merfolk illustrate the longevity of 'wonder' in Enlightenment discussions of natural science, whilst Béatrice Laurent has discussed the role of the mermaid in Victorian ideas of evolution.[20] Focusing on early modern English literature, Tara Pedersen argues that there was no fixed idea of a mermaid, that mermaids during this period feature in many different guises, including as inhabitants of uncharted water and as narrators of histories with no 'monolithic master-narrative' of winners or losers. Overall, however, these different iterations and sightings of mermaids were always associated with hybridity, complexity, strangeness and uncertainty.[21] So, too, were 'hermaphrodites' but in a very different way. Although mermaids were conceptualised as human-like, human-fish hybrids or non-human animals with human features, it was the classification of human beings as 'hermaphrodites' that was under debate. Historians have therefore tended to position histories of 'the hermaphrodite' in relationship to histories of medical debates over the meaning of 'sex' and sexuality, and of intersex history in particular.[22] As argued briefly below, this is too narrow a definition of the term 'hermaphrodite', which was used far more broadly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Finally, a word about terminology. Unless quoting directly from sources, I use 'they' to refer to those whose gender was ambiguous to observers and whose own testimony is lost or was never recorded.[23] Although some intersex scholars and activists have reclaimed the word 'hermaphrodite', much like 'queer' has been reclaimed, others regard its usage as rearticulating the violence and dehumanisation that is still enacted on intersex people.[24] I use the term, albeit cautiously and always in quotation marks, because in eighteenth-century Britain 'hermaphrodite' served as a discursive marker of a range of differences that blurred the boundaries of what we today view as distinct categories of gender, sexuality and racial differences that came together to mark the boundaries of the human.[25] Following Felicity Nussbaum's work on bodily 'anomaly' and 'the human' in the eighteenth century and Gill-Peterson and C Riley Snorton's analyses of the relationship between trans history and the history of race and racism, I understand trans history as impossible to parse out from these intersecting forms of difference.[26] My aim, therefore, is to understand how these shifting markers of difference constituted 'the human' and what trans historians might gain from focusing on its boundaries. Where better to begin than the abode of mermaids, the fluid boundaries of the coastline and the vast oceans that connect supposedly discrete and bounded spaces of land?

Half-fish and half-human beings have existed in literature, oral history and mythology for thousands of years and across different cultures and regions. Whilst tritons and seamen, mermen, monk-fish and bishop-fish are mentioned in the annals of early modern Europe, the most widespread image of a human-fish hybrid is the mermaid, who was almost always represented as half woman and half fish. Perhaps the best known and enduring of these hybrids are the sirens of Homer's *The Odyssey* who lured sailors to their deaths with their sweet and beguiling song. Throughout the classical and medieval periods, sirens were represented as both half human, half fish and half bird, half fish; it was not until the Renaissance that the terms 'siren' and 'mermaid' became used interchangeably to denote a fish-human hybrid.[27] As a chap-book published around 1757 illustrates, the mermaid was widely used as a sign of feminine duplicity and guile, often, as in this engraving, holding a mirror and comb as symbols of vanity. Evidently evoking *The Odyssey*, the text warns the reader of the dangers of temptation, stating: 'A Mermaid now with Luring Smile/And Soul-enchanting Song/Beware or she'll your heart beguile/And make you turn to wrong'.[28] However, the enchanting and dangerously 'beguiling' mermaid was not the only form of mermaid in the British Isles. In the Scottish Highlands,

mermaids were one of a number of water spirits, alongside shape-shifting water kelpies who turned from horses into other beings including humans.[29] From the sixteenth century, European colonial voyagers reported mermaids in a wide range of waters, from the coastlines of South and North America as well as East Africa, the Pacific Ocean and the rivers and lakes of the Congo.[30] These sightings were circulated in the press and occasional exhibits of mermaid specimens, usually in London, were advertised in handbills. They were also the subject of scientific curiosity and scrutiny; Hans Sloane, Linnaeus and Darwin all engaged with mermaid sightings and specimens as part of their wide-ranging research into natural history.[31]

As the early pages of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* make evident, mermaids were not the only human–animal hybrids to seize the imaginations of philosophers and popular spectators alike. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, the idea of hybrid species was widely accepted and attributed either to cross-species sex, or to the impression of an animal upon a pregnant woman's imagination, or even an accident of proximity to animal semen during sex.[32] In the chapter on monstrous births, for example, *Aristotle's Masterpiece* mentions cross-species sex as if it were a commonly accepted phenomenon and states that monstrous forms have a soul unless they are the result of 'the woman's unnaturally mixing with other Creatures' in which case they would 'perish as brute Beasts'.[33] Human–animal hybrids such as the 'elephant man' or 'bear lady' remained a feature of popular imagination well into the nineteenth century.[34] For physicians and natural philosophers, hybrids and cross-species sex provided possible answers to broader questions about the reproductive process. Sir John Floyer's observations on 'monstrous pigs' with a face 'something representing that of a man's' to the Royal Society, for example, argued that the human-faced pig could not be a hybrid because the male *animalcula* alone was determinative of species.[35] Read to the Society by Edward Tyson, the argument seems to have followed a version of the preformation theory of reproduction that understood the male seed to contain a miniature version of 'man'; the female, in this context, was primarily the vessel in which the *animalcula* grew.[36] These debates did not completely preclude the possibility of species hybrids – like Tyson, Daniel de Superville argued that mules always represented the male donkey than the mare because 'the male furnishes the most essential part in the generation, viz. the Embryo'.[37] The mermaid, however, appears not to have figured in these debates over generation until the mid-nineteenth century when, as Laurent has argued, evolutionary theory revisited the idea of hybrids in general and mermaids in particular as 'missing links' between fish and human. Charles Darwin posited a 'water-breathing, swimming-tailed, hermaphrodite ancestor', not exactly a mermaid but potentially inspired by debates over the Feejee mermaid of 1822 that Darwin would have encountered in his youth.[38]

The Feejee mermaid marks the end-point of my discussion of mermaids and their relevance for trans history. The dried corpse of the supposed-mermaid was brought to Britain and subsequently the USA by Captain Eades who purchased it from some Dutch East India Company sailors who had themselves bought it from Japanese fishermen. Despite being revealed as a hoax – a skilfully assembled combination of orangutan head, bird quill, and the tail of a fish – it was displayed, initially to great acclaim, in the 1820s.[39] Although the Feejee mermaid's exposure as a fake did not end the fascination with mermaids amongst the British public, it seems to have largely concluded a long period of debate over the existence of mermaids as half-fish, half-human hybrids. Reports of mermaid sightings in the press and handbills advertising their display both confirm Guerrini's argument, that learned and popular display intersected, and show how far Enlightenment rejection of 'superstition' and ideas about the correct means of observing and describing 'nature' permeated across genres and levels of society.[40] Sightings of mermaids and handbills advertising their display have common narrative frameworks, beginning with acknowledgements of the doubt surrounding the existence of mermaids and immediately followed by various literary devices aimed at dispelling that doubt through assertions of veracity and credibility. In 1796, for example, a handbill stated that 'whereas many have imagined that the history of mermaids, mentioned by the Authors of Voyages, is fabulous, and only introduced as the Tale of a Traveller; there is now in Town and Opportunity, for the Nobility, Gentry, etc to have an ocular Demonstration of its Reality'.[41] In his brief discussion of mermaids on the coast of Africa

around 1785, James Forbes stated that, 'Although the existence of mermen and mermaids is doubted by many, the history of England, Holland, Portugal and other countries, proves the reality of these creatures'.[42] Likewise, in his 1809 letter to Dr Torrence, the schoolmaster, William Munro begins by acknowledging 'general scepticism which prevails among the learned and intelligent' about the existence of mermaids and expressed his concern that his own witness testimony would render him a laughing-stock amongst philosophers. His letter, which was subsequently published in *The Times*, ends by asserting that it was only by seeing the mermaid with his own eyes that he was 'perfectly convinced of its existence' and hoped that his letter might convince others of 'a phenomenon hitherto almost incredible to naturalists'.[43] The 'doubt' that the many writers refer to inscribes them with respectability and rationality and reassures their audience of the veracity of their testimony. In this respect, it followed a standard format relating to the majority of 'monsters' or 'curiosities' on display in which seeing was proposed as the solution to overcoming doubt or fears of deception. As one advert for the display of a 'Satyr, Or Real Wild Man of the Woods' stated, 'haste, see him, and believe'.[44]

News of mermaids invariably came first from the peripheries of the British Isles – the coastal regions of the Highlands of Scotland, Cornwall and Ireland – and the oceans that were the conduits (as well as often the disrupters) of colonial conquest and the trafficking of enslaved Africans, convicts and indentured labourers. The circulation of knowledge about mermaids also mirrors the intersecting hierarchies of place (from the sea, to the coasts, inland, to London where the majority of mermaids were exhibited), gender and socio-economic status. Many mermaid sightings reported in the press begin with sightings by fisherman, sailors or cattle herders – often children – who report the mermaid to their superiors, who then write to the local parish priest or gentleman, who forwards their testimony to the press and sometimes to a gentleman's society. A newspaper cutting from 1810, for example, reported a mermaid off the coast of Kintyre, first sighted by an eight-year-old girl and her younger brother who had been herding cattle for her father. She was examined by the sheriff of Kintyre, who signed the letter, which was published above another testimony by a John McIrrie, simply described as a 'young man', who was examined by the Minister of Cambelltown and the Chamberlain of Mull.[45] In a letter written by a young woman, Eliza Mackay, about a mermaid off the coast of Reay in 1809, Mackay (like many women writers) undermines the veracity of her own, individual 'ocular examination' and states her hope that the numbers of witnesses – her cousin, a 'boy', and two servant girls – would be enough to substantiate her claim.[46] Her letter to the Dowager of Sandside was published in the *Oxford University and City Herald* and circulated across thirteen other local and national newspapers, including *The Times*, the *Morning Post, The Scots Magazine* and the *Dublin Evening Post*.[47] Such layered testimonies reinforced the veracity of mermaid sightings, linking periphery to metropole, and lower to upper orders, whilst also constructing a hierarchy of knowledge and credulity. Yet whilst these testimonies engendered a clear hierarchy, they also created a community of spectators spanning socio-economic divides and consolidated notions of the realm of the human through the explicit configuration of what made these mermaids both proximate to, and different from, humans.

Privileging sight over other senses, the command to believe one's eyes called forth a rational, individual subject as part of a community of other, seeing witnesses. Because witnesses knew that their testimonies would be met with incredulity, they focused on the features of the mermaid that they believed rendered them clearly distinct as half human, half fish, rather than, in Mackay's words 'some other uncommon, though less remarkable inhabitant of the deep'.[48] These testimonies thus offer an insight into the configuration, as well as the foreclosure, of humanness. For many of these testimonies, it was the physical attributes and bodily form that rendered the mermaid distinct as half human. In Munro's testimony, the mermaid he witnessed was, to him, so obviously an 'unclothed human female' that 'its' status as an actual a mermaid was discernible only because of 'its' position on a rock that was inaccessible to non-marine animals. Munro described the mermaid as follows, with a particular focus on 'its' long, brown hair:

> The head was covered with hair of the above colour mentioned and shaded on the crown the forehead round & the face plump the cheeks ruddy the eyes blue the mouth and lips

> of a natural form resembling those of a man[,] the teeth I could not discover as the mouth was shut; the breasts and abdomen the arms and fingers of the size of a full grown body of the human species the fingers from the action in which the hands were employed did not appear to be webbed but as to this I am not positive.[49]

Mackay's testimony similarly focused on the 'plump' and 'white' face, the round light grey eyes and small nose, and the mouth, which she described as 'large'. Although Munro's mermaid twelve years earlier had long, brown hair, Mackay described her mermaid as having 'hair thick and long, of a green oily cast'.[50] An account of a mermaid displayed in 1774 described 'it' as having a face 'like that of a young female, its eyes of a fine light blue, its nose small and handsome, its mouth small, its lips slim and the edges of them round like those of the codfish, its teeth are small regular and white, its chin is well shaped and its neck full'.[51] The anonymous writer, whose letter was published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, paid particular attention to the positioning of the ears, behind which were gills like an eel.

What can these eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century mermaid sightings tell us about the construction of the boundary of the human during this period of colonial expansion and 'scientific' exploration? First, there is a marked difference in how eighteenth-century witnesses described mermaids compared with earlier testimony. An account of a 'merwoman' captured in the Netherlands in 1403 claimed that 'she' was taught to spin and pray, and wore clothes, but never spoke.[52] No further mermaids adopted such practices, but earlier accounts did attribute greater agency and character to the mermaids they sighted. In 1755, *The Gentleman's Magazine* also carried a letter from a Richard Whitbourne who quoted an extract from his ancestor, Captain Richard Whitbourne's *A Discourse and Discovery of Newfoundland* (1622). This account discussed a mermaid who had been sighted in the harbour of St John's Island – now Prince Edward Island – in Newfoundland, recently colonised by Europeans who claimed and settled on Mi'kmaq lands. Captain Whitbourne described how the 'strange creature' 'put both its hands upon the side of the boat, and did strive much to come into him [Whitbourne's servant, William Hawkridge] and divers others then in the said boat'.[53] Although Whitbourne's seventeenth-century account interpretated the mermaid 'looking back towards me' as a sign of curiosity and communication, eighteenth-century commentators tended to deny intention and agency in mermaids' actions. A report in the *Gentleman's Magazine* on the display of the St Germain mermaid in Paris in 1759, for example, describes the mermaid as looking 'earnestly at the spectators' but rather than seeing that as sign of rational agency or communication, states that the mermaid's gaze was 'evidently the attention of mere instinct'.[54] Mackay who reported her sighting of the Reay mermaid in a letter of May 1809 noted that the mermaid's hair 'appear'ed troublesome to it' and that 'with both its hands frequently threw back the hair and rubbed its throat', whilst Munro claimed that the mermaid appeared to observe him, but neither perceive this as a form of communication or intent.[55] 'Instinct', rather than rational agency, positioned the mermaid in relationship to 'brutes', who, in contrast to 'man' was defined as being guided by nature rather than reason. 'Brutes' stated Dugald Stewart to his students of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh are under the more 'immediate guidance of nature, while man is left in a great measure to regulate his own destiny, by the exercise of reason'.[56]

The transition from depictions of mermaids as characters with agency and potential intellectual capacity to mermaids as objects of curiosity whose actions were perceived to be 'mere instinct' is suggestive of a wider transformation in perceptions of the 'natural' world and the place of 'monsters' and 'humans' within it. The relatively brief but often quite detailed accounts of mermaids' physical attributes share similarities with reports of anomalous births and conjoined twins that populated the pages of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* throughout the eighteenth century. Like the descriptions of mermaids, these reports noted the positioning of joints, the absence or presence of limbs, the features of noses and nostrils. 'A Letter from Mr Timothy Sheldrake to Sir Hans Sloane concerning a Monstrous Child born of a Woman under Sentence of Transportation' published in *Philosophical Transactions* in 1734–35, for example, noted that 'the arms were without the elbow-joint' and 'the nose was as if one nose was on the top of another, but only two nostrils, and those at the

bottom of the lower nose'.[57] Often accompanied by anatomical sketches, such reports were generally emotionally detached and descriptive rather than analytical, yet the words 'monstrous', 'monster' and 'creature' reinforced their status as anomalies that placed them on the boundaries of human form. An exception to this general trend sheds light on the role of speech and language in configurations of the monstrous. In 1789, 'An Account of a Monster of the Human Species' discussed the case of a Brahmin boy, Peruntaloo, whose parasitic twin, referred to in the account as his 'little brother', was attached to his abdomen. Although the title of the article refers to a 'monster', it is not clear whether the monstrous refers to Peruntaloo and his partially formed twin, or only to the twin. What is clear is that the description of Peruntaloo as 'a handsome well-made lad' whose 'sagacity' was commended by the authors, both of whom were East India Company servants in Madras Presidency, was in contrast to the other 'monsters' who could not communicate verbally with their observers.[58] The importance of language to the attribution of human-ness is made further evident in the very different case of David Gilbert Tate, a boy from the Shetland Islands born deaf and blind, and who was unable to communicate verbally, is described in the *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* as barely above 'that of a race of animals occupying the lowest scale of creation'.[59]

Despite the fact that philosophers from Francis Bacon to James Burnett, Lord Monboddo and Stewart spent years thinking about what wild children, non-European peoples, orangutans and disabled people meant for human capacities for communication, rationality and the soul, these attributes in mermaids never appear to have been considered.[60] One report referred to a mermaid sighted off the coast of Ireland as 'looking like a Christian, making motions with its hands and head' later referring to 'it' as 'making a noise like a young child' but not elaborating on these signs of humanness.[61] The mermaid's singing voice was a relatively frequent feature of sightings, but no comment was made about whether that song was meaningful or constituted a form of language. Similarly, whilst facial features played a critical role in determining the status of a mermaid as partially akin to humans, witnesses did not read or attribute emotion to them. Earlier depictions of merfolk noted the 'gentle', 'ferocious' or even 'rustic' expressions, but despite the fascination with phrenology and 'countenance' as a racialised marker of character, descriptions of mermaids focused almost solely on the facial features without attributing character to them.[62] At the same time, however, mermaids were not exempt from the racialisation already pervading European thought during this period. In the 'Account of the Mermaid shown in 1774', the anonymous author contrasts a mermaid captured off the Gulf of Stanchio and exhibited in London in 1774 with an earlier exhibit, referred to as the 'St Germain mermaid' in 1759. The latter, the writer claimed, 'had in every respect the countenance of a Negro' whilst the former possessed the 'features and complexion of a European' – 'fair blue eyes' and a 'small and handsome nose'. The differences between the two mermaids provided evidence for two 'distinct genera, or more properly, two species of the same genus', in the same way that there were distinct categories of human.[63] The comparison between the mermaids and the characterisation of the Black mermaid as 'ugly' used racialised ideas of beauty in which facial features, skin, and hair colour became markers of white superiority. The focus on skin colour, nose and lips replicates European-imperial representations of African women, whose black skin, full lips and different texture of hair were denigrated in terms of both femininity and humanity.[64]

Drawing chaotically on Linnaean taxonomic discourse, the author of 'Account of the Mermaid shown in 1774' cites mermaids as part of an Enlightenment debate over the boundaries of species and the variations between them; it is not clear exactly what the author believes. Did the differences between mermaids mirror the differences between 'man'? Or were mermaids part of an oceanic world that mirrored that of the land? This latter suggestion points to both an older cosmology that viewed earth and ocean as distinct, parallel, realms and an emerging evolutionary paradigm in which the ocean was the birthplace of life.[65] The messy and unresolved thoughts of the author point to the complex and slippery definition of 'the human' as it was being worked out across the pages of both 'scientific' and 'popular' print. Ambivalence towards the existence of mermaids remained feature at both ends of this literature. As Scribner has noted, Linnaeus and Osterdam's study of an amphibious creature in South Carolina that they called the *siren lacertina* was the closest they could come to

examining and explaining 'the mermaid'; their hypothesis that this *siren* might be a distant relation to the human was picked up by Darwin a century later.[66] Darwin's suggestion that the mermaid may have been a 'hermaphrodite ancestor' resonated with wider ambiguities and ambivalences around mermaids' 'sex' that were present throughout the eighteenth century. In a 1769 mermaid sighting off the coast of France, for example, the mermaid is alternately described as a 'sea monster, like a man' but from another angle, 'a beautiful woman'.[67] Similarly, sightings off the coast of the Isle of Mann and off Kintyre (Western Scotland) in 1810 referred to the mermaid as having hands 'like a boy', whilst descriptions of the Aquapulca mermaid, exhibited in Bartholomew Square in 1750 referred to it as 'she' and 'half like a woman' but ended by stating that 'the learned can make no discovery of whether it be male or female'.[68] Despite the assumption of femininity and female likeness in so many of these accounts, the mermaid's ambiguous sex is reiterated in all the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts by the use of the indefinite pronoun 'it'. This is a feature shared with other 'monsters' and 'creatures' who, despite the use of 'brothers' or 'boys', 'children' or 'female', are universally referred to as 'it'. It is this feature, too, that the mermaid most obviously shares with the figure of the 'hermaphrodite' to which I now turn.

Like the mermaid, the figure of the 'hermaphrodite' has a long history in European thought that goes back at least as far as the classical period and straddles mythological and medical discourse. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, was physically joined by the gods to the water-nymph, Salmacis, who had fallen in love with him.[69] There are many aspects of hybridity in this story but the one that became prevalent was the mixing of masculinity and femininity, physically and sexually. As with debates over the existence of mermaids, debates over 'hermaphrodites' were inherited from classical and post-classical natural science, physiology and myth. Similarly, although scholars frequently declared the debate to be 'over', questions about mermaids and 'hermaphrodites' constantly resurfaced, usually in response to reports of sightings, exhibitions or displays that capitalised on public curiosity and voyeurism. From the classical period onwards, medical debates around reproduction used the term 'hermaphrodite' to refer to babies born with indistinct genitalia, as well as to broader assumptions about gender and sexual diversity, particularly in non-European contexts. As Deborah Miranda has argued, from the sixteenth century onwards Spanish settler-colonists and colonial missionaries used words meaning both 'hermaphrodite' and 'effeminate' to refer to third-gender California Natives. The brutal persecution that they, and other 'gender-diverse' Native Americans, experienced from Spanish and British colonists was, however, as much about the assumption that they practiced sodomy – and the association of anal penetration with femininity – as it was about their gender.[70] Returning to this archive of violent persecution, Jamey Jesperson names this process of targeting feminine expression in people who were assumed by colonisers to be male, as 'transmisogyny'.[71] In colonial South Asia, British imperial scholars of Sanskrit interpreted the word *kliba* to mean alternately, 'eunuch', 'hermaphrodite' and/or an 'effeminate' male.[72] Although by the mid nineteenth century, British imperialists usually used 'eunuch' to refer to people such as the *hijra, kojah* or *khoti*, whose gender roles and expressions sat outside of the gender binary, 'hermaphrodite' remained a term of reference. The caption of an anonymous photo produced around 1860, for example, reads 'Gurmah, Khunsa, or Hijra, reputed hermaphrodite, Eastern Bengal'. The photo depicts three people standing in a reed and bamboo structure, the middle person is dressed in a sari, blouse and dupatta, whilst the two others are in white dresses playing small percussion instruments.[73]

That there was a widespread familiarity with the term 'hermaphrodite' amongst the British, as well as British imperialists and settler colonists, is evident from the frequency of the term in newspapers. The *Leeds Intelligencer* of 1760, for example, reported in the country news of a person named Montague in Bristol who 'feigned himself a woman in man's apparel'. Montague was examined by an apothecary, two surgeons and a nurse who declared them to be alternately male, female and 'hermaphrodite'; they were ultimately committed to the house of correction for being 'disorderly and an imposter'.[74] Eleven years later, the *Reading Mercury* reported from the *London Gazette* 'extraordinary' news of a wife 'accused by the husband of incontinency, and the husband by the wife of

being an hermaphrodite'.[75] That 'hermaphrodite' was used as sexualised and gendered slur is also evident in a certificate signed by the physician and anatomist, William Hunter, in 1772 stating that Anna Maria Montagu (b.1759) was not a 'hermaphrodite'. Hunter claimed that the rumours that Anna Maria 'is an hermaphrodite and partakes of both sexes or has some other secret and unnatural defect' were 'malice or wanton cruelty' and that having served as her physician since her infancy, he had 'neither observed nor heard of any suspicion that she was in any part of her body otherwise than naturally or perfectly well formed'.[76] Anna Maria Montagu may have been subject of gossip due to her parents' relationship outside of marriage – her mother, Anna Maria Donaldson was a singer and mistress of George Montagu-Dunk, Earl of Halifax who had died the year before Hunter wrote his certificate.[77] That 'hermaphrodite' was a widely known and used term amongst the British population in Britain and its colonies is evident from these fleeting examples. Encounters and engagements with 'hermaphrodites' in eighteenth-century Britain, however, are most prevalent in medical debate and popular display. As Ruth Gilbert has shown, eighteenth-century debates over 'hermaphrodites' were positioned at the intersection of the 'natural science's' instruction to observe and pornographic sensationalism.[78] Although obscenity was not legislated against until 1857, by the nineteenth century, the display of genitalia was viewed as obscene and likely to have been prevented by the authorities.[79] Indeed, part of the sensationalism around Sara Baartman's display as the 'Hottentot Venus' between 1810 and 1812 related to the violation of decency as a result of the tight-fitting costume she wore that suggested nudity and the voyeuristic fascination with her genitalia and buttocks, a fascination that brought Blackness and sexuality together in the British-imperial public's imagination.[80]

As with mermaid sightings, rumours of 'hermaphrodites' are preserved due to elite and media curiosity, but often began with the lower orders of society. Constantia Boon, for example, was 'discovered' and reported to be a 'hermaphrodite' by 'her mistress' when serving as an apprentice quilter.[81] Boon was one of a number of 'hermaphrodites' to be exhibited in London in the eighteenth century. Whilst Douglas insisted that they were female, a jury at the Old Bailey in which Boon's 'wife', Katherine Jones was accused of bigamy accepted that Boon was a 'hermaphrodite' (and 'monster' as Jones attested) and thereby acquitted Jones.[82] Although natural scientists and physicians decried the 'superstitions' of the populace for their belief in 'hermaphrodites', as with mermaid sightings they also relied on popular reports and exhibitions to gain awareness of, and access to, ambiguous bodies. This was certainly the case with the display of a person, referred to alternately as 'the African hermaphrodite' and 'the Angolan hermaphrodite' displayed in London in the 1740s. According to the physician and man-midwife, James Douglas (*c*.1675–1742), who examined them, they arrived in Bristol from the Americas, and from there travelled on to London.[83] In London, their presence was advertised in a broadside entitled, 'Faemina, Mas, Maurus, Mundi mirabile [Female, Male, Moore, Miracle of the world]' with an invitation to view them at the Golden Cross coffee house.[84] A year or so after that first display they were exhibited again, although there is no evidence that they participated in wider tours of Britain or beyond. For one shilling, members of the public could attend the showrooms 'a few doors from Ludgate-Hill, in the Old Bailey, on the Left-Hand, opposite to the Blue-Bell' and witness this 'curiosity'. Attendees could also purchase an engraving of their genitalia for another six pence. Unlike the initial broadside advertising their display, the *c*.1741 broadside simply referred to them as 'The Famous African' and stated that the passage of time had 'improved the Wonder in this unparallel'd Curiosity'. They were, it concluded, 'a most wonderful Mixture of Male and Female'.[85]

That there was widespread knowledge of this unnamed, probably enslaved African displayed as a 'hermaphrodite' in London is suggested by a reference to them in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, describing them as a 'The Negro *hermaphrodite* of Angola, who caused such a stir in London in the middle of this century'.[86] Given the interest of the men who made up the Royal Society, including the colonial collector Sir Sloane to whom Parsons dedicated the *Inquiry*, it is surprising that racial difference and blackness does not feature in the drawings or in the discussions of this unnamed African displayed as a 'hermaphrodite'. Unlike the Black mermaid whose features were described as 'ugly' in comparison with the 'European' mermaid, there is no explicit comparison made between the African displayed as a 'hermaphrodite' and other, European 'hermaphrodites'. Parsons claimed that instances

of 'macroclitorides', who were popularly assumed to be 'hermaphrodites', were more common in Asia and Africa, 'nearest the equinotical line' where the heat led to the 'general relaxation of the solids in human bodies' and thereby to the 'unseemly accretion of that part'.[87] This configuration of genital differences as both 'unseemly' and a 'deformity' and its linking to Africa and Asia constituted non-European bodies less perfect and natural than European bodies. In this respect, Parsons' comment can be linked to broader Enlightenment discussions of Blackness as aberration, monstrosity and deformity; he commended the 'chirurgical excision' of that part by Ethiopians and Egyptians in order to prevent tribadism.[88] Although Douglas' examination included taking a biographical history, the lack of any reference to the name of the 'African hermaphrodite' adds a racist layer of violence to the sexualised dehumanisation of people with sexually ambiguous bodies. This lack of naming contrasts with Europeans displayed as 'hermaphrodites', including Boon and Michael-Anne Drouart whose life-story was relayed as part of the discussion of their body.

As with mermaids, the focus of eighteenth-century medical and popular discourse on 'hermaphrodites' was on anatomical description. Although observations of mermaids focused on the aspects of their faces and bodies that rendered them part-human and part-fish, discussions of 'hermaphrodites' fixated primarily on the genitalia and then on other bodily features (breast development, muscular structure and hair patterns) that positioned them in proximity to either 'male' or 'female'. The attention to genitalia, like that of mermaid anatomy, appears to have become greater during the eighteenth century. Courtney Thompson argues that images of disembodied genitals contrasts with earlier images of 'hermaphrodites' portraying the whole body, including facial expressions that lend an air of pathos and personhood.[89] Drouart, the sixteen-year-old child of weavers in Paris and was exhibited as a 'hermaphrodite' in Paris in 1749 and in Carnaby Street, London in 1750. 'An Account of the famous hermaphrodite or Parisian Boy-Girl' written by the Belgian surgeon, M. Vacherie, provided a detailed description of Drouart's genitalia for those who 'may never have an opportunity of a personal visitation'.[90] Like the unnamed, African 'hermaphrodite', Drouart was examined by multiple physicians, including Parsons and George Arnaud, and members of the public. Drawings of their genitalia circulated alongside those of the unnamed African 'hermaphrodite', forming part of Parsons' *Inquiry* with the parts labelled; an engraving of their genitalia was also made by the same artist, Gautier d'Agoty who painted the St Germain mermaid.[91] Descriptions of the genitalia or 'hermaphrodites' were rendered in Latin in the handbills advertising their display to avoid accusations of indecency and to restrict comprehension to an educated, usually male elite. Yet the sale of engravings of the genitals of those displayed as 'hermaphrodites' for only six pence suggests a wider demand for visual access to their genitalia alone. Douglas' sketches from his examination were published in the 1740 edition of Cheselden's *The Anatomy of the Human Body*, and in James Parsons' *A Mechanical and Critical Inquiry into the Nature of Hermaphrodites* (1741), with an additional drawing of the external view of their genitalia.[92]

While the main focus of accounts of individual 'hermaphrodites' was on the genitals, comments on facial features, manner, voice and sexual activity provided the additional context for anatomies that refused to yield definitive answers. The handbill advertising the display of the unnamed African described their facial features as 'masculine, which seem perfectly feminine in the circumstance of smiling or joy', their body was also 'wonderful mixture of male and female' – their shoulders were strong, their arms and hands 'neat and slender', their 'thighs and legs a perfect model of female symmetry [*sic*]'.[93] In contrast, Douglas' description, to which Parsons referred in his *Inquiry*, claimed that there was nothing 'masculine in her countenance' – no beard, soft and 'fleshy' skin, small breasts and an 'effeminate voice in the common Tone of speaking'.[94] Arnaud concurred, stating that 'this African had all the proportions of body, the tone of voice, and the ways of a woman'.[95] Discussing Drouart, Arnaud determined that 'his countenance, his voice, his corpulence, the proportion of his limbs, denote very distinctly the male kind' and determined that he was 'a lad ill-formed in his genital parts, and incapable of generation'.[96] Parsons, on the other hand, referred to Drouart as a 'girl' and claimed that 'what is mistaken for a penis and has at first sight caused the deception, is the clitoris, grown to an inordinate size'.[97] As scholars from M. W. Bychowski, Matt Houlbrook and Jack Halberstam have noted, the

discourse of 'deception' has a long history in relationship to queer, trans and intersex histories and has acted an excuse for disciplining, denial and violence.[98] In Parson's comment Drouart's body becomes a site of 'deception', a 'deception' that is to be exposed and remedied through medical examination and his own assertion of the truth of Drouart's sex. It is clear from both Arnaud and Parsons' accounts that both Drouart and the Angolan person displayed as a 'hermaphrodite' spoke with their examiners, enough to provide insights into their tone of voice and to determine their sexual experiences and desires. Yet despite this, none of the accounts of Drouart or the unnamed, Angolan 'hermaphrodite' quoted from, or gave any significance, to the words that they shared with their examiners. Instead, their tone of voice became a part of their physiognomy; their bodies were the overdetermining markers of who – or what – they 'really' were.

As with mermaids, pronouns played an important role in configuring the meaning of those defined and debated as 'hermaphrodites'. M. Vacherie, who argued for the existence of 'hermaphrodites', referred to Drouart as 'it' throughout his 'Account' and as an 'extraordinary creature' whose body closely, if not perfectly, resembled that which the 'Greeks understood by their *Androgyne*, that is to say, a human Creature enjoying equally the full Powers of both Sexes, and capable of the double Act of Generation, in the Quality of Man and Woman'.[99] In contrast, Parsons used 'she' and 'her' to describe both Drouart and the unnamed African person in order to insist on their status as women.[100] In both accounts, Parsons and Vacherie use the term 'creature' but in markedly different ways. In the eighteenth century, 'creature' was itself a broad and flexible term, used during this period to denote the generality of God's creation ('any earthly creature') but also signifying an unclassifiable being, as well as an abject state, on the boundaries of the human.[101] Arnaud used the term 'creature' throughout his 'Dissertation on Hermaphrodites', even when he used 'she' or 'he', in order to suspend judgment on the sex of the body under examination.[102] Although in a more sensationalist manner, Vacherie also used 'creature', alongside 'it', which enabled him to keep open the possibility of the existence of 'hermaphrodites' in human form and to refute the claims made by an increasing number of physicians and natural scientists who treated 'the hermaphrodite' as 'an imaginary Being'.[103] 'Creature' did not necessarily denote an ambivalence over sex designation. A letter in *Philosophical Transactions* published in 1734–35 described a 'monstrous birth' as a 'surprising Creature' but at the same time stated that 'as to Sex, this Creature was a Female, and born alive'.[104] Similarly Parsons, who argued that 'hermaphrodites' were always women with enlarged clitorises, used 'poor human Creatures (which were only distorted in some particular Part)' to signify the wretchedness of those 'poor women' who had been mistakenly labelled as 'hermaphrodites' and thereby as 'prodigies or monsters in nature'.[105] In these instances, 'creature' could evoke wonder and curiosity about the diversity and capaciousness of the human form, or a state of abjection that was implied by a body that failed to live up to the perfection of nature, bodies that were in Parsons' words, merely 'deformed' or 'diseased'.[106]

Although he called for an end to the persecution of 'women' who had been labelled 'hermaphrodites', Parsons' nonetheless gave a deeply pathologising and othering account that understood genital differences as deformity and promoted genital mutilation in order to uphold heterosexuality. Like many other physicians including de Superville, Parsons explained 'monsters', including conjoined twins, as merely 'imperfect' forms, the result of compression during gestation.[107] Similarly, he argued that 'hermaphrodites' were not a separate or distinct species of human, or the combination of 'the two sexes, Male and Female' in perfect form, but an 'unseemly' deformity that could, in some cases, be corrected by surgical intervention in order to restore the natural order.[108] That Parsons recommended this in order to prevent 'women's abuse of them [large clitorises] with each other' promoted an inseparable relationship between bodily and sexual order.[109] Arnaud de Ronsil had a different interpretation, arguing that 'hermaphrodites', like other 'monstrous combinations' represented a coming together in one body of that which should be separate and distinct ('she separates what, according to her own laws, should be joined, and joins what ought to remain separate').[110] Despite their differences in explanation, however, both viewed 'hermaphrodites' as aberrations and as a threat to the perfect ordering of nature. Both advocated surgical interventions – Parsons in particular relished the cutting and snipping of the genitalia in the belief that it would yield the truth of sex – as

a corrective to nature's error. To be fully human was to be either male or female; those whose bodies and selves were ambiguous in relationship to that binary were configured not as distinct beings but as 'deformed' or 'defective', inferior and imperfect.

In the opening chapter of her book, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex*, Elizabeth Reis quotes Dr Alexander Hamilton's journal of his travels across settler-colonial North America in 1744 in which he states that he saw 'the greatest wonder and prodigy' who he suspected to be a 'hermaphrodite' and who he stated was 'every whit as strange a sight by land as a mermaid is at sea'.[111] Reis refers to this extract as a 'far-fetched vignette' that was intended to amuse and she uses it as a segue into more 'serious' discussion of early settler-colonists' beliefs about 'hermaphrodites' in North America. Yet it is worth pausing over Hamilton's comparison. Whilst it may be the case that Hamilton meant this simply as a means of comparing figures of mythology, his description of the 'creature' mirrors many aspects of the depictions of mermaids, as well as 'hermaphrodites', discussed above. Focusing on the face and hair, he described 'coarse features' and 'hideous' appearance, and portrayed the lower part of the 'creature's' body as covered in petticoats, with the silhouette 'the exact shape of a woman with relation to broad round buttocks'.[112] For Hamilton, this 'creature', which he refers to as both 'he' and 'it', appeared to be a land-based equivalent of the mermaid in its hybridity, rarity and monstrosity.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British-imperial fascination and disavowal of both 'the mermaid' and 'the hermaphrodite' was part of a wider, violent history of othering as well as of the disavowal of entanglements, relationships, and contingencies – between enslaver and enslaved, between agency and abjection, between 'civilization' and 'savage'.[113] The relegation to 'the monstrous' and 'unnatural' was itself a colonial strategy that enabled the construction of 'the human' not only as superior to all other beings, but as the only possessors of the capacity for agency, power and progress. As members of the Enlightenment's cabinet of curiosities and the Victorian freak show's 'monstrous' bodies, both 'the mermaid' and 'the hermaphrodite' were placed either side of the boundary of the human, as borderline figures whose hybridity and ambiguity questioned or disturbed the 'natural' order. It is no surprise that these figures in particular resonate with trans, genderqueer, nonbinary and intersex people today. Both brought together ideas about sex, gender and sexuality that intersected (albeit in different ways) with racialised and ableist assumptions about the meaning of the human body. They shared, for example, a perception of duplicity and inauthenticity that is inseparable from their ambiguous sex, bodily nonconformity and sexuality. The mermaid as 'siren' was believed to lure sailors to their deaths with their enticing song and was more generally used as a misogynistic symbol of sexual and moral danger and duplicity. In a different but similar way, the 'hermaphrodite' was often represented as a danger to women, either because they tempted them into tribadism or because they offered false promises of heterosexual procreation. The mermaid's hybrid body and human-like voice and the 'hermaphrodite's' dual status as both male and female, signified moral deception and danger in forms that were both highly sexualised and inauthentically human. These representations persist today. In the media and politics, in our homes and places of work and study, on the streets, in public toilets, we are relentlessly reminded that our bodies and selves are 'unnatural' or 'impossible', and that we supposedly pose a moral danger to children and cis women. At the same time, many of us find resonances with figures who have muddled the minds of generations of 'gentlemen' seeking to impose order and definitions on 'nature', who have troubled, in Malatino's words, 'epistemological certainties' and unsettled what is assumed to be the 'natural' order.[114]

It is not *just* that the monstrous beings of British imperial imaginations resonate with our experiences and locations as people whose bodies and selves are placed on the margins of the category of 'the human'. Rather it is that we are, in our bodies and selves – especially those of us who are also disabled, Black, brown, indigenous, Adivasi – entangled with and formed by that history of marginalisation. Exposing the abuses of power, the inextricable links between European colonialism, racism and 'science' masquerading as 'truth' that have led to bodies and beings like ours to be made the subjects of violence, abuse and objectification is one means of refusing its logic. Yet the power of that

exposure is undermined if we simply use it to claim a more expansive definition of 'the human', to confuse dignity and life with inclusion in a category that has itself been premised on the destruction and disavowal of other forms and ways of being.[115] In *Staying with the Trouble*, the queer-feminist scholar Donna Harraway responds to the horror of impending climate catastrophe with an argument for interspecies collaboration, for making 'oddkin … unexpected collaborations and combinations' that will allow us to think beyond the human and beyond 'inherited categories and capacities'.[116] Aligning ourselves with 'the mermaid', 'the hermaphrodite' and the myriad bodies and beings who were positioned on the boundaries of the human is a means of refusing all that is imposed as Other. Yet to make kinship (or 'oddkin') with these disavowed beings is to read against the grain of one-sided narratives, beyond the process of abject-making, to find resonances with our own worlds. How many of us have experienced the refusal to hear our voices and/or gestures as communication even when we speak? How many of us know what it is to have our bodies determine the nature of our being? Focusing on beings and bodies who straddle the boundary of 'the human', allows us to think not about and with identity but about resonance that draws us closer to a kinship with those of the peripheries of 'the human'. I am not claiming that either 'the mermaid' or 'the hermaphrodite' were or are transgender in their lived experiences of themselves and their world, but that the resonances between them and us matter for how we imagine ourselves and them. Building on Greta LaFleur's argument for embracing the 'uncertain complexity' of past lives that may (or may not) be akin to trans lives today, I suggest that we broaden the meaning of 'life' in the telling of trans history to encompass those who may look deeply unfamiliar.[117] This means focusing not on 'identity' – a fleeting and slippery concept – but on echoes and resonances, the glimpses of familiarity across the distances of time and space, of those beings in the past who were labelled the 'monstrous'.

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