

Cristina Brito

Humans and Aquatic Animals in Early Modern America and Africa

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In *Humans and Aquatic Animals*, historian Cristina Brito invites readers into the waters of the early modern Atlantic to explore multispecies interactions between humans and marine animals. Brito aims to give voice to aquatic animals, which have been largely understudied in histories of marine spaces. By studying the evolution in humans' perceptions of and relationships with these creatures, Brito offers a fascinating glimpse at the complex entanglements that make up the waters of the Atlantic. In doing so, she demonstrates that there are a multitude of ways to conceive of the Atlantic and our relationships with the creatures that inhabit it.

Brito follows a number of 'turns' in recent Environmental Humanities studies, particularly the Oceanic and Animal Turns (p. 27). She positions herself within the metaphorical wave of Blue Humanities scholars, adding to this literature by giving focus to marine animals, the environments in which they lived, and the people they interacted with. She also contributes to critical studies of the Anthropocene, particularly drawing from scholars such as Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway, to push against the notion of the Anthropocene as one long, homogenous period dominated by human beings. Brito introduces the concept of the 'Extocene', which she describes as an 'externalization' of the Anthropocene in service of reducing the nature–culture divide (p. 249). In Brito's view, the Anthropocene brought about the start of the Extocene, as it led to an eruption in the number and impact of multispecies assemblages globally (p. 247). And understanding the development of the Extocene requires knowledge of the globalisation and transformations that began in the early modern period, particularly in marine spaces.

Brito's primary muse throughout the book is the manatee, due largely to its hybrid nature. As she describes, manatees 'translate the multiplicities of the world, and the paradoxical ways humans address and use aquatic environments' (p. 224). Chapter 1 explores the story of Matto the manatee and the mythmaking around Matto. Matto was supposedly captured by a Taino chief in the early sixteenth century, lived in an enclosed lagoon for twenty-six years, and escaped following a high tide breaking the enclosure. Brito uses the story of Matto to highlight the multiplicity of ways that humans viewed and interacted with aquatic animals. Matto, along with other manatees, were viewed as both a resource to be gathered and exploited and as creatures with human characteristics to live alongside.

Chapters 2 and 3 detour from the manatee, examining perceptions of the unknown in the early modern period through analysis of aquatic myths and stories. Brito shifts from the manatee to the mermaid, arguing that mermaids

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best represent the inherent ‘paradoxes of the sea’ (p. 80). Chapter 2 focuses on perceptions of the sea through the realm of magic and religion to show how various aquatic deities tie into different understandings of aquatic life. She dives into the notion of duality, as the dual nature of many water-based deities reflects the dual nature of the sea, as both a provider of life and a threat to that very life. She connects this to mermaids by discussing their duality, with the twin-tailed mermaid viewed as both Good and Evil, at times simultaneously (p. 81). In Chapter 3, Brito discusses mermaids through the lens of monsters, encouraging the reader to rethink their understanding of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘true’ (p. 94). Mermaids are not ‘true’, as there is no evidence or proof that they exist. However, they are ‘real’ as beliefs in their existence make them so. Brito details how different societies came to develop beliefs around mermaids and other sea monsters, showing continuity across very different societies in how people made sense of the unknown.

Brito returns to the manatee in Chapters 4 and 5 to explore more broadly their utility and how they lived in relationship to human beings. Chapter 4 focuses on the perceptions of manatees in the early modern period and how different societies viewed and valued them. She details the different practices Amerindian and European societies developed to hunt, capture and kill the manatee, showing how the manatee as a commodity shaped economies. She additionally shows how many Amerindian societies used the manatee for medicinal purposes, with various manatee body parts being used to cure ailments from bleeding to gout (p. 193). By showing the importance of manatees to these societies, Brito makes the case for understanding manatees as actors, transforming the human societies they encountered through their interactions with human beings. In Chapter 5, she further develops her analysis on the interdependence of humans and aquatic animals like the manatee through the framework of ‘naturecultures’ (p. 223). She argues that manatees are a prime example of how humans have lived, and continue to live, in ‘entangled ecologies’ thereby blurring the nature–culture divide. She connects humans’ early modern interactions with manatees to the present to make the case that there are different, non-Western ways of viewing nature. In Brito’s view, having a greater understanding of the history of human actions towards nature is essential for developing new attitudes towards it and better strategies for conserving it.

Humans and Aquatic Animals is an excellent case study of how histories of the sea can help us to understand the relationship between humans and other-than-humans. Brito’s work is consistently thought-provoking and pushes forward discussions of animal agency and how to approach the Environmental Humanities more broadly. However, the organisation of the book occasionally muddies the waters of Brito’s message and argument. Brito saves many of her larger theoretical contributions and discussion, such as the multispecies entanglements of the Extocene, for the end of the book. For readers less versed in the

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literature of multispecies studies, this material may come too late in the book for them to understand it in the context of what they just read. Additionally, the work is often repetitive, such as when Brito seemingly makes the same justification for the study of manatees in three separate chapters. This flattens each chapter, giving the reader the impression that they are reading the same argument three times and doing a disservice to the value each different chapter provides.

Brito's work would fit well within a graduate classroom, particularly around themes of environmental history and the Atlantic World. The structure of the book as a whole may not lend itself perfectly to an undergraduate classroom, but parts of the book, such as the chapter on Matto the manatee, may fit within an upper-level undergraduate course. Overall, *Humans and Aquatic Animals* is an important addition to both Blue Humanities and multispecies studies. Aquatic animals have received sparse attention in the literature of both, providing experts in both new avenues to explore. It is a valuable contribution to the pushback against the nature–culture divide.

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