

Mermaids and Drag Queens: A Queer Look at Mermaiding

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Abstract

Mermaiding is the practice of wearing a tail designed to look like that of a fish. In this work I look at this phenomenon from the lens of gender and performance, aiming to understand if mermaiding constitutes a form of drag, by establishing the position of the mermaid symbol in queer and transgender spaces, then comparing testimonies of drag performers and professional and amateur mermaids. I also look at this practice through the lens of post-human theory, determining in which ways the mermaid body constitutes an object of identification for the person wearing a tail. By doing so, I demonstrate the similarities between the phenomena and their meaning, and show that the emergence of this practice affirms posthuman predictions of a future where the connection between human body and identity dissolve and enable new, hybrid identities.

Keywords: Mermaiding; Drag; Posthumanism; Queer; Performance

The transgender mermaid: The mermaid symbol in queer and transgender spaces

In this article I analyze the phenomenon known as ‘mermaiding’ – swimming with a mermaid tail – through the lenses of gender and performance studies as well as through post-human ideas of identity and the body’s limits. I establish the position of the mermaid symbol in queer and transgender spaces, explore various connections between mermaiding and drag as real-life practices, to explore if and in which ways the mermaid body constitutes an object of identification for the person wearing a tail. Doing so, I aim to firstly argue that mermaiding is a form of drag, and understand the meanings and implications of that connection; and additionally, to understand this practice through a post-human perspective, where the absolute connection between human body and identity dissolves, thus enabling options of identification with other bodies and expansions of the body. Scholars such as Patricia MacCormack (2009, 111) have long strived for the possibility to combine the queer and the posthuman schools of thought - and in this article I answer that call by looking at the mermaiding phenomenon through both these lenses and situating the mermaid symbol between them.

I will start by examining the mermaid symbol and its various iterations across history, as well as its most significant variant in modern times - the protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen’s 1837 story *The Little Mermaid*, and of the animated film of the same name released by Walt Disney Pictures in 1989, based on that story. I will review the history of this ancient symbol and show its connections to queer and transgender thought - the mermaid symbol, as well as the narrative, which has deep transgender connotations.

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The mermaid - half human, half fish - appears in many a place across human history, and according to Sax (2000) it seems tracing her origin is not just hard: it's impossible. Representations of ancient marine goddesses include Sumerian Ninhursag and Babylonian Tiamat. The oldest clear representations of merfolk, comprised of human torsos and fish-like tails, are Babylonian as well - Enki, the Mesopotamian God of Sea was at times represented as having a fish-tail, similarly to Dagon (a fertility god worshiped around Assyria and mentioned in the Jewish Torah and Christian Bible as one of the gods of the Philistines, with temples in Ashdod and in Gaza). Human-fish hybrid characters appear several times in the Babylonian creation myth, as part of Tiamat's army (Sax, 2000). According to Roebing (1992) and Bessler (1995), mermaid imagery has been found in Sumer, Turkey, Russia, India, West Africa (mainly Nigeria), South America and in the Caribbean islands. Merman imagery (the mermaid's masculine counterpart) was found around Assyria, in India and in Greece. For instance, Hietzge (2014) claimed that Greek antiquity holds a double origin of mermaids - the Sirens and the Nymphs: the Sirens, originally represented with a feathered body and wings, and since the sixth (according to Philpotts, 1980), or eighth century AD (Touchefeu-Meyhier, 1962) characterized by their now-infamous scaled lower-half, the Sirens drove sailors like Odysseus insane with their enchanting melodies; and the Nymphs, female demi-goddesses in the role of elementary water spirits connected to fertility and sexuality, of which the Naiads and the Nereids are known - spirits of rivers and of the Mediterranean Sea, respectively. One such naiad appears in the story of the voyage of the Argo, in which she abducts Hylas, a companion of Hercules, into a spring (Sax, 2000).

This theme, of a mermaid kidnapping a man (usually a sailor) to the bottom of the sea to marry her, repeats itself across history, and it is rooted in the deep and complex connection between mermaids and sexuality. The mermaid, a figure of primeval feminine power, is almost always viewed with intense ambivalence. On the one hand, the mermaid is considered highly sexual. Sax (2000) claims that the animal half of the mermaid, her fish tail, is a manifestation of her sexuality. Similarly, her narrative role as a temptress - an ancient mythical *femme fatale* - relates the same message. On the other hand, as Dundes and Dundes (2002) noted, mermaids have no human genitalia and thus, in contrast to their role as temptresses, they are eternal virgins (an aspect evident in the word for mermaid in several languages - such as the English word 'mermaid' and the Hebrew 'בתולת ים', both meaning 'sea virgin'). Sax (2000) describes this ambivalence writing:

The mermaid is plainly very sexual, yet not in the same way as normal women. Perhaps it is a sort of primeval, and there unformed, sexuality. Sexual intercourse between a man and a mermaid is not easily imaginable, since the mermaid is a fish beneath the waist.² (49)

Other researchers such as Williams (2010) find sexual elements not only in the mermaid symbol and in the ancient stories revolving mermaids, but also in Andersen's story, *The Little Mermaid*, and in the various representations of mermaids in contemporary culture:

“Mermaids are powerful symbols of transformation. Part women, part fish, they embody hybridity. But the mermaid also stands, as it were, as a symbol of female sexuality and desire - both as object of desire and as desire personified. In popular American culture, the mermaid has taken on the additional symbol of female rites of passage and pubescent change from girl to woman” (Williams, 2010. 194).

² Despite that fact, several royal houses in history were said to be descendant of or have matrimonial connections with mermaids: The Royal houses of Luxemburg, Plantagenet and Lusignan in Europe (said to be descendants of Melusine the mermaid) and the Sultans of the Javanese Sultanate of Mataram, of whom Nyai Roro Kidul, the mermaid queen of the Southern Sea, is said to be consort to this day.



Undoubtedly, the most prominent mermaid of modern times is the Little Mermaid, the titular character of both the story of the same name by Hans Christian Andersen and of the animated film created by Walt Disney Pictures and released in 1989. The story and the film have been discussed and looked at through various prisms and fields of research, such as feminist (Trites, 1990; O'Brien, 1996), psychoanalytical (Tseelon, 1995), as well as queer (Griffin, 2010) and transgender studies (Gerber, 2017; Spencer, 2017).

The story follows a young mermaid (unnamed in the original story; named Ariel in Disney's version), who falls in love with a prince and through the help of a sea-witch trades her tail (and her voice, as payment) for human legs. According to Yamato (2017), in both versions, literary and animated, the mermaid's interest in humans precedes her acquaintance with the prince, and comprises a key element in her identity. In Andersen's story, published originally in 1837, trading the fin for legs involves immense pain: the transformation itself feels as if a sword splits her body, and each step she takes afterwards feels like walking on sharp knives. The story ends in a complex and tragic fashion - the prince falls in love with another human woman, and the mermaid throws herself from a ship, but instead of dying and turning to seafoam as she expected, she turns into a 'daughter of the air', and might gain an immortal soul similarly to humans. Disney's version changed the story's ending to a happy one, as is customary in this studio's renditions of fairy tales and other children's stories. Thus, in the animated film, Ariel and the prince marry and live happily ever after as humans.

The little mermaid - both the mermaid symbol and the story most identified with her - have deep meaning for queer and transgender individuals. As a symbol, the mermaid is non-binary in its essence: she defies binaries and dichotomies by living on sea and above it, being both human and animal, and having a human identity but no human genitalia - an identity not dependent on sex organs. This notion can be compelling for non-binary persons and for transgender persons that due to gender dysphoria may feel a dislike of their own genitalia, and a need to disconnect their gender identity from it. This idea is expressed by Jazz Jennings, a young transgender woman who received acclaim after creating and swimming with her own mermaid tail. In an article published in *Cosmopolitan* by Michelle Ruiz (2015), Jennings expressed:

A lot of transgender individuals are attracted to mermaids and I think it's because they don't have any genitals, just a beautiful tail. I definitely secretly dream of being a mermaid (Ruiz, 2015).

Hurley (2014) noted that many texts, from mainstream media to medical literature, claim transgender children have a special fascination with mermaids. She adds that literature prepared by the Children's National Medical Center in Washington DC and distributed to families of children with "gender variant behaviours" by hospitals across North America goes so far as to make specific mention of Little-Mermaid-identification as a symptom of gender identity disorder in boys, "(...) usually first noticed between the ages of 2-4 years". As literature and mythology expert Joseph Campbell (1972) put it - a fairy tale is chameleon-like; "(...) putting on the colors of its background [...] living and shaping itself to the requirements of the moment" (1972, 850). It seems many children find elements in *The Little Mermaid* that were not necessarily put there (consciously³) by the author. Similarly, Slagle (2003) claimed that; "queerness is pervasive in texts, even those that are not intentionally queer" (Slagle, 2003, 132). However, there are reasons to believe that some queer

³There is speculation regarding Andersen's conscious use of the story as an allegory for his own heartache and difficulty surrounding his same-sex attraction to his contemporary, Edvard Collin. Andersen sent the story to Collin upon hearing about his engagement to another woman, as well as a letter in which he confessed his feelings - elements echoed in the story. Rictor Norton, in *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries*, theorizes that *The Little Mermaid* was written as a love letter.

values were imbued into the film intentionally, even if not to the original story. Some researchers have theorized that the main composer and producer of *The Little Mermaid*, Howard Ashman, and one of its chief animators, Andreas Deja – both out gay men – have affected the film in ways that enables it to be looked at through a queer lens. Deja, for example, has stated in several interviews that his sexual orientation has impacted the characters he drew – the sea witch Ursula’s visual traits and her use of makeup, for example, are evidently influenced by drag queen fashion (Griffin, 2010).

Trites (1990) said that reading the text from a transgender point of view, *The Little Mermaid* – both Andersen’s story and Disney’s animated version – can be read as a story about performing a transgender identity. Although feminist readings of the story (Trites, 1990; O’Brien, 1996) criticize its heroine for giving up a part of her identity (her tail) for a man, others (Gerber, 2017; Spencer, 2017) perceive the mermaid in a positive way, seeing the aim of her bodily transformation as listening to her heart and reflecting her inner sense of identity. These readings emphasize the fact that the mermaid has been enchanted with humans long before she met the prince, a fact feminist readings of the story tend to overlook. Her interest in the human world is an integral part of her identity, regardless of the romantic arc of the story.

Several scholars point out a number of parallels between the mermaid’s story and the identity development process experienced by transgender individuals (Spencer, 2014). These parallels are manifested in various aspects of the story, such as the central plot element – the mermaid’s will to transform and become human, and the manifestation of that will. Additionally, this can be seen in smaller, but significant elements, such as society’s relation to her, pre- and post-transformation (e.g., the loss of voice), the decision whether to perform a surgical process to change her body, and her father’s relationship with her.

The central and most prominent element, for scholars and trans children alike, is the theme of trans-species transformation. Morgan and Stevens (2008) have found that in many cases, transgender individuals often experience; “(...) a sense of body-mind dissonance, in which their internal gender identity does not match the biological sex of their physical bodies” (587), an experience that is reflected in Andersen’s story through the mermaid’s will to change her body as to reflect her inner fascination with-and attraction to humans. A transgender reading of the story undermines the common understanding of the mermaid’s aim to ‘get the prince’ and emphasizes her independent will to change. Thus, for example, in Andersen’s story, the mermaid; “(...) looks sadly at her fish tail”, and expresses her will to become human herself (2008, 585). In Disney’s version, which was expressed in the song *Part of your world*, in which Ariel sings about wanting to be “where the people are”. The Little Mermaid feels an identification with the human body, despite not being born into it - an identification that can be compared to Serano’s (2007) view of gender, which claims an identification with one gender is a natural human inclination. Similarly, the mermaid’s tendency to collect human objects and inquire about them is reminiscent of typical transgender behavior of collecting objects and clothes related to the child’s desired, or true, gender identity. For instance, many transgender individuals, early in their identity development, seek information and artefacts about the gender with which they relate and long to dress in clothes considered socially appropriate for that gender (Spencer, 2014). Bilodeau (2005), who studied transgender students and youth, cites female participants in his study who described feeling exhilarated at the chance to wear men’s clothes for a theatrical production when there were no men available to act in the role. Spencer (2007) notes that many transgender people move from reading articles to trying on clothes, to meeting other transgender people. Likewise, the mermaid moves from fascination to interaction with humans. In this way, there is a connection between the way the mermaid develops her identity



and fascination with the human world, and the real-world transgender experience and development process.

A transgender reading of the story recognizes that the mermaid must successfully perform an identity that others do not recognize as natural for her, including making decisions about whether to undergo painful changes to her body (Spencer, 2007). In the movie, and even more so in the original story, the mermaid's transition is magical, but no less surgical than a transition performed with a scalpel. The story emphasizes the physicality of her tongue being cut out by the sea-witch and the subsequent pain she endures. According to Spencer (2014), who theorized from a transgender point of view, this pain reflects the difficulty often inherent in a subversive performance of identity. The mermaid's voice, taken from her by the sea-witch, is sometimes interpreted as a symbol for society's silencing of transgender individuals, both as "abnormal" members of society before transitioning, and also after a "successful" transition (123).

Another element (appearing mainly in the animated version) that many see as representing of transgender experience is the mermaid's father's attitude towards her. In the beginning of the film, King Triton is a reluctant parent, refusing to recognize his daughter's distinct identity. The anger, confusion, and frustration Morgan and Stevens (2008) identify as typical to the relationships of parents with their transgender children are apparent in King Triton's behavior and reactions throughout the film (Spencer, 2007) such as his decision to destroy Ariel's collection of human artifacts.

Finally, the mermaid's story shows a complex image of transitioning: on the one hand it shows it as an immediate, absolute and even magical shift from one state to another. On the other hand, the story also shows the hardships of performing a role that is unnatural, or is perceived as such, for the individual - not only before but also after transitioning. This echoes ideas presented by Ziv (2011) in her analysis of the medical model of what accounts as a 'successful' transitioning, where postoperative transgender individuals are expected to settle quickly into their new gender, cut off their ties to the past, and become 'normal' heterosexual women or men. And yet, the story (Disney's version of it especially) also contains hope, and perhaps that is the key factor in its deep appeal to transgender persons: in the end, the Little Mermaid manages to transform her body and perform human; in Disney's film her father eventually accepts her and her new identity, so much so that he takes an active part in her becoming a human; and finally, as if winking privately, he even puts a rainbow in the sky.

Wigs and fins: Mermaiding as a form of drag

In this section I will define the key concepts to which this paper relates - mermaiding and drag; as well as other important concepts in queer and gender studies, which I wish to put in conversation with the mermaiding phenomenon.

Mermaiding

Mermaiding is the name given to a practice in which people (i.e., adults, children, non-binary, trans, and cis folk) wear a special tail, that is designed to look like a fish's tail, and is made from various materials (mainly Lycra, neoprene or silicone) and ends with a fluke (a firm monofin that strengthens the feet's propulsion through the water and makes swimming easier) (Hietzge, 2014). In the last two

decades⁴, mermaiding has turned into a new sports trend, growing due to exposure through traditional and social media. This type of swimming, which in the beginning of the millennium had been enjoyed by but a few women who made their own tails, has grown into an industry that is comprised of mermaid communities (or ‘pods’) around the globe, companies dedicated to creating and selling mermaid tails, mermaid conventions and events and more. For example, in Israel, there is a growing mermaid community; the Facebook group, “Israel’s mermaid and mermen community” consists of over 2000 people, as of 2023⁵. As a real-life practice, mermaiding has a queerness in its own, regardless of the queerness of the mermaid symbol - according to Hietzge (2014) who interviewed children who went through mermaiding classes and their swimming instructors; “(...) in the end [mermaiding] must be considered to be a physical technique that stresses changes in gender construction (e.g., having nothing between the legs), [...] starting in ambiguity” (56).

Drag

Drag is a form of exaggerated gender performance, in which the person doing drag (a ‘drag queen’ or a ‘drag king’), using various external accessories, such as a wig, fake eyelashes and padding that changes the shape of the body, an exaggerated expression of gender that is (usually) opposite to their biological sex. In their research regarding drag culture in California, Taylor and Rupp (2004) claim that; “(...) drag queens create their own transgender and theatrical identity that force their audiences to think in a complex way about what it means to be a woman or what it means to be a man” (131). In Butler’s (1990) seminal text, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, they define gender as a social construct composed of repeated, publicly performed, regulated acts, which through repetition create meaning. Respectively, drag; “(...) denaturalizes gender by showing us [gender’s] imitative structure; it operates on the contradiction between anatomical sex and gender identity, a contradiction that is interrupted by the performance itself. Defining gender as a performative production dismantles the illusion of a natural category” (175).

In the context of the film, *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula performs a drag performance. Ursula, the sea-witch, stages a camp drag show that begins ‘backstage’ with applying hair mousse and lipstick and continues with shimmying and wiggling in an exaggerated style while her eels swirl around her, forming a feather boa. According to the directing animator, Ruben Aquino, Ursula was modelled after the drag queen Divine (and their similarity is undeniable); Additionally, Ursula was voiced by Pat Carroll – Carroll, like Divine, is known for their cross-dressing roles (Sells, 1995).

In Ursula’s drag scene, Ariel learns that gender is performance. Ursula does not simply symbolize woman; she *performs* woman. Ursula uses a camp drag queen performance to teach Ariel to use makeup, to never underestimate the importance of body language, and to use the artifices and trappings of gendered behavior. In this scene, Ariel learns gender, not as a natural category, but as a performed construct. The exaggerated nature of her performance emphasizes the fact of womanhood being a performed behavior, and not a reality that comes naturally with female genitals. As she teaches Ariel to perform woman and use her feminine charms to lure a man, Ursula’s drag performance emphasizes the fabrication in the base of her own femininity, and of gender in general.

⁴There are accounts of several women who made and performed in their own tails as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, most importantly Annette Kellerman (1886-1975), who created mermaid tails and portrayed a mermaid in several films, including *The Mermaid* (1911), in which she was the first actress to wear a swimmable mermaid costume on film. Aquarium mermaid performances have been around as early as the mid-twentieth century, for example The Weeki Wachee Mermaid Show in Florida - an underwater show first opened in 1947 that has continued to be frequently sold out to this day. The modern term ‘mermaiding’ was coined around 2004, when professional mermaids such as Hannah Mermaid started raising awareness to the practice.

⁵<https://www.facebook.com/groups/israelmermaidpod>, accessed on 1.5.23



In drag, the dissonance between the male body and the feminine persona shows that femininity can be put on, and therefore can be also taken off (Williams, 2010).

Furthermore, beyond having the power to reflect to a crowd the deceit at the base of their own gender performance, drag has another ability - freeing the person performing it from the binds of an identity, allowing them to put on another one. Many drag performers report that getting into their drag character allows them to express parts of their identity that are intrinsically different from their out-of-drag personality; as expressed by Stern (2015) in his unpublished thesis, analysing the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag U*, a makeover show that creates meeting points between women seeking transformation and drag queens, drag liberates those performing it as well as those watching it, and drag queens "(...) exude fearlessness and ferocity [...] on the stage and screen". Stern (2015, 3) noted that in the show, one of the contestants describes the moment of getting into drag by saying; "I found my diva by putting that outfit on" (30). Drag queen Alyssa Edwards expresses a similar idea: in a teaser for her reality show, *Dancing Queen*, she introduces its premise - teaching little girls the power of drag - and compares the drag queen's wig to the superhero's cape⁶. In contemporary pop culture, the cape marks the superhero as one and sometimes grants them their power (Shrimpton, 2013), which suggests that for Edwards, the act of donning the wig is a 'Decisive Moment', that distinguishes and empowers the person.

This ability of drag to not only confront a crowd with the reality of gender but also to empower the performer themselves can be seen in the act of mermaiding as well. Research conducted at the University of Freiburg by Hietzge (2014), within a project called *The Mermaid Project*, examined children whose swimming lessons were substituted for mermaiding lessons, and included interviews with the children and with their swimming instructors. To the researchers' surprise, donning the tail was followed by a 'donning of an identity', that led to changes in the children's perception of various things: children who did not like swimming, for example, changed their mind completely after starting the mermaiding classes. In another set of interviews as part of the same project, girls who started taking mermaiding classes referred to their experience as 'being mermaids', and noted that when they 'were' mermaids their character changed and they became much more lively, adventurous and in contact with marine creatures. Likewise, in Porter and Lück's (2018) research, interviews with first-time mermaids at the Philippines Mermaid Swimming Academy (PMSA) on the island of Boracay in the Philippines showed that almost all participants in that research reported a wish to become a marine creature, or to identify as one ("I always wanted to be a fish or a mermaid", "I say that a lot - I am a mermaid" (241). Additionally, all of the participants in the interviews expressed their own connection to marine conservation, either by identifying themselves as 'marine conservationists', cleaning plastic from the water when swimming and walking on the beach, or refusing to eat fish or seafood. The researchers in the Freiburg project claim that "the body can be used to cope unconsciously or even consciously with perceptions [...] that disavows the stubborn notion of identity as a solid entity" (Hietzge, 2014, 57) - that is to say, physical activity holds potential for real change in the identity of the person involved in that activity; and "[the tail] has become a tool for material negotiation between identities, gender roles and body ideals for children" (73). That means that on top of the queerness coded in the mermaid symbol, the physical practice itself has power to challenge aspects of the identity of those that partake in it, including gender roles and other roles such as ones relating to the human-animal dichotomy.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQJTrBWqb8s>, Dancing Queen Alyssa Edward's New Netflix Series (Official Trailer) (2018), accessed on 14.1.21

References to such ‘Decisive Moments’ in which a person puts on a tail and experiences a change in their self-perception appear in testimonies of other professional and amateur mermaids. In an interview with a mermaid named Marielle published in an issue dedicated to mermaids of the publication *Fan Phenomena*, she describes the first time she put on a mermaid tail: “The experience was amazing, and deeply impressed me. I was enchanted by [...] positive energy” (Chartier, 2016, 20). Another mermaid interviewed in the same issue (Rivers, 2016), recounts her feeling of identifying as a mermaid: “I feel it was about then [when putting on the tail for the first time] that I ‘became a mermaid’” (26). These examples show how for some, practicing mermaiding challenges identity and is not a mere pastime - by denoting it as ‘becoming’ or ‘being’ a mermaid and not just acting as one.

A different testimony showing similar elements appears in a web-series called *Go Fun Yourself* created by BuzzFeed, in which people are introduced to new hobbies. In the show’s first episode⁷, a woman named Ella is introduced to the world of mermaiding. She is taken to a pool in which several professional mermaids and mermen let her experience swimming with a tail. She is reluctant at first, but after being shown various items such as a crown and a seashell bra, and wearing the crown, she responds with immediate enthusiasm. Moments later she asks her instructor if there are evil mermaids, and when he responds that there are, she immediately answers that she; “wants to lure [people] in, and then drown them, [...] I’m an athletic, evil mermaid”. The host of the show responds to this with surprise, saying; “It all happened so fast, the second you put the crown on.” Later in that episode, after expressing fear of going in the water, Ella puts the tail on and an extreme and immediate shift in her character and attitude is visible. The instructors’ response to her demonstrates her sudden transformation: as the instructors watch her swim, they describe her swimming for the first time with a mermaid tail as ‘very natural’, and one of the instructors adds; “We just needed to give her the tail, that was it.” The show’s host concludes the episode in a similar tone, claiming; “The second you pulled up that tail you literally got into character.”

Beyond putting on a different identity, the episode exposes other similarities between drag and mermaiding, including naming, familial connections and social activism. In the episode, Ella is introduced to the concept of ‘mermaid names’ - a key part of mermaid culture, in which merfolk choose new names instead of their given, human ones. This is similar to the concept of ‘drag names’ which drag queens choose when entering the business. Drag names sometimes include family names that may mark the queen or king’s ‘drag family’. A drag family is commonly a closely-knit group of queens who create strong familial bonds with each other, bonds that are often cited as one of the advantages of doing drag (Hopkins, 2004). Similarly, Robertson (2013) showed that professional mermaids and mermen sometimes form ‘pods’, family-like groups that provide expressions of belonging. According to Stern (2015), many drag performers form these strong drag-family bonds as a result of the disconnect they experience with their biological families due to their profession, sexual orientation or gender identity. Another parallel between both groups is their involvement in pursuing social change. Since the beginning of the gay liberation movement, drag queens had leading roles in the struggle. Prominently, Marsha P. Johnson, a gender non-conforming self-identified drag queen, was one of the leading figures in the Stonewall uprising of 1969, which led to the tradition of Pride parades happening annually all over the world, even to this day. Ziv (2011) argues that the visibility of drag queens pushed them to lead such struggles, and that; “(...) it is no coincidence that drag queens had a leading role in the Stonewall riots that started the gay community’s liberation

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJMwmkoh-bw>, I Turned My Friend into A Mermaid (2018), edited by Steven Kanter, accessed on 20.8.2018



movement” (125). In a similar way, many mermaids today take on a central role in environmental struggles regarding ocean conservation (Robertson, 2013). Mermaid organizations, such as: The Mermaid Alliance, the International Mermaid Swimming Instructor Association and M.o.M: Mermaids on a Mission work for ocean and coral conservation education (Guitton, 2016). In Israel, mermaids have taken part in beach cleanup events in Eilat (on the shore of the Red Sea) and have organized a demonstration at Dor beach (on the Mediterranean), protesting the construction of the natural gas rig Leviathan⁸. These activities, among the other similarities shown above, demonstrate various connections between the two practices that can be further explored through the lens of post-humanism.

Theorized hybrids and real mermaids: Mermaiding from a post-human point of view

After establishing the mermaid’s place as a symbol in queer and transgender spaces, and marrying the concepts of mermaiding (as a real-life practice) and drag, I introduce another field of thought to further explore the phenomenon of mermaiding.

According to Stern (2015), Gilles Deleuze’s writings present ideas of post-structuralism and imagine a post-human world, where the superiority of identity has expired and the body’s separation from its environment is disputed. Post-humanist thought is influenced by writings of post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who opposed humanist views that see Man as measure-of-all-things, and wishes to examine humanity as part of the context in which it lies: not as separate from (and superior to) the worlds of animals and plants but as part of them (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In this section I show how post-human thought can be used to explore the phenomenon of mermaiding. Firstly, I will present the Deleuzian term *assemblage*, and show how it connects to both mermaiding and drag. Finally, I will show how the connections between mermaids and queer thought are not incidental in this context, and how mermaiding can be explored as critique when looked at through a post-human prism.

In his analysis of Deleuze and Guattari, Stern (2015) defines the Deleuzian term *assemblage* as “(...) a body that is to be understood as structure-less, working through the connections it makes with other bodies as well as the affect these connections invite” (14). Through the connections a body creates with other bodies in space, it changes and evolves and thus does not stay constant but is constantly changing. Stern claims that drag is an infinite assemblage of living and inanimate objects: the human body, a wig, an outfit etc. Stern argues that;

(...) when different bodies come in contact, when they all assemble together, they create a new expansion of the self, a movement from static understandings of gender or sexuality to a multiplicity and expansion of these restrictive categories (25).

Peta Malins (2004) deems these ethical, life-enhancing assemblages which; “increase a body’s power to form creative, productive relations and which increase its capacity for life” (94). Stern continues to claim that drag; “(...) is a noteworthy assemblage because with it one breaks free of the constraints of identity and is given access to new internal feelings and understandings of the self” (25). This argument echoes the testimonies of mermaids regarding their sense of identity and the research regarding the children learning mermaiding in Freiburg, who by using an object that is external to the body - a tail - are creating a new body, or an assemblage, that gives them access to

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/mermaidisrael/videos/vb.130516570739317/505954309862206/>, accessed on 14.1.21.

new understandings of the self: by identifying (“I ‘became’ a mermaid”) or by having new identity traits (students that felt more adventurous when wearing a tail). This theory explains the change in Ella’s behavior that happened when she wore the crown: the assemblage she created did not contain only her body anymore but another object, and thus it was “not static, but changing and evolving” as Deleuze (1987) put it.

Deleuzian-influenced post-human thought enables the body to transcend the limits assigned to it by society - that is, it views the indivisible connection between body and identity as a construct that can be disputed or challenged. Elizabeth Grosz (2006) writes that; “(...) the body itself extends its limits, transforms its capacities, and enters a continuous process of becoming, becoming something other than itself.” (192). In her essay, *A cyborg manifesto*, Donna Haraway (1985) states that “(...) we are responsible for boundaries” (65). This essay discusses potential human-animal connections and unions, as well as human-machine hybrids, or unions between humans and artificial appendages that augment humans with additional abilities or traits; both are relevant. Haraway argues that in “(...) our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism - in short, cyborgs” (7), and that in this day and age, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached; “(...) language, tool use, social behavior, mental events - nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. And many people no longer feel the need for such a separation” (10); Haraway predicts a cyborg world that might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people; “(...) are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines” (15) - a reality all too familiar for many of us, who almost feel their mobile devices as part of their bodies.

The assemblage created between human and mermaid-tail (while identifying with the mermaid/merman character) allows one to transcend the limits of the standard biological body. The organic/artificial and human/animal connections created in this action are similar to the cyborg Haraway predicts, that constitutes a; “(...) creature in a post gender world” (Haraway, 1985, 8), that enables new connections and breaks down walls of identity. Post-human theory aims to conceptualize the body and its functions according to imagined experiences, which are in many cases rooted in technology and other objects, which are an extension of human will - a prosthesis or extension of the body (Stone, 1995). In her essay “Embracing humanimality: Deconstructing the human/animal dichotomy”, Freeman (2010) presents the term ‘Humanimality’, which strives to break the distinction between humans and animals, putting them on one spectrum. This is parallel to queer concepts of gender, in that gender is understood as more than a binary of man/woman. Freeman quotes Jacques Derrida (2002), who said; “Crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal - to the animal in itself, to the animal in me” (372). This view may explain the feeling of the mermaiding students as; “(...) closer to marine creatures”, as well as the importance the global mermaid community gives to ocean and marine life conservation, as stemming from a sense of identification.

The *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies (GLQ)* published an issue in 2015 under the title *Queer Inhumanisms*. The editorial of that issue was titled “Has the queer ever been human?” (Luciano and Chen, 2015), and it aimed to explore; “(...) the overlap between queer studies and the rising critical interest, across the humanities and social sciences, in nonhuman objects” (84). The editorial quotes Stacy Alaimo, who claimed; “The figure of the queer/trans body does not merely unsettle the human as norm; it generates other possibilities—multiple, cyborgian, spectral, transcorporeal, transmaterial—for living” (187). In her article *Queer posthumanisms: Cyborgs, animals, monsters, perverts*, MacCormack (2009) presents the possibility to join queer studies and post-human theories, and



strives to connect queer theory with undermining the human/animal dichotomy. Through various examples, she shows how;

(...) the conceptualization of humanity and sexuality are intertwined, and thus to interrogate the role of sexuality in the formation and the reification of subjectivity one must presume the consistency of all subjects as first belonging to a hermeneutic ontological system - human (111).

Thus, disassembling one's sexuality is an intrinsic stage preceding the disassembling of identity. That is, even more than dismantling one's sexual identity is an obvious stage preceding the change of identity possible through drag, in which the drag performer changes their gender expression and subsequently can perform another identity, it holds an even more integral part in mermaiding - where blurring one's sexual identity (the elimination of the human sexual organs) precedes taking on not just a different identity, but a nonhuman one - just as MacCormack (2009) theorizes.

MacCormack's aim to connect queer theory and the undermining of the human/animal dichotomy seems perfectly encapsulated in mermaiding that becomes - a phenomenon imbued with the critical potentiality allowing one to identify with a human-animal hybrid, simultaneously a queer symbol - through its nature as a hybrid, genitalless creature and a symbol of transition through its narrative role in stories of transition.

Conclusion

Looking at mermaiding through the prism of the post-human ideas influenced by the writings of Deleuze and Haraway as well as in MacCormack's article, shows that the parallels between mermaiding and drag exist, and are not incidental; and they are closely connected to the relation to gender that lies in the base of both practices. As add-on to drag, however, mermaiding also affords a questioning of, and playing with, boundaries between the human and nonhuman, thus affording another scope for individuals and narrators attempting to break with the binaries that reproduce power-hierarchies and suppress feelings or wishes to live outside of the bounds of binaries - it does not only break the male-female binary to a one-dimensional gender spectrum as drag does, but rather by breaking the categories of male/female, human/animal and real/imagined it allows a multi-dimensional space of identity in which one can move.

In this paper I thus answer MacCormack's call to marry the queer and the post-human, and I do so with the image of the mermaid - which I situate between them. The phenomenon of mermaiding stands in the threefold intersection between the mermaid symbol, the act of drag and post human theory - as a phenomenon that combines a queer symbol with a subversive action of disassembling human identity. By doing that, and by enabling one to identify with a sex-less creature, mermaiding allows identifying with a nonhuman hybrid thus affording a critical potential allowing the body to be free of its boundaries.⁹

The similarities between mermaiding and drag, and the connection between a post-human identity and a queer symbol, show that mermaiding is, in fact, a form of post-human drag. Not unlike the way drag, according to Butler, denaturalizes gender and exposes its categories as artificial, so does mermaiding show the unnaturalness of the human category as distinct from the animal one. In doing so, mermaiding may enable or precede the existence of post- and trans-human identities - in a similar

⁹ In this paper, I focus on the Deleuzian concept of assemblage. Other relevant concepts in his writing are the concepts of rhizome, body-without-organs, becoming and becoming-animal, which I believe will enrich any further work regarding mermaiding and post-human thought.

way to the way drag exposes the lie at the base of gender itself, invites discourse of gender regardless of biological sex, and enables the existence of queer, non-binary and trans identities. Just as drag affects both its viewers and its performers, so does mermaiding have the power to free people from various constraints of the identities perceived as possible. And like drag, mermaiding seems to be a pervasive practice that allows one (in part by eliminating sexual parts of one's identity) to revoke their sense of self, and don a different persona that has a different name, a different appearance and even different personality traits.

The parallels between these phenomena are fascinating - because they show that the two are not intrinsically different: both invite the questions "Who am I?" and "What can I be?". In mermaiding, like in drag, one uses artefacts that can be defined as external to their body (a wig, a tail) - to allow a form of liberation. In accordance with post-human thought, that liberty is not to only choose who one is on a spectrum of gender; it departs from a one-dimensional spectrum into a multi-dimensional space where the answer to that question does not have to be on the scope between man and woman - it does not even have to be human. This way of thought may allow new and deeper freedom as to what one can be, and as to the boundaries of the self.

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