

On Imagination, and the Mermaid

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A month ago, I wrote a short piece for an online journal entitled *imagine*, at the invitation of its editor, Mark Riva. It starts like this:

"I prefer to think of imagination as a transitive act."--Sonallah Ibrahimⁱ

I knew the first time I read this statement that I agreed with it: from time to time, though, I would return to it wondering if I actually understood it. My mind went to grammar first: as a verb, to imagine can be both transitive and intransitive, says the dictionary. But as I read the examples the distinction evaded me: "I imagine": intransitive. "He is imagining things": Seems transitive, except that the "things" aren't there. If to imagine "takes an object," as we learn in elementary school, does it count as "transitive" when the grammatical object acted upon does not and never did exist?

But Ibrahim is thinking about the noun, not the verb: imagination as a "transitive act." Does he mean simply "a transition"? That sounds too passive, something that just happens. Isn't imagination "active"? Certainly we say that children have "active imaginations": we call that play. In adults, though, that sort of play is not "doing" anything, unproductive play, a waste of time at a time when adults should be producing things of value. The action Ibrahim describes, though, is one by which we "arrive at the process of imagination, or rather the process of creating through the act of imaging." The act is itself a movement, a transit rather than a transition; a proceeding, a doing or making that is not the "re-production" of manufacturing, but the production of something else, something new, different. Not the handi-work of manufacture, but the "brain-work" (D. G. Rossetti) of art.

As I read in the following weeks the assigned readings for Terra Critica I was delighted to realize my TC commentary was half written already! The Bachelard chapters obviously resonated most directly; in my acceptance of Mark's invitation, I wrote, "Quite simply, I regard imagination as life." This personal truth I came to by working through Catherine Malabou's notion of plasticity and its relationship to imagination; as she herself states, her work is fundamentally about the "nature" of change. Donatella Meadows' inspirational talk also strikes home: *contra* the sociological obsession with "the function of utopia" (Ruth Levitas) and "concrete" utopias, I have argued that the utopian imaginary is precisely as "concrete" as it needs to be. What happens in "the mind's eye," as both Meadows and Hopkinson (and Wordsworth) suggest, is enough. But even before that, thanks to my own engagement over 30 years with utopian literature and theory, I fully understood Bachelard's suggestion that many utopian texts distract us from the radical, *imaginative* core of utopian work, which is the imagination itself. Such narratives focus, to their detriment, on "the

sojourn” rather than “journey”: thus the imaginatively dull guided tour that constitutes the bulk of these texts: *News from Nowhere*; *Looking Backward*; *Herland*, and many more. A major thematic and narratological point in my 2013 book on contemporary *feminist* utopian fiction is that the generic habit of focusing on *the sojourn* is “inverted”: that is, these narratives focus on the *journey*, which is different for every one of the female characters who populate the story. Nor is there a closed ending. It’s about the movement, the transit.

Then I wrote:

Thinking about imagination as transit-ive spurs the movement behind my own life work as a scholar of Utopia, in art, literature, and so-called “real life”: those political movements attempting to mobilize toward something better, closer to the “good place” (eu-topia) which is “noplacé” (ou-topia), per Sir Thomas More’s pun on the Greek neologism. In fact, to speak of utopia is to invoke imagination as a transitive act. Which is why one of my favorite definitions of utopia is also a defining of imagination as work:

Utopia [writes Louis Marin] is the infinite work of the imagination’s power of figuration. Utopia is the infinite potential of historical figures: it is this infinite, this ‘work,’ this potential that the Greek negation ou allows to be understand as a prefix to the name topos. Utopia is the plural figure of the infinite work of the limit or frontier or difference in history. Totality and infinity: Utopia at the horizon of a voyage (travel).”ⁱⁱ

If this passage seems to contain contradictions in terms, that signals precisely the very necessity of utopia and of imagination. If we’re not willing to make that voyage, to do that infinite work, then there is no hope for this world. Thus Margaret Atwood answers to contemporary politicians who have “done their best to finish [art] off”:

[It] is still the human imagination, in all its diversity, that directs what we do with our tools. Literature is an uttering, an outering, of the human imagination. It lets the shadowy form of thought and feeling – Heaven, Hell, monsters, angels and all – out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what the limits to those wants might be. Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime or even a duty, but a necessity; because increasingly, if we can imagine it, we’ll be able to do it. Therefore, not farewell, dear reader/voyager, but fare forward.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Imagination as transitive act, the endless work with the tools of imagination: music, literature, art, dreams, hopes, what-ifs. Through these we invent our own journeys forward, knowing that the journey will be incomplete, and are thankful for that, as it signals the possibility of futures. Imagination is the life-drive. It in some sense is utopia.

As the most astonishingly imaginative writer, China Miéville, enjoins us, “We should utopia as hard as we can.” Utopia as a verb now? Transitive or intransitive? Both? Neither?

Yes. That was always the point. We live in the contradiction of our times. Imagination lets us see it, move around in it, observe it, experience it, with the monsters, angels, and all—and image something beyond it, something different. “Along with a fulfilled humanity,” Miéville continues, “we should imagine flying islands, self-constituting coralline neighborhoods, photosynthesizing cars bred from biospliced bone-marrow. Big Rock Candy Mountains. Because we’ll never mistake those dreams for blueprints, nor for mere absurdities.”^{iv}

What Miéville leaves out in this particular source article is what would constitute a “fulfilled humanity”—or even what “humanity” is, since his own deeply imaginative fiction is so filled with all manner of hybrid and remade beings that the edges of what we call “human” are very blurry. Which brings me to: Mermaids.

“Money Tree” is not the only story about mermaids that Hopkinson has written. In 2012 she published *The New Moon’s Arms*, featuring a fifty-something Caribbean woman, Chastity, who discovers a strange young child washed up on the island beach. She decides to foster the child (“Agway,” she names him) until his own family can be located. The child has webbed toes (as does the woman herself, though they are less pronounced) and other small physical anomalies, including patches of very rough skin on the insides of both legs that she has surgically removed. The child has a burbly sort of voice, has trouble forming English words—and responds excitedly when he gets a glimpse of the sea. When she eventually takes him on the water, he hears a sound he recognizes: his mother’s voice. The boy is reunited with his merfamily, his biological mother dismayed to see his altered legs. Eventually an understanding is achieved—and in fact, Chastity’s own long buried ancestral mer capabilities are rediscovered.

Over my lifetime, I have always been interested in merfolk, wished I *was* a merperson. I love the idea of living in the water, being able to breathe in water and bob around the surface looking at things, including humans, explore the ocean floor and lie about on the rocks up top. I was introduced to mermaids by Hans Christian Andersen, unfortunately, whose version of “the Little Mermaid” describes the agony of being slit from tailfin to ... the groin area, with a knife. (Bruno Bettelheim’s reading made all the sense in the world when I got to that, much later.) The worst

part, besides that disturbingly visceral description that at some level I knew had something to do with the vaginal “slit,” was that the Little Mermaid gave up her elemental home, the ocean, and her family, to be stuck on dry land for ever after, with her human prince. I found these ideas unfathomable—especially since she also gets her tongue cut out so she can’t use her powerful siren voice. Foolish decision. When legendary Greek women got their tongues cut out, they got even.

(I recently gifted a friend who is also in love with the ocean Hopkinson’s novel, *The New Moon’s Arms* – I did not even know about the short story. Like myself, she loved this novel. In a text message exchange, I wrote, “I wish I were a mermaid. In fact, I wish there were still merpeople.” She (a Californian) answered: “There are. They’re called surfers!”).

Today, merpeople have gained a certain imaginary ascendancy once again, particularly in African-American literature. Part of Middle Passage lore is that slaves who were thrown overboard did not drown, but grew gills, their legs attaching together to form the tailfin, to live in as merpeople, sirens. Look online: There are black mermaid booklists^v and a blog, [#OwnVoices: Black Mermaids & Sirens](#)—there are numerous children’s books featuring black merfamilies, and at least one YA novel, *A Song Below Water* by Bethany C. Morrow. Contemporary African-American novelist Rivers Solomon, whose excellent first novel is the Afrofuturist tale, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, also published *The Deep*, based on stories of pregnant African women thrown overboard from slave ships. In the form of black siren we have a figuration of an alternate historical evolution. These are figurations of history and futurity at once, as Bachelard discusses (257); indeed, they are “duration that takes over [the] whole being,” a “living duration” (258). At least in “Conclusion II,” Bachelard seems to privilege the aerial and “lift”: I prefer the depths and materiality, and the healing salts, of the endless ocean: a self-sustaining source of energy, and life.

ⁱ Sonallah Ibrahim, in an interview with Elliott Colla, “The Imagination as Transitive Act: An Interview with Sonallah Ibrahim,” *Jadaliyya* (June 12, 2011). Retrieved at www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1811/the-imagination-as-transitive-act_an-interview-wit.

ⁱⁱ Louis Marin, 1993: 413, emphasis in the original).

ⁱⁱⁱ Margaret Atwood, “The Handmaid’s Tale and Oryx and Crake in Context,” *PMLA* 119 (2004): 515.

^{iv} China Miéville, “The Limits of Utopia,” *Salvage* (August 1, 2015). Retrieved at <https://salvage.zone/the-limits-of-utopia/>.

^v <https://afuse8production.slj.com/2019/07/16/the-black-mermaid-booklist/>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/09/top-10-books-about-mermaids-monique-roffey-the-mermaid-of-black-conch>