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Cristina Brito *Humans and Aquatic Animals in Early Modern America and Africa*

Pietro Daniel Omodeo
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Review of Brito, C. (2023). *Humans and Aquatic Animals in Early Modern America and Africa*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 270 pp.

In this recent book, biologist and environmental historian Cristina Brito explores the early-modern Atlantic spaces of cross-cultural interspecies interactions from a global Portuguese perspective. In her account, aquatic animals were at once resources, partners, and symbols in the context of early American-European and African encounters and clashes, when Iberian conquerors crossed the Oceans and set in communication continents that had been previously separated. Her aim is to contribute to Anthropocene humanities' multidisciplinarity by looking at the many agencies of history-making:

> I am trying to historicize nonhumans as beings that change over time and space, trying to find new evidence of nonhuman life and human interactions with it in anthropocentric archives and sources while most of us have been trained to edit animals out of our analysis. (32)

The book has a protagonist, who appears on the cover, in a colourful image: the manatee. In the stories that she carefully and lovingly

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collected for us, not only the species count but also some exceptional individuals. Among others, in the first chapter, she recounts an episode that was transmitted and varied in sources and visual representations. Sixteenth-century Spanish historian Francisco Lopéz de Gómara, famous for his report of Hernán Cortes's conquest of Mesoamerica, was the first who narrated the story of Matto, a manatee from Hispaniola. Matto was a domesticated female, who lived in captivity in a water enclosure, and belonged to the Taíno chief Caramatexi. The animal was so familiar with him and the natives that she would come to them to be fed when they called her name. Occasionally, she carried human children on her back. Sadly, her trust to people was broken when a young Spaniard hit her with an arrow. Although she was not hurt, thanks to the thickness of her manatee skin, she was deeply affected by this experience. After the aggression, she refused to appear to the water surface in the presence of 'Christians'. Eventually, an exceptional flooding of a nearby river offered her the occasion to flee and never come back to her human family. Such a story of a harmonious human-animal relation broken by the advent of the European conquerors is repeated and varied many times in the historical sources. According to Brito, part of its success depended and still depends on its highly symbolic meaning: the narrations point to a colonial rupture in the relation between people and their environment in the Americas. It indirectly denounces the violent attitude of the European conquerors, whose impact on the ecologies of the new worlds was as destructive as it was towards indigenous people and their cultures. Brito does not Romanticize the natives, as they had exploitative attitudes towards their environment, as well. However, their long adaptation and familiarity with local nature allowed them to develop more balanced and caring approaches. Moreover, the alterations of the natural and social settings during modernity offer her an occasion to reflect on the historicity of "nature-cultures", as spaces of human-nonhuman cohabitation and co-dependency in the time of transition from the precolonial world to the colonial and capitalist era.

Another exemplary story (connecting chapters 2, on aquatic mythologies, and 3, on aquatic monsters) relates to a sea monster that an intrepid Spaniard killed in San Vicente, today's Santos close to São Paulo, Brazil, in 1564. A water demon came to the shore and scared both Europeans as well as native people whose imageries were populated by aquatic monsters, called *igupiara*. The story of this terrific encounter largely circulated in Europe, especially in the follow of Pêro Magalhães Gândavo's account, in his *História da Província de Santa Cruz* (1576). The episode was then retold and varied. It was also transmitted through engravings illustrating the fight between a European with a sword and a standing monster with a fish tail and anthropic features, e.g., widely stretched arms. In the

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zoology of wonder of early modernity, this creature occupied a place close to sharks, alligators, water reptiles and the devil fish. Brito argues that the Gândavo's monster must have been a sea lion. Its transfiguration into a devilish figure is revealing of a mental world that became increasingly common between Europeans and other people. The testimonies of marvellous encounters are countless. Christopher Columbus, for instance, sighted three "ugly" mermaids in the Caribbean, while natural philosopher Ulisse Aldrovandi, in Italy, allotted scientific relevance to zoological wonders including specimens that he himself assembled (98-9).

The boundaries between science and imagination are often difficult to establish. Brito discusses the question of the veracity of her stories, independently of their apparent untenability for today's readers. For her, the reliability of early accounts of encounters with "the other", including the monstruous, cannot be reduced to establishing facts. It is rather a question of mentalities and interpretation frameworks. In her view, mythologies must be rooted in real experiences, codified in accordance with categories that can be imaginative and narrative, as well as scientific. Furthermore, a priori cultural spectacles inform perception, understanding, action, and scientific discourse. For instance, mermaids and tritons inhabited the imagery about the oceans so firmly that Carl Linnaeus found it natural to include the manatee, in the first modern scientific taxonomy, in the family of 'sirens' – with reference to the well-known mythological hybrid water beings of ancient cultures. The manatee itself is a symbol of hybridity: "the last of the beast and the first of fish" (15). This is the manner, in which writer Oliver Goldsmith still conceived of it in his *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774), a work reprinted several times and widely circulated in the nineteenth century. Manatees and sea lions alongside other terraqueous and anthropomorphized animals build epistemological bridges between representations and realities and set knowledge in motion "through a dialectical process between experience and preconceived ideas" (17).

In this perspective, early modern aquatic animals were at once "living beings, resources and symbols" (as the title of chapter 4 goes). Locals as well as newcomers from Europe hunt the manatees for their meat, fat, skin, bones, and teeth. However, within Atlantic transactions of trade and extraction, their exploitation intensified and acquired new monetary value within an expanding market economy. Despite the cold rationality of capital accumulation, indigenous practices and forms of hunting never ceased to enchant Europeans. This was the case with those symbiotic practices, in which animals most clearly appeared as 'partners' of human activities. European sources report that the inhabitants of Jamaica, Cuba and Hispaniola used to hunt sea turtles and big fish with the help of domesticated sucking fish, or remoras. The natives treated these animals as intelligent partners,

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spoke with them, and encouraged them to behave with courage before they went hunting together. They bound the remoras' tails with a rope and let them stick to big preys, which could be brought to the shores with incredible skill. At the end of the action, the fish was carefully detached from the prey by means of kind words of persuasion. The Europeans mocked those discourses as superstitious but at once acknowledged the indigenous' practices were very sophisticated and efficient forms of human-animal cooperation.

This and other habits, conceptions and mythologies of early-modern aquatic naturecultures in the Americas and on the African shores of the Atlantic are the basis for general considerations (especially in chapter 5) about processes of scientific codification. Brito points out that Iberian reports on the new world have not always made their entrance in the scientific discourse of modernity nor in mainstream historiography of science, owing to north-European cultural hegemony or Anglocentric approaches. By contrast, her book offers a strong argument for the reassessment of a broader "blue Anthropocene" – a global modernity marked by aquatic experiences and interactions connecting Portugal and Spain to the two shores of the Atlantic. Economic components played a fundamental role in the consolidation of empires and new political entities, for instance, colonial Brazil where whaling practices proved remunerable and called for regulation and governance. As Brito writes revising established economic histories,

> The Atlantic world was constructed on the backs of whales, sea turtles, and manatees, as much as it was from sugar and cotton plantations. (245)

Hence, she proposes to shift the historical focus of environmental humanities from land to water in order to fully comprehend a modernity marked by exploitation and other "exes": *ex*plorations, *ext*ractions, *ext*irpations, *ext*inctions, *ext*ensions, *ex*haustions. Brito calls it the *Extocene*, thus extending the list of quasi-Anthropocene periodizations: Chthulucene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Wasteocene… She adds to others' understanding of the geo-anthropological interconnection a perspective that is marked by zoological empathy and historical sensitivity. And by narrativity, too. Her attention to mythopoesis and story-telling makes her book a particularly pleasant reading – a rare quality in history-writing.

One of her stories well conveys the emotional sense of ecological loss. In the seventeenth century, father Cristóvão of Lisbon denounced the blind killing of manatees in the New World as it was producing a dramatic drop in this animal's population. Among others, Cristóvão reported the following case that he eye-witnessed:

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> I saw a female being killed and skinned and they put the skin on the shore; and in the next day, when they went to collect water, they found the cub lying on the skin and took it. (246)

Indeed, extinction and the extirpation of future generations – human and nonhuman alike – marks the tragedy of the Anthropocene. But since human relations with their environments and other species are not only destructive, as they are revealing of strong ties of care and empathy as well, Brito's retrospective glance on historical water-cultures also opens up the possibility to imagine a different, more sustainable future.

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