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Black Atlantic Merfolk: the Crossing, the Human, and the Black Maternal



Mermaids, water goddesses, and other kinds of aquatic beings have a long and rich tradition within African diasporic culture. From the various faces of Mami Wata, Yemaya and Oshun, transcontinental feminine deities who take mermaid form, to Lupe Fiasco's hip-hop storytelling of African sea-people in his concept album *Drogas Wave*, Black Atlantic merfolk's meanings depart significantly from the more regressive meanings that mermaids have held in Western culture, (idealized femininity, sinful danger, childish whimsy, or heterosexual romance). I am interested in the various ways that African-descended people in the diaspora envision merfolk and water-dwelling humans and how these visions—which almost always reference the experience and long afterlife of conquest and racial chattel slavery—call attention to the essentiality of white supremacy to Western modernity and the so-called Anthropocene. They also, in their portrayals of foster mothers, complicated mothers, absent mothers, goddess mothers, and mothers as source of new species and lifeworlds offer fresh possibilities for thinking through the Black maternal. This talk will give an overview of my larger project on Black Atlantic merfolk and focus in on the Black maternal within a particular recurring narrative, what I call *Crossing Merfolk*—the proposal that Africans who jumped or were cast overboard during the Middle Passage (or their progeny) transformed to survive in the sea. I contend that *Crossing Merfolk* offer a site of previously unexplored engagement between the mermaid as it has been engaged in fantasy, folklore, science, performance, and ecocritical studies, and Black feminism's ongoing critical interrogations of the human.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10 @ 12:30PM

REGISTRATION REQUIRED:

<https://ucr.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJUtd2h9j0tHd1goYpIzGUuSBTF7kaa7Ewo>