humanities

MDPI

Article

'I Have Seen the Sea': Caribbean Aquatic Poetics in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

Leighan Renaud

Department of English, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1QU, UK; leighan.renaud@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

The polyvalent nature of water is one often explored in fiction by Caribbean writers, and this paper will consider the ways that the representations of mermaids act as an extension of this exploration. Mermaids are central to a number of folk traditions across the Caribbean region and its diaspora. On islands, including Trinidad, Martinique, Carriacou, and Haiti, with names such as Fairymaid, Mama Glo, and La Siren, mermaids are often regarded as mothers and protectresses of both the sea and the creatures within it. This paper will analyse the representation of the mermaid in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020) and consider how the novel utilises the mermaid and an aquatic poetics to explore Kamau Brathwaite's conceptualisation of a submarine unity for the Caribbean.

Keywords: mermaids; aquatic; Caribbean; women's writing; contemporary literature

1. Introduction

'Water is the first thing in my imagination. . . Water is the first thing in my memory.'

(*Dionne Brand*)

Water has been a site of exploration and theorisation for numerous Caribbean thinkers. Dionne Brand describes the sea as overwhelming, as "bigger than feeling" (Brand 2011, p. 10), and as having the ability to "wash away blood and heal wounds" (ibid., p. 11), thus positioning it as a site of both pain and restoration. When thinking of her Trinidadian family, Brand goes on to posit that, "[o]ur origins seemed to be in the sea" (ibid., p. 12) as a nod, not only to her own lineage, but to the lineage of the contemporary Caribbean, and the watery journeys made by European colonial forces, enslaved Africans, and indentured labourers that contributed to the region's current creolised identity. Rinaldo Walcott considers water in relation to global Blackness, and coined the term "Black aquatic", which he defines as "the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that Black people hold to bodies of water" (Walcott 2021, p. 65). The Black Aquatic offers a way of interrogating "Black peoples' lived relation in and to bodies of water—as both self-constitutively historical and contemporary" (ibid.), and in the article, Walcott points to the aquatic as both a site of birth and death for diasporic Blackness, both a space of spiritual renewal and traumatic legacy for the African diaspora. Kamau Brathwaite, having understood the Caribbean as made of fragments, and questioning how to make the fragments whole, concludes that "the unity is submarine" (Brathwaite 2021, p. 90). This submerged unity speaks to the fact that Caribbean islands are physically connected underwater and offers a holistic counter-mapping opportunity for the region. It also demonstrates Brathwaite's understanding that, cosmologically and symbolically, water offers a way of articulating and bringing together "multilingual/multi-ethnic/many ancestored" (ibid.) Caribbean cultures. The Caribbean aquatic is both a site

check for updates

Received: 29 April 2025
Revised: 12 July 2025
Accepted: 17 July 2025
Published: 19 July 2025

Citation: Renaud, Leighan. 2025. 'I Have Seen the Sea': Caribbean Aquatic Poetics in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch*. *Humanities* 14: 154. https://doi.org/10.3390/h14070154

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

of innovation that opens the future, and a site of a history that is characterised by trauma, fragmentation, and rupture.

Mermaids and other mythic water dwellers have long been staple figures within the Caribbean cultural imaginary. Mermaids appear in the Caribbean under different guises and are generally considered to be real, rather than existing simply as popular folk stories. Mermaids go by various names—including River Mumma, Fairy Maid, Mama Dglo/D'leau, Mami Wata and La Sirene/Lasirenn—across different parts of the region. Far from falling victim to simplistic characterisation and being reduced to one-dimensional mother figures or protectresses of the sea, Caribbean mermaids, like the sea itself, are understood in far more complex and varied ways. In an article about mermaids in Tobago, H.B. Meikle describes mermaids as spirits that "partake of the nature of gods and can bestow on mortals both good and evil" (Meikle 1958, p. 103) and goes on to detail several interactions—often romantic at first and then menacing and possessive—between mermaids and Tobagonians. In Haiti, La Sirene is part of the Vodou pantheon of spirits known as *Erzulie* or *Ezili*. Erzulie is understood as resisting "any classical division between the good deity (belonging to the Rada family) and the evil one (belonging to the Petro family)" (Maltese 2010, p. 90). As such, La Sirene is regarded in multiple ways and, much like the water in which she resides, can be both friend and foe to those who encounter her. Social media is also full of stories and videos depicting possible mermaid sightings. One Twitter user posted in 2023, "if i hear a story about mermaids and it's from the Caribbean i immediately believe it," sparking a global digital conversation that included dozens of people sharing their own interactions with mermaids across the region.[1] These interactions were typically tinged with fear, though often the mermaid was cast as a heroic figure, saving various people from the dangerous sea.

My own introduction to mermaids in the Caribbean context came as a toddler in Carriacou, through the popular and esteemed work of folk artist Canute Caliste. Caliste was renowned for his artistic representations of the island's folk cultures, and depicted many scenes of the everyday in Carriacou, but what he is perhaps most well-known for are his several paintings of mermaids. According to his obituary in *The Guardian*, Caliste "claimed to have been inspired to begin painting. . . when he was told by a vision of a mermaid that, if he followed the Bible, he could achieve anything he wanted" (Mason 2005). To me, this assertion feels uniquely Caribbean. That a mermaid would encourage Caliste to become a more observant Christian speaks to the many cultural and spiritual fragments that work, sometimes together and at other times in spite of each other, to make up Caribbean cultures.

This paper seeks to consider how the mermaid exists within the ambivalent Caribbean aquatic space and how fictional representations of mermaids confront colonial trauma. It will be split into two parts. In the first, I further consider the Caribbean aquatic and contemporary representations of Caribbean mermaids, situating them within a larger transatlantic conversation about the sea as a site of connection as well as trauma. I then turn my attention to Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020) and consider how the novel represents the mermaid to express a Caribbean feminist politics and employs an aquatic poetics to narrativize Brathwaite's notion of a submerged unity for the Caribbean.

2. Caribbean Waters, Caribbean Mermaids

Mermaids and other mythical water dwellers have long appeared in stories across the greater Caribbean. Whilst there has been a recent critical turn towards Black mermaids and mermaids of colour in Cultural and Literary studies, their appearances in Caribbean literature are long established. In Lorna Goodison's poetry, for instance, she employs the mermaid—locally understood as a protecting and authoritative figure—to comment on Jamaican womanhood, shifting relationships and responsibilities to the land, and changing

belief systems. In 'The River Mumma Wants Out,' Goodison's speaker proclaims, "She no longer wants to dispense clean water/to baptise and cleanse. . . Go away, she will/not be seeing you, for you have no insurance." (Goodison 2017, p. 400). Here, Goodison's River Mumma has grown tired of mothering the nation and thinking of others over herself, and renounces her responsibilities to the community, which highlights the poem's anxiety about the detrimental effect of the hyper-individualism that is propelled through capitalism. For Tracey Baptiste, mermaids connect the Caribbean to West Africa in *Rise of the Jumbies* (2017), the second book of her YA *Jumbies* series. The narrative describes the novel's human protagonists meeting the four mermaids who are tasked by Mama D'Leau (described in the novel as a Jumbie who controls the sea) to escort them to Ghana in a bid to save children who have been captured by a malevolent Jumbie. The mermaids are described as having "dark skin, a long fish tail, and beautifully braided hair" (Baptiste [2017] 2019, p. 59). During their journey, the mermaids and human protagonists happen across a sunken slave ship, and a human bone fragment found entangled within a chain prompts a collective re-memory from the mermaids: "*They captured us from our homes*, said Noyi. *They chained us. . . I was called Ozigbodi*, she said. *That was my name then.*" (ibid., p. 93) Baptiste's mermaids are borne of the transatlantic slave trade, and function as a way to translate the submerged histories that connect the Caribbean with West Africa. The mermaid thus inhabits the Caribbean imaginary in a myriad of ways and serves several symbolic functions, echoing Philip Hayward's contention that the mermaid is a polyvalent figure, one with "the potential for multiple associations." (Hayward 2018, p. 3) The multiple possible interpretations of the Caribbean mermaid's symbolic function are all predicated on the manifold, multi-faceted relationship between the Caribbean and bodies of water. As such, in order to best analyse representations of the mermaids, it is necessary to understand the imagery of the Caribbean aquatic.

The Caribbean aquatic is an ambivalent space that is simultaneously a site of profound loss and a site through which new forms of being emerge. I think with Édouard Glissant, who describes the "womb abyss" (Glissant [1997] 2010, p. 6) of the slave ships, and the intense devastation of transatlantic crossings: "feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish" (ibid., p. 7). Yet, out of the sea's abysses, comes a knowledge of "Relation within the Whole" (ibid.) that signals a new way of understanding ourselves in relation to the world. The darkness of the abyss, for Glissant, is an opportunity to renegotiate one's relationship to the world. The ambivalent aquatic paves the way for Brathwaite's theory of tidalectics, which he understands in relation to "that humble repetitive ritual action(n)" of a woman "walking on the steps of sunlit water, coming out of a continent which we didn't fully know how to understand, to a set of islands which we only now barely coming to respect, cherish and understand." (Brathwaite 1999, pp. 33–34) For Brathwaite, the aquatic facilitates the relationship between the African continent and the Caribbean archipelago, out of which emerges that complex and beautiful Caribbean culture.

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley thinks with water—specifically water deities—in a manner that supports and extends Brathwaite's conceptualisation of the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean. In *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (2018), Tinsley reconceptualises Black Atlantic sexuality through careful and innovative engagement with the Haitian Vodou pantheon of spirits called Ezili and has a chapter that focuses specifically on Lasirenn (spelling varies depending on source), the "Ezili of the waters" (Tinsley 2018, p. 139). Lasirenn is a mermaid goddess whose primary function is to connect past and future generations, thus connecting African lineages with the Caribbean contemporary for her devotees through a tidalectic intimacy that spans the Black Atlantic. Tinsley describes Lasirenn:

> Brown-skinned and pink tailed, this marine, riverine lwa. . . lives at the bottom of the water in a palace decked with shipwrecked gold. . . Lwa of the watery unconscious, she's also the lwa of altered consciousness. She's the spirit who swims with you as you move beyond the limits of your rational self to "consciousness of the intuitive world,". . . Lasirenn will take you down—underwater, under possession, under the influence—but she'll bring you back up: back to the shore, back to yourself, back to sobriety. (Tinsley 2018, p. 140)

Lasirenn, then, is understood to submerge people so that they can emerge as renewed versions of themselves. Tinsley explains that those chosen by Lasirenn return from their three-day underwater retreat "with a miraculous knowledge of healing arts, so you can heal the pain of being present to life on land; and with the ability to see the future, so you know you can make it okay." (ibid., p. 147). By becoming acquainted with the bottom of the water, those who encounter this mermaid deity are gifted with the ability to know and to survive their emerging future on land. Lasirenn, a uniquely Caribbean mermaid, understands that there is something restorative about being introduced to and surviving the darkest elements of your universe and that this experience can forge a path to knowledge, clarity, and intuition.

St Vincent-based photographer Nadia Huggins also understands the aquatic as a site from which to emerge with a greater sense of clarity, and understands that, whilst the sea holds space for the traumatic histories of the Caribbean, it also holds space for those seeking to imagine new futures. Huggins frequently photographs themselves—and others—interacting with the sea. The photography series "Transformations" (Huggins 2016) comprises diptychs exploring the relationship between the human and the marine world. One half of the image is a self-portrait—a photograph of some part of Huggins' own body—and the other half is a photograph of some marine organism that simultaneously disrupts and completes the portrait. The series imagines a different kind of human/sea life hybridity from that of the mermaid, but still a hybridity that encapsulates the possibilities of intimacy between earth and water, human and nonhuman. The ambivalence of the Caribbean aquatic means that it can be both a holding site for history and a space for new forms and meanings to emerge. And I think that, similarly, mermaids can connect the Caribbean to its past as well as represent the possibility of a new intimacy between people and water in the Caribbean.

In her work on mermaid representations in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* and Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* (2007), Jalondra A. Davis identifies the "crossing merfolk narrative" as a particular genre of mermaid story that "[anchors] mermaid lore within the transatlantic slave trade as it launches modernity and global racial capitalism" (Davis 2021, p. 350). Crossing narratives imagine the Black mermaid's existence as a way of reckoning with the violence of the Middle Passage. Solomon's *The Deep* imagines the underwater mer-community's genesis at the moment of crossing; "Our mothers were pregnant two-legs thrown overboard while crossing the ocean on slave ships. We were born breathing water as we did in the womb. We built our home on the seafloor" (Solomon 2019, p. 29). Crossing merfolk narratives imagine another kind of "womb abyss," wherein loss of human life results in a rich and expansive underwater community. In her reading of *The Deep*, and through drawing on existing scholarship about the mermaid, Davis argues that "crossing merfolk narratives enhance the mermaid figure's potential to disrupt the hierarchical and ecologically disastrous category of the human. . . In doing so, these narratives reveal the imbrication of white supremacist and environmental violence and embody alternative forms of being." (Davis 2021, p. 350).

Davis suggests that Black merfolk and crossing narratives engage with the lasting impacts of colonialism, and I argue that Monique Roffey's novel also does so, but from the

vantage point of the newly independent Anglophone Caribbean. Caribbean merfolk can be read as reordering post-colonial worlds and reconciling relationships to both land and sea for peoples of Caribbean descent. Fictional representations of Caribbean mermaids offer readers and writers opportunities to engage with difficult pasts and imagine possible futures. As such, the remainder of this article will think specifically about the ways that Roffey's depictions of Caribbean mermaids can be read as a feminist figure and an aquatic engagement with the long colonial histories of the region.

3. Sea/Shore Intimacies in *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (henceforth referred to as *Black Conch*) tells the story of Aycayia, a centuries-old Amerindian woman cursed to live as a mermaid, who falls in love with David, a Rasta fisherman from Black Conch in 1976. The novel depicts her violent capture at the hands of American tourists, her being rescued and sheltered by David as she loses her heavy fish tail, and her human life in Black Conch before the curse takes effect again and her hybrid form re-emerges. Originally marketed as "a love story",[2] *Black Conch* does depict a tender romance between Aycayia and David, as well as blossoming friendships between the mermaid and Arcadia Rain and her son, Reggie, two characters who exist on the peripheries of the St Constance community. But these relationships help to draw attention to the mermaid's greater symbolic function in the novel—the imagining of a Caribbean future that has properly reckoned with the entirety of its colonial past. Through Aycayia, the novel carefully suggests that, in the Caribbean, earth, water, the climate crisis, racial and gendered disparities and inequalities, neo-imperialism and Western extraction are all connected through brutal histories of colonial conquest that have not yet been reconciled. Steve Mentz argues that, although "Roffey's anticolonial vision lacks some of the fierceness of the generation of Cesaire and Glissant, [she is] more attentive than they were to feminist questions" (Mentz 2024, p. 102), and it is in her careful rendering of Aycayia that the novel is perhaps most successful. *Black Conch* uses the otherness of the mermaid figure as an opportunity to offer models for reconciliation. Roffey employs an aquatic poetics through narrative form and style, the characterisation of Aycayia, and the relationships formed between mermaid and humans to highlight the novel's politics of solidarity and position the indigenous mermaid as a symbol of connection.

Aycayia's story is an oral Taino story from Cuba, and in her correspondence with Roffey, Jutta Schamp learns that Roffey first located the Cuban myth "on the Internet" (email to the author). This Aycayia myth that Roffey retrieved online can be found *in Tradiciones y Leyendas de Cienfuegos* (1919) [*The Traditions and Legends of Cienfuegos*] by Adrián del Valle" (Schamp 2024, p. 262). Schamp succinctly summarises del Valle's (a Spanish writer) written version of the Cuban myth, wherein Aycayia is described as "dancer… 'virgin' and troublemaker" who disrupts the peace of her village by giving pleasure to men and then enslaving them. (ibid., p. 263). In retaliation, the wives in the village banish her, along with the elderly woman Guanayoa. However, "the men of the village are so mesmerized by Aycayia that they still come to see her dance and hear her sing" (ibid). As such, the women consult a spiritual chief, resulting in the goddess Jagua sending a hurricane that turns Aycayia into a mermaid, Guanayoa into a turtle, and banishes them to the sea for good. Roffey keeps these details in her own retelling of the Aycayia myth, and rather than rewrite the established story, chooses to extend it, and reimagine a life for the mermaid beyond del Valle's record of her. As Schamp identifies, whilst "it might be healing for many Caribbeans to have access to Taíno memory through this 'Aycayia' myth, a feminist reconfiguration might be helpful" (ibid., pp. 263–64). Indeed, a written reconfiguration of the story by a Caribbean woman writer that prioritises Aycayia's voice

and imagines a future for her also helps draw attention to the problems of a European man writing (and therefore immortalising) his version of an Indigenous Taino story. Schamp usefully challenges the 'authenticity' of del Valle's version, noting similarities between Aycayia and Homer's sirens, and questioning whether the more misogynistic elements of the tale (Aycayia as both virgin and seductress, and the severe punishments for her supposed transgressions) might have been the writer's own additions (ibid., p. 236).

Early descriptions of the mermaid Aycayia in *Black Conch* are entirely captivating, and David describes his first encounter with her as follows:

> She looking like a woman from long ago, like old-time Taino people. . . She face was not young and not pretty at all, and I recognise something ancient there too. I saw the face of a human woman who once lived centuries past. . . Then, there was her tail. Oh Laa-aad-o. . . I think, then, that this fish-woman must be heavy as a mule. She must weigh four or five hundred pounds, easy. (Roffey 2020, p. 13)

The description of Aycayia is particularly powerful in its subversions of so many established Western tropes about the mermaid figure. Far from a Disney-esque representation of an innocent-looking white mermaid who could easily pass as human from the waist up, Aycayia is always described as visibly other, and even when she transforms back to human form, she is still marked by her physical differences. That David recognises something ancient in her face suggests that she holds a watery wisdom that does not match her physical youth. Her tail is described as giving her "a look of power" (ibid.), and there is no suggestion that her tail somehow accentuates any feminine curves. Rather, the enormity of her tail suggests an affinity with some of the ocean's bigger and more powerful inhabitants whilst simultaneously connecting her to the earth through the comparison to a mule.

In their exploration of mermaid art and symbolism, Müller, Halls, and Williamson describe the Western mermaid as the "quintessential symbol of seduction, combining the image of the virgin with that of a soulless, immortal creature, but also encapsulating that profound human fear of the unknown in the depths of the sea." (Müller et al. 2022, p. 1). This image of seductive, alluring merfolk can also be found in the Caribbean, and H.B Meikle's study of Tobagonian merfolk depicts a similar dynamic. Meikle explains that, according to local lore, "Mermaids. . . are male in sex, Fairymaids female. The former 'live in the sea' the latter 'in the rivers'" (Meikle 1958, p. 103). Tobagonian merfolk are described as beautiful and powerful, but also vulnerable to intense jealousy. Meikle describes a fairymaid luring a human man into her underwater home and possessing the ability to "'turn his head'. That is, she dements him. Or as it is commonly expressed, 'de fairymaid take he shadow'. The shadow is an essential part of a man. With that gone he is no longer under the control of reason." (ibid., p. 104). As with Muller, Halls, and Williamson's depiction of the Western mermaid, the Tobagonian fairymaid is a figure that is as alluring as she is powerful and dangerous.

Roffey borrows from Tobagonian lore in *Black Conch* whilst also setting Aycayia apart from some of the more problematic mermaid/fairymaid stereotypes. Early in the novel, the narrator details David's familiarity with mermaid stories, but explains that "Black Conch legend told of mermen who lived deep in the sea and came onto land now and then to mate with river maidens—old time stories, from the colonial era." (Roffey 2020, p. 8). The insistence that it would only be mermen with the capability to navigate deep-sea waters and swim alongside bigger sea creatures, whilst feminised merfolk are constrained to smaller bodies of water, is steeped in gendered stereotypes. *Black Conch* rejects this characterisation immediately, and Aycayia's pilot whale-sized tail (ibid., p. 12) immediately confronts the limitations of Tobago's river-dwelling fairymaid lore.

Roffey's subversion of mermaid stereotypes can also be observed in the way that David and Aycayia meet. The narrator describes Aycayia being lured to the surface world by David's music:

> David was strumming his guitar and singing to himself when she first raised her barnacled, seaweed-clotted head from the flat grey sea [. . .] he picked [up the guitar] and began to hum and strum a tune, quietly. She stayed there, floating, watching him [. . .] The music brought her to him, not the engine sound, though she knew that too. It was the magic that music makes, the song that lives within every creature on earth, including mermaids. (ibid., pp. 7–10)

Rather than the oft-heard story of mermaids luring human men with siren songs to their deaths, it is David who entices Aycayia—whose name means 'sweet voice'—to enter a new realm. Roffey's mermaid is not a seductress; rather, she is drawn to the surface by music—something beautiful that transcends humanity and is enjoyed by all in nature. In contrast to Tobagonian lore, which describes the fairymaid as possessing some magic to entrap human men, the magic in *Black Conch* is David's guitar and his voice. And this magic does not seek to ensnare. David plays songs to please Aycayia and returns to the water to meet her in a space that is comfortable to her: "Many times I sing and play my guitar to her off them rocks in Murder Bay. I never bother dropping my lines after seeing her the second time, 'cause I fraid of hooking her." (ibid., p. 13). The Caribbean is often characterised as being made up of many distinct cultural fragments that come together (sometimes violently) to form a creolised culture. European colonial ideals are one such fragment, and their expectations about prototypical masculinities and femininities have informed contemporary gender dynamics in the region. If one of the symbolic functions of the mermaid is to reorder the world, then the Caribbean mermaid has the power to reimagine gender dynamics in the post-colonial region. Whilst not all interactions between men and women in *Black Conch* are necessarily subversive, the introductory interactions between David and Aycayia resist simplistic and damaging tropes that position the mermaid as a dangerous 'femme fatale' that seeks to control men. Rather, it is David who needs to work to seduce Aycayia, a creature so powerful and ancient that she finds kinship with other ancient sea creatures. Not only does their interaction reorder human gender dynamics, but it also reimagines the hierarchies between humans and animals. In this instance, the human man is not the ultimate prize—the "fish-woman" (ibid., p. 13) is.

What is interesting and perhaps disappointing about Roffey's subversion of the man/mermaid interaction is the fact that we never hear about their initial meetings from Aycayia's perspective, though her voice punctuates the rest of the narrative in fascinating and poignant ways. Indeed, the narrative strategy for *Black Conch* is highly effective and brings to mind Brathwaite's concept of tidalectics and suggests—as many Caribbean writers have—multivocality and atemporality as a strategy for reconciling the fragments that constitute the Caribbean. DeLoughrey understands tidalectics as a "dynamic and shifting relationship between land and sea" that engages "what Brathwaite calls an 'alter/native' historiography to linear models of colonial progress" (DeLoughrey 2010, pp. 2–3). Brathwaite characterises time–space as a fluid thing, and understands the Caribbean "like the movement of the ocean. . . coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding ('reading') from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future" (Brathwaite 1999, p. 34). The continual touching and receding Brathwaite describes can be read in the narrative structure of *Black Conch*, which features three distinct narrative voices that circle each other from various points in time to tell the story of Aycayia and David. The events of the novel take place in 1976, and the story is told by an omniscient narrator, who relays the story in third person and in the past tense; David, whose narrative is made up of journal entries, written (in first person) between March 2015 and February 2016; and

Aycayia, whose first person narrative is written in verse and is predominantly in the present tense. There is no regular order to the way these voices appear in the text, but no one is prioritised over the other, and they build on each other in interesting and significant ways. The fact that David, fifty years later as an "ol' man now, and sick sick" (Roffey 2020, p. 11) is able to recall with such precision and with no suggestion that his recollection is unreliable his encounter with Aycayia demonstrates a resistance to linear conceptualisations of time, wherein events of the past fade from memory. Rather, this meaningful period in David's life shifts how he understands himself so critically that the memories remain intact and his journal entries are understood by the reader to be as reliable—if not more—than the third-person omniscient narrator.

Chapter three starts after Aycayia's capture by the American tourists, and details David's rescue and the subsequent fallout in Black Conch. The chapter starts with David's journal, which describes in some detail how he rescues Aycayia, brings her to his home, and puts her in a bathtub while tending to wounds. His entry ends with Aycayia watching him "the whole day" while he pours "some rum on the deep wound from the gaff hook near the top of her tail, hoping it would heal up." (ibid., p. 37). The chapter then moves to the perspective of the omniscient narrator and moves back in time to the moment just after David rescues Aycayia, but from the perspective of the American fisherman who caught her, Thomas Clayson, "who was still half-drunk from all his celebrating" (ibid.). This slight shift backwards in time, before then propelling the story forwards, creates an oceanic overlapping that echoes the touch and recede that is pivotal to Brathwaite's conceptualisation of the tidalectic. In order to progress, the story—and the Caribbean more generally—must come back to the past and understand that it is made up of several overlapping and interlocking narratives. The narrative describes an encounter between Thomas' son Hank and Arcadia Rain, who, upon hearing the story of a stolen mermaid, asserts, "Mermen do not exist. Okay? And neither do merMAIDS. They don't exist. They are stories. Old-time stories. Left over from long ago." (ibid., p. 44) The short, punchy sentences suggest that Arcadia has an authority over the matter that need not be questioned or elaborated upon. The chapter then moves to Aycayia's voice and further back into the past, as Aycayia explains the curse that confines her to the sea:

> These women figure it easy to get rid of me
> Seal up my sex inside my tail
> Good joke to seal up that part of me men like
> The old woman was kind to me though
> She was already exiled for being old
> Her name was Guanayoa
> Goddess Jagua transform us into new beings
> turtle and mermaid
> we both disappeared same night
> from the island shaped like a lizard (ibid., pp. 44–45)

Aycayia offers a voice to a longer history of the Caribbean that proves pivotal to offering a complete narrative in *Black Conch*. Not only does her voice interject to demonstrate Arcadia's ignorance of merfolk, but it also brings in a pre-colonial perspective that introduces a new spiritual system and further reinforces the submerged unity of the region, despite the surface fragmentation. The lizard-shaped island Aycayia and Guanayoa (another woman cursed because of her womanhood, though for different reasons) disappear from is Cuba, which is on the opposite extreme edge of the region to Trinidad and Tobago, upon which Black Conch is based. Aycayia's ability to swim "under islands" (ibid., p. 10)

means she is able to connect and unify the entire Caribbean archipelago. That the goddess Jagua would enact the curse suggests a complexity to Taino deities in that, perhaps similarly to Haitian Vodou deities, they do not subscribe to the dualism between good and evil, and thus their powers can be called on for malicious purposes. Anthony Stevens-Arroyo explains that Taino spiritual systems were earth religions that celebrated "the rhythms of nature" and understood that "[spirits] animated rocks and plants, breezes and storms, every supple on the lake and every tide of the sea" (Stevens-Arroyo 2024, p. 4). Aycayia's worldview is entirely different from that of David and indeed the novel's omniscient narrator, which perhaps explains why her voice exists in verse, whereas the others aremore neatly aligned with the prose style we are familiar with. The above quote from Aycayia's narrative is characterised by an absence of punctuation. The first seven lines begin with a capital letter, which suggests rather than demands moments of emphasis. However, at the moment when Aycayia and Guanayoa are transformed and exiled to the sea, even the capital letters cease. The transition here from a legible grammatical system to none works symbolically on three levels. Firstly, it signals the freedom afforded to Aycayia in the sea. There is no longer any need to make herself understandable within the confines of human language systems because her mermaid status gives her another way to relate to the world. Secondly, the lack of grammar means that there is something untranslatable about Aycayia's land experiences, thus marking how much Indigenous Caribbean history has been lost through European genocide. Thirdly, Aycayia's poetic verse is another example of Roffey simultaneously connecting and setting apart the mermaid from her human counterparts. What is at first a grammatical system that is different but legible to the twenty-first-century reader dissolves into a much freer way of writing. It suggests that Aycayia's relationship to the Caribbean of 1976 is both legible and illegible to the contemporary reader. And if Aycayia symbolises the region's pre-colonial past, then her voice is at once both integral to the story, whilst also being harder to interpret.

The sea in *Black Conch* is an ambiguous character, oscillating between prison and freedom in the novel. Aycayia describes it as "the kingdom" (Roffey 2020, p. 65), indicating her appreciation of the vastness and majesty of the underwater world. 'Kingdom' also suggests that it is a hierarchical domain, and as a mermaid, Aycayia understands herself as a perpetual visitor: "[The] kingdom of the sea is big big and it have own ways/And so the life of a mermaid is the life of a visitor/I watch and keep to myself" (ibid.). Despite centuries of living in the sea, her part-human nature renders her other in that environment, and loneliness characterises much of her experience in the water. However, the sea is still her home, and even as Aycayia becomes more comfortable in her life in Black Conch, she is described as yearning for the water:

> She missed the sea, though. She missed the hiding she could do in it. She missed her tail. She had been a tremendous mermaid. But there was something in her old power that hadn't come with her, that had fallen off with her tail. On land she was a small woman. In the sea, she had swum alongside whales[. . .] The sea was her home, and her exile. She felt passion for it and another feeling too, close to revulsion. (ibid., pp. 125–26)

Aycayia's indigeneity and womanhood mark her as different and subordinate in Black Conch, and her hypervisibility within the human world results in her missing her watery isolation. In an interview about the novel, Roffey says of her motivations for writing the book that "[There] was so much in this story [the Taino legend of Aycayia] that needed a 21st century feminist rewrite. Old stories frequently contain outdated tropes about womanhood. And all, or most, mermaid stories are a product of the male gaze." (Tepper 2022). Indeed, Roffey's mermaid rejects several established tropes about mermaid figures, and it is notable that, in this contemporary re-writing, Roffey does not see a way that Aycayia's life on land

could be as fulfilling as liberating as her life in the sea. Roffey characterises the sea itself as feminine in the novel, describing it as "the giant woman of the planet, fluid and contrary." (Roffey 2020, p. 17). The sea, then, acts as a protectress for Aycayia, providing space for anonymity when she needs it, as well as opportunities to feel powerful and graceful amidst the natural underwater world. Aycayia describes her condition:

> I have swum under islands
> I have swum close to shore in shallow waves
> and seen children playing
> I have swum with slow steel canoa
> I have swum everywhere in this archipelago
> I have swum with large POD of dolphins
> I have swum with SHOAL of fish [. . .]
> I would have died very soon as a woman
> Forty cycles? Children, husband
> life of land and life of birth and death
> Instead I have lived for more than a thousand cycles
> inside the sea (ibid., pp. 10–11)

As a mermaid, Aycayia is able to access a strength, longevity, and autonomy that she could not access on earth. Swimming under islands suggests an intimate knowledge of the region incomprehensible to humans. The capitalisation of "POD" and "SHOAL" emphasises the largeness of the communities of sea creatures amongst which she recognises her own strength and ability. But in order to enjoy this power, she must remain a perpetual visitor. Aycayia swims with the fish and dolphins but does not describe herself in kinship with them; rather, they are a marker against which she is able to establish her own capabilities. Similarly, she describes seeing children playing as a way of highlighting her ability to traverse shallow and deep waters. For all she witnesses in her many years in the Caribbean, the price is a peripheral existence; yet, this is positioned as a more fulfilling possibility than life on land. Aycayia gestures towards the shortness of human life, and the line "Forty cycles? Children, husband" characterises womanhood as constructed through service to others.

Jagua's curse ultimately dictates that Aycayia return to the sea, and just as the hurricane in del Valle's written account of the legend banishes her to the sea, so too does it return her to the water in Roffey's novel. But in this updated version of Aycayia's story, I also think that the expectations of and inequalities associated with human womanhood in the 1970s Caribbean (a decade when several Anglophone Caribbean islands gained their independence) are part of the reason why, despite their tender romance, she is unwilling to marry David. Victoria Pasley explains that the "Black Power Revolution in Trinidad in 1970 presented a serious challenge to the dominant cultural ideology based mainly on a European model, which had, to a large extent, been left intact from the colonial era," and that, even though women did participate significantly and play leading roles in the movement, the language of the movement "demonstrated an emphasized masculinity enveloped in power" (Pasley 2001, pp. 25–26). Laurie Lambert describes the "classic postcolonial condition in which women contribute to anticolonial struggles, only to be excluded from true leadership positions and rendered invisible in the retellings of these histories," (Lambert 2020, p. 1) and this is not a version of the Caribbean that Roffey wants Aycayia to inhabit indefinitely. When David and Aycayia meet in 1976, the region's anti-colonial "process of self-assertion" has taken root (Quinn 2014, p. 16). But Aycayia's discomfort and otherness at this moment are indicative that, to Roffey, the revolutions

of the 1970s had not done enough to address feminist concerns across the Caribbean. Simultaneously, the 1970s witnessed a rise in Rastafarianism in Jamaica and across the region that Quinn describes as a "parallel [movement]. . . that fertilised Black Power outside the United States." (ibid., p. 8). In their exploration of Rastafarian spirituality, Michael Barnett and Adwoa Ntozake Onuora explain that Rastas often make a "concerted effort to give back to the earth and tend to the environment because it is through maintaining a balance in the earth that they are able to maintain this natural and earthy diet, the Ital diet." (Barnett and Onuora 2012, p. 168). Rastafari envisions and enacts a symbiotic relationship between land and humans that rejects the extractive logics that characterised early colonial European encounters with the region. An inherently anti-colonial religion, Rastafari is characterised in the novel as a worldview that is almost understandable for the pre-colonial mermaid. On more than one occasion, Aycayia's hair is described as dreadlocked, creating a spiritual and physical connection between her and David (Roffey 2020, p. 61). She is introduced to the music of Bob Marley: "Get Up Stand Up Duppy Conqueror/Bob Marley was half white/he was half and half too. . . Mix up good like me" (ibid., p. 65). Again, the narrative points to a moment of connection between the Taino mermaid and the twentieth-century Caribbean through Rastafari. But still, Roffey's mermaid returns to the sea: "Strong pull all the time away from land and back to the sea" (ibid., p. 97). The Black Conch of 1976 is not yet ready to accept Aycayia and all that she represents, but through the inclusion of David's 2016 journal entries, Roffey gestures towards different possibilities for our contemporary moment. David's last words in the novel suggest there is an emerging future for the region that could accept the indigenous mermaid: "Next day, everything would be different. I was right about that" (ibid., p. 185).

4. Conclusions

As Carole Boyce Davies reminds us in her re-reading of Sylvia Wynter's essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," Wynter argues that "the task is for these silenced others to speak and also to account for their speech" (Boyce Davies 2018, p. 844). As with Baptiste and Solomon, Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* gives a voice to the subaltern that has been unfairly or inadequately remembered in the existing written record. Through the characterisation of Aycayia—an Indigenous woman with a unique voice and the capacity to connect diverse communities in Black Conch—Roffey imagines the possibilities of strength and freedom for Caribbean women, although this possibility is, ultimately, unachievable in the 1976 novelistic world she imagines. The Black Conch of 1976 is positively impacted by the anti-colonial movements of the region, and whilst this must be recognised as great progress, Roffey does not imagine that, in 1976, the Caribbean had fully realised its potential for inclusivity. Yet, the 2015/2016 diary entries in the novel suggest that, in the 21st century, there is the potential to achieve her vision of a decolonial feminist future for the region.

The novel employs a non-linear, multivocal narrative to weave together past and present, and bring into dialogue multiple perspectives as a way of gesturing towards Roffey's vision for the Caribbean's future. The novel's narrative strategies and the ebb-and-flow motion with which the novel moves support a reading of the Caribbean as a region made up of several fragments that are brought together through processes of creolisation. The non-linear narrative evokes Edward Baugh's assertion that "the conceptual model of Caribbeanness shuns linearity, consolidation and stasis [. . .]. Itis a movement of fluidity and flux and tides, of waves endlessly repeating themselves outwards and returning" (Baugh 2006, p. 7). The Caribbean, like the aquatic, is mutable. At different times in the novel, the sea is cast as a space of exile, and at others, Aycayia articulates a deep longing to return to it. The water in *Black Conch* is both friend and foe; a space of terror and a

space of possibility. This ambivalence is not reconciled; rather, these paradoxes are simply allowed to exist in the novel. The mermaid, then, connects the inhabitants of post-colonial Black Conch to each other and to the region's pre-colonial history; a history that must be understood in order to realise a truly decolonial future. Aycayia's return to the sea by the novel's conclusion might at first seem solely like a pessimistic reading of the limitations of radical politics in the 1970s, but I read it as an assertion that the 21st-century Caribbean is in a better position to accept the mermaid, and all she embodies, on her own terms.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] https://x.com/thereturnofBWA/status/1704240123888418929 (accessed on 2 February 2025).

[2] This descriptor appears on the cover of the original Peepal Tree Press publication, though does not in subsequent versions of the book published by Penguin.

References

Baptiste, Tracey. 2019. *Rise of the Jumbies*. New York: Algonquin Young Readers. First published 2017.

Barnett, Michael, and Adwoa Ntozake Onuora. 2012. Rastafari as Afrocentrically Based Discourse and Spiritual Expression. In *Rastafari in the New Millenium*. Edited by Michael Barnett. New York: Syracuse University Press, pp. 159–74.

Baugh, Eddie. 2006. Literary Theory And The Caribbean: Theory, Belief And Desire, or Designing Theory: (Plenary Address, 2nd Caribbean Culture Conference UWI, Cave Hill "(Re)Thinking Caribbean Culture," June 4–8, 2001). *Journal of West Indian Literature* 15: 3–14.

Boyce Davies, Carol. 2018. Occupying the Terrain: Reengaging "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman". *American Quarterly* 70: 837–45. [CrossRef]

Brand, Dionne. 2011. *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. 1999. *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey*. New York: We Press.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. 2021. Caribbean Man in Space and Time. *Small Axe* 66: 90–104. [CrossRef]

Davis, Jalondra A. 2021. Crossing Merfolk, the Human, and the Anthropocene in Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* and Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 32: 349–67.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. 2010. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Glissant, Edouard. 2010. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. First published 1997.

Goodison, Lorna. 2017. *Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

Hayward, Philip. 2018. *Scaled for Success: The Internationalization of the Mermaid*. Herts: John Libbey Publishing.

Huggins, Nadia. 2016. Transformations. Available online: https://nadiahuggins.com/Transformations (accessed on 12 January 2025).

Lambert, Laurie R. 2020. *Comrade Sister: Caribbean Feminist Revisions of the Grenada Revolution*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Maltese, Emanuela. 2010. 'What is the Truth?': Ezili, or the Power of Feminist Love. *Journal of Haitian Studies* 16: 87–94.

Mason, Peter. 2005. Canute Caliste. *The Guardian*, November 25. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/nov/25/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries#:~:text=Caliste%20claimed%20to%20have%20been,could%20achieve%20anything%20he%20wanted (accessed on 11 February 2025).

Meikle, H. B. 1958. Mermaids and Fairymaids or Water Gods and Goddesses of Tobago. *Caribbean Quarterly* 5: 103–8. [CrossRef]

Mentz, Steve. 2024. *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. Oxon: Routledge.

Müller, Axel, Christopher Halls, and Ben Williamson. 2022. *Mermaids: Art, Symbols and Mythology*. Exeter: Exeter University Press.

Pasley, Victoria. 2001. The Black Power Movement in Trinidad: An Exploration of Gender and Cultural Changes and the Development of a Feminist Consciousness. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 3: 24–40.

Quinn, Kate. 2014. Introduction: New Perspectives on Black Power in the Caribbean. In *Black Power in the Caribbean*. Edited by Kate Quinn. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, pp. 1–24.

Roffey, Monique. 2020. *The Mermaid of Black Conch*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press.

Schamp, Jutta. 2024. 'Does My Voice Count?' The Reconfiguration of Myth and Gender in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch*. *Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies* 12: 254–75.

Solomon, Rivers. 2019. *The Deep*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Stevens-Arroyo, Anthony. 2024. Taino Religion. In *The Oxford Handbook of Caribbean Religions*. Edited by Michelle A. Gonzalez. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 3–16.

Tepper, Anderson. 2022. The Bestselling, Crowdfunded Novelist Changing the Face of Caribbean Literature. *Los Angeles Times*, July 5. Available online: https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2022-07-05/the-bestselling-crowdfunded-woman-novelist-changing-the-face-of-caribbean-literature (accessed on 1 March 2025).

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. 2018. *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Walcott, Rinaldo. 2021. The Black Aquatic. *Liquid Blackness* 5: 63–73. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.