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Atlantic archipelagic women's narratives as fractal models of resistance: The case of *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses ecocriticism's "ocean deficit" by foregrounding contemporary Atlantic archipelagic women's literature as a cultural force for reimagining human-sea relations and resisting exploitative practices. Drawing on island feminism, it explores how islandness and gender intersect, producing models of resilience rooted in fluid kinship across human and nonhuman realms. Adopting the transdisciplinary approach of the Blue Humanities, the Atlantic archipelago is examined as a formation where disruption and precarity become resources for survival. This reframing informs a gendered ecocritical reading of Monique Roffey's archipelagic novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch*. The analysis shows how the protagonist's attunement to the insular environment – through transcorporeal exchanges and interspecies mutations – disrupts fixed notions of women and water as passive, reimagining them as dynamic, relational forces. Roffey's fiction models an archipelagic existence that embraces fluidity, disavows domination, and accepts contamination as survival, generating fractal forms of resistance from island to planetary scale.

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Introduction

A "return to the sea" is how, in 2013, the late ocean historian John Gillis described humanity's increasing engagement with the great waters in the present epoch.[1] As sea levels rise, glaciers melt, and warmer air absorbs more moisture, the current generation is witnessing profound changes in planetary water systems – both on a vast scale and in the intimate disruptions of daily life. This often disorienting proximity to water – manifesting in tropical rainstorms in nontropical areas, devastating floods, and ever-shifting waterscapes – confirms Elizabeth DeLoughrey's argument that the planetary future is becoming increasingly oceanic.[2] These transformative times, marked by a deepening global water crisis, reveal how human lives are physically, socially, and culturally shaped by their relationship with the aquatic world. On one hand, water bears some of the most visible signs of planetary environmental distress.[3] On the other, it has catalyzed "a new oceanic imaginary,"[4] inspiring twenty-first-century cultural approaches[5] that treat wet matter as a central ontological concern rather than a shapeless backdrop to human activity. Within the cultural productions driving this "oceanic turn"[6] in the humanities, islands emerge as potent physical and symbolic sites – spaces to "think with"[7] and key figures of entanglement between human and nonhuman worlds. As Elaine Stratford, Godfrey Baldacchino, and Elizabeth McMahon argue in *Rethinking Island Methodologies*,[8] islands and archipelagos warrant sustained attention for the insights they offer into geography, history, and the socio-cultural dynamics that shape both insular and continental contexts. Yet, as ecocritics have noted,[9] the humanities still suffer from an "ocean deficit"[10] that privileges a focus on terrestrial rather than marine environments.

This study responds to that critical imbalance by examining the material and semiotic dimensions of Atlantic islands as portrayed in contemporary women's archipelagic literature,[11] a form of Indigenous knowledge that highlights the ontological entanglement between human bodies and the ocean with an anti-patriarchal, non-anthropocentric, and decolonial agenda. In this respect, island feminism offers a productive analytical lens for investigating the interplay between place and social constructions – particularly gender – by foregrounding "the agency, geographical awareness, resourcefulness, and forms of community of

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lives shaped by categories of islandness."[12] By foregrounding inequalities and diversities in and around islands, as well as strategies of resistance specific to island contexts, an island feminist perspective validates women's distinctive experiences and insights into the material, social, and cultural practices that shape archipelagic life. Within this framework, literary and cultural productions from and about archipelagos emerge as particularly valuable sites for a gendered environmental analysis.

This essay examines Trinidadian writer Monique Roffey's modern novel, *The Mermaid of Black Conch*,[13] which tells the story of an Indigenous mermaid's emancipation from oppression and solitude through her capacity to engage with her surroundings in fluid, creative, and open ways. The essay first situates the Atlantic archipelago as a unique geographical, ecological, and conceptual formation in which disruption, deviation, and liminality are not burdens but vital conditions for survival; it then applies this reframing to a gendered ecocritical analysis of Roffey's novel. The close reading, centered on the mermaid protagonist, highlights how her hybrid existence – shaped by both terrestrial and aquatic forces, and expressed through transcorporeal exchanges and interspecies fluidity – disrupts fixed categories and hierarchical binaries. In doing so, the author models an alternative way of thinking and acting in relation to both women and the aquatic world. Ultimately, the entanglement between insular terraqueous environments and archipelagic women points to new relational ontologies for the Anthropocene – ontologies based not on stability or control but on adaptability, permeability, and creative leaking between human and nonhuman worlds. As I argue, this archipelagic perspective generates fractal forms of resistance, capable of proliferating from the small scale of the island to planetary contexts, offering inspiring models for living on "our small and fraught planet."[14]

The Atlantic and its islands: An archipelagic elegy of disruption

The Atlantic is an oceanscape of central importance to the Blue Humanities. Within it, the Caribbean Sea – where Roffey's novel is set – epitomizes the interdependency and entanglement of ecological, social, and cultural systems that define the present epoch. Its circular currents, for example, facilitated the transatlantic slave trade that has shaped Atlantic history since the fifteenth century and enabled European colonial expansion. This same colonial enterprise not only transformed human societies but also disrupted ecological balances across numerous sites in the New World. The patriarchal fantasies of maritime domination and control that fueled colonial expansion were also projected onto Caribbean islands, historically cast as vulnerable, isolated, and backward places, deprived of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and relational support. The enduring "myth of island isolation"[15] that DeLoughrey critiques in her article, "The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific," feeds into broader stereotypes related to tropes of fecundity, tropical beauty, and exoticism, as well as ideas of ultimate disposability. However, these stereotypical views of islands, mostly rooted in their perceived separateness, have been radically reconsidered over the last few years, especially in light of the global ecological interconnectedness that defines the Anthropocene. As Johnathan Pugh and David Chandler have highlighted, the island has become the central epitome of the relational and co-dependent life that characterizes our present epoch, offering valuable insights on workable modes of living in times of profound changes.[16] As "exemplary figures of the Anthropocene," islands have shifted from the margins to the center of global attention paradoxically thanks to their traditional association with anti-modern modes of living, which stand in stark contrast to the orderly, instrumental, and stable practices typically associated with continental life.[17] Rachel Carson anticipated this shift by identifying islands as precious sites of unrest, flux, and transformation – qualities once regarded as detrimental but now recognized as essential for imagining planetary futures.[18] Their ecosystems thrive precisely through mutability, discontinuity, and hybridity, offering a tangible demonstration that survival in the Anthropocene depends less on stasis, order, and fixity than on dynamism, disruption, and temporal as well as spatial instability.

Several examples epitomizing the virtuous transformational exchanges between the terrestrial and aquatic systems that characterize insular regions can be found within the nonhuman realm. The tropical mangrove, for instance, is a living allegory of insular existence, embodying the entangled thresholds of land and sea where survival depends on flux, permeability, and resilience. Its exposed roots and amphibious adaptability mirror the Caribbean's capacity to thrive in states of liminality, showing that change and instability are not liabilities but vital conditions for endurance. John Drabinski observes that

> [t]he tropical mangrove, *the Rhizophora*, survives precisely because it is lifted above the sea with special roots. Propped above the tidal pulse, the tree's body is given oxygen, which keeps it alive despite the unpredictable and often violent crashing of salt, time, memory, and waves on the shoreline. Yet, the mangrove is also constantly contested by the sea. Becoming mangrove is no easy piece. It survives because the roots have lifted what is essential above the contingent destructive reach of the waves. The mangrove is a border plant. Roots like no other – plural and in no relation of dependency to the One.[19]

Drabinski's description emphasizes the dynamic adaptability of Caribbean vegetation, which, existing in a constant state of flux, has developed "self-regulating" capacities essential for survival.[20] These adaptive traits extend to the islands' human inhabitants, whose innovative responses to various disruptive forces – ranging from global warming and rising sea levels to ongoing colonial legacies and ecological degradation – have drawn increasing international recognition as inspirational practices of "attunement" to a rapidly transforming world.[21] As Monique Allewaert has noted in her reflections on the environmental influence on the biological evolution of Caribbean inhabitants, many people from this tropical region have historically lived in swampy environments – directly experiencing conditions of liminality – while also contending with high humidity and close physical contact with insects and other nonhuman creatures.[22] This constant exposure has given rise to complex processes that have entangled human bodies with their nonhuman surroundings, resulting in "what we might now call an ecological phenomenon" of new forms of embodiment.[23] As Mentz also argues, the formation of a "microcosm of multispecies alliances,"[24] favored by the entwinement of human and nonhuman living beings and the unique climatological forces characterizing the Caribbean, has contributed to the formation of hybrid bodies, which Allewaert describes as "parahuman."[25] A case in point is represented by Roffey's mermaid, presented as follows:

> A red-skinned woman, not black, not African. Not yellow, not a Chinese woman, or a woman with golden hair from Amsterdam. Not a blue woman, either, blue like a damn fish. Red. She was a red woman, like an Amerindian. Or anyway, her top half was red. […] Her shoulders, her head, her breasts, and her long black hair [were] like ropes, all sea mossy and jook up with anemone and conch shell. A merwoman. (2)

As the description suggests, the first point of indeterminacy lies in the identification of the creature's racial belonging. She is introduced through a litany of negations, before her red skin is tentatively linked to Amerindian heritage. This rhetorical strategy resists fixed ethnic categories, positioning the mermaid instead as a hybrid figure whose association with Indigenous peoples evokes cultural, linguistic, and social multiplicities rather than a single, stable identity. The subsequent reference to "her top half" foregrounds her hybrid constitution, further underscored by the marine growths that encrust her hair and body. These vegetal and animal accretions literalize her condition as a transcorporeal being, whose identity emerges through porous exchanges between human and aquatic worlds. In this sense, her body exemplifies what Stacy Alaimo describes as queer embodiment: a mode of being that unsettles the presumed boundaries and coherences of the human, revealing corporeality as fluid, relational, and shaped by its material entanglements with nonhuman forces.[26]

This emphasis on queer embodiments and transcorporeal exchanges is a hallmark of contemporary women's archipelagic narratives, which function as powerful ecofeminist interventions, foregrounding women's knowledge and contributions to dismantling individualistic, anthropocentric, and phallogocentric modes of thought and practice.

Archipelagic narratives as ecofeminist tools

Due to their unique positionality, views, and experiences, women are powerful agents of change regarding how individuals interact with oceanic matters. As Sareen Ali and colleagues have argued, "recognizing and integrating women's roles and perspectives in ocean literacy can lead to an effective interconnectedness between humans and the ocean."[27] Yet, as Marina Karides has pointed out, islandness and gender or sexualities have rarely been conceived of together.[28] Bridging this gap, the intersection of these categories offers crucial insights into power, exploitation, and marginalization that extend well beyond the bounded space of the island. Conceptually, archipelagic thinking and gender studies share key areas of investigation. Both frameworks reposition the periphery – whether marginalized peoples or places – at the center of analysis, while also challenging dominant land-centric and patriarchal perspectives in favor of fluid and alternative

environmental and social formations. Furthermore, both critical practices foreground the relationship between places and identity formation. Places are imagined not as static, passive backdrops but as events, happenings, and "a constellation of processes," to borrow Doreen Massey's formulation.[29] As dynamic sites of cultural production, the locations where lives unfold carry subversive and revisionist potential, functioning as catalysts for change through their capacity to shape thought and behavior.[30] This shared emphasis on place as lived experience translates into a common concern with locality and situatedness – that is, the specific geographical, social, and cultural positions from which individuals engage with the world. From a spatial perspective, both archipelagic and gender studies interrogate how we position ourselves in relation to the environment – particularly waterscapes – and in doing so, they advance an ethics of care, empathy, and respect toward the nonhuman. As a consequence, they also propose a reconceptualization of the human body as a system resulting from exchanges and contaminations between human and nonhuman forces. Scholars such as Stacy Alaimo and Astrida Neimanis – who develop hydrofeminist frameworks at the intersection of feminist theory and water ontologies – challenge anthropocentric, masculinist, and humanist notions of the body as a self-contained whole, proposing instead queer imaginaries of fluid embodiment. As Neimanis contends, "to be human means also always to leak beyond the limits of that humanity."[31] From this perspective, relations between the human and the surrounding world, namely the aquatic realm, are not understood in hierarchical or exploitative terms but as generative, productive encounters that affirm interdependence, permeability, and shared vulnerability. Thematically speaking, a reconceptualization of wet matter is a central issue in both archipelagic and gender studies. The two critical perspectives reject traditional ideas of water as an isomorphic, tamable, and containable substance or an abstract void to be instrumentalized according to humans' needs. On the contrary, they forward alternatives to dominant imaginaries, especially through art forms – including literature – that can give access to "embodied experiences of wateriness."[32] In this respect, archipelagic literature foregrounds aqueous imaginaries in which queer embodiments emerge and the agentic properties of wet matter come to the fore. Within Caribbean writing, works such as Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) and Tiphanie Yanique's *Land of Love and Drowning* (2014) foreground bodily exchanges and metamorphoses – instances of "trans-corporeality," to use Stacy Alaimo's term.[33] By emphasizing fluidity, openness, and interconnection, these narratives articulate an ethical framework that resists containment, rejects mastery, and dissolves rigid boundaries. Such an approach may be understood as a form of archipelagic ecofeminism, in which the entanglement of land and sea that defines island life provides both the material and conceptual ground for contesting practices of gender inequality and environmental exploitation in archipelagic contexts.

Building on these ecofeminist engagements with watery embodiment, Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch* develops an especially powerful meditation on the interplay between the island's terraqueous environment and a woman's body. The novel, set between the 1970s and the present on a fictional Caribbean island named Black Conch, places at its center a mermaid – an ancient Indigenous Taíno woman cursed to eternal solitude in the depths of the Atlantic – who surfaces as a potent symbol of hybridity and in-betweenness. Bridging apparently opposed systems – human and nonhuman, terrestrial and aquatic, natural and supernatural – she embodies the generative possibilities of contamination and relation. Her violent capture by American fishermen and subsequent arrival on Black Conch disrupt not only the intimate life of David Baptiste, a Black fisherman with whom she forges a profound physical and emotional bond, but also the ecological and social fabric of the island. In line with archipelagic thinking and ecofeminist stances, the novel reframes disturbance as a generative force: rather than signaling damage, it operates as a subversive practice of non-alignment and a catalyst for reimagining and transforming harmful habits, beliefs, and spaces. Through her bodily presence, language, sexuality, and social behaviors, the mermaid channels the hybrid nature of the terraqueous world she inhabits and destabilizes entrenched exploitative attitudes toward women and aquatic environments.

The creative power of disturbance: *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

The traditional humanist assumption that nature is a self-regulating space persistently tending toward harmony – and thus rejecting disturbance or contamination – has been largely contested by contemporary ecology. As Anna Tsing demonstrates, there exist multiple "*disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest*."[34] In her account, cross-species interactions are

not exceptions to balance but the very drivers of evolution, giving rise to new species formations and fostering strategies of "collaborative survival."[35] The Caribbean island of Black Conch, where Roffey's novel is set, is an ever-shifting place of unpredictable encounters that make life on the island a paradoxical tension between fecundity and death, possibilities and limitations, peace and precarity. Ecologically speaking, singular nonhuman animals, such as the howler monkeys and the macajuel snake, inhabit the rainforest and threaten the safety of their human fellow inhabitants. Extreme natural events, including hurricanes and droughts, also put humans' lives at risk. Yet these same forces and presences are not mere background elements but active participants in shaping human survival. The island's environment – at once threatening and sustaining – ensures prosperity by offering an abundance of products, such as "nutmeg, indigo, ginger, cotton, bananas, cocoa, and sugar cane" (96). Black Conch thus epitomizes a dynamic assemblage where human existence depends on negotiating precarious but productive relations with the nonhuman world. From a cultural-historical viewpoint, Black Conch island carries the legacies of Dutch, French, British, and American settlers, marking it as a space of deep multicultural entanglement. At the same time, it is also a site of profound suffering and injustice, shaped by the slave trade and European imperialism: "Every bay had seen a bloody sea battle and there'd been countless murders on the beaches" (Ibid.). The sea and beaches therefore emerge as paradoxical sites of passage: they facilitated not only exchange, resilience, and cultural renewal, but also conquest, exploitation, and violence. They are repositories of memory, enabling creative survival and hybrid cultural forms, while simultaneously carrying traces of trauma. In this light, Black Conch is not a neutral backdrop but a character in itself, embodying the contradictions and generative tensions of archipelagic life. Its ecological fecundity and danger, its cultural hybridity and violence, converge to illustrate that "indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but […] precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible."[36]

The apparently contrasting qualities of this insular environment – at once fragile and resilient – are mirrored in the figure of the mermaid, Aycayia, who inhabits both the waters and the land of Black Conch. Physically, her body, described as that of a "human fish" (18), bears both terrestrial and aquatic traits. At the moment of her capture, the fishermen saw a woman whose "[…] head, […] breasts, […] belly, [and] pubic bone […] met the tail of a glistening fish" (20). Two seemingly opposite realms – human and nonhuman – thus converge within the same creature, producing a queer embodiment that destabilizes the rigid categories on which the crew relies. As the narrator observes, voicing a fisherman's unease, "he didn't like she was half-naked, half-female. […] Was she fish or meat? […] She was a mutation of the natural world […]" (53–55). This inability to draw clear distinctions or to "manage" hybridity reveals the limits of anthropocentric and masculinist epistemologies, which turn to violence when faced with bodies that exceed their frames of recognition. The fishermen's subsequent aggressive attempt to contain her therefore epitomizes a broader colonial and patriarchal impulse to master what is fluid, hybrid, and untamable, an impulse that Aycayia's very existence profoundly unsettles. The fluidity of the novel's protagonist is also emblematized by her innate capacity to metamorphose into a different being, depending on the changing circumstances she faces. After being rescued by the local fisherman, David Baptiste, the mermaid progressively loses her fish traits, "coming back to woman, and a woman from another time. […] Her enormous silver tail [began] to come apart" (55). As the external conditions shift, Aycayia adapts, embracing both the challenges and the new possibilities offered by her environment. This capacity for transformation appears rooted in ancestral knowledge inscribed within her as an Indigenous inhabitant of the Caribbean archipelago – a "woman from another time" – highlighting how deep ecological and cultural histories shape adaptive, relational modes of being. This double temporal belonging, perfectly expressed by the sentence "she was young and she was ancient" (71), is a further marker of hybridity that defines Aycayia. She embodies a continuity of knowledge and experience that spans generations, using the wisdom of Indigenous practices to navigate her present condition fully and with agency. As the narrator explains, "she was from ancient times, from times when people knew magic, when people saw gods everywhere and talked to the plants, the animals and even the fish in the sea" (66).

As mentioned above, Aycayia's transformation should be read not only as a necessary strategy of survival, but also as the capacity to enjoy the pleasures that such transformation might entail. A case in point is represented by her intimate relationship with David, thanks to whom she discovers the depth of sexual pleasure and physical connection. Her union with David is a prominent example of the book's intention to shed light on interspecies entanglement and reciprocal validation. Indeed, despite her transformation into a woman,

Aycayia retains several traits that visibly mark her as an in-between creature: “Her feet were enormous and bunioned; her toes were webbed. The arches had collapsed and so her feet caved inwards. […] She still smelled like the ocean, a strong sea salt scent” (79). These lingering features confirm that her passage to humanity is never complete, and that she continues to embody the fluid intersection of marine and terrestrial realms. Her body thus destabilizes binary logics of classification, refusing to be assimilated entirely into either category. Moreover, her intimate relationship with a human intensifies this ambivalence: she is both lover and other, kin and stranger, a figure of contamination and connection. This is evident in the passage describing the first intercourse between her and her savior: “[H]e parted her legs, the legs where once there had been a fish’s tail, sealed off, banished and cursed for eternity” (144). The episode is deliberately unsettling and can be read as invoking familiar patriarchal tropes of male access to the female body. Yet the novel complicates this dynamic. The scene functions not merely as heterosexual coupling but as a liminal event in which intimacy is reframed through archipelagic and ecofeminist logics: a moment where transformation, vulnerability, and relational alterity interrupt normative scripts of desire and reproduction. Aycayia exemplifies a queer, transcorporeal embodiment, one that results from productive disturbances, as Tsing would claim, that unsettle anthropocentric and patriarchal frameworks while foregrounding physical and cultural hybridity, interspecies entanglement, and the possibilities offered by dismantling rigid schemes.[37]

If Aycayia’s body is the tangible sign of her existence – as well as her capacity for adaptation – between two worlds, language is the immaterial evidence of this double belonging. The mermaid’s way of communicating combines idioms, styles, and genres, resulting in a unique form of expression that goes beyond the mere use of words, involving also rhetorical devices that draw on both oral tradition and mythopoetic imagination. Her speech thus emerges as a hybrid practice, simultaneously archaic and contemporary, local and transoceanic, a linguistic in-betweenness that mirrors her corporeal hybridity. Her account of the days after the rescue, spent in David’s bathtub while waiting for her body to be ready to inhabit the terrestrial world, unfolds in a form that is at once poetic and oral:

> Days pass in tub of water
> Drinking it and it taste bad
> Not enough salt
> My tail rotting and it happen quick quick
> Old legs seeing them again
> But I am cursed creature
> Women jealous jealous of my young self
> Put me in the sea
> A thousand cycles ago
> I am cursed creature
> Cursed to be unhappy
> What happen to me then?
> Fish scales fall away
> Breasts like young again
> I come back to woman
> My new old self start coming back
> I was woman again and I was frighten bad (61)

The first striking feature of Aycayia’s discourse is its oral tone. She directly involves readers, asking rhetorical questions and recounting memories of a distant past, as in oral tales. The rhythm recalls spoken storytelling traditions through repetitions (“quick quick,” “jealous jealous”), alliterations (“cursed creature”), and parallel or rhyming structures (“Fish scales fall away/Breasts like young again”). Grammar rules are deliberately unsettled, and archaic vocabulary (for example, “a thousand cycles ago”) is employed, adding emphasis and pathos to her discourse. The word “cycle” not only signals an archaic temporality but also invokes mythic structures of repetition and rebirth, as well as the procreative rhythms of the young female body (for example, the menstrual cycle). In this way, the novel weaves together ecological, mythological, and gendered temporalities. Aycayia’s voice resonates with Caribbean oral cultures, which have long privileged rhythm, performance, and voice as carriers of history and identity. As Kamau Brathwaite argued in his theorization of “nation language,” the cadence and structure of speech can become a medium of resistance, reclaiming non-standard, mixed, and embodied forms of expression.[38] Similarly, Aycayia’s language unsettles the colonial, patriarchal, and logocentric codes of communication, privileging instead a relational poetics

grounded in orality, affect, and memory. During her permanence on Black Conch island, the mermaid also communicates through sign language, which she learns from a deaf boy she befriends. This additional communicative practice further emphasizes her archipelagic nature: a being who forges connections through creative, embodied means that resist logocentric models and instead privilege relationality and multiplicity in meaning-making. Alongside visual means such as sign language, Aycayia also expresses herself through sound, singing ancient chants and litanies. Yet, unlike the traditional mermaid figure who employs her mellifluous voice to seduce and ensnare men, as Elisabetta Moro has observed, Aycayia uses her voice as a medium to reconnect with her past and to interpret her present through ancestral knowledge.[39] Her chant is therefore not a tempting melody but a disruptive resonance, described as a "blood-curling growl from centuries long past" (112), which unsettles listeners while anchoring her to a collective memory of survival and endurance.

Aycayia's ability to merge multiple dimensions extends beyond her individual self and her relationships with humans, encompassing a deeply intimate bond with the natural world as well. Specifically, her connection with water remains very much alive even during her terrestrial stay in Black Conch. As she reflects, "there was the sea inside her; […] [t]he pull of it flared in every cell of her body" (154). A striking manifestation of this unbroken link is "the fish rain" (118), an unusual storm that suddenly hits the island hosting Aycayia: "A live carite hit the ground. […] Another fish fell. […] Then another and another, until […] [t]he sky opened [and] [h]undreds of silver carite rained down through the trees" (128–129). This uncanny convergence of sea, sky, and earth dramatizes the ocean's vital presence and refusal to be silenced, transforming the lawn into a "sea of fish" (130). Far from a random anomaly, the event exemplifies a disturbance-based ecology, where disruption generates new forms of coexistence rather than destruction. From an ecofeminist perspective, the storm also acts as symbolic resistance against patriarchal violence, reclaiming Aycayia, who had been forcibly estranged from her element. At the same time, the scene reactivates an archipelagic imagination in which elemental spheres – water, air, and land – interpenetrate, dissolving rigid boundaries and affirming interconnectedness. In this sense, the "sea of fish" signifies both the restitution of an ocean's creature and the wider possibility of envisioning contamination, fluidity, and relationality as alternatives to separation and domination.

The fundamental hybridity that characterizes the book protagonist – expressed through her fluid physical conformation, language, relationships, and way to inhabit the world – is her ultimate source of salvation as well as means of resistance against a system that is attempting to entrap her into categories that would inevitably kill her multifaceted, boundless nature. As if to affirm the self-awareness of her power, she claims:

> I will live until there is no more water in the sea
> I am now and forever
> I will be here for the whole of time
> I, Aycayia Sweet Voice (181)

Her words resound as a manifesto of endurance, affirming an existence that exceeds the finitude of human life and the frameworks of colonial, patriarchal, and anthropocentric order, anchoring her being to the ocean, a force that is cyclical, unruly, and potentially eternal. Moreover, the insistence on her "forever" presence signals a refusal of human-imposed limits, whether physical – as in her arrest – or conceptual, as when she is labeled a "freak of nature" (194). Her voice – proclaimed as "Sweet Voice" – is not simply lyrical but insurgent, a counter-discourse that contests domination while affirming resilience and continuity across time and space. Her innate resilience is ultimately manifested through her final metamorphosis back into mermaid, which Aycayia describes as follows:

> Blood came back
> Then fish scales
> Full change to woman
> And then change back to fish (181)

The bodily flexibility described in this passage suggests that Aycayia's organism enacts inter-species mutations in response to external circumstances, revealing a capacity for survival rooted in transformation rather than fixity. This fluid corporeality resists binary divisions – human/nonhuman, land/sea, woman/mermaid – and instead instantiates a form of archipelagic being, where boundaries are porous and mobility

is essential. Significantly, the juxtaposition of "blood" with "fish scales" intertwines the most intimate and earthly states of womanhood, such as menstruation, with the most basic, watery features of aquatic life. Aycayia's body, thus, emblematizes the inseparability of human and more-than-human matter. Moreover, the cyclical pattern of change – woman to fish and back again – challenges linear, reproductive temporality, privileging instead a mythic and ecological rhythm that aligns her with oceanic cycles. This refusal of permanence destabilizes anthropocentric notions of identity as fixed, showing survival as contingent, mobile, and always in relation. In this way, Aycayia's metamorphosis is not simply a return to origins, but an assertion of her hybrid, transcorporeal, and archipelagic nature. In this respect, the statement that "she was going back, same, but different" (225) reveals that Aycayia's departure from land is not a regression, but an evolution into a wiser, more experienced being. Her terrestrial stay has enriched her with new forms of knowledge and intimacy, expanding her sense of self rather than diminishing it. She has learned to navigate both marine and human environments, and this dual experience ensures her resilience and capacity for survival. Crucially, her return to the ocean is not a simple restoration of a lost origin, but a re-entry marked by transformation: she returns "same" in her elemental belonging to the sea, yet "different" because of the lived encounters and relationships that have reshaped her being. This paradox encapsulates the logic of archipelagic existence, where identity emerges not in purity or stasis, but in movement, circulation, and the capacity to be altered by multiple worlds. It also disrupts the idea that growth is linear and harmonious, pointing instead toward a more convoluted path in which change always carries the potential for renewal and growth.

After Aycayia's departure and the passing of the hurricane that takes her to the sea, the place that hosted her is also different:

> Everything had changed up in Black Conch. [...] Some places stay same same, never change. Not here. Not on this tip of an island looking out into the sea, not in a place full of the ghosts of [...] ancestors, not in a place where the gods still laughed and said *not so fast*. (231)

Nature, history, and myth merge in this insular space, where the delusion that permanence and stability are the conditions to lead a safe and meaningful life is persistently eroded. The natural and supernatural forces that animate the archipelagic environment, as portrayed by Roffey, have been in continuous conversation with the woman protagonist, who leaves a legacy of deep attunement to nature, respectful remembrance of past lessons, and trustful acceptance of disruptions. In this sense, the transformation of Black Conch illustrates the island feminist principle of reciprocal influence between women and insular environment: the island becomes a site of identity affirmation, metamorphosis, and rebellion. Here, Roffey dramatizes an archipelagic ontology in which land, sea, humans, gods, and ghosts continually reshape one another, destabilizing the humanist pursuit of fixity. This resonates with the fractal logic of planetary archipelagic thinking, where every local disruption, lesson learned, and progress achieved might reverberate into a global pattern of productive relation and change.

Conclusion

This archipelagic ecocritical reading of *The Mermaid of Black Conch* has confirmed Tsing's poignant statement that "changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival."[40] Monique Roffey presents Aycayia as a figure of radical instability: a body fluidly shifting between woman and fish, a language that fuses orality, archaism, and invention, and relationships that resist reproductive futurism while opening spaces of intimacy grounded in reciprocity rather than possession. Her resilience, manifest in metamorphosis, and her deep attunement to both land and sea, enact an alternative mode of existence – archipelagic, transcorporeal, and irreducible to rigid categories. Yet Aycayia's story is not confined to individual survival. As Édouard Glissant claims, "[h]umans' behaviors are fractal in nature," suggesting that every action can be perfected through relation and reciprocal influence, and each disruption echoes outward in self-similar forms.[41] The fecund leaking – both literal and figurative – between her simultaneously human and nonhuman self, enabled by the archipelagic environment, has shown that coexistence with disturbance is not only possible, but an antidote against alienation from the surrounding world. Aycayia's multiple transformations, spatial mobility, and interspecies exchanges could be read as smart ways of inhabiting a time when "precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systematicity we seek."[42] In this respect,

women's archipelagic literature, with its creative emphasis on local and ancestral knowledge, ecological responsibility, and adaptive responses might not promise salvation from an increasingly vulnerable world, but it does expand our imaginative repertoire. Women appear here not merely as narrators or witnesses of ecological and social transformation, but as active agents whose strategies of adaptation and relational ethics provide fractal models for conceiving planetary interconnectivity, promoting intra- and inter-species collaboration, and embracing impermanence and contamination as fundamental conditions of life in the near future.

Notes

1. Gillis, "The Blue Humanities."
2. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*.
3. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*.
4. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 165.
5. The oceanic turn in cultural studies has given rise to diverse critical frameworks, including the Blue Humanities (Gillis 2013; Oppermann 2023; Mentz 2024) – which reorient humanistic attention toward water as culturally and ontologically generative – and hydrofeminism, as advanced by Astrida Neimanis (2017), which reconceptualizes bodies in terms of fluid relationality and resistance to anthropocentric norms. Other emerging strands, such as Blue Ecocriticism (Dobrin 2021) and Archipelagic Ecocriticism (Marland 2023), are also critical perspectives that aim at recentering oceanic waterscapes and their cultural and environmental significance.
6. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 134.
7. Gillis, *Islands of the mind*, 1.
8. Stratford, Baldacchino, and McMahon, *Rethinking Island Methodologies*.
9. See, for instance, Brayton's *Shakespeare's Ocean* and Dobrin's *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative.*
10. Dobrin, *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*, 3.
11. Jos Smith, in his article, "An archipelagic literature: reframing 'The New Nature Writing,'" has proposed the term "archipelagic literature" to identify all contemporary nature writing from and about islands that retains a distinctive sense of locality while also reflecting global connections and influxes.
12. Karides, "Why Island Feminism?" 32.
13. Roffey, *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (hereafter *MBC*). Subsequent references to the novel will be cited parenthetically.
14. Hay, "What the Sea Portends," 210.
15. DeLoughrey, "The Myth of Isolates,"167.
16. Pugh and Chandler. *Anthropocene Islands*.
17. Pugh, "The Affirmational Turn to Ontology in the Anthropocene," 65.
18. Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*.
19. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage*, 46.
20. Pugh and Chandler*, Anthropocene Islands,* 8.
21. Ibid., 97.
22. Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology*.
23. Ibid., 9.
24. Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, 95.
25. Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology*, 9.
26. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.
27. Ali, Poto, and Porrone. "Introduction to Gender, OIN Project, and Ocean Literacy," 39.
28. Karides, "Why Island Feminism?"
29. Massey, *For Space*, 141.
30. On the performative potential of geographies and their impact on individual and collective identity, practices, and creativity, see Fletcher's "' … Some Distance to Go'."
31. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 45.
32. Ibid., 55.
33. Alaimo, "Trans-corporeality."
34. Tsing Lowenhaupt, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 16 (italics original).
35. Ibid., 25.
36. Ibid., 26.
37. Ibid., 73.
38. Brathwaite, *History of the Voice.*
39. Moro, *Sirene*.
40. Tsing Lowenhaupt, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 31.
41. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192–193.

42. Tsing Lowenhaupt, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 26.

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