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Cann, Lucy Gender and Sexuality Reading Group discussion on October 21 2024 - Review of Mowat et al's "Historicising Trans Past" and Gust's "Of Mermaids and Monsters". Other. Birkbeck, University of London. (Unpublished)

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Gender and Sexuality Reading Group - October 21, 2024

The Gender and Sexuality Reading Group (GSRG) met for the first time this academic year on Monday 21 October. The group discussed the introduction to the recent special issue of *Gender & History* entitled '**Historicising Trans Pasts**' and Onni Gust's article '**Of Mermaids and Monsters: Transgender history and the boundaries of the human in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain**' from the issue.¹

On the introduction, the group noted how the articles contained in the issue suggest a shift towards broadening how we talk about trans history and who we include in the term.

Beginning with a discussion of the appropriateness of present-day terms such as 'trans' when talking about the past, we reflected on the authors' contention that 'to accept 'trans' as a term for the present but deny it for the past is to assume too much uniformity in the present and to put too great a burden of proof on premodern and non-Western sources/histories'.² We noted that while historical actors may not self-identify or look the same as present day understandings of trans, it is still useful to historicise the concept. We also discussed the authors' support for Karma Lochrie's argument that 'the whole defense against the charge of anachronism arising out of the use of modern categories such as "trans-gender" to understand the past is no longer necessary',³ and agreed that while this may seem contradictory, it is a useful way in which the authors align the issue with existing scholarship and locate a common framework of reference.

We also noted challenges around encapsulating non-western ideas of a third gender within studies of trans history and whether it is appropriate to include them in the field. Specifically, it was pointed out that fitting ideas of a 'third gender' into trans history may not be accurate given that those people themselves don't identify in these ways, and that these third identities are sometimes seen as god-given and would not be questioned by individuals' family networks in the same way that a trans identity may be.

We also discussed the reframing of trans as a methodology rather than a research subject, concluding that while it is unclear what this might look like it remains an interesting shift to think about.

Turning to Gust's article, we firstly discussed the term hermaphrodite and noted that we felt that the author is not specific enough about what this term encapsulates. More broadly, we agreed that the author brings in a lot of themes to the article such as colonialism, exoticised ideas about gender and race, as well as the climate catastrophe, without sufficiently expanding on each of these and explaining how they are linked to the article's subject matter.

¹ Chris Mowat, Joanna de Groot, and Maroula Perisanidi, "Historicising Trans Pasts: An introduction," *Gender & History* 36, 1, (March 2024), p1-13. Onni Gust, "Of Mermaids and Monsters: Transgender history and the boundaries of the human in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain," *Gender & History* 36, 1, (March 2024), p112-129.

² Mowat et al, 7.

³ Mowat et al, 7.

We then talked about the inclusion of mermaids in trans history. On the whole, the group was not convinced by the author's argument that they be included because of the 'resonance' between human trans experience and that of mermaids. We felt that the author needed to offer more of an explanation here, and also include a more in-depth discussion of mermaids and gender. This led us to ask broader questions around which groups should trans history include and the ethical questions around using a broad definition of trans.

On the author's examination of the figure of the hermaphrodite, we noted that the author did not include much material relating to people's experience and instead relied on the work of James Parsons' work on hermaphroditism in the eighteenth century. We also reflected on how the article's linking of the mermaid and the hermaphrodite relied on a focus on genitalia. We appreciated that the author did not produce historical images, but that their focus here still risked a pornographic approach in which other themes are pushed into the background.

Drawing on Gust's statement that discussions of mermaids and hermaphrodites often began with the lower classes, we reflected on themes of class and socioeconomic status. We complicated the idea of there being expectations regarding individuals' gender and sexuality based on their class, noting that while being upper class may provide people with more resources to facilitate freedom of expression, these classes may also have stricter expectations regarding heterosexual marriage. We also noted that it is challenging to explore the 'lower class' experience because of limited archival evidence from these groups.

Finally, we reflected on the issue's link between historicising trans past and how this is linked to trans futures. We noted in particular the importance of centering joy in these histories because oftentimes this can be overwhelmed by the negative.

We welcome suggestions for readings for the next GSRG meeting which will be scheduled for November.

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