

Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 12: *Feejee Mermaid*



October 29

Arts & Letters

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Q&A + OPEN HOUSE

Join ECL faculty & learn strategies for grad student success. Get your questions answered! Room AL-266.

12:00-1:00 PM

Meet + mix with ECL faculty, students, and organizations. Learn about 2026 courses. Get free candy! A&L Floor 2.

1:00-2:00 PM

Interested in tabling? Contact rporath@sdsu.edu.

ADMIN

- Grades for Discovery (and blogs and all writing):
- **A=** Post contains a **focused thesis** or question and **close reading** of a passage,
- **B=** Post contains a close reading of content but no focused question or thesis
- **C=** Post contains no analysis of text (no close reading), just summary and undirected ideas
- **D=**Post contains little substantive thinking as content

ADMIN

- Moved from of our reading around later in semester— in Blue Humanities section
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Essay 1 peer review

- WHAT + HOW = insight about the text/object
- SO WHAT? Why does this insight and interpretation matter ?

Essay 1 Brainstorming thesis

- WHAT + HOW = insight about the text/object
- SO WHAT? Why does this insight and interpretation matter (to our thinking about Lit and the Environment, concepts of “human”, etc.)

Discussion

- What to discuss from today's reading??

From your blogs- cultural shift in mermaid— race and power

- ANGIE: However, the difference between these two assigned readings, *Undine* and *The Mermaid* editorial, points to a cultural shift in the mermaid's symbolism in popular culture. This cultural shift occurs in the West as the United States becomes an imperialistic force in the global south, and conversations of slavery and the subjugation of Black people in the southern states come into focus in the years prior to the Civil War. The mermaid transitions from a beautiful (white) creature into a monster reflecting the fears of Westward expansion.
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From your blogs- end of belief

- GAVIN: “Just as Eades’s and Barnum’s mermaids brought the Western merpeople craze to fever pitch (in London and America, respectively), so too did they implode it.” The moment that a widely accepted belief and a communal sense of wonder turn into disbelief and ridicule represents a pivotal moment in the negotiated game of truth, spectacle, and cultural imagination in society...a key contradiction in the modernity of the nineteenth-century Western world: While scientific rationalism and mass media were increasing, the desire and demand for spectacle and sensationalism were growing too:

From your blogs- race and racism

- JESMOND: The 1758 St. Germaine's mermaid: "...about two feet long ... fed with bread and small fish ... female, with **ugly negro features. The skin was harsh, the ears very large, and the back parts and tail were covered with scales.**"
The 1775 London mermaid: "Its face is like that of a young female—its eyes a fine light blue—its nose small and handsome—its mouth small—its lips thin, and the edges of them round like that of the codfish—its teeth are small, regular and white—its chin well shaped, and its neck full.
- Yikes. If you read them closely, you can practically see the racism permeating from these descriptions alone. While the London mermaid was described as a very beautiful female, the St. Germaine mermaid, despite her agility and delight, is described as ugly because her skin looks black, hence the word "negro." The use of the word "negro" coupled with the word "ugly" in the 1758 example implies that even *mermaid sightings* were rooted in racism. Keep in mind that these alleged sightings were reported while the transatlantic slave trade was taking place, when dark-skinned African people were forcefully taken overseas to work for their masters.
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Cabinet of Curiosities, Freak-shows, and Exotic “Other”

EGYPTIAN MUMMIES,
and ancient Sarcophagi, 3000 Years old ; and an entire
Family of Peruvian Mummies ;
the **DUCK-BILLED PLATYPUS**, the connecting link between
the **BIRD** and **BEAST**, being evidently half each ;—the curious
half-fish, half-human



FEJEE MERMAID,

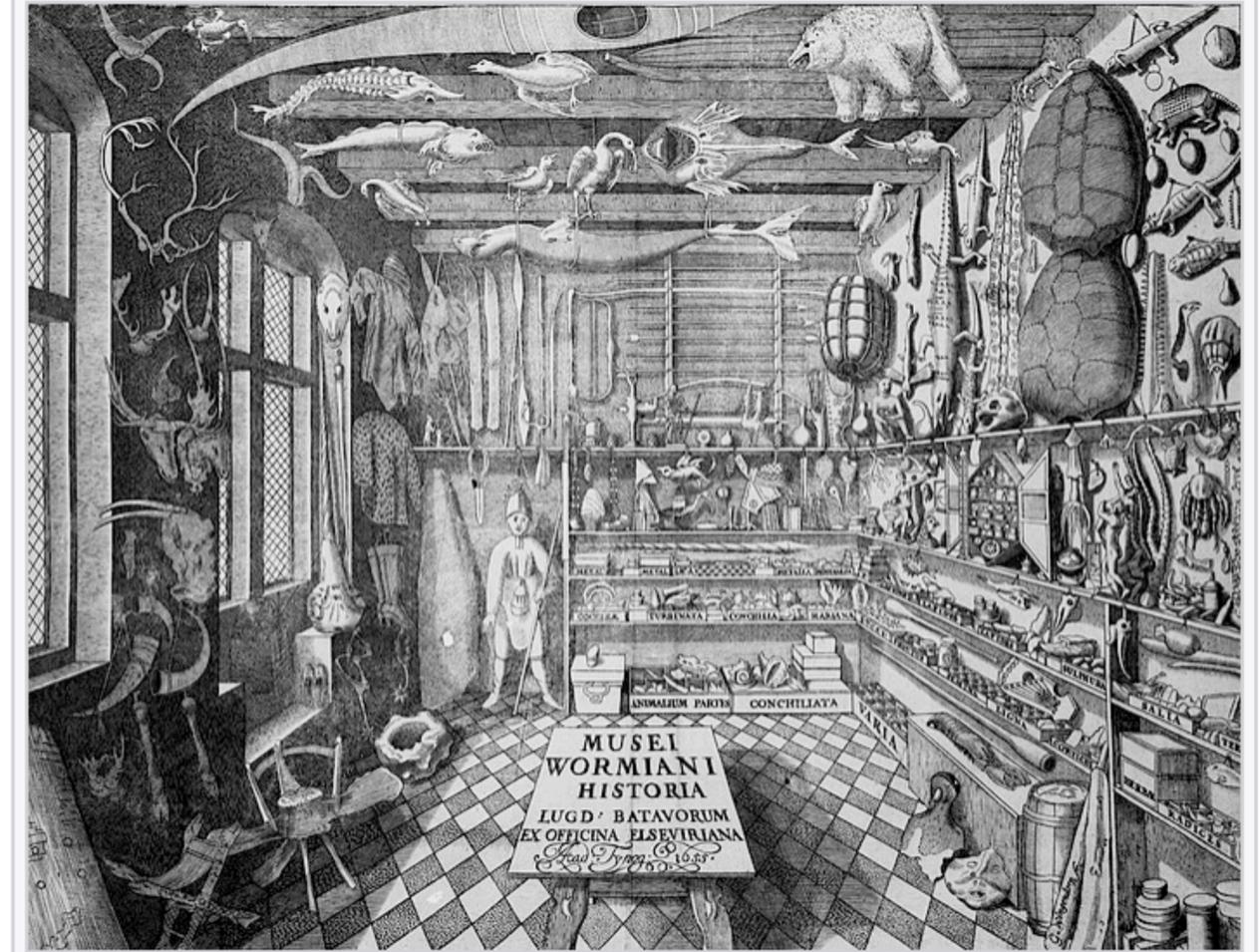
which was exhibited in most of the principal cities of America, in the years 1840, '41, and '42, to the wonder and astonishment of thousands of naturalists and other scientific persons, whose previous doubts of the existence of such an astonishing creation were entirely removed ;

Cabinet of Curiosities, Freakshows, and Exotic Other



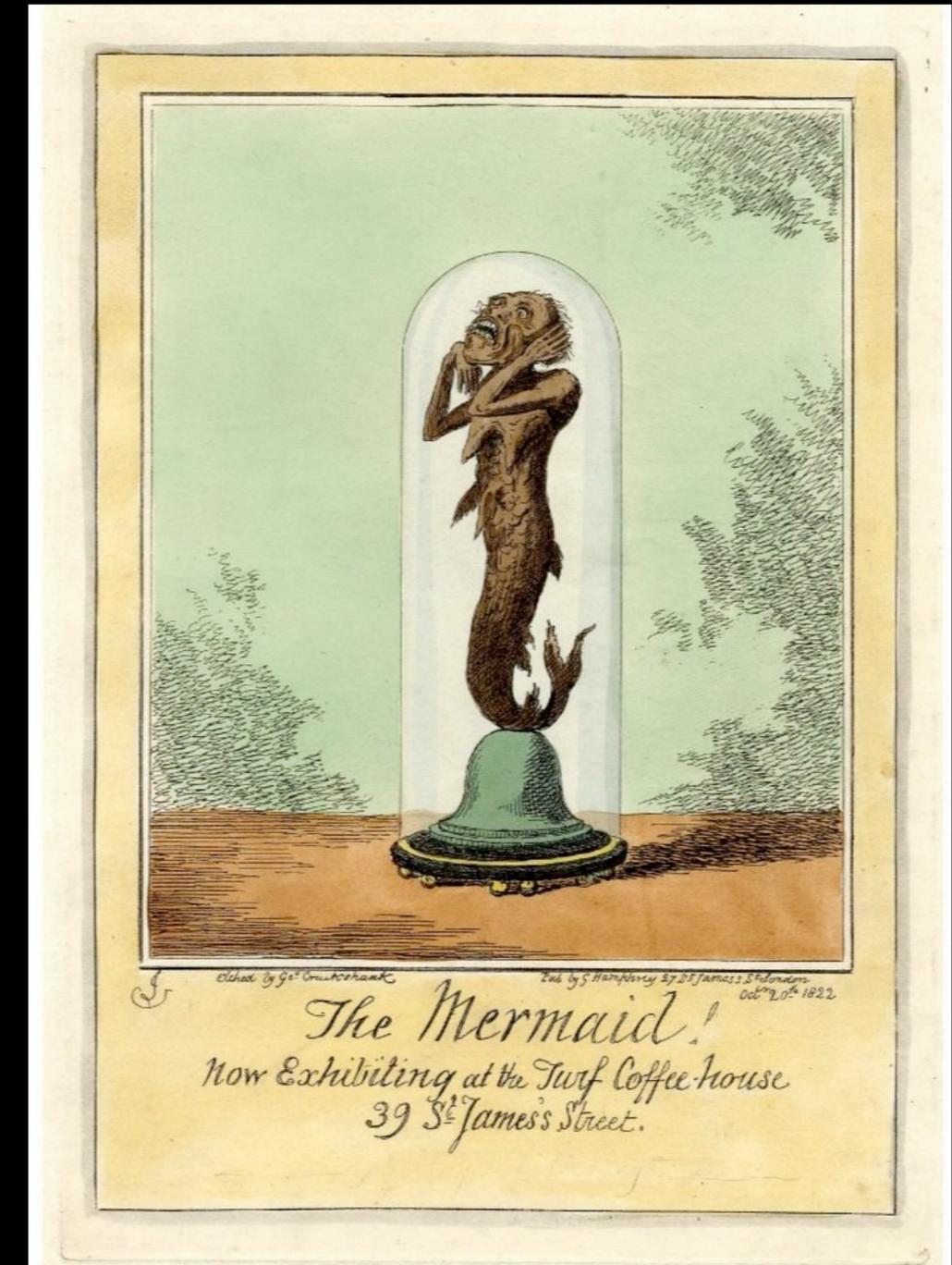
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Frans Francken the Younger, detailed view of *Kunst- und Raritätenkammer (Chamber of Art and Curiosities)*, 1636. Oil on panel.



"Musei Wormiani Historia", the [frontispiece](#) from the *Museum Wormianum* depicting [Ole Worm](#)'s cabinet of curiosities.

Cabinet of Curiosities, Freakshows, and Exotic “Other”



The Feejee Mermaid





FOR A LIMITED TIME ONLY

THE FEEGEE MERMAID



Subject of Scandal and Speculation with her fishy companion

THE JAPANESE MERMAID

TOGETHER WITH OTHER LONG RUN ATTRACTIONS FROM

Boston's Earliest Museums

1791-1822

viz: the Columbian; the Washington; the New York; the "first" Boston; the New England Long FASHIONABLE and ELEGANT RESORTS of Entertainment and Enlightenment FOR STRANGERS AND RESIDENTS OF ALL AGES culminating in the Establishment of the

BOSTON MUSKUM

the popular local Theatre (1841-1900) from whose

BARE, STRANGE and INSTRUCTIVE COLLECTIONS amounting to nearly

HALF A MILLION NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL CURIOSITIES

This Special Presentation originates. To which was added, by its proprietors, ca 1848-50...

IMPORTANT ADDITIONS FROM PEALE'S CELEBRATED PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM BRINGING TO BOSTON AND THENCE TO PEABODY MUSEUM

First of the Nation's Public Museums (1786-1841) under the Distinguished Proprietorship of O. W. Peale, renowned Portraitist, Naturalist and Inventor

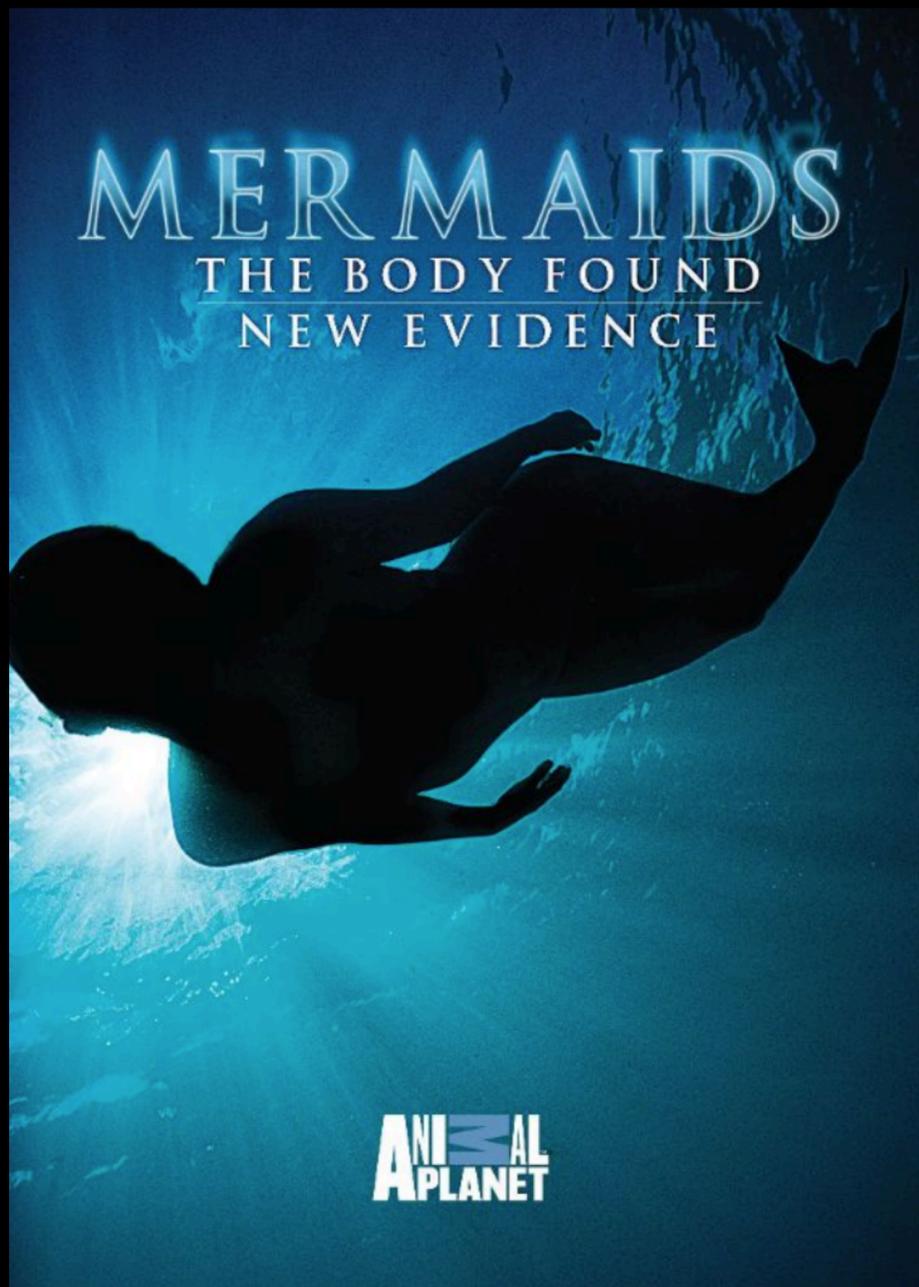
& including

INNUNERABLE UNIQUE EXAMPLES OF NATIVE MANUFACTURE

<p>COMPRISING: TOOLS * WEAPONS * CLOTHING * AND IMPLEMENTS, FROM THE INDIAN TRIBES OF THE WESTERN TERRITORIES * SOUTH SEAS PADDLES * BARK CLOTHING *</p>	<p>FEATHER ARTICLES * COCONUTS * MOR * CHINESE BOAT MODEL * ARMOR * GATHERED IN THE EARLY OVERLAND AND VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY, TRADE AND *** MILITARY ADVENTURE *** DONE BY HEROES AND PATRIOTS</p>
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More recent hoaxes



- 2012

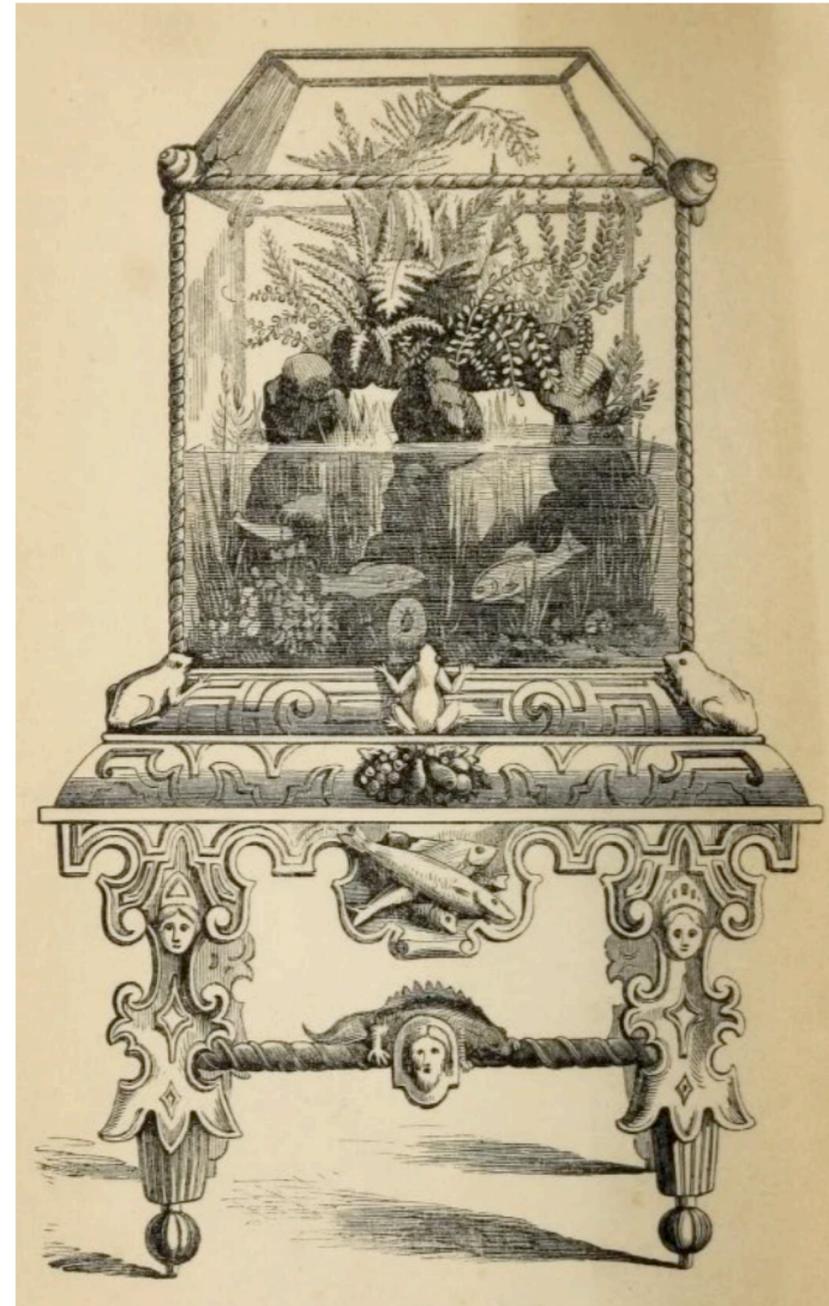
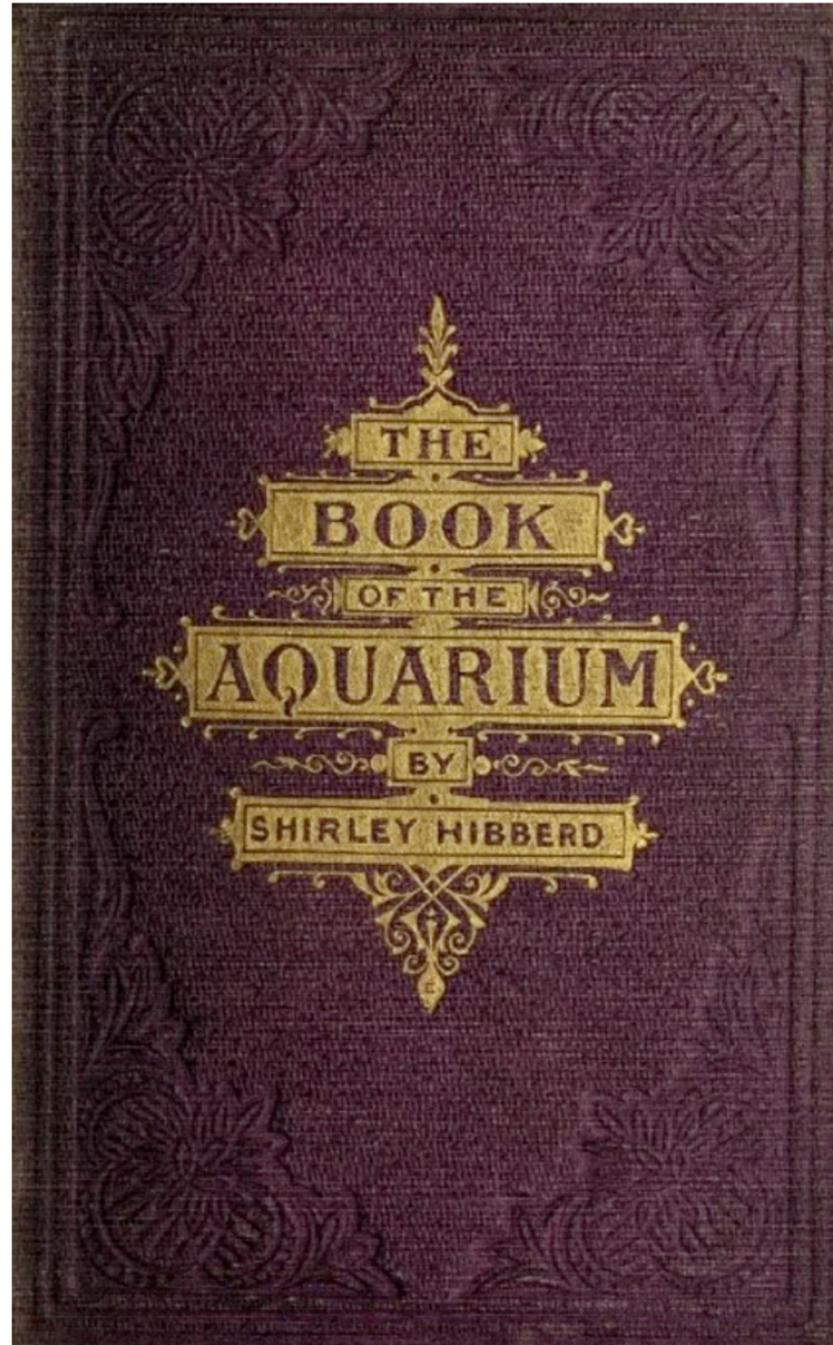


Mermaids as commodities

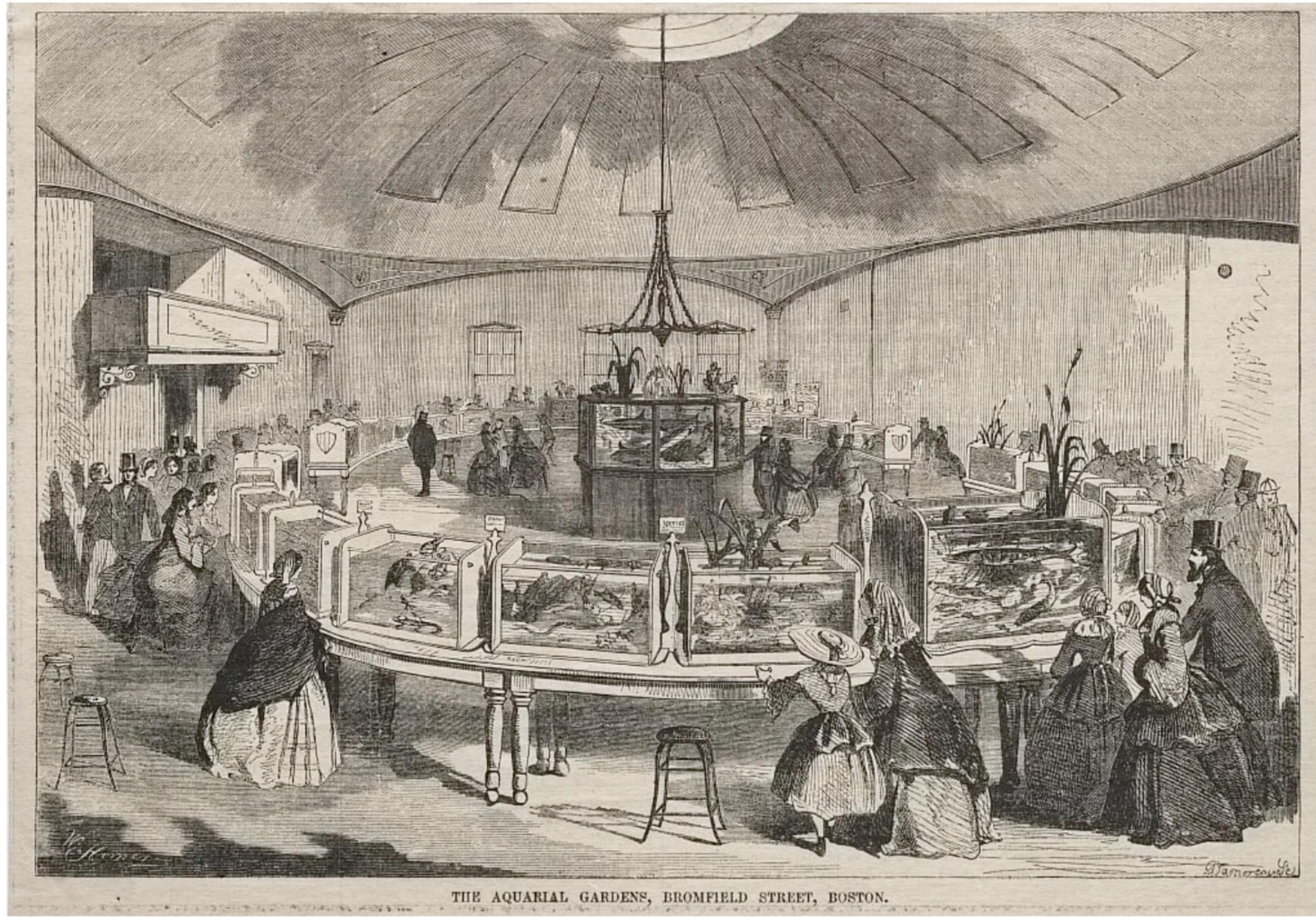


Victorian/19th C Aquaria

Untitled image at the beginning of Hibberd's 'The Book of the Aquarium' first published in 1856 showing a typically ornate Victorian aquarium



The Aquarial Gardens, Bromfield Street, Boston, 1859. Wood engraving by Winslow Homer



THE AQUARIAL GARDENS, BROMFIELD STREET, BOSTON.

In 1862, Barnum bought the business, remodelled the space, and changed the name of the business to Barnum's Aquarial Gardens.

Discussion- monsters & hoaxes

- Why do we need/desire monsters?
-

Monster Theory: Reading Culture

Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Introduction by Cohen

Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996

“America, a society that has created and commodified ‘ambient fear’—a kind of total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its own name. This anxiety manifests itself symptomatically as a cultural fascination with monsters” (viii)

“The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns’” (4)

“These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expressions. They ask us why we have created them” (20)

Discussion- monsters & hoaxes

- How are monsters & mermaid hoaxes part of human nature and history?
Part of Nature and the Environment?
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Take aways?