Swimming with the Trouble: Queer Hydrofeminism and the Sea Cure in Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* (2016)

Barbara Barrow
Lund University, Sweden
barbara.barrow@englund.lu.se

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.1.5879

Abstract

Deborah Levy's salty, ruminative novel *Hot Milk* (2016) follows a young woman, Sofia, as she travels from England to Almería, Spain in search of a cure for her mother Rose's many ailments. Sofia begins swimming in the Mediterranean, where she is repeatedly stung by medusas who have, she learns, grown abundant from overfishing (3). These medusas sting her "into desire" (72) and into a queer sexual awakening, acting not only as material agents but also as symbolic, rebellious creatures that recall the monstrous Gorgon of Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), which is excerpted in the novel's epigraph. In this essay, I argue that *Hot Milk* looks back to a cultural and literary tradition of writing about the "sea cure," but with a key ecological twist: what happens to the sea cure when the ocean itself is sick? Thick with medusas, polluted by gasoline spills, and flanked by dunes of cement powder (23, 167), the Mediterranean acts not as a salubrious backdrop for Rose's healing, but rather as a dynamic force that interacts with the bodies of Sofia and her lovers Ingrid and Juan as they swim in its waters and that, like the characters of the novel, is marked by its own ailments and afflictions. Considering this, I argue, expands our understanding of "sickness" or impairment as a designation and pathologization that flows across both human and more-than-human worlds in *Hot Milk*. In this way, the novel troubles an idealized cultural and literary trope of the restorative seaside by depicting, instead, watery communities of both human and marine life reckoning with anthropogenic harm.

Keywords: Blue humanities, hydrofeminism, queer ecology, sea cure, *Hot Milk,* jellyfish, becoming-animal.

Resumen

La picante y reflexiva novela *Hot Milk* (*Leche caliente*, 2016) de Deborah Levy sigue a una joven, Sofía, que viaja de Inglaterra a Almería (España) en busca de una cura para las numerosas dolencias de su madre, Rosa. Sofía comienza a nadar en el Mediterráneo, donde le pican repetidamente medusas que, según descubre, han aumentado de forma abundante debido a la sobrepesca (3). Estas medusas la pican "en el deseo" (72) y en un despertar sexual queer, actuando no sólo como agentes materiales, sino también como criaturas simbólicas y rebeldes que recuerdan a la monstruosa Gorgona de "La risa de la Medusa" (1976) de Hélène Cixous, que se cita en el epígrafe de la novela. En este ensayo, sostengo que *Hot Milk* se remonta a una tradición cultural y literaria de escribir sobre la "cura del mar," pero con un giro ecológico clave: ¿qué ocurre con la cura del mar cuando el propio océano está enfermo? Lleno de medusas, contaminado por vertidos de gasolina y flanqueado por dunas de polvo de cemento (23,167), el Mediterráneo no actúa como un salubre telón de fondo para la curación de Rosa, sino más bien como una fuerza dinámica que interactúa con los cuerpos de Sofía y de sus amantes Ingrid y Juan mientras nadan en sus aguas y que, al igual que los personajes de la novela, está marcado por sus propias dolencias y aflicciones. Sostengo que tener esto en cuenta amplía nuestra comprensión de la "enfermedad" o la discapacidad como una designación y patologización que fluye tanto por el mundo humano como por el más que humano en *Hot Milk*. De este modo, la novela pone en tela de juicio un tropo cultural y literario idealizado de la costa reparadora, describiendo, en su lugar, comunidades acuáticas de vida humana y marina que se enfrentan al daño antropogénico.

Palabras clave: Humanidades azules, hidrofeminismo, ecología queer, cura marina, *Hot Milk*, medusa, devenir animal.

Deborah Levy's salty, ruminative novel *Hot Milk* (2016) follows a young woman, Sofia, as she travels from England to Almería, Spain, in search of a cure for her mother Rose's many ailments. Sofia begins swimming in the Mediterranean, where she is repeatedly stung by medusas who have, she learns, grown abundant from overfishing (3). These medusas sting her "into desire" (72) and into a queer sexual awakening, acting not only as material agents but also as symbolic, rebellious creatures that recall the monstrous Gorgon of Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), which is excerpted in the novel's epigraph. In this essay, I argue that *Hot Milk* looks back to a cultural and literary tradition of writing about the "sea cure," but with a key ecological twist: what happens to the sea cure when the ocean itself is sick? Thick with medusas, polluted by gasoline spills, and flanked by dunes of cement powder (23,167), the Mediterranean acts not as a salubrious backdrop for Rose's healing, but rather as a dynamic force that interacts with the bodies of Sofia and her lovers Ingrid and Juan as they swim in its waters and that, like the characters of the novel, is marked by its own ailments and afflictions. Considering this, I argue, expands our understanding of "sickness" or impairment as a designation and pathologization that flows across both human and more-than-human worlds in *Hot Milk*. The novel troubles an idealized cultural and literary trope of the restorative seaside by depicting, instead, watery communities of both human and marine life reckoning with anthropogenic harm.

Current scholarship on *Hot Milk* tends to center human subjects in its attention to pathology and diagnosis. Jasmine Bajada, for instance, draws on Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject to examine how Sofia others Rose as she seeks her own independence (14), while Gabriele Griffin incorporates Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979) to underline how children can be co-opted into meeting the unfulfilled needs of mothers (210-11). For Anna Kisiel, Sofia's repeated returns to the sea illustrates a convergence of both physical and psychological trauma: Sofia "engages in a game of *fort/da* with the medusae, opening herself up for new wounds over and over again" (258). These and other scholars have also been alert to the queer and feminist themes of the book, and the ways these build on Cixous's essay. Madeleine Gray argues, for example, that, in Ingrid, "Sofia finds a fellow Medusa, someone unafraid to look at her fully" (75), while Kisiel asserts that the "relation between Sofia and Ingrid reveals both women's monstrosity" (259). Both Gray and Griffin relate the novel's Cixous epigraph, "It's up to you to break the old circuits" (Cixous 890) to the idea of forging new, less repressive, relations. Gray argues that women in the novel can "reimagine old circuits and change their tempo" by stopping to "reflect on themselves and each other" (73), while Griffin notes that the Cixous quote "is set within a context which challenges heteropatriarchal familial relations" (211). *Hot Milk,* she contends, engages this "breaking of circuits, and the breaking of kinship structures" (211).

My argument builds on these feminist and queer analyses of the human characters in the book, in particular on the parallels between Medusas and queer, "monstrous" sexualities and identities. However, I want to extend this idea of new

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 1

kinship structures to include more-than-human life, especially the jellyfish that Sofia, Ingrid, and Juan encounter as they swim in the Mediterranean, and the dorado and octopus that feature in the early parts of the book. I ask: what if we understood this breaking of kinship structures not only as a breaking of heteropatriarchal familial norms but also as a breaking of the boundary that purportedly separates the human from the marine? Sofia's repeated swims with the medusas facilitate her process of "becoming-animal," a process Rosi Braidotti describes as one of "redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space" (94). In this process, what we generally understand as the "self" becomes "in fact a movable assemblage within a common life-space that the subject never masters or possesses, but merely inhabits, crosses, always in a community, a pack, a group, or a cluster" (94). Sofia's jellyfish swims portray a transspecies community moving in connection through damaged waters.

At the same time, these transspecies encounters model a queer present which I will call, borrowing and revising from Donna Haraway, "swimming with the trouble." While Haraway's phrase, "staying with the trouble," invites kinship among humans and nonhumans who must learn to "live and die well with each other in a thick present" (1), *Hot Milk* asks us to swim with the trouble, to understand the centrality of marine life and oceanic waters to this thick present. The novel emphasizes that this is a queer present through a circular narrative structure that returns Sofia again and again to the medusas, rather than pursuing a teleological coming-of-age arc. This recursiveness has two central, intertwining effects. For one, it immerses Sofia in water, a space in which, as Geoffrey Maguire writes, "bodies surrender themselves to the force of natural flows, liberated from the terra firma of hegemonic constructions of gender, sexuality, and identity" (1). Sofia's medusa stings are painful, but they also awaken her desires to pursue intimacies beyond the bounds of the heteronormative ones modeled by her parents. Second, this recursiveness demands that characters and readers reckon with the anthropogenic causes that have contributed to jellyfish blooms. To swim with this "trouble," in *Hot Milk,* is to really see it and sense it, to fully be present in oceanic worlds where humans and a newly abundant medusa population make kin in damaged but resilient planetary waters.

Queer Hydrofeminisms, Monstrous Gelata

Cixous's famous essay offers one possible entry point into *Hot Milk*'s watery imagery. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," oceans and waters are part of the feminist project, in various ways: the desire to write is described as an "overflow," as "luminous torrents," and, again, as "waves" and "floods" (876). Cixous also takes up the patriarchal associations that reduce women to wombs, to the role of "little phallic mother," declaring: "look, our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves…" (889). Cixous's oceanic language here has intriguing resonances with *Hot Milk*. She

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 1

writes that the ocean is "full of fish or not," a situation that, in the novel, describes the Mediterranean, "not" full of the fish who normally prey on medusas. Cixous emphasizes, also, both the flow of the ocean and the submergence and movement of the human within it through the imagery of women as "swimmers." Indeed, she invokes the image of the erogenous, heterogenous "airborne swimmer" who is both "dispersible" and "desirous" (889-90) in a passage that could also describe Sofia, as someone whose bodily boundaries are momentarily effaced in the water, but who also emerges with sharpened physical and erotic wants. While Cixous's essay does not explicitly address environmental harm in this passage, the intertextual resonances of the essay in *Hot Milk* do, submerging the desiring subject in anthropogenically affected waters and waterscapes, through scenes of eating, drinking, and swimming.

It is important to note, though, that Cixous's essay can also be criticized for possibly essentializing the desiring body, to which Neimanis's concept of hydrofeminism can act as a useful corrective. As Neimanis writes, Cixous's linking of the female body to the sea is potentially problematic for how it threatens to reinscribe the "phallogocentric fantasy" of women and wombs, and yet the morphing, shape-shifting properties of water also exceed attempts to capture or make static such instances of representation: "Rather than alerting us to some 'essentialist' difference between masculine and feminine (or normatively reprosexual and nonreprosexual) embodiment, such aqueous body-writing might invite *all* bodies to attend to the water that facilitates their existence" ("Hydrofeminism" 88-89). Thinking of corporeality in terms of a broader aqueous community, or a "watery commons," begins to collapse the human/nonhuman boundary and facilitates a transspecies hydrofeminism that goes beyond sexual difference ("Hydrofeminism" 92). Neimanis's concept of "posthuman gestationality" extends these ideas by claiming that "human reprosexual wombs are but one expression of a more general aqueous facilitative capacity: pond life, sea monkey, primordial soup […] We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells" (*Bodies of Water* 3). It is this understanding of watery bodies—as dynamically co-constitutive of one another across species boundaries—that best describes Sofia's encounters with the jellyfish.

This transspecies hydrofeminism has clear overlaps with Stacy Alaimo's marine transcorporeality, a term building on Alaimo's earlier analysis of how the human is "perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments" (*Exposed* 112). Extending this concept to the ocean reveals a long evolutionary past linking humans and aquatic ancestors that calls up "modes of kinship with the seas" (*Exposed* 113). Alaimo writes that we should not stop investigating this process with the emergence of the human, but rather "submerge the human within global networks of consumption, waste, and pollution" (*Exposed* 113). *Hot Milk* picks up this idea of kinship, but with a special focus on the present, and the book effects this submergence by showing how characters participate in networks of

 ISSN 2171-9594

consumption, specifically of seafood, and how waste, pollution, and other anthropogenic harms contribute to the warming oceans in which Sofia swims.

Jellyfish blooms are the most symptomatic effects of these altered oceans in the novel. Juan links these blooms directly to anthropogenic causes: "You know… the infestation of the jellyfish is due to the decline of natural predators such as the turtle and the tuna, changes in global temperature and rainfall" (206). Jellyfish blooms, then, are indicative of damaged oceans, but they also model resilience and flourishing. As Juan points out, their blooms are symptoms of an endangered ocean, but they are not, in fact, themselves endangered, and their ability to thrive in damaged marine environments has led to their reputation as a "'weed'" species (Bakun and Weeks 329) whose large blooms are enabled by "overfishing, eutrophication, climate change, translocations and habitat modification" (Richardson et al. 313). This representation of jellies as sea pests is consistent with a broader tendency to view jellies as "stinging intruders" (Kalinowski and van der Voet 95), an anthropocentric stance reinforced by media reports of jellies as malevolent, and predatory.

Hot Milk does participate in this framing through, for example, Juan's language of "infestation" and through frequent comparisons of gelata to the Gorgon Medusa, which reinforces their monstrous imagery. Moreover, the novel does not name which jellyfish these are (likely *Pelagia noctiluca,* who have, in recent years, formed large blooms in the Mediterranean).[1] This lack of specificity could flatten out what is in fact a large, varied group of organisms. As Juliet Lamb cautions, "Only a few of the ten thousand species of jellyfish have been involved in the blooms that have been documented […] Lumping all jellies under the nuisance banner ignores those species that are less able to thrive in the face of human disturbance" (Lamb).

On the other hand, Sofia's oceanic, swimming encounters with the gelata also put her in a radical proximity to species otherness that pushes past the limits of both cultural representation and human, fleshly embodiment. Alaimo documents a trend in video and still photography that offer up "highly aestheticized representations of jellyfish" ("Jellyfish Science" 140), and observes, further, that human encounters with jellyfish both in photographs and aquariums "remove the jellies from their own ocean environments" (152). *Hot Milk* does exactly the opposite of this, by immersing Sofia in the ocean, among the gelata, where she experiences a sharper sense of proximity and direct contact with the jellies along her body's exposed surfaces. Moreover, jellyfish challenge human models of corporeality based in boundedness and stability because they are "just barely organized bodies" and hard to distinguish from the "seas that surround them" (Alaimo, "Jellyfish Science" 153), a factor Sofia tries to comprehend in the novel's early pages: "The medusas are transparent because they are 95 per cent water, so they camouflage easily" (3). The novel's gelata act as "images of the formless" that reveal "matter's pressure on the impositions of anthropomorphism" (Harpold 17). That is, even if human characters in the novel anthropocentrically ascribe various roles to the jellyfish—as invaders and

[1] See Canepa et.al., "*Pelagia noctiluca*."

monsters—so too do these jellyfish swims push against Sofia's sense of corporeal boundedness that underwrites her understanding of herself as a human subject.

The novel also aligns the monstrosity of the jellyfish, in these recursive jellyfish swims, with a queer coming-of-age narrative arc that acts, if painfully and ambiguously, as a necessary counterpoint to the heteronormative family dynamics described elsewhere in the novel. Rose's disappointing marriage to Sofia's father and Sofia's father's new marriage to a much younger wife who defends his unethical behaviors are both negative examples of futures Sofia does not desire for herself.[2] Sofia's repeated swims with the jellyfish frequently become occasions for her interactions with Juan and Ingrid, inviting her into non-monogamous and queer intimacies. In this way, the novel's ethos of swimming with the trouble—staying with it, immersing oneself in it—also resists a trajectory of forward progression into a restrictive heteronormativity, dwelling instead in a state of watery submergence and rhythm with the jellies and the tides.[3] This watery immersion exemplifies Braidotti's concept of "nomadic thought": "the practice of estrangement as a way to free the process of subject formation from the normative vision of the self" in favor of "the open-ended, interrelational, multisexed, and transspecies flows of becoming by interaction with multiple others" (83).[4] Interaction rather than boundedness, becoming rather than arriving; these dynamics animate Sofia's scenes of swimming and propel her in a different direction from the marriages her parents chose. Much as the novel resists this model of progressive, heteronormative socialization through Sofia's gelata swims, so, too, does it reject a romanticized idea of the ocean as a restorative resource for human healing, in its investigation, and ultimate dismissal, of the sea cure.

The Sea Cure

Associations between water and healing have ancient origins, but, as Matthew Kerr argues, the idea of the "sea cure" for Western elites dates to the mid-eighteenth century (12).[5] Two kinds of thinking affected this shift: the beginning of the belief, promoted by the English physician Richard Frewin and others, that sea-water and sea-air were remedies for diverse illnesses, and the belief in the sea as a sublime force, necessary to "transform the sea's buffeting from an unpleasant medical necessity into the form of spiritual and erotic exhilaration it would later become" (Kerr 23-24). The

[2] Indeed, the name "Alexandra" has roots in the name "Alexander," or "defending men" ("Origin and history of Alexandria"), a name that speaks, ironically, to Alexandria's justifications of her husband's selfish actions, which include abandoning his first family: "Why should he do things that are not to his advantage?" (142).

[3] In this, I agree with Gray that the novel resists "heteronormative, forward time" (66) but I think oceanic ecologies and swimming play a central role to this resistance.

[4] See also Deleuze and Guattari on becoming-animal: "To become is not to progress or regress along a series" (238).

[5] On the ancient origins of seawater therapy see, for instance, Charlier and Chaineux 838-856.

 ISSN 2171-9594

sea was meant to "soothe […] anxieties, re-establish harmony between body and soul" and to "cure the evils of urban civilization" (Corbin 62). The chosen beaches were at first northern because conceptions of the Mediterranean as unhealthy and dangerous persisted among many privileged bathers; this conception did not change until medical texts began praising the positive effects on health of warm waters and temperatures (Corbin 86).

The sea cure tradition does not map entirely neatly onto Sofia's and Rose's situation. While they are racially privileged and can assume access to water, they lack secure economic means: as María Magdalena Flores Quesada notes, Sofia and Rose have mortgaged their house, Sofia feels financially indebted to Rose, and the novel is full of references to the European financial crisis and especially the debt crisis in Greece (115-16). Yet the description of the clinic where Rose undergoes her treatment conveys a sense of restorative seaside harmony for patients of means: it is carved into the mountains, made out of marble and glass, and surrounded by gardens that a brochure touts as a "'mini-oasis of great ecological importance'" (13). Its aura is both "calming and comforting," and, from here, Sofia looks down "at the deep blue Mediterranean below the mountain and felt at peace" (13).

Given this romantic association of the sea with health and recuperation, it is helpful to recall that early histories of the sea cure describe instances of physical discomfort rather than restorative sublimity. As John Gillis recounts, early sea cures involved being carried down to the water in bathing machines for dips in the sea, along with the recommendation to drink sea water:

> When English elites began in the early eighteenth century to abandon inland spas for resorts located on the coast, they were not seeking warm water and sandy beaches. It was the relief of pain, rather than search for pleasure, that motivated the first surge to the sea. The ill and the convalescent were drawn by the reputedly superior medicinal qualities of cold sea water. And the treatments they encountered there were, by our standards, more hellish than heavenly. They came not to swim but to bathe, and they were assisted in that activity by so-called bathing machines, cabins on wheels that transported them across the beach and into the water where, with the assistance of hired attendants, women and men alike dipped into the sea as part of their mental and physical cures, which also included drinking sea water […]. Later, when England's elites began to look south to the Mediterranean for their cures, they went in winter, for it was not until the twentieth century that the sun replaced cold water as elixir of health and vitality. (144)

Gillis observes that "By today's standards the preferred strands were ugly and uncomfortable. They were more associated with invalids than athletes, with diseased rather than healthy bodies" (144).

Hot Milk gestures towards this older sense of the sea cure, as a discomfiting reckoning with the elements, but with the provision that the human characters are not the only life forms who are afflicted and need attention. Throughout the novel, different characters recount, in a factual, almost desensitized way, instances of ecological damage. We can understand this pattern as an important ecological variation on the disassociation Bajada identifies in Sofia's relationship to her mother (14); a similar, alarming disassociation prevails in the detached manner in which characters rehearse facts about environmental harm. Juan, the student who works at

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 1

the Injury Hut and treats Sofia's stings, is "well informed about jellyfish […] one of the reasons there are so many of them in the oceans of the world is because of over-fishing" (3). Rose argues with a taxi driver who has just described the history of coal bunkers in the region before recommending the Beach of the Dead for its "clear, clean water;" Rose tells him that swimming would be better than burning in hell's furnace "for which all the trees in the world will have to be felled and every mountain stripped for coal" (12). The fact that these statements go largely unnoticed or unremarked—we learn that, as Rose speaks, the "driver's attention was on a fly that had landed on his steering wheel" (12)—suggests a kind of self-evident truth or undeniability of environmental hazards to which a common response is to distance or detach.

Concerns about lost income from beach tourism also fuel a refusal to see and acknowledge the damaged waters. Juan tells Sofia that the district council is afraid tourists will stop coming to the beach because of the jellyfish, and are currently at work on a "Plan Medusa" strategy (206). The district council's response to this alarming scenario is to be concerned about the possible loss of tourist income, which downplays the severity of species loss and climate change. Notable, too, is Juan's language of diagnosis, which gives a clinically detached assessment of the crisis—as he tells Sofia this, as a flippant aside, he is laughing and "enjoying his crisp, fresh apple" (206). In another scene, Ingrid tells Sofia that, while Sofia was away in Greece, police came to investigate a gasoline spill and made everyone leave the water (167-68). Ingmar, a local business owner, annoyed at the disruption to his customers, ran out to protest and was told to taste it himself: "and then he agreed that, yes, there had been a gasoline spill. Now he is sick and can't work and he wants to sue the sea police for forcing him to taste the water" (168). Ingmar's sickness is striking not only for the way the absolute evidence of the gasoline spill overcomes his denialism, but also for the reversal it effects in a longer history of sea cures; if people once drank sea water in the belief it would make them well, now it obviously makes them ill.

What does it mean for "damaged" characters to seek healthful solace in a place that is also ailing? In *Hot Milk,* it means that the ocean recedes as a site of healthfulness and restoration, and it instead becomes a source of alarm. At the same time, the water's presence is not relegated to a backdrop or resource for the novel's primary characters, but rather a substance that permeates, saturates, and acts upon human bodies, and that brings together human and marine life. In this way, the sea cannot be the unequivocal source of a cure; instead, both humans and sea are shown to be interrelated, vulnerable. Much as Ingmar confronts the damaged waters through ingesting them, *Hot Milk* has its characters confront the sea, through senses, ingestion, and swimming, imagining, finally, not a final healing that the sea can offer but rather the queer co-presence of the human and marine in damaged environmental conditions.

 ISSN 2171-9594

Transspecies Encounters and Queer Desires in *Hot Milk*

While the traditional sea cure brought invalids to the sea, *Hot Milk* brings the sea to invalids. This confrontation begins with the title of one of the early chapters, "Bringing the Sea to Rose," in which Rose, Sofia, and Dr. Gómez go to lunch (46). This is a puzzling title, at first glance. Rose has already arrived at the sea, to Almería, and the ocean has been a strong presence in the opening chapters. Yet the chapter title emphasizes not Rose's arrival at the sea but rather the sea's being brought to her, as if to insist that Rose really *sees* it. Previous critics have noted the novel's intense scopic preoccupations with the mother-daughter gaze and the queer gaze (Kisiel 255-56, Griffin 218, Gray 75-76). Extending this scopic focus beyond the human reveals a visual and embodied confrontation with sea life that is equally gripping. Although Rose says she has a "'fish problem'" and cannot be around fish at all without breaking out in hives (47), Dr. Gómez orders grilled octopus and eats it, extravagantly and sadistically, in front of her, causing Rose both to receive red welts on her cheek (49) and also, strangely, to relax and open up, even becoming "flushed and flirtatious" (54). Later, he observes that Sofia seems weak and apathetic, and advises her: "Why not steal a fish from the market to make you bolder? It need not be the biggest fish, but it must not be the smallest either" (58). In both cases, Dr. Gómez seems to imply that an exposure to marine life can build rigor and resilience, although in both cases the marine life has been taken from its ecosystem and, literalizing the way the sea is brought inwards, to the land: the restaurant and the market. In both cases, characters must experience marine life in the foreground, through confrontation and through the senses.

To the extent that this cure has an effect, it is because Sofia allows her body to be completely imprinted with sea life. It is "brought to her" as well as to Rose, and it does make her bolder, but not necessarily recovered or peaceful. Rose's and Sofia's accommodation is next door to a diving school whose director, Pablo, keeps his Alsatian dog tied to the roof, where it howls all day (7). In the first part of the novel, Sofia considers going to Pablo to demand that he free his dog, but it is only after she steals and guts the fish, a furious-looking dorado, that she finally confronts him. As she does so, she catches a glance of herself in his mirror: "My cheeks were marked with streaks of fish blood and some of the entrails were caught in my hair, which had become a coarse tangle of knotted curls from swimming every day. I looked like some sort of sea monster rising from the shells and starfish that decorated the mirror's frame" (79-80). Her new persona, assertive and commanding, is connected to her being marked and defined by the sea. When Pablo complies, going up to the roof to calm and quiet the dog, Sofia hears "the sea as if my ears were laid against the ocean floor. I could hear everything. The rumbling earthquake of a ship and the spider crabs moving between weeds" (81). Ironically, this scene takes place in a diving school, a place whose mission it is to carry people down to the sea floor, and yet it is on the beach and inside this school that the sea floor becomes accessible to Sofia's senses,

 ISSN 2171-9594

adjusted for an underwater soundscape where a ship's movements are as loud as an earthquake.

The scene also shifts the novel's scopic focus to an auditory one. In her work on marine mammals and Black feminism, Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks, "How can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm? How does echolocation, the practice many marine mammals use to navigate the world through bouncing sounds, change our understandings of 'vision' and visionary action?" Listening, for Gumbs, is the place where "our trans-species communion" begins, and it is "not only about the normative ability to hear, it is a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in" (15). The passage with Sofia's underwater listening seems to approach this change in sensory understanding, engaging with the aural, and making a space for patient, radical attention. In this way, the scene at the diving school also brings the sea and sea life inland, urging a confrontation, and becoming entangled with Sofia's body.

The novel further develops this confrontation with marine life through scenes of transcorporeal inscription, in which the sea and its creatures 'write' on the characters' bodies. In this way, the novel revises Cixous's famous remarks that a woman "writes in white ink" (881), a metaphor for motherly milk that fuels and nourishes women's libido and creative power. In the novel, the sea and marine life imprint themselves on the characters, in *dark* ink, suggesting that the more-than-human world participates in this creative expression. In the restaurant with Rose, Dr. Gómez smiles with "lips […] black from the octopus ink" (50), his face written over with the creature's liquid.[6] When Sofia goes to the fish market, her medusa stings are now "raised welts, a sprawling, crazy web of tattoos inked in venom" (76). These scenes displace the human subject as the one who writes. Instead, marine life inks its own forms of expression onto skin and lips and bodies, taking on its own kind of material agency.

When the trajectory is reversed, that is, when the human goes to the sea, what emerges is a strong sense of the sea's vulnerability, rather than its curative powers. While he undertakes an examination of Rose at the clinic, Dr. Gómez sends Sofia down to the beach in Carboneras, "famous for its cement factory," a town that, as the taxi driver notes, gets its name because "carboneras means coal bunkers, and the mountains had once been covered in a forest, which had been cut down for charcoal. Everything had been stripped for 'the furnace" (12). Sofia's trip to the beach is already shaped, then, by reminders of a long practice of extractivism. She arrives at the "deserted beach opposite the cement factory" at a café near a "row of gas canisters" that looked like "strange desert plants growing out of the sand" (23), an image that emphasizes the rootedness of environmental damage that has come to seem both

[6] In *Real Estate* (2021), the third in her Living Autobiography trilogy, Levy explicitly links octopus ink to writing and embodiment as she reflects on an ink stain left on her sheets: "It was from writing with my fountain pen in bed, but I began to think of language itself as having its own bodily secretions: blood, sperm, faeces, tears, urine, sweat, spit. In the old days the ink would have been octopus ink, a literal bodily fluid […]" (98).

 ISSN 2171-9594

alien and organic, natural. The beach landscape itself is suffused with latent, anthropogenic violence:

> A large industrial cargo ship floated near the horizon. It was flying a Greek flag. I looked away and gazed instead at a rusty child's swing that had been hammered into the coarse sand. The seat was made from a battered car tyre and it was swaying gently, as if a ghostly child had recently jumped off it. Cranes from the desalination plant sliced into the sky. Tall undulating dunes of greenish-gray cement powder lay in a depot to the right of the beach, where unfinished hotels and apartments had been hacked into the mountains like a murder. (23)

In this passage, evidence of environmental exploitation lurks across multiple planes, from the cargo ship on the horizon to the cranes reaching into the sky. In this altered landscape, the cement powder, not the sand, forms "undulating dunes." The hotels and apartments are sinister not only for their murderous effects on the mountains but also for their unfinished state, suggesting possibly a pointless series of damages, inflicted in the name of projects that have since been abandoned, an abandonment emphasized by the image of the ghostly child hopping off the swing. On the other hand, the incomplete construction could gesture towards a future filled with more damage as the hotels and apartments are completed and begin to receive guests and tenants who will have their own effects on this environment. In such moments, the novel refuses a sense of the sea as a romanticized site of repose and healing, staging, instead, a confrontation with anthropogenic harm.

Likewise, Sofia's swimming offers not a bracing opportunity to heal but rather a site of further affliction. Like the octopus giving welts to Rose's cheek inland, the medusas sting Sofia repeatedly as she swims, and these stings become a catalyst for her desire for Ingrid and Juan. She goes to the injury hut ready to sleep with Juan, reflecting that "Something weird was happening because I wanted to pull him down to the floor and make love to him. I had been stung into desire. An abundance of desire" (72). Sofia's intimacy with Ingrid is also expressed through medusa stings: Ingrid looks at Sofia's medusa sting and traces it, says she smells like the ocean, like a starfish, and observes: "Those little monsters really came after you" (43). These ideas of risk and danger, associated with swimming and the ocean, offer an analogy for Sofia's growing feelings for Ingrid. Sofia gazes down at the sea with the floating medusas, and reflects "I am in love with Ingrid Bower and she is in love with me;" Ingrid is not a "safe person to love, but I'm prepared to take the risk" (202). Sofia's proclamation of their love, increasingly confident in its pattern of declarative statements, is aligned with this vision of floating medusas. Sofia also looks forward past the entrenched structures of heteronormativity, insisting that "Love is getting bigger" (202).

The dynamic interchanges among water, medusas, and desire contrast with the stasis she encounters when she goes to visit her father and his new wife and child in Greece. Sofia reflects, at the end of the chapter, that "I was flesh thirst desire dust blood lips cracking feet blistered knees skinned hips bruised, but I was so happy not to be napping on a sofa under a blanket with an older man by my side and a baby on my lap" (202). The syntax of this passage, which collapses body parts, injuries, and

 ISSN 2171-9594

urges with no clear hierarchy between them, suggests how Sofia's sense of herself as a bounded body dissolves in tandem with the jellyfish encounters. The asyndeton, or omission of conjunctions, in this passage stylistically emphasizes the "sweeping away" of "syntax" that Cixous sees as the "strength of women" (886) when they free themselves from phallogocentric structures, from the "language of men and their grammar" (887). Indeed, Sofia reflects that "I had journeyed as far from myself as I have ever been, far, far away from any landmarks I recognized" (202). Like Cixous's "dispersible" and "desirous" swimmer, Sofia is scattered into different parts, flesh, lips, and hips, in language that suggests a coming-apart, but also an emancipation from phallocentric notions of a "centralized body" to which Cixous opposes women's "capacity to depropriate unselfishly: body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts.' If she is a whole, it's a whole composed of parts that are wholes […] a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros" (889). In *Hot Milk,* pain is part of this capacity, but this watery dispersibility is more vital and dynamic than the entrapped, heteronormative, indoor scene of the napping family.

While this dispersibility ultimately affirms Sofia's queer sexuality, it is worth pausing over Ingrid's, and the novel's, more ambivalent language of monstrosity. In a chapter titled "Big Sea Animal," Ingrid tells Sofia, "'you look like a sea monster'" and, if taken at face value, it is not a compliment (172). Indeed, the transfer of monstrosity between Ingrid and Sofia, and the sense of danger and anxiety surrounding Ingrid, suggests an internalization of homophobic, misogynist language that haunts the intimacy between the two women. Ingrid gives Sofia an embroidered top with the word "Beheaded," which Sofia misreads, initially, as "Beloved," and her discovery of the correct word brings the gruesome image of Medusa's severed head back to mind (Kisiel 260). This misreading is also intriguing in terms of onomastics, as the name "Ingrid" means "beloved" ("Ingrid"): Ingrid is simultaneously the object of love and the specter of monstrosity.

With Cixous's "beautiful… laughing" Medusa in mind, however (885), we can understand this transfer of monstrosity not only as an internalization of bigotry but also as a subversive, ironically charged statement of affinity between two women who recognize, and mock, the social projection of monstrosity onto queerness. Elsewhere, in one of the book's italicized interludes, an unnamed, first-person speaker, arguably Ingrid, lies on the beach with the "Greek girl," or Sofia; the two fall asleep, with Ingrid's hand on Sofia's breast. Ingrid wakes to Sofia shouting: "LOOK! She is pointing to the print of my hand. It leaves a white tattoo on her skin where everything is brown. She says, I will wear the print of your monster claws on my body to frighten my enemies" (191). The daylit, beach setting suggests the exposure or revelation of their intimacy, while the metamorphosis of Ingrid's hand to a claw speaks to the ways their intimacy would be seen, by a homophobic society, as monstrous and inhuman. At the same time, the "white tattoo" recalls Cixous's "white ink" as a source of feminine power, which Sofia affirms when she says the print will scare away her enemies. For Sofia, the print of the hand/claw is a source of strength, not of shame, one that defies a

 ISSN 2171-9594

society that ascribes horror to queer love, much as it ascribes horror to jellyfish, making them seem menacing and predatory.

From an ecocritical perspective, these explicit and implicit references to the Medusa and the medusas also suggest the dynamic and multidirectional flow of human, mythical projections onto marine life. That is, if humans impart monstrous, mythical imagery to jellyfish, so too does that monstrous imagery circulate back to humans who affiliate with them in the process of becoming-animal. Marine transcorporeality is generally understood as a materialist concept, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the body's traffic with surrounding substances. But, in *Hot Milk*, these transcorporeal inscriptions still bear myth in their wake. The medusa/Medusa language flows back and forth from human to marine (albeit still centered in human perception and consciousness) and enfolds into itself the anxiety, risk, and danger which Sofia feels in her relationship with Ingrid.

This association among humans and medusas speaks not only to same-sex desire but also to gender non-conformity. Sofia looks at the Medusa flag on the beach, planted on days when jellyfish are especially abundant, and reflects:

> In the distance below the mountain I could see the ocean and a yellow flag planted in the coarse sand on the beach. It was like a haunting, that flag. Where would the Medusa's case history begin and end? Was she shocked, devastated, appalled to discover she was no longer admired for her beauty? Did she feel de-feminized? Would she walk through the door labelled 'Ladies' or the door labelled 'Gentlemen'? 'Hommes' or 'Femmes', 'Caballeros' or 'Señoras'? I began to wonder if she had more power in her life as a monster. Where had I got to in my own life by trying to please everyone all the time? Right here. Wringing my hands. (66)

This moment recalls the scene of Sofia's initial encounter with Ingrid. Sofia sees her boots under the bathroom stall in a women's room and thinks she is a man, feels threatened, and runs to get help. As it turns out, Ingrid is wearing men's dancing shoes (34). This highly gendered and charged moment of encounter—the male expression in this feminized space being perceived as a danger—fades as Sofia begins to think about why bathroom doors split identities as rigidly as they do, working to "tell us who we are": "Are we all of us lurking in each other's sign?" (42). This moment collapses rigid semiotic distinctions and Sofia looks to the medusa as a figure who derives more power from refusing to adhere to such labels. Eva Hayward, writing of human encounters with hermaphroditic comb jellies in an aquarium, posits that cross-species encounters foster "a turning-toward the monstrous oceanic […] updated for a technoscientific modernity" (168). Sofia, in her encounters with the medusas, similarly turns towards the monstrous, finding in it the power and affirmation of a queer present, even if that affirmation refuses the idea of healing and recovery as a final destination.

Conclusion: A Sea Past, A Sea Present

The novel's conclusion intertwines damaged bodies and seas in a final upending of the sea's purported healing powers. In one of the last few chapters, Sofia

is at the beach, unbeknownst to Rose, and catches a sight of her mother walking, exactly what she had said she could never do, a "woman in early old age in a pretty dress and a hat taking a stroll barefoot in the sand" (204). Rose goes to shower the sand off her feet, and Sofia hunts for her mother's footprints, anticipating that the "tide would take away these footprints inscribed in the wet, firm sand before the surgeon could set upon them" (205). This moment seems to gesture at the shore as a place of repose and healing, but also of mutual inscription—the shore covers Rose, momentarily, with its sand, even as she leaves momentary traces on it with her feet—in a temporality shaped by the movements of the tide rather than the diagnostic time of Rose's treatment. Yet this image of shoreline recovery is undermined in the final pages, where we learn that Rose is still sick—and sicker in a more urgent, literal way than anyone had understood, with oesophageal cancer. The final lines return to tidal imagery: "The tide was coming in with all the medusas floating in its turbulence" (218), perhaps a sign, now, not only of the mother's footprints vanishing, but of her impending mortality. The shore, in the end, is no final scene of healing; rather, the image of medusas and the grim prognosis recalls the book's larger interest in the co-presence of creatures learning to live and die together in the present (Haraway 1). In the novel's symbolic lexicon, this is also an oceanic present, one marked by anthropogenic, marine "trouble" that the novel refuses to neatly or tidily resolve.

The book closes with an image of the "tendrils of the jellyfish in limbo, like something cut loose, a placenta, a parachute, a refugee severed from its place of origin" (218). The "place of origin" recalls the evolutionary history that ties humans to the ocean, one that a terrestrial worldview seeks to displace or "cut loose." These unsettling lines also recall the book's themes of maternity, the maternal body, and the plight of an unnamed refugee who swims the Mediterranean, here strangely dehumanized ("its") and symbolically aligned with other instances of displacement in the book, where a globalized commodity system repeatedly carries people and goods far away. The "place of origin," then, recalls multiple threads in *Hot Milk*: the tragic crisis of migrants whose lives are at risk as they cross a sea to work, under inhumane conditions, in the Spanish desert farms; the circulation of commodities like water and computers; the multinational backgrounds of Sofia and Dr. Gomez; the future between Sofia and her mortally ill mother.

At the same time, the image of being "cut loose" recalls another, less painful, sundering in the book: the passage where Pablo's dog is released. In a later scene that takes place on the Beach of the Dead, Sofia encounters the dog again, swimming with two naked girls, one of whom gives him water. Afterwards, when Ingrid's boyfriend Matthew asks what message she would like to carry to Ingrid, she says to tell her that "Pablo's dog is alive and free. He can swim because he has a sea past" (186). Sofia's message aligns her own actions with the dog's: they are both alive and free on the beach of the dead, swimming with a kind of instinctual and primordial attraction to the water, staking survival for human and more-than-human bodies on their remembrance of a sea past. Haraway writes, "Making kin […] troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible […] What shape is this kinship,

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 1

where and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what? What must be cut […] if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?" (2). *Hot Milk* proposes the severing of heteronormative kinship ties but also a more clear-eyed recognition of the ties between the human and the more-than-human, inviting us to swim with the trouble as we forge new, unlikely affinities in the queer ocean.

Submission received 24 June 2025 Revised version accepted 1 March 2026

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible." *Thinking with Water,* edited by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, McGill-Queens University Press, 2013, pp. 139-164.

---. *Exposed. Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times.* University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

"Origin and history of Alexandria." *Etymonline,* n.d. https://www.etymonline.com/word/Alexandria. Accessed 17 Dec. 2025.

Bajada, Jasmine. "Mothers, Daughters, and Damaged Legs: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*." *antae*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2020, pp. 12-26. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/59230 .

Bakun, Andrew, and Scarla J. Weeks. "Adverse Feedback Sequences in Exploited Marine Systems." *Fish & Fisheries*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2006, pp. 316-333. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-2979.2006.00229.x.

Braidotti, Rosi. "Animals and Other Anomalies." *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 81-97.

Canepa, Antonio, et al. "*Pelagia noctiluca* in the Mediterranean Sea." *Jellyfish Blooms,* edited by Kylie A. Pitt and Cathy H. Lucas. Springer, 2018, pp. 237-266. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7015-7_11.

Charlier, Roger H. and Marie-Claire P. Chaineux. "The Healing Sea: A Sustainable Coastal Ocean Resource: Thalassotherapy." *Journal of Coastal Research*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2009, pp. 838-56. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27698380.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239.

Corbin, Alain. *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840.* Translated by Joceyln Phelps, University of California Press, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus.* Translated by Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Flores Quesada, María Magdalena. "Reorienting Vulnerability: An Analysis of Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 42, 2021, pp. 105–25. https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.42.2021.105-125.

Gillis, John R. *The Human Shore.* The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Gray, Madeleine. "Making Her Time (and Time Again): Feminist Phenomenology and Form in Recent British and Irish Fiction Written by Women." *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 14, no.1, 2020, pp. 66-83. https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpaa014.

Griffin, Gabriele. "Morphing Together: Motherhood, Old Grievances, and Corporeal Materiality in Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*." *Close Relations: Family, Kinship, and Beyond,* edited by Helena Wahlström Henriksson and Klara Goedecke, Springer Nature, 2021, pp. 209-220.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals.* AK Press, 2020.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Duke University Press, 2016.

Hayward, Eva. "Sensational Jellyfish: Aquarium Affects and the Matter of Immersion." *differences,* vol. 23, no. 3, 2012, pp. 161-196. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892925.

Harpold, Terry. "'Quelque Chose Qui Flotte, Qui Bouge... Qui Grouille...' Some Flows of the Formless in Late Anthropocene Fiction." *Épistémocritique*, vol. 21, 2023, pp. 1-12. https://epistemocritique.org/10-quelque-chose-qui-flotte-qui-bouge-qui-grouille-some-flows-of-the-formless-in-late-anthropocene-fiction/.

"Ingrid." *Behind the Name*, 3 April 2024. https://www.behindthename.com/name/ingrid. Accessed 17 Dec. 2025.

Kalinowski, Katharina Maria and Rosanne van der Voet. "Of Jellyfish, Lichen, and Other More-than-Human Matter." *Poetry and the Global Climate Crisis: Creative Educational Approaches to Complex Challenges*, pp. 91-106. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003399988-10.

Kerr, Matthew P.M. *The Victorian Novel and the Problems of Marine Language: All at Sea.* Oxford University Press, 2022.

Kisiel, Anna. "Monstrosity – Illness – Wound: Uncanny Interconnections in Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*." *Er(r)go: Theory – Literature – Culture*, no. 47, 2023, pp. 99-214. https://doi.org/10.31261/errgo.14934.

Lamb, Juliet. "The Global Jellyfish Crisis in Perspective." *JSTOR Daily,* 29 March 2017. https://daily.jstor.org/global-jellyfish-crisis-perspective/.

Levy, Deborah. *Hot Milk.* Hamish Hamilton, 2016.

---. *Real Estate.* Hamish Hamilton, 2021.

Maguire, Geoffrey. *Bodies of Water: Queer Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Cinema.* The State University of New York Press, 2024.

Neimanis, Astrida. "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water." *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, edited by Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 85-99.

---. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Richardson, Anthony J., et al. "The Jellyfish Joyride." *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2009, pp. 312-322. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2009.01.010.

 ISSN 2171-9594