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Hooked on Mermaids

Recuperating Personal Passion as Scholarly Research

This special section, its editors claim, explores creativity “as an open process and a dynamic presence of ongoing transformation,” rather than starting from “a static, ‘universal’ definition” of the term (Brillenburg Wurth, Van der Tuin, and Verhoeff 2023: 60–61). It seeks to “break open the invisible cage . . . within which we have been working to research creativity since the 1950s” and adapt the term *creativity* to serve more expansive creative-critical purposes (60). My contribution to this special section is the sharing of a secret passion for mermaids that I am now lovingly turning into a critical project: a book on twenty-first-century mermaid narratives. In what follows, I consider why I never dared to use creative work on mermaids as objects of critical reading. I also argue how such work—and the “productive reception” (the remakes, adaptations, reconfigurations) that mermaid narrative propels—is deeply relevant to understanding the times we are living in (Plate 2011).

We are living in the midst of a mermaid craze, a renaissance in popular culture that crosses media forms and geography and is evident in the sale of monofins and mermaid merchandize, “mermaid-ing” as a growing amateur activity and entrepreneurial movement (Strandvad, Davis, and Dunn [2022]), the expansion of mermaid conventions (“mercons”), the production of mermaid films and television shows, the opening of two museums in the United States claiming to be the world’s first mermaid museums (both in 2021, in Washington and Maryland), the publication of *The Penguin Book of Mermaids* (2019), and, of course, the proliferation of mermaid literature across genres (YA, horror, science fiction, children’s literature, erotica, and more), media formats (books, films, web-comics, wiki fan sites, and more), languages, and readerships. Disney’s new live-action *The Little Mermaid* (2023) was just the latest in a decades-long cultural obsession but a particular and exemplary case for understanding what is at stake in taking mermaids seriously today. I use as my point of departure the contemporary fracas over this latest creative adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s famous 1837 tale “The Little Mermaid” (“Den Lille

Hafvru”) and specifically the ridiculous, racist backlash over Disney’s casting choice of its little mermaid: the African American actress Halle Bailey. I argue that current controversies over mermaids in popular culture, brought to the surface with Disney’s recent film, are about identity and power, including ownership of creative literary works and the concept of creativity more generally. This is what makes research into the productive reception of mermaids so fascinating and timely. And that “invisible cage” that kept me from turning my critical attention to my personal source of creativity and passion? Let’s just say that it is the vestige of a particular generation of academia, a training and discipline of critical reading that I have been disciplined into for over twenty years (Warner 2004). I am now trying to break that cage open to let in the mermaids.

Engaging with Mermaids

On September 10, 2022, Disney released its trailer for the new *The Little Mermaid* movie . . . and it was gorgeous. Days later, the web was alive with videos capturing gleeful responses of young Black girls as they watched the trailer and slowly recognized that the mermaid on screen looks like them. Also gorgeous. Not so beautiful, but also not so surprising: the web was simultaneously polluted with racist diatribes about the need to #MakeMermaidsWhiteAgain (yep, a real Twitter hashtag).

I am not a woman of color. I come to the topic as a lifelong mermaid lover and a literary scholar, an entanglement of identities that drives me to enter the whirlpool of cultural discourse provoked by a recent mermaid film. Mermaids are (once again) central to contemporary culture. As Vaughn Scribner (2020: 9) writes in *Merpeople: A Human History*, mermaids have been an important part of human history for millennia: “Humanity’s interaction with merpeople demonstrates our ongoing need for discovery as much as our attempts at regulation and classification.” Mermaids are, and always have been, a focal point upon which humans project and (ideally) process deep, complicated feelings and sedimented histories. That is why I am writing a book about the contemporary proliferation of mermaid narratives. It is a project on cultural memory located in contemporary cultural production, exploring the adaptations and (after)lives of myths and fairytales in various media as well as objects (including memorials and memorabilia) and the ways these objects are treated today. I consider the project as a lighthouse beam (cue Helen Reddy singing “Candle on the Water” from a different Disney film, the 1977 *Pete’s Dragon*) to illuminate the larger stakes involved in thinking about and through mermaids.

Popular culture, particularly that aligned with girls and girlhood, is often relegated to the margins of critical and scholarly thought, deemed unimportant or superficial. This is particularly true when it comes to Black girlhood, which is why a whole field of scholarly study has arisen in response.¹ I invite us to shine that lighthouse beam, with a steady and direct focus, here—on why and how Bailey as Ariel is so provocative and powerful. There is much to glean from the waters surrounding this particular mermaid sighting.

But first, in the spirit of creativity brought to bear on critical writing, let me offer a bit of personal history to explain why I care so much and also why I am only now starting to see that personal attachment is valuable for scholarly analysis. I follow Rita Felski's (2020: viii) advice and place a "stress on attachment: how people connect to art and how connects them to other things"—the need to explore and explain, but at least acknowledge how art (of all kinds and strokes) hooks one, to address the creative part of reception as well as production. Felski asks, "Why do works of art matter?," and then answers, "Because they create, or cocreate, enduring ties" (1). These ties matter, and they deserve to be the focus of concentrated analysis and criticism. So, here are the "enduring ties" that bring me to this topic and project.

I remember sitting in the movie theater as a high school freshman, way back in 1989, my eyes wide from trying to hold in view all of Disney's glorious depictions of life underwater and its presentation of a female protagonist's desire to explore the world beyond her constrained, through privileged, life. I felt seen in this narrative of a protagonist yearning to explore the larger world, to take on new forms and positionalities in it, to learn and love, adventure and experience. By that point I had been dreaming of mermaids for years. I was five when I fell in love with mermaids. At a friend's birthday party in Oakland, California, in 1980, we watched a full-length Japanese anime film of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" (the 1975 version by Toei Animation). As many, if not most, readers will know, Andersen's tale is about a young mermaid who falls in love with a prince and is willing to renounce her voice, well-being, and long submarine life span to become human and acquire a soul. Unlike the later Disney animated film, Tomoharu Katsumata's 1975 version remained faithful to the story's original ending: the mermaid, unable to kill her love in order to save herself, is turned into foam on the water's edge. The anime heroine is blonde but with big Asian eyes; her English voice is dubbed and a bit off-kilter with the animation. Her hybridity as a racial creature is present and powerful.

Forty-plus years later, I am a scholar of contemporary literature and new media. I have written books about born-digital literature and kitschy bookish objects, arguing for the importance of taking seriously such creativity in popular culture (Pressman 2020). But I have yet to turn my critical gaze and scholarly practice to the original focal point of my desire, curiosity, and literary love: the mermaid.

The question of my new book is *why* the mermaid craze *now*. But the other question at work here—and the one that pertains to this special section’s focus on scholarly creativity—is why I did *not* previously consider analyzing mermaids and mermaid literature. I am feeling deeply Michael Warner’s (2004: 35) words from twenty years ago: “Critical reading is a historically and formally mediated practice, with an elaborate discipline of subjectivity.” As a well-trained critical reader, with over twenty years in the discipline of literary analysis, I now recognize that my inability to take seriously mermaids and mermaid literature says a lot about critical training and the disciplined divide between creativity and scholarship. It is a divide that I now seek to suture by analyzing our contemporary mermaid craze, specifically the subgenre of mermaid narratives that span global readerships, genres, multimedia formats, diverse aesthetic modes, and registers of affect and attachment. Lacking is serious (and certainly scholarly) attention to *how* and *why* mermaid tales mean so much to contemporary creative culture. The fact of the popularity of the genre and the lack of serious analysis of it are vexing when one considers that these recent mermaid narratives defy troubling genre conventions solidified by mermaid imagery in the wake of Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid” (i.e., alabaster skin and blond hair, Christian ideals of female sexuality, and heteronormative romance). Today’s mermaids are Black and Brown, queer, powerful in their relationships to nature, and grounded in Indigenous knowledge. Their stories present challenges to living under neoliberal capitalism, white patriarchy, ableism, and environmental destruction. These mermaid tales reflect our most pressing anxieties and concerns, about racial and social justice, climate change, technological upgrade culture, and more. They deserve critical attention because they have much to say about a quickly changing world and the need for creative negotiating of power relations within it.

As Lori Yamato and many others have pointed out, Andersen’s tale symbolizes and reinforces destructive Romanticist binaries between nature and culture, the “natural” and “human” worlds. It does so almost literally in the splitting of the mermaid’s fin into two legs, a rupture that produces inexpressible pain with every step she

takes. “The mermaid’s body, which is neither fully human nor fully animal, and her spirit, which is not possessed of a soul and yet guilelessly desires a soul, become the site of questioning about the limits of what it is to be human” (Yamato 2017: 298). She is thus the perfect symbol to consider our posthuman selves and, following Tok Thompson (2019), the renewed importance of folktales in our historical epoch. Contemporary adaptations speak powerfully to contemporary contexts, such as the #MeToo movement (consider Amanda Lovelace’s [2019] poetry collection *the mermaid’s voice returns in this one*) and transgender narratives of transformation and shifting selves (consider Stephanie Burt’s [2022] poetry collection *We Are Mermaids*). “The Little Mermaid” story also invites eco-critical attention and analysis, as do many recent narratives. For example, in an essay currently in progress, I read the Freeform television show *Siren*, which ran three seasons (2018–2020), as an ecological allegory of the Anthropocene. How might reconsidering this particular story—which was previously viewed as an allegory of misogynist sacrifice (Golden 1998)—offer ways of seeing new poetic possibilities and agency in acts of transforming one’s body and acclimating to new spaces? In other words, how might we bring together scholarly critical practice with creativity research to understand the twenty-first-century mermaid renaissance as a movement of creative transformation?

Mermaid Animosity

The splash made by Disney’s announcement, back in 2019, that the live-action remake of its beloved 1989 animated film would feature a Black actress in the lead role of Ariel fueled a torrent of racist backlash on Twitter. The hashtag #NotMyMermaid became a thing, demonstrating how easily a political tag used to critique a misogynist president could be co-opted to support the very white supremacist ideologies he spewed. But, the entanglement of mermaids and racism is a much longer story.

Tracey Baptiste, author of *Rise of the Jumbies* (2017), a novel for young readers with a Caribbean mermaid as protagonist, puts her thesis in the title of her 2019 *New York Times* article: “Mermaids Have Always Been Black.” I quote from the article extensively to share the power of her argument and her voice:

Black mermaids have always existed: long before Andersen, certainly long before Disney. Given the way African stories have been taken and twisted, I wonder just where Andersen got his idea in

the first place. He was writing at the height of the colonial period as people were being stripped from African lands, clinging to the stories that made them who they were. The focus on Eurocentric stories and storytelling has done us a disservice, leaving most totally ignorant of the fact that mermaid stories have been told throughout the African continent for millennia. Mermaids are not just part of the imagination, either, but a part of the living culture. (Baptiste 2019)

Black mermaids are certainly “a part of the living culture” of our contemporary moment and its literature. Black feminist authors are writing beautiful, powerful, and poignant works that illuminate the entangled histories of race/ism and mermaids in ways that chart new narrative futures (I have written about a few such works elsewhere; see Pressman 2022).

Yet, both the racist backlash unleashed by a Black Ariel and the rebuttals to it—which show how mermaids can be (and, indeed, have been) Black, either because there is a long tradition of merfolk in Near Eastern and African cultures or because mermaids are fictional and can thus be depicted any way we want—leaves me wanting a more robust, critical conversation about what is happening around and through mermaid narratives. It also prompts me to consider how my personal inability to previously consider mermaid fiction as a scholarly topic is part of the problem.

The mermaid is a hybrid creature that refuses binaries and, thus, offers an opportunity for opting out of tired intellectual oppositions. Mermaids are nonbinary border crossers, transgressors of categorizations and classifications; they even defy the opposition of fact versus fiction because they are a historical part of the human record, a fact of literary and visual culture since Babylonia, and a fixture of imaginings in the present day (Scribner 2020). Mermaids are symbols that represent and reflect back to us cultural concerns, confusions, and changes. Their presence on early modern navigational maps denoted unexplored areas and fears of “the other” that might be found therein. An embodied entanglement of fear and desire, the mermaid became a staple of Western culture; as Scribner (2020: 68) writes, “From art to science, merpeople had become critical facets of the European worldview.” Mermaids remain sites for exploring and interrogating changing worldviews, for producing cultural connection and confusion.

This became evident in July 2020 when the famous bronze statue of Andersen’s little mermaid in Copenhagen harbor was sprayed

with the graffiti “RACIST FISH.” The tagging drew international attention because the mermaid sculpture is one of the most visited and photographed tourist attractions in the world. The enigmatic statement “RACIST FISH” prompted a range of responses from curiosity to outrage, but I think the inscriptive act and its historical context deserve a bit more attention, even though this was not the first time the statue was attacked; over the years, the memorial to the mermaid—and a monument of national tourism—has suffered mutilation and decapitation for various political purposes. Considering the disfigurement of the mermaid’s body *in* the story—the wound caused by the splitting of her fins, the tongue cut out of the mermaid’s mouth (her price to pay to assume human form), and the constant pain of walking—the attacks on the statue have their own ironic material manifestation. But what did “RACIST FISH” ultimately refer to? Was Andersen’s mermaid the referent? And, why should we care?

Reuters News situated the vandalism in the context of the social justice movement unfolding in the summer of 2020: “Protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement around the world have in recent months rallied against statues of historical figures who played a role in racist oppression, such as slave traders and colonialists” (Reuters Staff 2020). The Little Mermaid, as a fictional character, was not a slave trader, colonist, or Confederate general; so how did she get lumped together with other “historical figures who played a role in racist oppression”? The article provides a hook or net (oh, so many mermaid puns!) for a possible answer: “The Little Mermaid has not been part of this [Black Lives Matter] debate but last year a Disney live-action remake of the 1989 animated film of the same name was the subject of a controversy after African American actress Halle Bailey was cast in the central role.” White supremacists may have had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that a woman of color, not a white woman, figures as a character that viewers of any color can identify with and adore; as such, it was the myth of whiteness as a cultural standard, not the mythological figure of the mermaid, that seated a anger around a remake of this particular mermaid film.

The Reuters article, which was shared widely across social media, ends by quoting a local scholar and expert on Andersen. Her words, placed at the article’s conclusion, are meant to sum up the general feeling surrounding this act of vandalism on the 107-year-old sculpture: “I am having a hard time seeing what is particularly racist in the fairy tale ‘The Little Mermaid,’” Ane Grum-Schwensen, researcher at the H. C. Andersen Center at the University of Southern Denmark, told

local news wire Ritzau. Andersen's protagonist is white ("she now had the prettiest small white legs that any young girl could have," and "the little mermaid raised her pretty white arms," and "the little mermaid laid her white arms on the bulwark"), aristocratic (she's a princess, after all), heterosexual, and seeking a Christian soul. In the context of the story, she represents a very distinct worldview and ideology. Yet, she is also *not* every merperson, certainly not every merperson from across time and literary history. So, to turn this particular mermaid narrative into a claim about *all* mermaid narratives, whether in support of white supremacy or its dissolution, is to practice historical erasure.

The colossal popularity of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid"—a figure traceable to others in European folklore like Undine and Melusine, and, further back, to the classical Greek Sirens—blocks from view countless other mermaid narratives from different times and cultures. (Just consult the recent *Penguin Book of Mermaids* for examples [Bacchilega and Brown 2019]). Disney's *The Little Mermaid* is not Andersen's, and neither is Katsumata's, and none of these narratives is the only—or the oldest—mermaid tale. But then, the graffiti on the statue in the harbor may never have been directed at Andersen's mermaid in the first place. "RACIST FISH" may have been a response to the online racist communities "defending" the tale and its mermaid as white: to a racist *werktreue*, so to speak. Productive reception, graffiti on a statue celebrating a fictional character, here speaks to how the mermaid becomes a stake, symbol, and unstable signifier in debates about cultural ownership and identity. The mermaid is not just a character: she is a work of cultural memory (Rigney 2012). As such, she outlives the pages of a nineteenth-century book to become a focus of deeply felt concerns in the present and across its media (and mediated) forms.

Conclusion

Mermaid stories have long been part of human history and imagination. Though they permeate global literature in different shapes, colors, and contexts far before the Old or New Testament, the recent backlash against Disney's casting choice illuminates how an ahistorical view of the mermaid as white has become scripture. To see mermaids this way—as white by default and owned and operated by white, colonial (Andersen) and white, capitalist (Disney) infrastructures—is to enact historical erasure and censoring. This kind of political enforcing is affecting public libraries and educational curriculum across the United States today, which is why a focus on mermaid literature—one that is both scholarly and creative, that reads carefully, closely, and comparatively—

is no longer a personal passion project but is now a cultural imperative. Recognizing that I have never taken seriously mermaids and mermaid literature as a subject for scholarly attention or an object for analysis, I hereby admit that I needed the contemporary mermaid craze (and perhaps even the racist backlash about Disney's casting choice) to command my attention and push me to take the deep dive that this subject deserves.

Note

1. Thanks to my colleague Lashon Daley for opening the world of girlhood studies to me, including the peer-reviewed academic journal *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

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