

Disney's Black Mermaid is No Breakthrough – Just Look at the Literary Subgenre of Black Mermaid Fiction

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Mermaids have become a cultural phenomenon, and clashes about mermaids and race have spilled out into the open. This is most pointedly apparent in the backlash over Disney's much-anticipated "The Little Mermaid."

After Disney unveiled its trailer for the film, which will be released in May 2023, social media captured the faces of gleeful young Black girls seeing Black mermaids onscreen for the first time. Less inspiring was the racism that simultaneously occurred, with hashtags like #NotMyMermaid and #MakeMermaidsWhiteAgain circulating on Twitter.

The fact that Disney's portrayal of a nonwhite mermaid is controversial is due to 150 years of whitewashing.

In a 2019 op-ed for *The New York Times*, writer

Tracey Baptiste – whose children's novel "Rise of the Jumbies" features a Black mermaid as the protagonist – points out how "Eurocentric stories have obscured the African origins of mermaids."

"Mermaid stories," she writes, "have been told throughout the African continent for millenniums. Mermaids are not just part of the imagination, either, but a part of the living culture."

Nonetheless, contemporary culture is pushing back. Mermaids have, in recent years, become a popular subject in literature, film and fashion. In many cases, their depictions reflect contemporary culture: They appear as Black and brown, as sexually fluid and as harbingers of the climate crisis.

As a scholar of contemporary literature and media – and as a lifelong lover of mermaids – I am fascinated by the recent surge of mermaid literature that remixes African folklore and connects the transatlantic

slave trade to mermaid tales.

By briefly charting this new literary movement, I hope to show how these stories are part of a larger current with a much longer historical tail. I also hope to put to rest the idea that Disney's decision to feature a Black mermaid represents some sort of modern breakthrough.

Here are three very different works of Black mermaid fiction that deserve attention.

1. Rivers Solomon's "The Deep" (2019)

This novella is marketed as fantasy, but it does the very real and important work of opening up new ways to think about the legacy of slavery.

Specifically, it pushes readers to think about mermaids as products of the Middle Passage, the harrowing stage of the transatlantic slave trade in which enslaved Africans were transported in crowded ships across the Atlantic Ocean.

The novel's conceit is that pregnant, enslaved



A coffin made to resemble a mermaid at a Ga funeral. The Ga people live along the southeast coast of Ghana.

Africans who either jumped or were thrown overboard from slave ships gave birth underwater to babies who moved from amniotic fluid to seawater and evolved into a society of merfolk.

The protagonist, Yetu, is a mermaid who serves as a repository of the traumatic stories that would be too troubling for her people to remember on a daily basis. She is the historian, and once a year she delivers "The Remembrance" to her people in a ritual of sharing.

The narrator explains,

"Only the historian was allowed to remember," because if the regular folk "know the truth of everything, they will not be able to carry on."

Once a year, the society gathers to hear the history. The memories are not lost or forgotten but submerged and transformed, hosted by the ocean and housed in the body of a mermaid.

This vibrant and readable book can be tied to the work of literary scholar Christina Sharpe, who presents the concept of "the wake" – a means of contemplating the continued effects of the Middle Passage. For

Sharpe, "The wake" is "a method of encountering a past that is not past" and of endeavoring to "memorialize an event that is still ongoing."

"The Deep" also offers an allegory for the challenges of working in archives of African American experience – the main mermaid is, of course, the historian – and evokes the work of another important scholar in contemporary Black studies, Saidiya Hartman, who has written about the erasure of Black women from archives largely compiled

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