

Part of That World?

Racial Belonging and the Politics of Adapting Andersen

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Andersen in Contemporary Reception

Hans Christian Andersen is part of Denmark's national cultural heritage, yet his works have long since transcended national boundaries and now circulate globally in a wide array of formats and media. His fairy tales have been republished, adapted, and reimagined by publishers, filmmakers, theatre companies, and artists across the world. These ongoing reinterpretations speak to Andersen's durability as a global cultural phenomenon, whose stories continue to resonate far beyond their original context.

A central assumption of this essay is that when Andersen is reinterpreted or assigned new meaning, it reveals something about the cultural, social, and political forces at play in that specific context. In other words, whenever Andersen is embedded in a new cultural format or adapted to a particular medium, his reception becomes entangled with the present moment and the value systems that inform it. There is always something at stake, be it political, ideological, or emotional, when Andersen is adapted anew. In the following, I explore how power and politics are negotiated in North American receptions of Andersen's fairy tale "The Little Mermaid" (1837). More specifically, I focus on the public response to Disney's 2023 live-action remake of the company's 1989 animated film in which the character Ariel is portrayed by black actress Halle Bailey. Drawing on examples from Instagram, I examine how the casting decision sparked debates about identity, representation, and belonging, and how Andersen's tale has been mobilized within these discussions.

Framing the Study: Critical Heritage and Cultural Struggle

Recent approaches to Andersen's works have moved beyond traditional philological and biographical readings to include perspectives from British Cultural Studies and Critical Heritage Studies (Thomsen, 2019; Thomsen & Bom, 2019; Bom, 2020; Bom, 2025). These newer frameworks shift attention away from authorial intention and historical context and

instead examine how Andersen's works circulate as cultural phenomena that acquire shifting meanings in different times and places.

This essay is based on Critical Heritage Studies (CHS), which view culture and heritage as dynamic and contested processes. As Laurajane Smith (2006) and Rodney Harrison (2013) argue, heritage is not a passive inheritance from the past but an active negotiation shaped by the needs, concerns, and identities of the present. From this perspective, Andersen's fairy tales are not fixed literary artefacts, but mutable cultural resources that are continually repurposed in response to contemporary social and political concerns.

Following Stuart Hall's foundational claim that popular culture is best understood as "sites of struggle" (Hall, 1981, p. 233), the reception of "The Little Mermaid" can be seen as a discursive arena in which competing interpretations vie for legitimacy and visibility. The remake becomes a site of struggle where different cultural positions are asserted through the figure of the mermaid. What is at stake in this struggle is not only the meaning of the character Ariel, but broader questions about racialization, representation, and cultural ownership.

This essay contributes to the field of Andersen studies by engaging with an emerging and largely unexplored site of reception: social media. By analyzing public responses to the film *The Little Mermaid* on Instagram, the essay examines how Andersen's legacy is reshaped in the context of digital activism, fan engagement, and hashtag-based identity politics.

Method and Empirical Material

The analysis in this essay is based on a selection of Instagram posts tagged with the hashtags #myariel and #notmyariel. These hashtags have emerged as central markers in the public debate surrounding Disney's live-action remake of the animated film *The Little Mermaid*, particularly in relation to the casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel. Across different social media platforms, hashtags are used to express approval, disapproval, pride, frustration, and various forms of identification. The material was collected using web scraping methods, focusing on posts and comments related to three key events:

1. March 2019, when Disney announced that Halle Bailey had been cast as Ariel.
2. September 2022, when the teaser trailer for the remake was released.
3. May 2023, when the film premiered in cinemas.

In this study, I concentrate on material posted in connection with the September 2022 teaser release, a moment that triggered widespread emotional and political reactions across social media. The central research question guiding the analysis is: What is at stake in the reception of Disney's live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, and what meanings are assigned to the mermaid's identity in the public debate? By examining how users assign meaning and value to Ariel's character and appearance, the essay sheds light on the discourses and identity markers that are activated in the negotiation of cultural belonging. The focus is especially on the interplay between racialization and representation, while acknowledging that other intersecting markers such as gender and class also shape the debate.

Negotiating Identity: Hashtag Activism on Instagram

One of the most prominent patterns in posts using the hashtag #myariel is a focus on representation. Many posts feature black or brown mothers sharing images and videos of their children watching the teaser trailer for *The Little Mermaid* and reacting with joy or wonder at seeing a mermaid who looks like them. In these moments, the figure of Ariel becomes more than a fictional character; she becomes a symbol of recognition and inclusion. One Instagram post captures this dynamic vividly:

“Wow! Wow” That’s what Emmie said as she watched the new Little Mermaid trailer. When I was 4 years old, *The Little Mermaid* was released. It quickly became one of my favorites as a kid. Now we get to share the newest one together with a mermaid that looks like her. She made me watch the trailer another 11 times at least. I did so gladly. Thanks for capturing this moment, dada. (Alese, 2022)

This post articulates an intergenerational experience of viewing and identification. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon (1986) and Sara Ahmed (2007), this moment can be interpreted as a shift in the inherited structures and orientations of whiteness, as described by Ahmed (2007, pp. 152–156) – that is, the bodily norms and expectations passed down across generations that define what bodies are supposed to be and do within a racialized world. In Disney's 1989 adaptation, Ariel was a white character in a white-coded fantasy space; in the 2023 remake, the mermaid becomes, in Ahmed's terms, an object “within reach” (p. 152) for black viewers.

Following Fanon, Ahmed describes how certain objects and roles are historically structured as unreachable for non-white bodies. The post above shows how that dynamic begins to shift: a black child can now identify with the character of Ariel not just as a mermaid, but as *her* mermaid. This moment of recognition reorients the child's relation to the cultural field and subtly reconfigures what a black person can be in a world still shaped by the legacy of whiteness.

“Part of that World” and Racial Belonging

Another significant use of the hashtag #myariel appears in posts that celebrate Halle Bailey's casting through artistic expression, including fanart and curated images. One such example is a post by a 17-year-old black artist who shares a drawing of Bailey as Ariel accompanied by the caption: “Wish I could be, part of that world.” (we_stan_halle, 2022).

At first glance, this may appear as a simple reference to the well-known title song from Disney's 1989 animated film. However, the phrase acquires additional resonance in light of whiteness theory. In Frantz Fanon's terms, the “world” the mermaid longs to be part of is not merely the human world, but the *white* world – the world of visibility, legitimacy, and cultural belonging. In this light, the post can be read as both a celebration and a claim: Halle Bailey's Ariel is no longer on the margins; she is now *part of that world*.

Sara Ahmed's work on racialization and space offers a helpful lens here. Whiteness, she argues, functions as an orientation that determines which bodies can move freely, which are welcome, and which are seen to belong (2007, pp. 152–154). In this instance, Bailey enters and reshapes a previously white cultural space. Ariel is no longer simply a character seeking transformation from mermaid to human; she is now also a figure through whom racial belonging is negotiated in contemporary popular culture. By depicting Bailey's Ariel as worthy of admiration and artistic representation, the post reframes the mermaid as a site of empowerment and inclusion. It signals a shift in what kinds of persons are permitted to occupy the space of fairytale fantasy and be taken seriously as cultural protagonists.

Counter-movements and Whiteness Under Stress

While many posts tagged with #myariel celebrate the remake as a breakthrough in representation, others use the hashtag as a direct response to its counterpart, #notmyariel – a slogan adopted by critics who reject the casting of a Halle Bailey. In these counter-movement posts, affirmation of Bailey as Ariel is coupled with explicit resistance to the exclusionary

rhetoric of whiteness. One example is a post by a profile which reposts a still image from the teaser trailer with the caption:

ADULTS are honestly using #notmyariel in response to the casting of Halle Bailey as The Little Mermaid? Shame on you! We are so proud of Halle Bailey! She's my Ariel, she's our Ariel. We can't wait! Can I get a ticket now? (Mychal, 2022)

In this post, the speaker mobilizes a collective “we” – a community united not only by admiration for Bailey but by shared identity markers. As Sara Ahmed notes, familial language and racial likeness often work together as something that “‘extends’ the family form.” (2007, p. 154). Here, the words *my* and *our* signal more than fan enthusiasm; they assert a claim to cultural ownership rooted in racial affinity. The post continues: “#Notmyariel? Hans Christian Andersen wrote The Little Mermaid, and he was Danish. It’s a Danish fairy tale. Guess what? Black and brown people are Danish!” (Mychal, 2022) This argument reframes the debate by repositioning black and brown identities as already part of the cultural space that Andersen’s tale is assumed to represent. It also echoes Disney’s own public response to the controversy, in which the studio stated: “Let’s say Ariel, too, is Danish. Danish mermaids can be black because Danish *people* can be black.” (Griffith, 2019)

In this context, whiteness itself becomes destabilized. Ahmed describes how certain spaces – where whiteness is no longer centered or affirmed – can generate discomfort or a sense of disorientation for those accustomed to its normative presence, producing what she refers to as a form of affective “stress” (2007, p. 160). The hashtag #notmyariel, seen from this angle, can be read as a stress reaction, a defensive response to the perceived erosion of whiteness as the default setting of cultural fantasy. When whiteness is contested, so too is the cultural mobility it affords: what certain bodies are allowed to be and do.

Conclusion: Mermaid Identity and Disputed Whiteness

This essay has examined how identity, racialization, and representation are negotiated in the public reception of Disney’s 2023 live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. Through an analysis of Instagram posts tagged with #myariel and #notmyariel, it has explored how Andersen’s fairy tale becomes a site of struggle in contemporary digital culture.

Three key observations emerge from the material. First, the remake enables the mermaid to become an object within reach for non-white people, particularly in posts where

black and brown mothers witness their children identifying with a character who now resembles them – an experience that subtly reorients inherited racial expectations. Second, the reception of the film reveals a movement toward greater inclusion, in which the non-white individual becomes part of that world not only within the film’s fictional universe but in the broader cultural imagination that surrounds it. Third, the backlash expressed through #notmyariel exposes how the remake unsettles whiteness itself, producing affective reactions that register a perceived loss of normative centrality.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the broader significance of Andersen’s tales as cultural heritage: they are not static or innocent narratives but living sites of negotiation where questions of power, belonging, and visibility continue to surface. In this light, Ariel’s transformation is not merely a matter of cinematic casting but of cultural reorientation, a reimagining of who is allowed to inhabit the fairytale world and to speak from within it.

Perhaps this is why Andersen’s stories endure: because they are never finished. Each adaptation reopens them to the currents of the present, inviting new readers, viewers, and publics to claim a place “in that world.” In this sense, “The Little Mermaid” remains not only a story about longing for another realm, but a mirror held up to our own – where the struggle over who belongs, and who may be seen, continues to ripple outward.

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