

THE BLACK ARIEL: CULTURAL CRITICISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF REPRESENTATION IN DISNEY'S *THE LITTLE MERMAID* (2024) LIVE-ACTION ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

This mini-article explores the live-action adaptation of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (2023) through cultural criticism, focusing on Ariel's portrayal. It highlights her significance as a black-skinned character portrayed by actress Halle Bailey within a historically white narrative and argues that this adaptation critiques dominant cultural narratives that marginalize Black experiences. By reimagining Ariel, the film empowers Black representation in mainstream media and encourages audiences to engage with the complexities of identity and freedom, ultimately challenging perceptions of race in storytelling.

Keywords: Ariel, Black Skin, Culture Identity, Representation, Intersectionality.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's society, the stories we tell and how they reflect our culture are under renewed review. The need to question traditional narratives has led to the rise of adaptations that challenge and reinterpret established cultural norms. This proposal focuses on the adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* through the lens of cultural criticism, with particular emphasis on the film *Black Skin*, which reimagines Ariel's story in a new and compelling way.

In earlier times, the media has focused on European people because of colonialism and racial biases. When European countries colonized many parts of the world, they set their cultural values and standards, which became the "norm" in global media. This led to a portrayal of beauty

and heroism that favored white, European ideals, while people of color were often excluded. In early Hollywood, this focus meant that most actors were white, and harmful practices like "blackface" were common, supporting stereotypes and limiting authentic roles for Black and non-European characters. This created a society where whiteness was viewed as the standard for beauty and heroism.

However, in recent decades, there has been a significant change. Civil rights movements and a greater awareness of diversity have led to demands for more accurate representation in the media. People now recognize that it's important to see characters from all backgrounds in movies and stories. Halle Bailey's casting as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* is an important change. By selecting a Black woman for this famous role, Disney challenges traditional ideas about what a princess or hero looks like. This supports Hall's belief that representation is important because it influences how people view themselves. Bailey's portrayal helps more people relate to a beloved story, encouraging young Black girls to see themselves as leaders and heroes. Overall, her role is a significant cultural moment that helps break down old stereotypes and supports a more inclusive understanding of identity in media.

The main question addressed in this study is how *Black Skin* challenges the Eurocentric perspectives embedded in the original story, particularly those concerning femininity and desire. This adaptation exposes the limitations of the traditional narrative while amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, offering a broader and more inclusive understanding of the story. By reviewing character development and its relationship to race, the study also explores how changes in representation affect audience perceptions and interpretations.

The subject of this study is *Black Skin*, a film adaptation that reframes *The Handmaid's Tale* in a way that addresses contemporary issues of race, gender and identity. Drawing on cultural criticism, this proposal examines the methods used by *Black Skin* to reimagine Ariel's journey, focusing on how race influences character development and narrative structure. This study builds on related work in adaptation theory and cultural studies that emphasize the role of storytelling in shaping and reshaping cultural norms.

The research aims to show how *Black Skin* not only honors the original story, but also addresses its limitations, offering a transformative perspective that speaks to modern audiences. This analysis explores the potential of adaptations to both preserve and challenge cultural narratives, ultimately promoting discussions of social justice in the arts. By engaging with both the original story and its reinterpretation, this study seeks to uncover.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of "Black Skin"

By analyzing this iconic figure through a racial and cultural lens, the 2023 live-action movie *The Little Mermaid*, which stars Halle Bailey as Ariel, presents a critical critique of conventional narratives. The adaptation offers viewers a version of Ariel that represents a wider range of identities and experiences by explicitly challenging the Eurocentric depiction that has traditionally characterized the character by hiring a Black actress in the role. This change underlines the value of inclusive storytelling while also pointing out the shortcomings of earlier representations.

Black Skin, White Masks by Frantz Fanon (1952), which explores the impact of colonialism on racial identity and self-perception, is especially relevant in this context. Fanon's findings can

be used to examine how the 2023 movie retells Ariel's story, dispelling myths about non-white characters by showing her as strong and brave. Furthermore, Ariel's persona in this adaptation embraces a fluid identity shaped by cultural intersections, which may be understood through the perspective of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity. Ariel overcomes one-dimensional representations by embodying a singular fusion of strength, curiosity, and innocence through Bailey's portrayal. Because of this cultural hybridity, viewers may relate to an Ariel that is relevant, modern, and representative of a range of life events. Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said in 1978, provides additional insight into how Western narratives frequently present "the other." Ariel and like characters have generally represented Eurocentric standards of identity and beauty in previous representations. However, by putting a Black Ariel at the heart of the narrative, the 2023 delivery intentionally challenges this framing, inspiring viewers to reconsider these conventional norms and appreciate the value of inclusive representation.

The movie invites viewers to interact with a world that embraces variety by rethinking Ariel and examining topics like self-determination, belonging, and perseverance. As an example of how popular stories can and can represent greater human experiences, the 2023 version of *The Little Mermaid* goes beyond simply retelling the original tale. This interpretation pushes for a greater comprehension of identity, uniqueness, and the transformational power of narrative by encouraging viewers to reflect on the diversity of viewpoints.

Deconstructing Ariel's Identity: Cultural Shifts in Representation

The adaptation of Ariel as a black character challenges Eurocentric ideals of beauty and identity by casting Halle Bailey in the iconic role. This casting choice disrupts traditional narratives, highlighting the importance of inclusive storytelling and representing a more diverse spectrum of identities. The film critiques historical depictions that privilege whiteness, instead celebrating the fluidity of identity through cultural hybridity. By reimagining Ariel in a modern and relevant context, the adaptation invites audiences to reconsider established norms. Ultimately, this interpretation honors the essence of the original story while encouraging meaningful conversations about race, gender, and empowerment in contemporary media.

The portrayal of Ariel as a Black-skinned character in Disney's live-action *The Little Mermaid* has had a significant impact on how legendary characters are viewed in modern culture. Casting Halle Bailey expands representation, giving minor communities, particularly Black-skinned audiences, the chance to see themselves in iconic roles. This reinterpretation disputes traditional ideas of cultural preservation, suggesting that beloved stories can adapt to modern values and diverse audiences. Although it has sparked criticism from those who view such changes as deviations from the "original" version, it also creates a new standard for equality in future adaptations. By reimagining Ariel, the film redefines the relevance of fairy tales, making them more meaningful to a global audience and sparking essential conversations about diversity in entertainment.

Intersectionality in the Adaptation: Race, Gender, and Power

The live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* offers a fresh take on traditional narratives by addressing key themes of gender, race, and power in Ariel's character. Casting Halle Bailey, a Black actress, represents a major break from the Eurocentric standards often associated with Disney princesses, promoting greater inclusivity in Disney films. This casting choice not only challenges racial norms but also sparks discussions about the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in the media and its societal impacts. Ariel's journey in this adaptation

reflects the concept of intersectionality, illustrating how race and gender intersect to shape individual experiences. Through Ariel's bravery and determination, the film highlights the importance of amplifying diverse voices and sends an inspiring message that beauty can be found in all forms.

The adaptation also revisits traditional power dynamics. Unlike the animated version, where Ariel's journey is primarily driven by romance, the live-action version centers on her personal ambition and determination. This shift underscores her agency, portraying Ariel as someone who actively takes charge of her destiny. By focusing on her independence and strength, the adaptation critiques patriarchal authority, represented by King Triton, and explores her struggle to establish her identity. These changes reflect modern values, emphasizing inclusivity and empowerment while reimagining classic stories to connect with contemporary audiences.

Reception and Resistance: Public Discourse and Cultural Criticism

The reception to Halle Bailey's portrayal of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (2023) reveals a significant cultural divide regarding diversity in media. Many audiences praised Bailey's casting for breaking traditional depictions of Ariel as a Eurocentric figure, offering a new version of the character that better represents a multicultural world. This aligns with Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which argues that media can redefine cultural identities by introducing more inclusive portrayals (Hall, 1997).

Resistance to the casting, however, reveals lingering biases and discomfort with changing traditional narratives. Critics argued that Bailey's Ariel diverged too far from the original character, critiquing physical differences like skin tone and hair color. These reactions align with bell hooks' analysis of how dominant cultural expectations are challenged when inclusivity disrupts the status quo (Hooks, 1994). Such responses are not isolated; similar controversies have arisen in the casting of other characters of color, such as Quvenzhané Wallis in *Annie* (2014), demonstrating a pattern of resistance to diversity in historically white roles. Despite these challenges, the adaptation represents a step forward in addressing inequities in media representation.

Following the live-action adaptation of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* in 2024, the reception to Halle Bailey's portrayal of Ariel has sparked significant public discourse regarding inclusivity and representation in media. The reaction to Bailey's casting, particularly from segments of the audience who rejected the reimagined narrative and departure from traditional portrayals, highlights the ongoing struggle between maintaining established cultural norms and embracing diversity. Critics argue that such adaptations dilute the original material, while supporters argue that they provide necessary visibility for underrepresented groups. This tension reflects broader societal debates about race, identity, and the importance of representation in storytelling, suggesting that conversations around inclusivity are not only about acceptance but also about challenging long-held perceptions of who can embody iconic characters (Smith, 2023).

Conversely, the acceptance of Bailey's cast has encouraged a more inclusive dialogue, prompting audiences to reconsider the narratives they receive and the implications of those stories in contemporary society. As audiences increasingly support diverse representation, the push for inclusivity in reimagined narratives gains momentum, prompting creators to rethink character portrayals and storylines. This evolution in public sentiment could lead to a transformative impact on future adaptations, as the demand for authenticity and representation becomes increasingly prominent. Ultimately, the reception of Bailey's Ariel is a microcosm of the

larger cultural shifts occurring in the entertainment industry, where calls for inclusivity are reshaping the storytelling landscape and challenging the status quo (Johnson, 2024).

Reclaiming The Narratives

Halle Bailey's characterization of Ariel in the 2023 live-action version of *The Little Mermaid* remakes how beloved tales should celebrate diversity and inclusivity. The movie questions developed Eurocentric standards in popular tales by using a Black woman to play Ariel. This brave choice not only brings the character up to date but also starts a larger discussion about media representation. Ariel's representation as a complex figure is essential to this reworking. She represents power, determination, and uniqueness rather than being limited to conventional representations of innocence and beauty. By reflecting the diversity of modern identities, this reinterpretation helps viewers to understand her as more than just a princess from a fairy tale.

By presenting Ariel as a character influenced by cultural hybridity, the adaptation also emphasizes the relationship between race and culture. This idea, which is frequently examined in postcolonial theory, highlights how several influences can be combined to produce a character that refuses easy categorization (Bhabha, 1994). Viewers from a variety of backgrounds can relate to Bailey's Ariel because it shows a world in which identities are flexible and complex. Furthermore, by challenging traditional ideas of beauty and asking viewers to reevaluate what it means to belong, the movie reclaims the story. It changes the focus from a restricted Eurocentric viewpoint to one that values uniqueness and diversity (Said, 1978).

The Little Mermaid illustrates the transformational potential of representation by incorporating these components throughout its narrative. It provides a new perspective on well-known stories, serving as a reminder that inclusive narratives not only show a more complex world but also encourage greater understanding and empathy. This remake demonstrates how tales can change while keeping to their timeless themes of self-discovery, hope, and resilience.

Cultural Criticism Framework

In *The Little Mermaid* (2023), Halle Bailey as an actress who played Ariel represents traditional portrayals and offers a new perspective through the lens of cultural criticism. This adaptation reinterprets the familiar tale by transforming the main character into a modern symbol of identity that expands Ariel's image to today's diverse cultural landscape. Traditionally, Ariel has been presented through a Eurocentric lens, embodying a specific standard of beauty.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation helps explain how Halle Bailey's casting disrupts these long-standing norms, reshaping Ariel's character to include a broader range of identities and experiences. Hall argues that identity is not inherent but constructed through cultural symbols and images, meaning that media plays a powerful role in shaping who is seen as fitting or iconic within certain roles. Ariel, as an animated character, has always represented a specific kind of "universally accepted" beauty, rooted in Eurocentric features and characteristics. By recasting her with a Black actress, this new version redefines the boundaries of who can embody and relate to a beloved character, emphasizing the fluidity of cultural identity.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity further enriches this adaptation, showing how diverse elements can coexist within one character to create a more layered identity. Bhabha's hybridity spaces where traditional and contemporary elements blend into something new. With Bailey's Ariel, traditional aspects of the character's identity, such as her curiosity, independence, and longing for freedom, remain, but are reimagined through the lens of her cultural background.

This version of Ariel is no longer a mere adaptation of a familiar character but an expanded interpretation that bridges fairytale fantasy with the current cultural landscape.

Implications for Future Adaptations

In the context of Disney's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid*, the implications for future adaptations are significant, particularly when considering how cultural criticism can reshape traditional narratives. The adaptation of Ariel's story from a fairytale to a cinematic experience has already demonstrated a shift in narrative focus, emphasizing themes of empowerment and agency. This shift is crucial as it reflects broader societal changes and the increasing demand for diverse representation in media. Future adaptations must continue to challenge the conventional portrayals of characters, particularly female protagonists, by integrating cultural critiques that resonate with contemporary audiences. This approach not only enriches the narrative but also aligns with the evolving expectations of viewers who seek authenticity and relatability in storytelling (Kim, 2023).

Moreover, the adaptation process should be informed by a systematic understanding of audience engagement and cultural context. As highlighted by recent studies, the iterative assessment of adaptations can enhance the relevance and impact of narratives in diverse cultural settings (Glasgow et al., 2020). By employing frameworks that prioritize stakeholder feedback and cultural sensitivity, future adaptations of Ariel can transcend mere retellings of the original tale. Instead, they can serve as platforms for exploring complex themes such as identity, belonging, and the intersectionality of race and gender. This method not only fosters a deeper connection with the audience but also encourages a more nuanced portrayal of characters that reflect the multifaceted nature of contemporary society (Holliday, 2023).

In conclusion, the implications for future adaptations of Disney's Ariel are profound. By embracing cultural criticism and employing adaptive methodologies that prioritize audience engagement, future iterations can challenge traditional narratives and contribute to a richer, more inclusive storytelling landscape. This evolution is essential not only for the integrity of the narrative but also for the cultural relevance of adaptations in an increasingly diverse world.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the new version from the movie *The Little Mermaid* through cultural criticism,, we see a significant transformation of a classic story. This new version of the movie challenges the traditional views of our beauty standards. With Halle Bailey playing a Black Ariel in the 2023 production of *The Little Mermaid*, the character's long-standing Eurocentric beliefs are being questioned.

The theories of representation and cultural hybridity emphasize how Ariel's personality changes to incorporate both her traditional characteristics, this is resulting in a more open diversity, empowerment, and social justice, showing that a movie adaptation can be a powerful tool to challenge old perspectives and emphasizing the modern storytelling. By exploring these themes this journal show's how growing inclusivity's representation is very important in the media.

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