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Siren: An Allegory for the Anthropocene and Example of the Contemporary Mermaid Craze

We are in the midst of a mermaid craze. Everywhere you look—from literature to film, fashion to social media—mermaids are omnipresent. Disney's live-action *The Little Mermaid* (2023) was just the latest in a decade-long global phenomenon, evidence of which spans a tidal wave of books and films, the opening of two museums in the US claiming to be the world's first mermaid museums (both in 2021, in WA and MD), the publication of *The Penguin Book of Mermaids* (2019),[1] "mermaiding" as a growing amateur activity and entrepreneurial movement,[2] the exploding popularity of mermaid conventions ("mercons") and mermaid eco-activism.[3] Mermaids have become part of the landscape or "current" (to use Steve Mentz's linguistic reconfiguration) of contemporary culture.[4] A simple Google n-gram that graphs the dramatic increase in the word "mermaid" in published books with a tipping point around 2010 invites consideration (see fig. 1).

Mermaids have been part of human history and storytelling for millennia, but recent mermaid narratives confront and defy expectations of alabaster skin and blond hair, Christian ideals of female sexuality and heteronormative romance, and other genre conventions solidified in the wake of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837) and Disney's famous animated adaptation of it (1989). Today's mermaids are Black and Brown, queer, and aligned with Indigenous
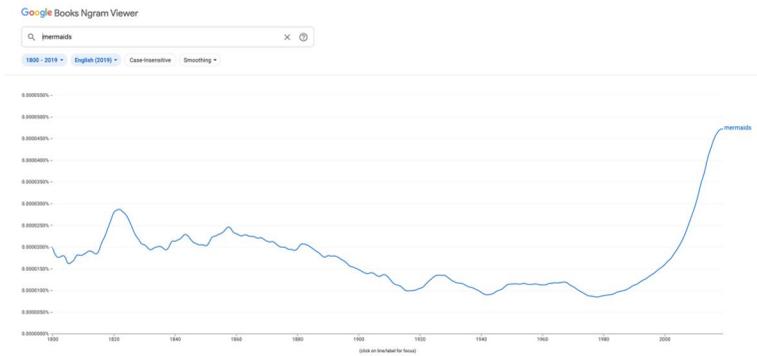
Figure 1. Google n-gram of "mermaid".

knowledge systems. The contemporary mermaid craze presents a cultural thread that connects and disrupts the historical record.

Mermaids have, in fact, always been Native, queer, and fluid.[5] To expect mermaids to be white and heteronormative (as exemplified in the racist backlash online in response to Disney's casting of Ariel in the recent *The Little Mermaid*) is an ahistorical myopia induced by anemic media archives. Synchronistic with and emerging in the wake of such social movements as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQIA civil rights, and climate change (particularly with the 2009 Copenhagen Summit and Greta Thunberg's emergence on the scene around 2018), the mermaid renaissance that erupted in the second decade of the twenty-first century can be read as a sort of reckoning. This cultural current demands critical examination, particularly in how it represents concerns about the environment.

This essay argues that contemporary mermaid fiction is an emergent literary subgenre with identifiable tropes, patterns, and formal aesthetics, and that it serves as an important site and data set for ecocriticism. These narratives are diverse and wide-ranging, spanning global readerships and multimedia formats—from novels and poetry to film and television, manga to arthouse films.[6] A concern for climate change connects these stories. Mermaids are figured as environmental refugees fleeing the polluted ocean[7] or revolutionaries organizing rebellions against corporate and militaristic oceanic incursions;[8] they possess marks of trauma from a changing climate and remind readers of alternative ecologies and ethics of care.[9] Collectively, this narrative subgenre uses mermaids to promote reflection and is a vital site for environmental imagining and poetics.

While this essay will take as its case study a recent mermaid narrative that foregrounds climate crisis as a central, even didactic point and plot element, many mermaid fictions are more subtle in their ecocritical teaching. Such works might mention climate concerns only obliquely but in ways that prove pivotal for narrative development and thus turn these mermaid tales into ecofiction. To demonstrate the prevalence of this occurrence before launching into my tutor text, I cite a few examples of mermaid novels from across an array of genres: highbrow *New York Times* lauded fiction, self-published pulp, a graphic novel, and a YA classic.

Consider the recently published *American Mermaid* (2023) by Julia Langbein, a novel that offers a sardonic critique of book publishing in the age of social media and Hollywood blockbusters, but that subtly demonstrates a concern for climate change. A novel within a novel, the diegetic fictional layer depicts a woman learning that she is really a mermaid and that her adopted father, a brilliant scientist-turned-billionaire entrepreneur, is pursuing a villainous plan to address climate change: the world will inevitably flood, he presumes, so why not develop a plan to stimulate the flood and make a fortune by saving the uber-wealthy and mermaids too? The mention of climate change is brief, but the ramifications of this ecocritical plot detail permeate the novel. Similarly, the self-published, print on demand *Born of Water: An Elemental Origins Novel* by A.L. Knorr (2016) occupies a different place on the literary spectrum but also buries its ecocritical impetus. The novel follows the teenage daughter of a mermaid, reared on land, as she comes into her own and realizes her power as a mermaid. In that euphoric moment, Targa feels exuberance that immediately shifts to pain: "My smile disappeared when I caught a whiff of diesel in the water and gagged" (237). Environmental pollution is physical, personal, and pivotal. Kat Leyh's comedic graphic novel, *Thirsty Mermaids* (2021), is about alcoholic mermaids who come ashore seeking more drink. The backdrop of environmental crisis is distilled into a single cell portraying human destruction of the ocean, but this cell is the lynchpin of the narrative for it registers the mermaids's entrance into the human world. The cell shows the mermaids as they "land," shaken and stirred, out of the "spinny" current that has taken them from deep sea to shore. Buried in the sand are the signs of human waste—a car tire, an aluminum can, a metal appliance (n.p.). Seeing the manmade trash, the ringleader exclaims, "WE! ARE! HERE!" Finally, consider an older and more canonical example, the children's book *Aquamarine* (2001), which begins with a statement about the effects of climate change: "At the Capri Beach Club, every day was hotter and hotter until the asphalt in the parking lot began to bubble" (1); "Even those families who had been coming to the beach club

for years gave up their memberships and found other ways to while away the scorching days of August" (2). A hotter climate shutters the tourist beach club, leaving two local girls to discover a mermaid in the pool. Reading collectively and comparatively with a focus on mermaids illuminates a diverse body of literature set in the Anthropocene that explores the impacts of climate change. Mermaid stories are ecofiction.

In what follows, I take seriously one example of contemporary mermaid fiction and read it as an "allegory of the Anthropocene" (Elizabeth DeLonghrey) to demonstrate how this subgenre of narrative serves the Environmental Humanities.[10] My tutor text is a streaming television show: *Siren*, from Freeform, which ran for three seasons (2018–20). This long-form narrative presents a complex ecocritical allegory that teaches viewers to look to mermaid fiction for lessons about the changing environment. This environment includes the digital ecology—media infrastructures and environmental factors that support the Internet, "the cloud," and its various material accessories.[11] The fact that *Siren* is a streaming show, digitally distributed and networked, renders it exemplary of the Web 2.0 era that supports the contemporary mermaid craze and invites a media studies critical approach.[12]

Siren

*Siren'*s season 1, episode 1 (2018) opens in the Bering Strait, at night, in the midst of a storm. A small fishing boat rocks in the tumultuous sea as fishermen pull in a net that spills an unusual load onto the deck. "Shark?" one man asks; "that ain't no shark" another responds. They grab their flashlights and spears, but the thing moves too quickly. Danger is thick, and the scene registers horror. A series of quick cuts creates a sense of confusion and crisis. Disorientation pervades. Something leaps out of the net and onto the boat, moving too quickly for the fishermen (or the camera) to capture. Chaos ensues. The viewer does not see the attack, but a fisherman goes down. Stomach sliced open, he lies bleeding and screaming on the deck. Because the viewer does not see the source of fear directly, they cannot identify it, but the sounds pervade and stimulate fear: high-pitched screeching from the monster overlays a soundtrack of low and distanced vibrations. Isabella van Elferen describes the sound in horror films as sonic "dorsality," "the unseen-uncanny" state of horror produced, she writes, through sounds that are "behind our back: the invisible, the sinister, sinister presence that just escapes our peripheral vision when we turn around" (167). *Siren'*s opening scene operates through sonic

"dorsality" to introduce a show about monsters with dorsal fins: carnivorous mermaids.

The affect shifts. An eerie moment of peace pervades. Dulcet sounds infuse the air. The injured man stops screaming while the other fishermen stand quiet, as if enchanted. One man moves to open the lid of the hold, where the monster hides. The horror sonics and anticipatory affect ratchets up. Just then, the scene is interrupted, *deus ex machina*, by bright lights overhead. A military helicopter drops fully-armed Navy Seals onboard the fishing vessel. Purportedly there to evacuate the injured fisherman, they seem more invested in the monstrous catch of the day. When the helicopter departs, it absconds with the beast and the injured fisherman, leaving the remaining men alone on deck in the dead of night. The camera pans out and stops at sea level, showing the boat as a tiny speck on the horizon. Something moves in the water at center screen—a serpentine curve disturbs the surface before a tail breaches.

Cut to Bristol Cove, a fictional town on the coast of Washington state known, in the diegetic world, as the mermaid capital of the world. Here, a different aesthetic: a beautiful summer day, "Mermaid Days" as the festival's banner suggests. On stage, children perform the mythic tale of the town's founding in the mid-nineteenth century: a fisherman, Charles Pownhall, fell in love with a mermaid. The Pownhall family is now the town's landed gentry. They occupy center stage at the festival, beaming smiles to a clapping audience as they bestow a large bronze monument of their ancestor, Charles Pownhall, standing over a mermaid who encircles his feet. A crack in the façade emerges when the Pownhall patriarch, Ted, leans in to whisper to his wheelchair-bound wife, Elaine, "Where the hell's Ben?" Ben, the son who chooses not to show up and perform settler colonialism on stage at the town festival, is out saving a seal from starvation with his girlfriend, Maddie, who works alongside him at the marine rescue center. Maddie, whose racial status as half-Black and half-Indigenous is central to the plot in this allegory of the Anthropocene, is acutely aware that Ben's family disapproves of her. Later in the episode, Elaine chides Ben for missing the parade and derides his relationship with Maddie with a racist comment: "You've always had a thing for the wild girls." Little does she know how true this statement will become, for Ben will fall in love with a mermaid. From the start, *Siren* presents an entanglement of realism, fantasy, and horror that renders inseparable the historical terrestrial politics of white, settler colonialism with the aquatic and mythic.

Figure 2. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 1, episode 2, "The Lure" [March 29, 2018] directed by Nick Copus, written by Eric Wald) with Donna in military tank.

The next episode (Season 1, episode 2) is set in a military laboratory where technicians are preparing to extract stem cells from a captive mermaid who struggles, clearly in pain (see fig. 2). Sezin Koehler, of *Black Girl Nerds* blog, writes: "She [Donna] is kept in a too-small tank, tortured, and her stem cells extracted while she is awake, in a powerful indictment of military and medical industrial complexes that have kidnapped, enslaved, and used Black bodies for their experiments since the beginning of America. And yes, Donna is a dark-skinned Black mermaid, making this a particularly powerful statement about just how Black lives matter when it comes to war and science" (n.p.) (see fig. 3). In a potential reference to Henrietta Lacks, Donna situates the televisual fantasy in real history, a foundation that *Siren* builds upon in its ecocritical allegory.

In its first two episodes, *Siren* indicts the US military complex for surveillance torture, depicts the ongoing effects of settler colonialism in social hierarchy and power structures, and shows how mermaids are part of reality. These entangled elements are tightly woven into a narrative that provides the context for the show's protagonist to appear.

A mermaid comes to land searching for her sister (Donna) and takes as her name a word she overhears while observing a child watching TV through an open window: Ryn. "Ryn" has multiple meanings, but one etymology (from Old English) is aligned with "rind" or the bark or peel of skin that can be shed—as in this character's trans-

Figure 3. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 1, episode 2, "The Lure" [March 29, 2018] directed by Nick Copus, written by Eric Wald) with Donna in military tank observed by Dr Dekar.

species transformation that sheds aquatic for human skin; it is also a Welsh word for "ruler," and Ryn is the ruler of her mermaid tribe—the strongest in battle and leadership. When Ryn first appears, she is dirty and naked, roaming the forest. One of her first encounters with a human is a violent assault. A man registers her apparent lack of language or knowledge of human civilization to mean that she is mute and dumb. He attempts to rape her, and she tears him apart, literally. Ryn is a different species, but the viewer will learn that her mermaid civilization is an evolved society with its own laws, language, and belief systems. *Siren* begins by suggesting that something is deeply wrong with a terrestrial human civilization that greets an outsider with sexual assault, and the show continues its critique by questioning the logic of Western law, ethics, and social practices. For example (in Season 2, episode 6), the Sheriff (Maddie's father) tells Ryn, "Law keeps people safe. Killing people is wrong," and Ryn responds, "Always?'" In this moment, the viewer knows that the answer to that question is "no," for the viewer might well have rooted for Ryn to kill the rapist in the first episode, just as the US government's torture of mermaids for scientific purposes also feels wrong. The show fosters these affective alignments by presenting Ryn as protagonist and hero.

Siren's three seasons follow Ryn as she assimilates into human society, but its first episode (Season 1, episode 1) casts her as outsider with stark, physical differences. After roaming land in search of her sister,

Figure 4. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 1, episode 1, "Pilot" [March 29, 2018] directed by Scott Stewart, written by Eric Wald and Dean White) showing Ryn's painful transformation from human legs back to mermaid tail.

Ryn returns to the sea, and an underwater camera at the marine rescue center captures her physical transmogrification from human to mermaid. The transformation is gory. Flesh tears apart, bones fuse, blood spurts (see fig. 4). *Siren* refuses the slow, seductive reveal so often used to cinematically depict a mermaid's change between states. Instead, *Siren* presents a visceral, realistic portrayal. The naturalism is notable for a show billed as a "fantasy drama" but actually is more aligned with realism, and this aesthetic propels *Siren's* allegory of the Anthropocene.

Upon seeing the video of Ryn's transformation, Maddie asks, "They've been out here all this time. So why are they showing up now?" The question addresses the duality of *Siren's* allegory, illuminating the show's ecocritical commentary and identifying *Siren* as exemplary of the contemporary mermaid craze. The diegetic narrative presents an answer to Maddie's query: human overfishing has caused the mermaids to hunt too close to shore, leading to their capture (as in Donna's case).

Across its narrative allegory, *Siren* uses mermaids to critique human destruction of the ocean. For example, Season 2 opens with whales beached onshore. An oil company's efforts to map the ocean floor through sonar technology results in sonic pollution that disorients the whales, causing them to swim ashore and die on the sand.[13] Merfolk similarly suffer, becoming environmental refugees on land. The show maintains that these are not one-off acts of technological malfeasance. Instead, just as Ryn's first encounter with a human is a

violent assault, *Siren* suggests metonymically more extensive, systemic corruption. The local fishing companies, led by Ben's father, are in cahoots with the US government, using sonic pollution and overfishing as intentional strategies to force mermaids to shore for capture. Operating in the vein of shows like *The Wire*, *Siren* exposes the entangled ecosystems of corrupt corporate, military, and political infrastructures that collectively produce environmental destruction. Maddie's question illuminates *Siren*'s answer within the diegesis; but her query also serves to ask, meta-critically, why the mermaid craze now? *Siren* exemplifies a larger cultural movement that uses mermaids to address climate change, rendering *Siren* decidedly of its time even though mermaids have been part of the human imaginary forever.

Humans have always believed in mermaids, or some related aquatic hybrid. Even if one sticks to Western culture, specifically the long durée of Western science and its printed history, humans have believed in merfolk longer than they have not. In *Merpeople: A Human History* (2020), Vaughn Scribner traces the presence of merpeople back to 5000 BCE Babylon and explores the evolution of mermaids in Western religion and science over centuries. Scribner argues, "Humanity's interaction with merpeople demonstrates our ongoing need for discovery as much as our attempts at regulation and classification" (9). Being part human, merfolk serve as sites for projecting and reflecting human concerns, desires, and fears; they have long been involved in the development and definition of what it means to be "human." As Cristina Bacchilega and Marie Alohalani Brown, editors of the anthology *The Penguin Book of Mermaids* (2019), write, "aquatic humanoids raise questions about what it is to be human and what lies beyond a human-centered world" (xi). Understanding that one can read human history and a history of "what it is to be human" *through* mermaids reinforces the urgency of analyzing the recent mermaid renaissance.

Maddie asks why mermaids now, and it is significant that she is the one to articulate the question upon which *Siren*'s allegory pivots, for Maddie represents an alternative to Western epistemologies and power structures. In *Siren*, the Haida people (Maddie's father's tribe), have a history of caring for mermaids. Bristol Cove's founding father, Charles Pownhall, not only fell in love with a mermaid, as the "Mermaid Days" festival celebrates, but he also had a child with her, which he declared deformed and then abandoned. The Haida took in the child and raised it in secrecy. Pownhall then slaughtered the mermaids, in a founding act of genocide largely erased from the history

books or Bristol Cove lore. The townspeople evolve to believe that mermaids are myth. But in *Siren*'s realistic world, mermaids exist, and the show identifies the Indigenous community as the truth tellers and radical outliers refusing capitulation to Western belief systems. *Siren* shares with other contemporary mermaid narratives a trope of identifying and valorizing communities that have maintained a belief in merfolk, held fast to traditional ways, and thereby fought against the destructive forces of Western science and corporate, governmental control that claim authority and ownership over the natural world.

Siren positions the First Nation Haida as an alternative source of knowledge and imaginary potential. The Haida hew to a different history, one that includes the story of mermaids and their genocide as well as a story signified by a raven feather that Maddie has tattooed on her chest. The tattoo captures Ryn's curiosity early in the show, and she delicately touches it—right after touching another signifier of race, Maddie's cornrows (Season 1, episode 2). Maddie explains that the raven feather refers to the First Nation Haida god who found the First People inside a giant clamshell. "It's just a story," Maddie tells Ryn; "Made up. Some things are real, others are just stories." Despite Maddie's words, *Siren* teaches viewers to take myths seriously. In their introduction to *The Penguin Book of Mermaids*, the editors explain, "Mermaid stories did not emerge as fairy tales—that is, as fictions—but as myths and legends" (xvi). Mermaids are part of knowledge systems for explaining the events and realities of life, nature, and history.

Maddie's poignant question—why mermaids now?—opens up the opportunity for the viewer to ask *why* some humans have rejected the possibility that mermaids exist. Why, these allegories ask, this conclusion knowing full well that 80% of the ocean remains unexplored and unmapped and that aquatic species are still being discovered?[14] It is Helen, another character in *Siren* with Indigenous roots, who understands and explains. Helen is the town outsider: the kooky lady who owns the local kitschy mermaid store. But she is also the only one to recognize Ryn as a mermaid when Ryn walks down the sidewalk in human form. Helen taps into and represents a different way of seeing and knowing. She is a vital source of ancestral and embodied knowledge. She knows the location of the ancient mermaid burial grounds; she shares a "family recipe" that lubricates Ryn's drying mermaid skin. Helen learns later that she herself has mermaid ancestry, being delineated from the hybrid offspring of Charles Pownhall and the mermaid. She is, as she states, "one-eighth, to be exact" mermaid (Season 3, episode 1)—a direct reference to the racist laws that classified racial identity and, thus, citizenry in the United States circa 1705.

The fantasy of mermaids merges with the very real history of US policy, showing *Siren* to be an allegory both of US history and of the Anthropocene. Helen tells Ben the truth, that his "family history is bloodier than you know"; she continues, "genocide, that's your legacy" (Season 1, episode 1).

Not all contemporary mermaid fiction operates in the register of historical realism and naturalism, so *Siren*'s intentional and determined aesthetic is purposeful and meaningful. It supports an extraordinary explosion of meta-critical speculation in Season 2's finale, a narrative experiment that demonstrates the power of allegory to promote critical inquiry and ethical reflexivity. When a journalist (Ian) writes a story about how the oil company is destroying marine life, including mermaids, the TV network for which he works kills the story because the oil company is a major sponsor of the network. Ian reflects, "We live in a world that's controlled by the same people who are destroying it" (Season 2, episode 6). Desiring to have his story heard, Ian kidnaps Ryn, purportedly to take her to his news network and demand that her realness be recognized. Speeding along a curvy seaside bluff, he accidently drives off the cliff and into the ocean. Ben dives into the water and saves Ian while Ryn, now transformed into a mermaid, swims away. Ian shares his story with the world, releasing video footage documenting Ryn's existence, and all hell breaks loose. In a montage full of allusions to various real, horrendous moments from World War II, Helen's storefront is tagged with graffiti identifying her as "mermaid lover" and its windows are violently broken; Bristol Cove goes under martial law with citizens confined indoors and military power exerted in full force; protests erupt globally; mercenaries scour the oceans for mermaids to sell to big pharma for big money. Canada offers asylum to mermaids and hybrids, but the US goes in the opposite direction and introduces a blood test to identify "our kind," that is, full-blooded human. In a nightmarish echo of WWII Japanese internment camps, the US starts rounding up "half-bloods," including Helen, and putting them in camps. This quick chain of events unfolds in terrifying realism because, indeed, much of it is based in real, historical events.

Then, suddenly, thirty-five minutes into the episode, the show stops and cuts back to an earlier, pivotal moment: Ben is underwater, peering into the car window at Ian, who struggles to unfasten his seatbelt and escape his watery grave. But, this time, instead of helping Ian to escape, Ben swims away. He lets Ian drown. Everything that happened before—the marital law, the internment camps, the mercenaries killing mermaids—is erased. The previous half hour of action extravaganza is shown to be an act of speculation *within* the diegetic layer of

narrative; Ben was imagining what might happen if he saved Ian's life. He (and the viewer) sees that speculative plot through to its end, and then Ben chooses a different action; he lets Ian die, and the show is left to explore an alternative reality and story path. This fascinating narrative twist turns attention to the formal practice of allegory—a form of storytelling that develops and explores simultaneous speculative possibilities. The sequence suggests nonlinearity and interactivity within a decidedly linear and non-interactive medium. *Siren* draws attention to its media format and suggests a medial aspect to its allegory.

As one might expect from a show titled *Siren*, the ancient Greek story of the Sirens from *The Odyssey* forms a foundation for this contemporary rendering. Indeed, one of the most compelling parts of the show is its depiction of sirens *as* media that transmit data-rich content in the form of a sonic output that is addictive drug, deadly weapon, and affective art. Recall how, in the show's opening scene, amidst chaos and violence onboard the fishing vessel, a dulcet song lulls the fishermen to calm and stillness. The sonic "dorsality" creeps in from the background as the sounds of haste and horror give way to soothing acoustics that enchant until the military helicopter breaks the spell.[15] Season 1 shows the siren song's power in the military lab as Dr Dekar becomes obsessed with Donna's song, which she releases from her tank of captivity in an effort to entice Dekar to release her. Season 2 explores the destructive qualities of the siren song as Ben becomes

Figure 5. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 2, episode 4, "Oil and Water", [February 14, 2019] directed by John Badham, written by Ian Sobel and Matt Morgan) of Ben listening to a recording of Ryn's siren song.

addicted to Ryn's song, listening to a recording of it on repeat with headphones, eyes dazed and glassy (see fig. 5).

Like a drug addict, he takes his hit of the song and recognizes it as a narcotic that "gets me through" and "takes the edge off" (Season 2, episode 4); he even attends a twelve-step meeting.[16] Ben's addiction to Ryn's song is so strong that his health is compromised; the song infiltrates his brain and, like a virus, causes cognitive damage. One night he takes his boat out, dives into the ocean, and nearly drowns. Ryn saves him and is shocked to learn that her song drove him to such self-destructive action: "I didn't know my song would do this." The song is no longer something that Ryn possesses. Media separate song from singer, data from medium.

Siren depicts elaborate efforts by humans to use digital technologies to extract the siren song from its embodied owner and natural, aquatic environment. For example, Season 2, episode 11 depicts military efforts to use digital technologies to break down the frequencies and components of the siren song so that it can be replicated and repurposed as a weapon. Yet, it is a mermaid, not the military, that figures out how to use media networks nefariously to broadcast the destructive siren song. The show's third and final season introduces the mermaid Tia as Ryn's counterpoint and rival for the position of merfolk leader. Tia has a different tact than Ryn: rather than collaborate with humans, Tia seeks to wipe them out. In an act of global terror, Tia broadcasts a video across television and cellular networks in which she tells the terrestrial world, "Your negligent disregard for this planet will no longer be tolerated. You were warned and now will suffer. The reckoning has come" (Season 3, episode 10). She then releases her siren song—the ancient mythic weapon that drowned Greek sailors now pulses through a broadband network and undersea cables that support it.[17] Humans fall to the ground in pain, blood flowing from their apparently burst eardrums.

The siren song has always been imagined as data-rich content, and mermaids the media that transfer it. In *Sirens: Symbols of Seduction*, Meri Lao explains that the siren song of *The Odyssey* was not about pleasure but knowledge: the sirens "offer men memory, meaning, knowledge of the world, glory, and fame" (19). Homer's sirens were not described physically in the Greek epic because it was their action, intention, and effect that was notable; they were "winged female sea entities who, by seducing man with their inescapable song, distract him from his set course" (Lao 10). The siren song has since become an adjectival phrase suggesting seduction and death, but the danger of the siren song, Lao points out, lies in its disruption of linear trajectories

and navigational routes. Linearity is a central and lauded feature of Western culture—exemplified by Darwin's theory of evolution and McLuhan's theory of media history, wherein the invention of mechanical type produces linear print culture and "alphabetic man." Recognizing the siren as an original disruptor of linear progress positions her as a threat to Western ideologies and suggests her alignment with—and symbolism of—alternative epistemologies.[18]

Across the centuries, the sirens have metamorphosed from air to aquatic animals but have retained their power as hybrid creatures with songs that compel and command. Contemporary mermaid narratives, like *Siren*, often depict human efforts to employ new media technologies to capture and harness these songs. "We think of sound waves," Lisa Yin Han writes, "as immaterial as they travel in air, but in truth they travel through all mediums, including solids and liquids, using matter to transfer vibrations" (231). Han points out that human "reliance on sound as primary interface for the ocean" (230) has had disastrous ramifications for the inhabitants of the sea. Recall the opening of *Siren*'s second season, with beached whales demonstrating the effects of sonar mapping technologies. *Siren* depicts the "sonar and sonic saturation, which," John Shiga writes, "have not raised public concern to the same extent as other aspects of the environmental crisis such as greenhouse gas emissions and deforestation" (105). *Siren* translates into visual imagery via televisual media the effects of oceanic sonic saturation. The narrative allegory illuminates how sonic media turn sound waves into inscriptions—textual interpretations of the oceanic environment. Corporations, government agencies, and other entities then read these texts, interpret them, and write history in the form of policies and plans for (or against) future oil drilling, naval and fishing policies, and more. *Siren*'s allegory of the Anthropocene suggests a feedback loop between reading the ocean through sonar technologies and writing the future of the aquatic. Mermaids serve as the medium and lynchpin for the heuristic.

An example appears at the end of Season 2, when Ryn develops a plan to treat Ben's addiction to her siren song. Episode 12 depicts Ryn, Ben, and Maddie using a military submersible to access an ancient mermaid breeding ground in the deep ocean, which is also an echo chamber containing the voices of Ryn's ancestors (see figs 6–7). This is a healing place of sound, a literal sound bath and archive of "very old sounds." The journey to the ancient site proves successful in healing Ben, but Ryn's plan also promises the future exploitation of this sonic archive by a military that now possesses its coordinates. The scene invokes Shiga's examination of Cold War submarine films that

Figure 6. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 2, episode 12 "Serenity" [June 27, 2019] directed by Steven A. Adelson, written by Elias Benavidez) of Ben, Maddie, and Ryn in a submersible entering mermaid breeding grounds.

Figure 7. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 2, episode 12 "Serenity" [June 27, 2019] directed by Steven A. Adelson, written by Elias Benavidez) of Ben, Maddie, and Ryn in a submersible entering mermaid breeding grounds.

demonstrate "new forms of military subjectivity with the potential to unleash total obliteration of human and nonhuman 'living space'" (112). *Siren* depicts an aquatic "living space" for non-terrestrials being breached by military technologies and the televisual imaginary; its depiction is also its destruction.

Capturing this fictional space on camera within both the diegetic narrative and the television show incites further incursion into deep waters. The scene operates as a siren song and an allegory of the

Anthropocene that shows how media "progress" comes at the price of environmental destruction. It does all of this within a visual medium that is only able to stream online due to underwater sea cables, heat-conducting data centers, and other environmentally-entangled media infrastructures.[19] Such is the paradox of the digital condition and the reality illuminated by *Siren'*s ecocritical allegory.

Friedrich Kittler, a pioneer of modern media theory and media archaeology, who ushered in a method of paying attention to media as a means of writing cultural history, was obsessed with the sirens. He dedicated the end of his life to locating the site of the actual siren song in order to try to capture it using digital technologies. In his books *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1985) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), Kittler made famous the concept of a media epoch, a way of understanding history based on a cultural period's predominant media technologies, especially technologies that capture and store sound. For example, he argued that the twentieth century (of computing, semiotics, and communication theory) is indebted to the phonograph: "Thanks to the phonograph, science is for the first time in possession of a machine that records noises regardless of so-called meaning" (*Gramophone* 85). This situation allows for what one, in the twenty-first century, calls "big data"—the capture and consideration of information as an entity in itself, regardless of its content and usage. Once a darling of academic theory, Kittler's work has shifted out of the limelight, but *Siren* presents an opportunity to reconsider the importance of his media approach, specifically for the Environmental Humanities and based upon an entanglement with mermaids.

Kittler's final expedition as media theorist was an attempt to use digital technologies to follow the siren song. Wolfgang Ernst describes the 2004 expedition: "an academic team from Humboldt University Berlin undertook a sound-archaeological research expedition to the Li Galli islands at the Amalfi coast of South Italy" (7). The theoretical purpose of the trip was to pursue a media archaeological approach to the sonic archive that Ernest calls "archaeoacoustics."[20] "Sirens are 'non-human' in terms of machinic or cyborg sound" (9), Ernst writes, and "the uncanniness of the monstrous Sirens corresponds with the imaginary of technology itself" (9). The Sirens are herein a form of technology, perhaps *the* first technologies of sound. They are a historical throughline shaping and symbolizing the technological imaginary from ancient to contemporary times. The archive of siren sounds depicted in *Siren'*s season 2 finale is a dream Kittler might have had— the use of contemporary media technologies to access ancient,

aquatic-based sonic archives.[21] *Siren* invites viewers to recognize the siren song as part of media history and mermaids *as* media for allegory.

What connects Kittler and *Siren* is a recognition that understanding the Anthropocene requires attention to media and mediation, media theory and archaeology. In *Wild Blue Media*, Melody Jue updates a Kittler-ian methodology to bring it to bear on an aquatic environment. Jue writes, "oceanic environments challenge some of the most ingrained and sedimented concepts in media history: interface, inscription, and database storage" (xi). These are central concepts in Kittler's work, but, as Jue shows, bringing a media studies focus to the aquatic can reorient our understanding of media and media studies. For example, Jue describes seaweed as an important element in media archaeology. Describing "kelp as archival media," she writes, "future seaweeds may offer their own snapshots or photographic negatives of climate change" ("Seaweed" 201). Seaweed records in their bodies the level of carbon emissions in the ocean at a moment in time, so by "registering the particularities of their microenvironments, then they also serve as historical witnesses to anthropogenic climate change" ("Seaweeds" 201). Thinking seaweed as media and ocean as archive renders inseparable Blue Humanities from media studies and reveals mermaids to be a perfect symbol and medium through which to explore this suture.

I end with *Siren*'s ending, the final scene from the final episode in the final season (Season 3, episode 10). After three years of visual

Figure 8. Screenshot from Siren TV (Season 3, episode 10 "The Toll of the Sea" [May 28, 2020] directed by Joe Menendez, written by Eric Wald and Emily Whitesell) of Ryn sitting on rock in the final moments of the show.

naturalism, speculative turns of narrative, and ecocritical didactics, the show concludes with a scene so decidedly uncharacteristic of its realistic aesthetic but also so very familiar to anyone with even a slight knowledge of mermaid imagery from human history and cultural media. Ryn sits atop a rock formation near shore, her entire body and tail are visible out of the water. Her torso is erect and vertical; her face turned to the viewer. She waits and watches as the viewer watches her (see fig. 8).

This poses contrasts with how Ryn has been depicted throughout *Siren*. She has never been visible in her mermaid state out of the water. When she has a tail, she is swimming forcefully, fighting with spears and sharp teeth, ferociously hunting. She never just lolls and looks, never allows the viewer to gaze voyeuristically. In this final moment, however, *Siren* gives in to expectations of mermaid fantasy cultivated through "a centuries-long process of adoption, adaptation and recycling" (Scribner 26) and recycles a visual trope from the mermaid media archive. The concluding scene offers a reflexive, meta-critical awareness that reminds the viewer how much they already know about mermaid narrative. *Siren* ends by turning attention to sirens as media forms for interpretation and makes viewers want more. This is the power of the siren song and of *Siren*, an allegory of the Anthropocene.

N O T E S

1. The collection presents a diversity of mermaid stories in English; the publisher notes that this book is the first in which "[a] third of the selections are published here in English for the first time."

2. See Strandvad, S. M., Davis, T. C., & Dunn, M, who write, "Mermaiding, we argue, exemplifies a cultural entrepreneurial activity carried out by participants outside traditional art, craft, and labor institutions" (71).

3. On mercons, see Kari Paul's article for *The Guardian*, "Inside the world's longest-running mermaid gathering: 'The first place I've truly belonged'" (May 27, 2023). https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/costume-and-culture/2023/may/27/california-mermaid-convention-longest-running. On mermaid eco-activists, see, Kaleigh Rogers' article for *Vice* on Hannah Fraser, "The Activist Mermaid" (December 25, 2015). https://www.vice.com/en/article/qkj8k5/the-activist-mermaid. For a scholarly analysis, see Sara Malou Strandvad, Tracy C. Davis & Megan Dunn (2021).

4. Steve Mentz suggests a shift in vocabulary to reflect how thinking about the Ocean inspires different perspectives and paradigms: "What if instead we redescribe the adventures of thinking as currents, as rates of flow and change? Why not emphasize movements and connections between or through difference?" (*Ocean*, xiii–xvi). Also, see, Astrida Neimanis's *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

5. See *The Penguin Book of Mermaids*.

6. To give a sense of the wide variety of contemporary mermaid texts, consider the following: horror novels such as Mira Grant's *Into the Drowning Deep* (2017), Jade Song's *Chlorine* (2023), and Cassandra Khaw's *The Salt Grows Heavy* (2023); YA novels such as Natalia Sylvester's *Breathe and Count Back from Ten* (2022), Natasha Bowen's *The Skin of the Sea* (2021), and Bethany C. Morrow's *A Song Below Water* (2020); poetry collections such as Stephanie Burt's *We Are Mermaids* (2022) and Amanda Lovelace's *the mermaid's voice returns in this one* (2022); films such as Agneska Smoczynska*'s The Lure* (Poland, 2015) and Lisa Bruhlman's *Blue My Mind* (Switzerland, 2017); short artfilms such as Emilija Skarnulyte's *Sironemelia* (2017) and Gabrielle Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (2018); the Japanese manga and anime series *One Piece*, written and illustrated by Eiichiro Oda (in particular episode 531 (2012), and many more.

7. For example, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry collection *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007), *The Mermaid* film (China, dir. Stephen Chow, 2016), and the Australian television show *Tidelands* (2018).

8. For example, Sarah Porter's *Lost Voices* YA trilogy (2011–13), Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), Rebecca Roanhorse's fantasy novel *Black Sun: Between Earth and Sky* (2021), and Maggie Tokuda-Hall's YA novel *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* (2020).

9. For example, Monique Roffey's novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020), the Brazilian television show *Invisible City* (2021-), and Matthea Harvey's mermaid poems in *If the Tabloids are True What are You?* (2014).

10. Postcolonial eco-theorist Elizabeth DeLoughrey claims that calling climate change a "crisis" is based in a "lack of engagement with postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives" (2); this lack has "shaped Anthropocene discourse to claim the *novelty* of crisis rather than being attentive to the historical *continuity* of dispossession and disaster caused by empire" (2, italics in original). Changing the data set of analysis can change the take-aways; mermaid narratives are a data set that offer such opportunity.

11. On digital media ecocriticism, see such examples as Jussi Parikka's *A Geology of Media* (U. of Minnesota Press, 2015), Tung-Hui Hu's *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (The MIT Press, 2015), and Nicole Starosielski's *Media Hot and Cold* (Duke UP, 2022).

12. Web 2.0 has been identified as a founding reason for the mermaid Craze. For example, Matthieu J. Guitton writes, "Although mermaids have existed for millennia, the merfolk community—people who have an interest

in merfolk, ranging from fans of mermaid- related aesthetic to wannabe mer-folk—has only recently emerged as a full-pledged community. One of the reasons of the success is to be found in the Internet, virtual spaces, and social media, which have been instrumental in structuring this community" (53).

13. Lisa Yin Han writes, "Whale carcasses are the forgotten companions to sonar images—inextricably limited in their shared emergence, their abstraction and alienation from the sea, and their circulation through our mediascapes" (225).

14. https://scripps.ucsd.edu/news/new-species-deep-sea-fish-discovered-costa-rica

15. The 50 second "Siren Song" by Summer Davis, made for the show and which plays throughout it, is enchanting—minimalistic, mostly two-toned stretch of breathy vocals, an almost straight tone with a lot of reverb. Deep, slow, and ethereal; it contains whale or aquatic animal sounds in the background that merge in a kind of harmony.

16. The image of Ben hooked up to media technologies, walling himself off from the world, invokes the very real situation of digital media addiction, especially in the era of screens and social media.

17. Nicole Starosielski's *The Undersea Network* (2015) shows how the Web is built upon networks of telegraph wires, physical lines of colonial politics, and argues, "Undersea fiber-optic cables are critical infrastructures that support our critical network society" (1).

18. Here I am thinking of Native Hawaiian theorist Karin Aminmoto Ingersoll's "seascape epistemology," which she describes, "Seascape epistemology dives into the ocean, splashing alternatives to the Western-dominant and linear mind-set that has led the world toward realities of mass industrialization and cultural and individual assimilation" (15).

19. See Starosielski (2015) and Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds. *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (U of Illinois P, 2015).

20. Sound requires medial context, infrastructure through which it can move and communicate. Stefan Helmreich explains that "sound is a form of energy transmitted through a medium" (222); Steven Feld introduces "acoustemology" to explore how sound is relational and requires analytical methods that "concentrate on relational listening histories" (15).

21. See Geoffrey Winthrop-Young's "Kittler's Recursions" for more on "why was the older Kittler so recursively inclined?" (4).

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