

Aquaman: a New Year Parable In Race and Ethnicity

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, JAN 12 2019

As a kid, I used to climb to my grandfather's second-story room in his gingerbread house on the islands of Massachusetts, where he hid his Marvel, DC Comics, and other classic comic books collection from the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and more recent decades. I would read, jealously, for as long as I could until I was called downstairs to more social duties. I read so many, and I was so young, that I no longer remember all of the characters who I encountered. I do remember Superman, of course, and Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Arrow, Green Lantern, a host of otherworldly women investigating outer planets, and worldly men taking care of the lost Western range, all in the midst of interwar or nuclear (depending upon decade) patriotism and concomitant anxieties. But, many of the details and the character names are lost to the netherworld of my now middle-aged imagination, floating around in a soup of superhero flights of fancy, which made up many of the most delicious of my early-childhood summer days. That is, as soon as I could read about Brer Rabbit, I was also reading about Gotham, Wonder Woman's invisible glass jet, and the beautiful range of superheroes who corrected the world whenever it went astray.

Always the straight kid, my grandfather's comics were as close to Heaven as I ever needed to get. My grandfather's comics library stood right next to his classic children's stories collection, which included first editions (just by virtue of age) of *Robin Hood*, *Treasure Island*, *The Black Stallion*, the first five books of *The Wizard of Oz* collection, and the like. After reading one or the other, I would often doze off in dreams of *Alice in Wonderland*, glass jets, archers protecting traditional forests or ultra-modern cities, and giant creatures of the deep who required the efforts of, sometimes, several of these supernatural [sic] heroes at once to send them back to their own proper worlds.

Thus, while no expert in comics or superheroes in any way, I cannot deny being something of a devotee and aficionado of the same. Based upon my own completely anecdotal experience, I think it is safe to say that comics and superheroes appeal to a wide cross-section of people.

I come, then, to *Aquaman*, that Christmas 2018 extravaganza of lights, effects, underwater worlds, campy-comic-come-to-life, and good-guy-beats-the-bad-guy fame. Many reviewers mention that it is campy and comic par excellence. Some even mention the ecological, green political message (e.g. stop polluting the oceans!) Fewer, however, have mentioned the 6-ton African forest elephant in the room: Race and Ethnicity. God forbid we talk about the obvious.

In case you have not seen the movie, spoiler alert for all text below:

Jason Momoa is cast as the son of surprise guest star, Nicole Kidman, who is pale as the moon and light as the Norwegian summer sky. Momoa's father is a beautiful man played by Temuera Morrison, a man who, according to his bio, is Scottish, Maori, and Irish. Although he looks equally much British Isles as Maori, he is not pale as the moon and light as the Norwegian summer sky. The film capitalizes on this ethnic difference silently to explain how their sun-drenchingly-steamy and heroic son, Momoa-as-Arthur-Curry (who my Scotch-Italian-Polish husband teasingly accuses me of seeing as "dreamy") came to represent both the land dwellers (of his father's kin) and the sea dwellers (of his mother's kin). Indeed, the sea dwellers of *Aquaman* are all exceedingly fair of skin and mostly of hair as well (Willem Dafoe is a dark-haired exception, and Amber Heard is a vibrant red-head), while the land dwellers tend to appear, for lack of a better word, more earthy.

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That is, the film overtly uses the (fair colored) sea dwellers and (more earthy) land dwellers as a parable on both race relations and inter-civilizational strife back in the good-old Real World. These issues of race and ethnicity may remain uncomfortable for us, which may explain why few reviewers seem to have discussed this obvious aspect of the film.

As a mixed-ethnic person myself (Irish, Dutch, Prussian, Navarra, and Philippina), I found it to be the most obvious and important aspect of the film. I think that it is rare, indeed, to have a Jason Momoa figure (of part-Hawaiian descent) embracing his Nicole Kidman mother (of English-Irish-Scottish descent) in an American film. This isn't to mention the couple played by Kidman and Morrison who are presented as nothing short of Heaven sent. This dynamic happens occasionally in more recent films, which probably set the stage and made the configuration of this film possible. Nonetheless, I believe there is a more typical history of avoiding it among main characters. This is seen especially among A-list actors and blockbuster films in Hollywood (at least since Poitier and Houghton, or Hair; for more recent examples including less clean-cut or blockbuster movies, see this link).

In this way, *Aquaman* stands out as an extraordinarily brave film, and its actors, who do a superb job in creating pure magic superhero pro-fun-dity, should be lauded for this advancement in Hollywood film. Over and above the basic biology of the film, the tensions and civilizational strife between sea and land dwellers have epic-heroic-comic morals to tell about relations between very different parts of the world, as well as coexistence, warfare, exceptional beauty in unexpected places, and the stages or optional (liminal) states (of being, and étatist) in-between. For the Middle East scholar in me, the film also includes a (delicious and) gratuitous underground Saharan desert city scene. So in my book, *Aquaman* is *all that* for 2019.

The moral of the story for me: It is not a "mixed-up, muddled-up, shook-up world" to be feared. But it is a mixed-race and mixed-ethnic world, and it is going to stay that way. Any claims or efforts to purity on any side are ultimately bound to fail.

Aquaman shows that we have come a long way and should be lauded; our discomfort with the discussion, however, suggests that we still have some work to do.

About the author:

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