

Camping Outside the Magic Kingdom's Gates: The Power of Femslash in the Disney Fandom

Kodi Maier, *University of Hull*

ABSTRACT

Walt Disney Studios has long been considered the curator and creator of the American fairy tale canon, establishing the tacit narratives that reflect the United States' unique set of values, which are then disseminated throughout the Western world. As such, the fairy tales, myths, and legends the studio chooses to animate have enormous influence in arbitrating who does and does not belong in Western society. Because Disney's canon representation of queer women in these narratives has been non-existent, many queer female fans feel they are othered, obscured, and erased in real life. Not content to simply wait for such recognition, these Disney fans have rallied together to create their own positive representation, lovingly cutting and stitching characters from Disney's animated texts to create femslash narratives that satisfy their desire to see themselves reflected in the films they love. In other words, in a society that rejects and discriminates against queer female relationships, Disney femslash fans poach Disney's animated canon in order to create a space that validates their queer identities.

KEYWORDS

Disney, Walt Disney Studios, Fandom, Femslash, Disney Femslash

Introduction

When asked about the power of representation in literature, Junot Díaz said, 'There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves' (Donohue 2009). So it is in mainstream media: those who are not cis, straight, white, or Christian are so frequently denied accurate and positive representation in film, television, and literature that they are transformed into a collective of monsters. Unwilling to passively wait for their peers to recognize their humanity, these othered groups have forged their own spaces where they can create and share content that legitimises their identities. The Disney femslash fandom, a group of fans who imagine animated Disney female characters in queer relationships, is one such space. Given fairy tales' power to define society and Disney's position as the curator/sometimes creator of those fairy tales, the poaching practices of the fandom are particularly powerful. By reworking Disney animated films and characters into fan fiction (also known as fanfic), gifs, moodboards, and other media, the Disney femslash community is able to carve out a place for themselves within Disney's Magic Kingdom and thus society at large.

Ethics, Methodology, and Limitations

This article is by no means a comprehensive survey of the entire Disney femslash fandom, which, like other fandoms, spans numerous demographics and digital platforms, including blogs, forums, fan wikis, photo and video sharing sites, file sharing sites, and social media platforms (Deller 2015 ¶ 1.3). Instead, it is meant to be a spring-board for further inquiry, employing personal interviews and participant observation to broadly sketch the motives and methods of the Disney femslash fandom.

Certain assumptions about the Disney femslash fandom are in place, namely that the group discussed self-identifies as queer and female. It is never possible to account for every member of any given fandom, especially on Tumblr where the boundaries are ‘loose and informal’ and fans ‘are part of the fandom when they feel they are’ (Deller 2015 ¶3.3 – 3.4). However, ‘qualitative scholarship [...], informal surveys, community self-definition, and [...] informal observations suggest that it is accurate to say that an overwhelming majority of active participants in femslash fandom identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer women’ (Ng and Russo 2017 ¶ 2.8). This is corroborated to some extent through interviewees’ self-identification. It is these fans’ perspective that will be discussed herein.

Although Tumblr is not the only watering hole for femslash fans, as fan activity tends to bleed across various digital platforms, primary source material was collected solely from Tumblr due to its reputation as the ‘fandom platform du jour’ (Deller 2015 ¶ 1.5). It is on Tumblr that Disney femslash fans gather to share gifs, photo edits, mood boards, headcanons (noncanonical ideas about a text that the fan nevertheless accepts as true), video edits, fan fiction, and other original works. Given the issues surrounding Tumblr as a public/private platform, consent is a crucial part of any work in Fan Studies (Jones 2015). In light of this, interviewees were located through a post on the author’s personal Tumblr: the author generated a call for participants that tagged prominent Disney femslash fandom members, which was then reblogged through a series of signal boosts. Fans who wished to discuss their practices in detail were further invited to privately message the author through Tumblr’s messaging system. All participants cited in this article have consented to be quoted and to have their Tumblr accounts referenced throughout the piece. Other primary source material was gathered through searches of the ‘Disney femslash’ tag on Tumblr between November 2015 and July 2017. In the instances where consent to share material was not explicitly given, screenshots were taken of the material with the username blacked out in order to anonymise the content and prioritise the fan’s privacy. Quoted material is edited for clarity, specifically capitalisation and punctuation.

Barred from the Magic Kingdom: Disney’s Lack of Queer Representation

According to Julie Levin Russo and Eve Ng of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, ‘femslash communities have been leaders in positioning themselves as a critical counterpublic with an investment in shifting the dominant terms of representation. This stance was an organic outgrowth of fan activity precisely because of the privileged correspondence between being queer women and transforming queer female characters, which animated an imperative to see

oneself reflected on screen' (2017 ¶ 2.6). In other words, there is an element of activism in femslash creative endeavours, with queer female fans outwardly pushing to see themselves represented on screen even as they produce the representation they crave. As Kate, a writer at *Autostraddle.com*, states, 'femslash is written by those whose identities and personal narratives are reflected in the stories themselves. [...] That queer author has two girls fall in love with each other in her story even if they're straight in the original work because two girls falling in love means something to her and to so many people like her, and it's important that she sees herself in a work of media whose canon forgets she exists. One of the great frustrations of LGBTQ media is the fact that so little of our representations end up coming from LGBTQ-identified creators, and thus we see inaccurate portrayals with limited diversity. Femslash exists because we were sick of being told we didn't exist, so we wrote ourselves into their stories' (2014).

Providing positive representation for members of the LGBTQ+ community is not solely Disney's responsibility, and indeed, media creators outside queer fandom are making strides in generating better representation. In their annual report on LGBTQ+ representation in Hollywood, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) states, 'As recent successful animated films and TV programs have shown (Oscar-nominated *Paranorman*, Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe*), LGBT people appearing in 'all-ages' programming – animated or not – is not the impossible notion it once was' (*Studio Responsibility Index* 2016, 24). Elsewhere, independent artists are turning to crowdfunding to help fund, publish, and disseminate their works. Comic anthologies like *Valor* (a collection of re-written or updated fairy tales that centres on heroic, cunning, strong, and often queer female characters) and films like *Happy Birthday, Marsha* (a movie that focuses on Marsha "Pay it No Mind" Johnson, one of the transgender activists who ignited the Stonewall Riots) all help to fill the void in mainstream media representation.

However, Disney is more than a highly influential entertainment giant. According to film scholar Sean Griffin, 'Disney consciously cornered the market on producing animated versions of fairy tales – so much so that literary critics at times have complained that Disney's version of certain fairy tales have completely supplanted the literary texts from which the films were derived' (2000, 62). It is through fairy tales and myth that individuals learn how to function in society and it is Disney who controls the American fairy tale canon. With this canon of animated fairy tales, Walt Disney Studios wields far more influence and power over modern Western culture than any other entertainment company, a fact that endows the studio with the potential to legitimise or further other minorities. Hurley corroborates this claim: 'Fairy tales [...] have an important role to play in shaping the self-image and belief system of children' (2005, 221), who 'tend to believe that Disney's version of the fairy tale is the real story rather than the "classic" version to which they may or may not have been exposed through school or home' (2005, 222). She further states, 'Not only does the Disney version provide visual images for the fairy tale it is depicting, these images and the relative value of group membership associated with the images are then translated into beliefs children hold about status in particular group membership, in relation to notions of good, bad, pretty, and ugly as reflected in the films' (2005, 222).

Given Disney's power and influence, the egregious lack of queer representation in the Magic Kingdom means LGBTQ+ individuals are effectively locked out of Western society, leaving many eager to be officially recognised in the studio's animated canon. Disney fans on Tumblr have repeatedly expressed this need for recognition from Disney, both through community-produced content and in personal interviews. The Tumblr *Walt Disney Confessions* (<http://waltdisneyconfessions.tumblr.com/>) operates much like Frank Warren's famous PostSecret project. Fans are encouraged to anonymously share their hopes, dreams, wishes, disappointments, annoyances, and other Disney-related thoughts in the 'About the Blog' section, which reads: 'Welcome to Walt Disney Confessions! Here people can confess their innermost Disney thoughts. This blog seeks to unite Disney fans and have them connect over shared experiences or feelings they may have had through Disney. Who knows, someone may be keeping the same dark secret as you' (<http://waltdisneyconfessions.tumblr.com/>). Since *Walt Disney Confessions* started in August 2011, numerous fans have confessed their desire for a lesbian or bisexual Disney princess. Indeed, one of the first confessions posted on the site simply states, 'I wish Disney would make a lesbian Disney Princess.' **[Figure 1]** Another confessor elaborates: 'I am convinced both Merida and Elsa are lesbians. Mostly because I am desperately waiting for Disney to make a lesbian princess. I want all little girls to know that they can have a happy ending. Even if theirs is with another princess' **[Figure 2]**, while yet another says, 'I wish Disney had a lesbian princess/queen. I am lesbian and it is very hard for me to relate to any of the Disney Princess movies.' **[Figure 3]** A fourth confession reads, 'Growing up bisexual, I always wished for a Disney Princess that was like me' **[Figure 4]**. While the anonymity of these confessions makes details such as gender identity, sexuality, and fandom/fannish practices impossible to know, the fact that other Tumblrs dedicated to Disney femslash reblog and/or 'like' these particular confessions shows their desires are shared, on some level, by those in the Disney femslash fandom.



Figure 1: Disney confession wishing for a lesbian princess.



Figure 2: Disney confession on Elsa's and Merida's lesbian sexuality.



Figure 3: Another Disney confession hoping for a lesbian princess.



Figure 4: A Disney confession wishing for a bisexual princess.

This desire for a queer princess in Disney's Magic Kingdom has been further echoed in personal interviews with Disney femslash fans and shippers (fans who support certain sexual or romantic character pairings, also known as 'ships'), who often attribute their participation in the fandom or their support of certain ships to this lack in representation. One bisexual fan, Sam, said, 'I'm not super involved in the fandom, per se, as I don't really create stuff but I admire all the art and the fics that are created by people inspired by LGBT princesses. I really hope they give Elsa a girlfriend in *Frozen 2* because I think it's time little LGBT girls have a romance they can look up to. I know I wish I did growing up' (Personal correspondence 30 July 2017). Femslash writer Allison takes this desire one step further, echoing Griffin and Hurley's views on Disney as the curator of Western fairy tales. According to her, 'Disney is a modern Grimm,' who heavily influences 'how these later generations see fairy tales, at least especially in the western culture' (Personal correspondence 30 July 2017). Thus, Allison enthusiastically attributed her participation in the Disney femslash fandom 'to the fact that THERE ARE NO QUEER FAIRY TALES[.] Not in mainstream culture, at least' (Personal correspondence 10 April 2017). A third anonymous individual who runs a Disney femslash Tumblr concurred, saying they 'got into Disney femslash because I'm both a lesbian and a huge Disney lover. I wanted to be able to relate more to the characters, so I looked up Disney femslash and found an entire fandom' (Personal correspondence, November 2015).

Slash and Ships: Disney Femslash and DIY Fairy Tales

Femslash, then, allows queer female Disney fans to create their own fairy tales, thus filling the lacuna of queer female representation in Disney's Magic Kingdom and, by extension, society. Sean Griffin argues that because queer individuals are often 'denied the ability to openly produce texts dealing with homosexuality (through both law and economic means),

the emergent gay and lesbian culture often [relies] on its ability to appropriate texts from the dominant heterosexual hegemony' (2000, 50). Griffin continues, 'Due to the relative lack of texts explicitly dealing with homosexuality, enjoying a text from a lesbian or gay viewpoint often requires selecting out the scene, image or section from the text that suits the individual's needs and discarding the rest' (2000, 50). Femslash takes this poaching process¹ one step further by using the isolated elements – here, the female Disney characters fans identify with or idolise – and splicing them together to create fan fiction, fan art, gif sets, fan videos, moodboards, and other media.² These works in turn result in the wholly queer Disney narratives that femslash fans crave. As one fan states, 'Crossover Disney femslash vids on YouTube are better lesbian representation than any TV show has come up with in the last, like, 10 years.' [Figure 5]



Figure 5: A Disney femslash fan comments on the quality of representation in YouTube fan videos.

Like slash fiction, Disney femslash narratives do feature sexually explicit content between characters. However, an overwhelming amount of femslash narratives focus on the dynamics of the pairing, imagining an environment in which characters can engage with one another on a deeply personal level. One anonymous interviewee, herein referred to as SW, noted that she shipped Moana from *Moana* (2016) and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) 'because they're so close in age and would have so much to talk about' (Personal correspondence 1 August 2017), i.e. Moana is the daughter of a Polynesian chieftain who leaves home to explore the ocean and Ariel is a mermaid princess who leaves home to explore the world of humans. The Ariel/Moana ship, also known as Moariel, is more recent than other pairings, but has quickly grown in popularity. In her interview, Sam stated that she supports the ship 'because the fan art [...] made me fall in love with these two young girls who both have a connection with water and also just want more than what they currently have' (Personal correspondence 30 July 2017). Other Moariel fans confirm this connection, calling the heroines 'water girlfriends' and 'ocean girlfriends', and frequently depicting the two sitting on the sand, cuddling and kissing, swimming together in the water, or exploring the ocean with Moana on her canoe and Ariel swimming next to her. [Figure 6]

¹ For an in-depth discussion on textual poaching, please see *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins, New York and London: Routledge, 2013.

² It is important to note that not every fan chooses to publicly share their works on Tumblr. Some fans create such pieces strictly for their own pleasure. More often fans participate in a certain fandom by reblogging certain posts, thereby curating and disseminating the content they support/enjoy.

i love drawing my water girlfriends

#artist on tumblr #art #drawing #doodle #fan art #disney #moana #ariel
#the little mermaid #disney princess #moariel #water girlfriends #girlfriends
#my art #popular

2,932 notes



Figure 6: An artist refers to Moariel as ‘water girlfriends’.

Other femslash ships function much in the same way. SW explained her love for ‘Belsa’ (Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* [1991] and Elsa from *Frozen* [2013]) by saying, ‘I think they’d have a lot in common – they’re both bookish introverts, old souls. They have difficult pasts that they’ve overcome. They’re both extremely smart and creative. I think Belle’s kindness and her ability to genuinely empathise with Elsa’s feelings of isolation and abnormality would allow her to move past Elsa’s defenses and build a friendship that would eventually lead to love’. This dynamic features strongly in SW’s Disney university alternate universe fanfic, with other relationships coming into play. She explained, ‘Some of the storylines follow their original films fairly closely, like *Frozen*. Instead of ice powers, of course, Elsa is trying desperately to hide her sexuality. Esmeralda, Jane, and Tarzan all end up in a polyamorous relationship. [...] Kuzco is genderfluid and in a relationship with Kronk. And then Aurora and Merida end up together – Merida is [asexual] but not [aromantic], Aurora is demisexual’ (Personal correspondence 1 August 2017).³ SW’s fic is particularly notable not just because it fills the gap in queer representation in Disney’s canon of films, but because she reimagines the majority of the Disney characters she uses as queer. In other words, Disney’s dearth is not just filled with one or two lesbian pairings but answered with an abundance of queer characters. Thus, SW uses femslash to reimagine a society where queer individuals are not merely minorities who must fight to be recognized, but are as normal and plentiful and human as their heterosexual counterparts.

Such headcanons and fanfics are powerful, but the visual work (i.e. gifs, fan videos, and moodboards) takes fanfic’s textual poaching to an entirely new level. These visuals are extraordinarily creative in their manipulation of Disney’s visual texts, splicing and editing Disney heroines and princesses from vastly different films to imagine the favoured pairing as they exchange intimate looks, ‘come hither’ smiles, and tender embraces. Gif sets are particularly popular, functioning like short comics that depict glimpses into the ship’s relationship. One Moariel gif set is comprised of two gifs: one with Ariel, who is in the water, waving at Moana on shore, and a second where Ariel turns to meet Moana’s eyes. Ariel’s ecstatic waving in the first gif and Moana’s expression of quiet yet touched surprise in the second gif create the sense that they are sharing a tender moment that either could or

³ Characters listed here feature in the following Disney animated films: Esmeralda – *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), Tarzan and Jane – *Tarzan* (1999), Kuzco and Kronk – *Emperor’s New Groove* (2000), Aurora – *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Merida – *Brave* (2012).

already has blossomed into a romantic relationship. **[Figure 7]** That Ariel and Moana are from two different films, not to mention two different animated mediums, may limit Moariel fans' visual resources, but it does not ultimately limit the power of the ship.

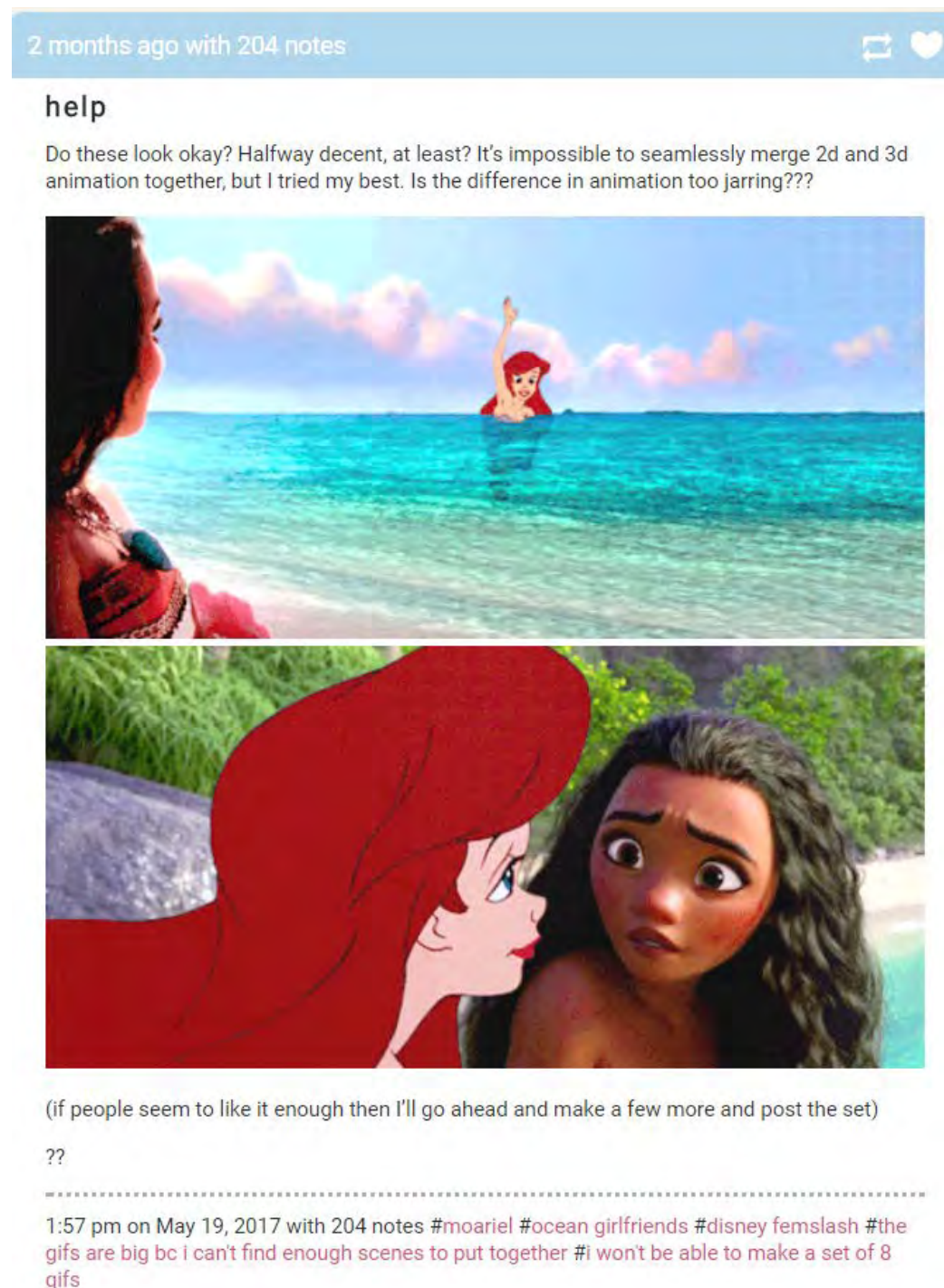



Figure 7: A Moariel gif set.

Gif sets like the Moariel example previously mentioned are common in the Disney femslash fandom, and are usually accompanied by bits of text to further elaborate on the scenes depicted. A second set of gifs on another post shows two scenes where Ariel and Princess

Kida from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) make eye contact. Like the Moariel set, the scenes are edited in such a way that their looks are quiet, shy, but still convey a sense of love and affection. These images effectively communicate the moments Ariel and Kida share, yet the creator further elaborates, fleshing out the relationship the two princesses might enjoy together. According to the creator, Kida and Ariel would be perfect for each other because '[o]ne of Ariel's strongest traits is her need to learn things. She's pretty much a self-taught amateur anthropologist', while 'Kida has lived for a very long time, she possesses knowledge gained over the course of 8 thousand+ years. Think of what she could teach Ariel!' **[Figure 8]**

9 months ago with 477 notes



please consider Kida/Ariel!! They'd be PERFECT together

- Atlantis and Atlantica are fictional aquatic places. Who's to say that they're not situated close to each other?
- Ariel frequently travels around looking for sunken ships and human artifacts that are scattered across the sea. Kida's a highly adept swimmer/athlete who explores a lot herself. It wouldn't take much for these two to accidentally stumble upon each other.
- One of Ariel's strongest traits is her need to learn things. She's pretty much a self-taught amateur anthropologist.
- Kida has lived for a very long time, she possesses knowledge gained over the course of 8 thousand+ years. Think of what she could teach Ariel! Scuttle definitely wasn't a competent teacher, but Kida would set Ariel on the right path. Kida would be the firm but patient type.
- Kida's probably the only non-mermaid that could keep up with Ariel underwater.
- They're both curious, active, fearless people. They'd go on so many adventures together!!

1:55 pm on Jul 13, 2016 with 477 notes #disney femslash #headcanons #my edits #*** #wlv

Figure 8: Ariel and Kida headcanon.

In her article on fan-made femslash videos, Julie Levin Russo notes that femslash video creators essentially don 'slash goggles', metaphoric lenses that open up 'a queer mode of viewing that interfaces with television's contradictions, excesses, gaps, and fragments', enabling fans to 'fix the myopic heteronormativity of mainstream representation' (2017 ¶ 1.2). According to Russo, vidders exist 'somewhere between the reality of simply watching (even with corrective lenses in place) and the virtual reality of an original universe, [augmenting] their source with a layer of interpretation that wouldn't be visible to the naked eye' (2017 ¶ 1.3). Vidding, then, allows femslash fans to share their queer, remixed visions of their favourite franchises; the resultant creations thus becoming the slash goggles by which their audience can experience the creator's queer vision. Russo may be discussing video-editing practices in femslash overall, but her analysis neatly maps onto the Disney femslash fandom's gif editing practices and creations. Despite Disney's insistence that these princesses and heroines remain separated – characters included in the official Disney Princess franchise do not make eye contact or interact with each other either in the merchandise or other materials (Orenstein 2006) – femslash fans freely poach and splice Disney's animated texts into brief gif sets, allowing their followers and fellow fans to more fully engage in their queer reimaginings of the Magic Kingdom. This collective vision, made tangible through gifting, arguably splinters and reconfigures Disney's reality, carving out a space where queer female pairings can thrive.

Some fans do not utilise images, clips, or characters from the Disney films. Instead, they create collages, called 'moodboards', to evoke the personalities and emotions related to their favorite ship. One such moodboard includes images of mermaids, beaches, oceans, and women with long red and blonde hair kissing to evoke the relationship Ariel might share with Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2010). **[Figure 9]** Another Tumblr user combines pictures of mermaids, the ocean, volcanos, tropical flowers, and seashells to conjure the Moariel ship. **[Figure 10]** In another moodboard, the same fan uses picturesque villages, a figure in a powder-blue cloak on a white horse, gargoyles, cathedrals, rococo ceiling art, and two women kissing to suggest Belle's relationship with Esmeralda. **[Figure 11]**



Figure 9: Ariel and Rapunzel Moodboard.

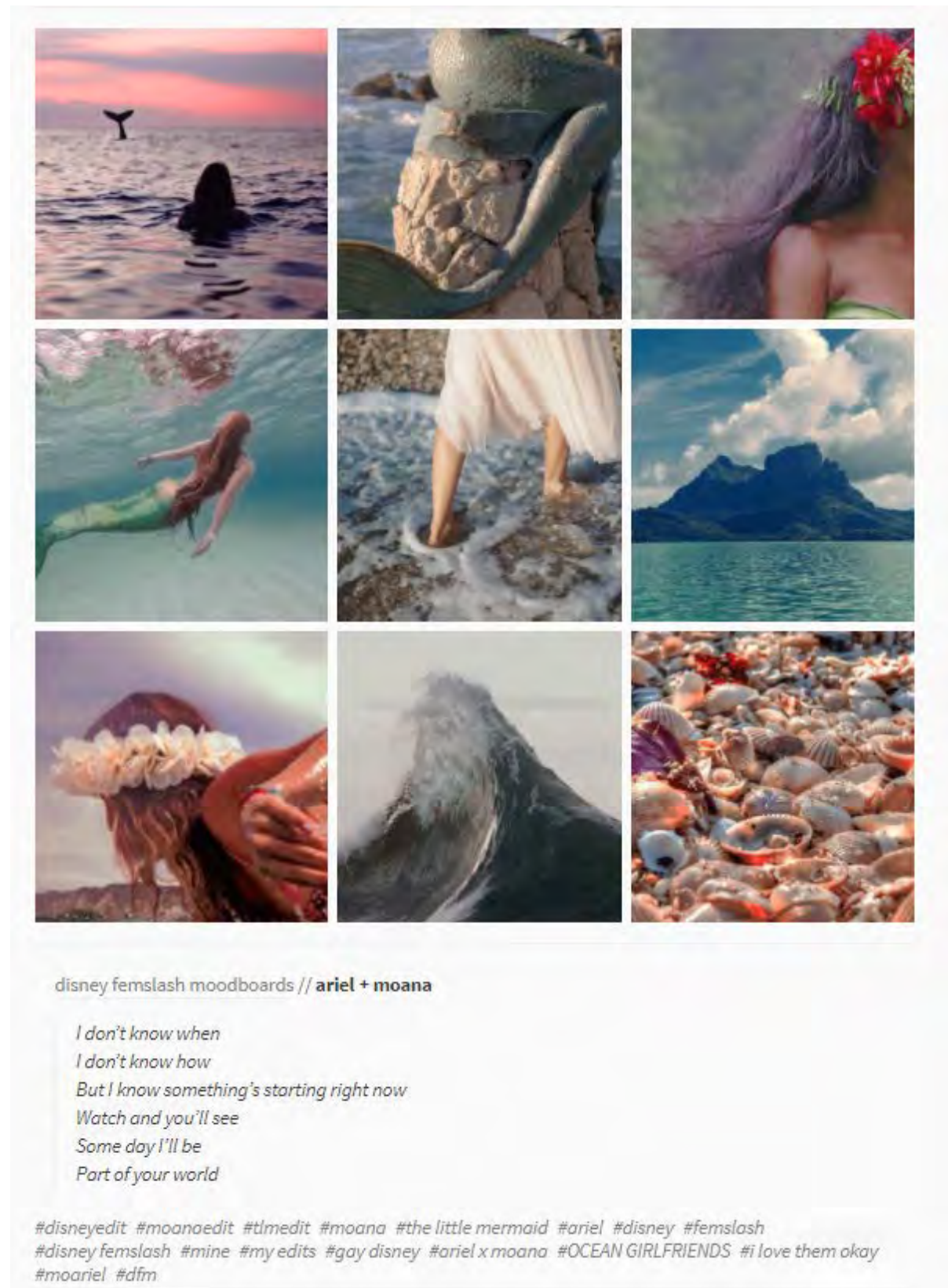


Figure 10: Moariel Moodboard.

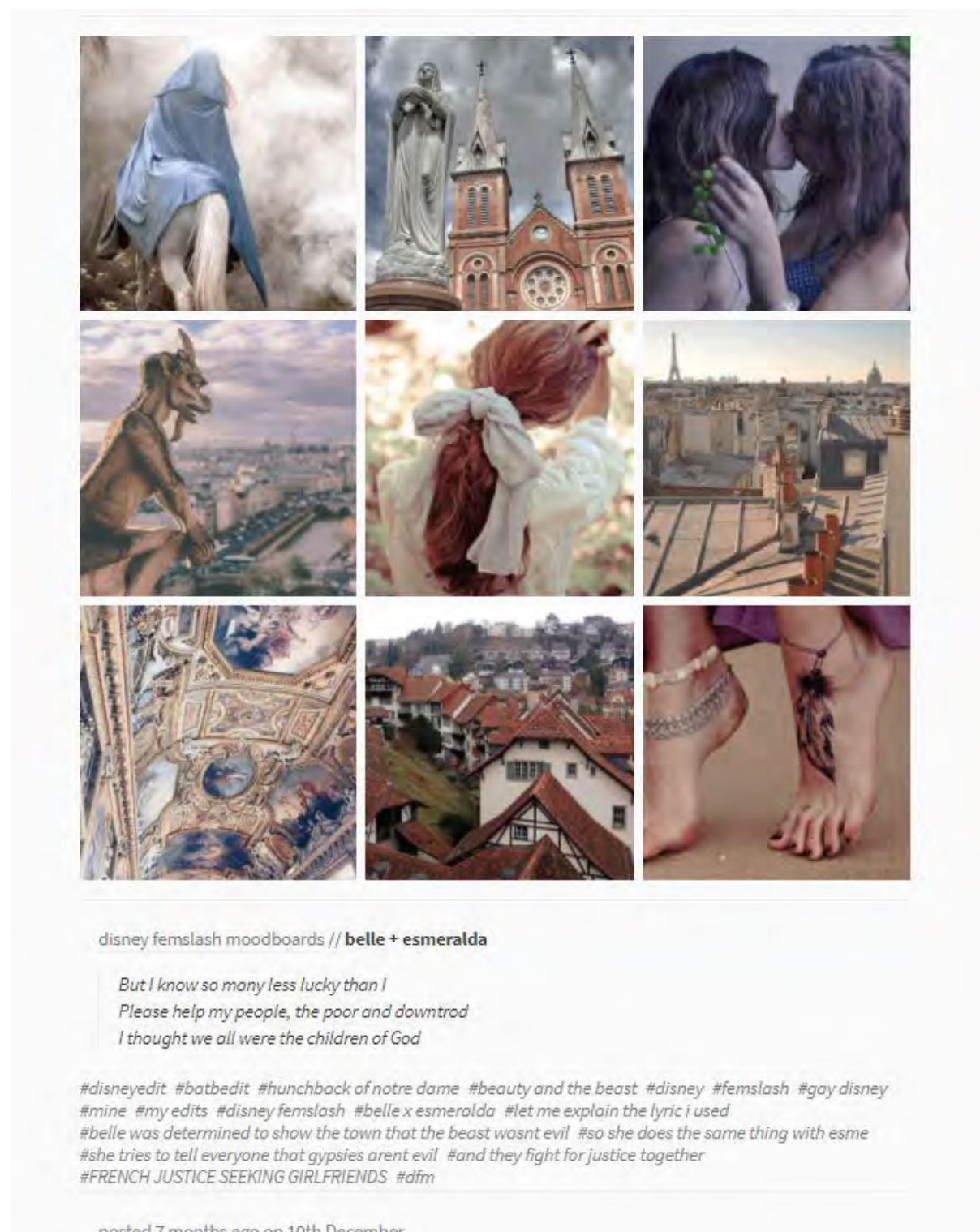


Figure 11: Belle x Esmeralda moodboard.

Each of these boards draws on different aspects of the princesses/heroines and their stories – Ariel’s ocean home, Rapunzel’s long hair, the lush, tropical islands that Moana explores, the provincial town where Belle grew up, the Notre Dame cathedral that acts as a stunning backdrop to Esmeralda’s story – to wordlessly tell stories of romance, shared interests, and

shared histories. Thus, even if the Disney femslash fandom did not have access to the source material, they would still find ways to create and share the fairy tales they crave.

Conclusion

Although Disney has yet to feature a queer female heroine in its fairy tale canon, that does not deter queer Disney femslash fans from poaching Disney texts in order to create fairy tales that legitimise their place in society. Through poaching, cutting, and splicing female characters from Disney's animated canon, these Sapphic fans are re-joining Disney's conservative silence with boundless creativity. In these new Disney fairy tales queer identities are no longer monstrous but commonplace, normal, and utterly human. So long as Walt Disney Studios remains silent on queer female representation in their animated films, the femslash fandom will continue to camp outside the Magic Kingdom's gates.

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Kodi Maier is a PhD candidate at the University of Hull, researching the Disney Princess franchise. They have contributed to a number of independent and academic publications, including the Society for Animation Studies blog and GEEKED magazine. They also recently mounted a symposium sponsored by the Society for Animation Studies on concepts of queerness within animation called “Queer/ing Animation” (www.facebook.com/queeringanimation).

Email: L.M.Maier@2013.hull.ac.uk