

Domestication in the Theater of the Monstrous: Reexamining Monster Theory

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Abstract: Scholarship on monstrosity has often focused on those beings that produce fear, terror, anxiety, and other forms of unease. However, it is clear from the semantic range of the term “monster” that the category encompasses beings who evoke a wide range of emotions. I suggest that scholars have largely displaced first-person accounts of the monstrous and those accounts which do not rely upon horror or anxiety, and I propose a three-category system to correct this displacement. These categories draw from Derrida’s notion of the domestication of the monster and Žižek’s notion of a “fantasy screen” for the monstrous. These categories encourage further research, both between categories of the monstrous and categories that would not typically fit within this descriptor.

Keywords: monster theory, Derrida, Žižek, comparison, Mothman

There are an enormous number of creatures that fit under the umbrella of the term “monster”: vampires, Slender Man, Cookie Monster, sightings of strange creatures in the sea,¹ Godzilla, and unicorns all fit within the category. However, in Monster Studies, the focus of analysis has primarily been those creatures that induce fear or disgust, and most often on those that rest comfortably within the pages of narratives and the frames of films. Yet this narrows the category to a rather small range of beings and obscures the various ways in which people interact with monstrosity.

One such exempted being is Tōfu-kozō, the Japanese *yokai* who offers tofu to passerby in the night. While the meaning of this monster is unclear – he could be an advertising mascot from the 18th century, a parody of a smallpox god, or a lost reference to a topical event² – he is never depicted as inducing fear or invoking disgust, “rather there is something a little lonely about him; he is often show walking behind people who don’t seem to want to talk with him.”³ Yet if there is no fear or disgust, much of our theory about monsters is of little use when applied to poor Tōfu-kozō. Rather, we need a more holistic approach to understand these creatures. Moreover, without such a holistic approach, we run the risk of assuming that fear and horror undergird every monster that we encounter.

This holistic approach is especially important when applying Monster Studies to a discipline in which monstrosity is as recurrent a topic as Religious Studies. What some consider angels in the service of God, Esther Hamori has addressed in her lectures and forthcoming book

¹ I am being deliberately vague here for reasons that will become apparent.

² Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 213.

³ *Ibid.*

as God's "entourage of monsters,"⁴ an entourage not unlike those that accompanied many Near Eastern divinities. While there could be objections to such an approach, it is far from unlikely that a discussion of monstrosity could illuminate beings such as the cherubim, which Ezekiel describes as having four faces, four wings, feet like a calf's, and "the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides."⁵ A similar problem is encountered when the boundaries of monstrosity "shift" under our feet: while Leviathan is quite clearly one of the most famous Biblical monsters, in Job "the first-person divine subject ('I,' 'me') merges with its third-person monstrous object ('it')."⁶ More simply, God and Leviathan blend together. The distinction between the divine and the monstrous becomes more problematic with lay comparative activities: when Mark Twain addressed the religious iconography of Benares in his *Following the Equator* as "a wild mob of nightmares" he was continuing a problematic tradition of characterizing religious art in India as filled with monsters.⁷ At the same time, one wonders if there might not be a more responsible and productive way of deploying the notion of monstrosity to evaluate "monster-gods,"⁸ such as Kali or the wrathful deities of Buddhism. Moreover, though Twain traveled thousands of miles to discover monstrous sacrality, scholars of the Middle Ages know he went too far: the Christian tradition is full of beings both sacred and monstrous. St. Christopher, both as giant Canaanite and dog-headed cynocephalus, springs to mind as a being who is both saint and monster, as do the Christian werewolves that Gerald of Wales writes of in his *Topographia Hibernica*.⁹ Even Jesus has been evaluated for his monstrous character.¹⁰ Thus, while this article might not seem particularly focused on religious issues, I believe that the theoretical construct detailed here might be especially suited for handling the complexity of monstrosity in the discipline.

To start this theoretical construction, I offer three categories of the monstrous/monster: "the Monster as Awe-ful," "the Monster as Dirt," and "the Monster as Self." In all of these categories, I take seriously the problematic notion of categorizing the monstrous around a set of phantom boxes that must be checked. Far more qualified predecessors in the field than I have pointed out that this is futile.¹¹ Rather, my thought in all three categories is informed by Žižek's

⁴ The language here is taken from an announcement of Hamori's lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary ("God's Monsters - Lecture by Dr. Esther Hamori at Fuller Theological Seminary," *Union Theological Seminary* (blog), accessed March 3, 2020, <https://utsnyc.edu/event/gods-monsters-lecture-by-dr-esther-hamori-at-fuller-theological-seminary/>), but similar language was also used at the two AAR panels I had the pleasure of attending at the 2018 and 2019 national meetings.

⁵ Ezekiel 1:6-8 (KJV)

⁶ "See Any expectation of *it* will be disappointed./One is overwhelmed even at the sight of *it*./There is no one fierce enough to rouse *it*./Who can take a stand before *me*?/Who can confront *me*? *I* will repay him!/Under all the heavens, *it* is *mine*." (Timothy Kandler Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* [New York; London: Routledge, 2002], 51; italics original).

⁷ See for instance Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁸ David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 118-119.

⁹ Leslie A. Scoduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (Jefferson, N.C.; London: McFarland & Company, 2008), 26-38.

¹⁰ Robert Mills, "Jesus as Monster," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

¹¹ Cohen points to the slippery nature of the monster's body, a body that is an "uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness: like the ghost of Hamlet, it introjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of 'pre-' into the sensory moment of 'post-,' binding one irrevocably to the other. The monster commands, 'Remember me': restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal

discussion of the monstrous, particularly how the monster should be conceived as a “a kind of fantasy screen where the multiplicity of meanings can appear and fight for hegemony.”¹² This approach foregrounds the space in which the monster appears rather than the signification of the monstrous figure. As a result, I pay careful attention to the “theater of the monstrous,” the environment in which monstrosity in each category seems to emerge and the different types of grotesque fruit that they bear.

All three of these categories are likewise informed by Derrida’s notion of monstrosity as domestication.¹³ While Derrida does not speak of monsters at length as compared to the other theorists treated here, he does propose that a monster is “that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized.... As soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it... to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster.”¹⁴

As suggested by the title, the notion of the domestication of the monstrous is an important one in this article, and I perceive each category of monstrosity as a mounting degree of domestication. This domestication is neither good nor bad, it simply places the monster within a different phantom screen (changing the viewing space, if you will). Likewise, this does not mean that these are necessarily sequential stages (i.e., that all monsters begin in the 1st and progress to the 3rd). While this may occur at times (e.g., I will be using the Mothman of Point Pleasant in my discussion of all the categories as it moves quite nicely through all three stages), there is ample evidence to suggest that new monsters can appear in each category without recourse to the others.

1ST- CATEGORY: THE MONSTER AS AWE-FUL

In contemporary culture, we are often told that monsters do not exist. This is frequently followed up with some variation of “but they do, and we are them.” This colloquialism is built on a two-fold assumption: 1) while people *used* to believe that creepy-crawly, oozy, winged, non-Euclidian, predatory things red-in-tooth-and-claw walked the world, we now know better. Instead, 2) humans beings were behind these creatures all along: they were – as the word implies – “created things” and we were the creators.¹⁵ However, if this were the case, I have to expect that we would stop *seeing* monsters. Contrary to this, enormous animals, strange fish, so-called “wild men,” and a host of stranger things yet that the average person would qualify as impossible continue to be seen with remarkable frequency for creatures that supposedly do not exist.

return” (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Preface,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], ix). Foster similarly points out the essential “mutability” of *yokai* in his work (Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008]).

¹² Slavoj Žižek, “Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears,” *October* 58 (1991): 63.

¹³ While the word “domestication” could be interpreted in either a positive or negative light, in this case I intend it in a neutral register: it is simply a useful term to mark the movement of the monster from the fringes into the home. Neither “more” nor “less” domestication is desirable.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Points Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 386.

¹⁵ E.g., “Peel back the fur, the scales, the spikes, the slime, and beneath the monstrous hide, there *we* are, always and inevitably. This is because all monsters are human creations. They exist because we create or define them as such. We therefore owe them our care and attention” (Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, “Introduction: ‘A Marvel of Monsters,’” in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare, Volume One*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel [Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018], x).

I am ultimately not interested in ruling one way or the other on the veridical content of these sightings. Instead, I am intrigued by the ways in which such sightings often appear to be “pre-monstrous.”¹⁶ That is, observers fail to ascribe the term “monster” to the being that they have sighted. These sightings appear to follow Derrida’s notion of monstrosity quite well, being both “not yet recognized” and “a composition or hybridization of already known species.”¹⁷

However, if these sightings are, at first, unrecognized as monstrous, then they can have no previous cultural formations around their appearance. Given this, the majority of our theory of monstrosity must be abandoned in such cases. These are not the “uncertain cultural bodies”¹⁸ or the “harbingers of category crisis”¹⁹ to which Cohen points, nor the ethnocentric bodies of Friedman’s Plinian races;²⁰ they cannot be constructs of “art-horror” because they have no cultural context to be registered as “impure” by a viewer²¹ nor can these monsters be “meaning machines”²² because their appearance has yet to be interpreted. There must be an irruption of the undefined to necessitate a later eruption of meaning.

I look towards the newspaper clippings of the 19th and 20th centuries for evidence of this sort of encounter.²³ Once more, I am not particularly interested in whether such creatures exist, but rather in what appear to be significant commonalities between observers’ descriptions.

These commonalities appear to be four-fold. First, following Derrida, there is a tendency among observers to describe their encounters in terms of hybridizations of already-known creatures. For example, one “G. Bachelor” describes his encounter with a creature that has “bulging blue eyes that were mild and liquid. Then there was a neck – no end of a neck – and it swayed with the wash of the waves... I’ve never seen anything like this *sea giraffe*.”²⁴ At the same time, this creature disappears below the surface of the ocean with “an odd little wail like a baby’s cry.”²⁵ Mr. Ershom, leading a party of four intrepid spelunkers, describes an encounter with a creature that roared “like an enraged bull,” was of “immense size” with a “long neck and the head of a horse without ears,” “jaws armed with long teeth,” and “a sort of flipper on each

¹⁶ See my fourth point below for a further elaboration of this trend.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Points ...*, 386.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Preface,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), ix.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6-7.

²⁰ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 26.

²¹ “I am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X, say Dracula, if and only if 1) I am in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming, etc.) which 2) has been caused by a) the thought: that Dracula is a possible being; and by the evaluative thoughts: that b) said Dracula has the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction and that c) said Dracula has the property of being impure, where 3) such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid the touch of things like Dracula” (Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 27).

²² Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

²³ More specifically, I favor articles in this analysis which quote the observations of those who had the encounter or that were first-person accounts reproduced in articles. These clippings needed to contain an attribution by the author of the monstrosity of the observed (e.g., the title includes an allusion to a monster) or the observed must later have been identified as a monster.

²⁴ “Makes Drawing of a Marine Monster,” *Upland Monitor*, November 20, 1913, p. 2. Italics mine.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

side like those of a seal or the wings of a bat.”²⁶ Matthew Strong in his letter to the *Bombay Gazette* similarly describes the sea creature that he encounters as having a head “not unlike that of a monstrous toad.”²⁷ Despite this amphibian appearance, it also has mammalian characteristics in its “coarse reddish hair [that] hung over the mouth, quite concealing it” and possible insectoid elements in the “eyeballs [that]... scintillated constantly” and were “covered with small alternate squares” of “burningly bright, copper hue.”²⁸ Despite both the captain of the ship and the newspaper declaring it a “sea-serpent,” the author instead notes that “the thing could not possibly have been a serpent; for, to raise so prodigious a length of neck above the surface a huge body below the surface was of course required.”²⁹ Or consider an encounter an English hunter had in Africa³⁰: his guides described the creature as “some sort of cross between a sea-serpent, a leopard, and a whale” while, upon seeing it, the hunter described it as “fourteen or fifteen feet long, head as big as that of a lioness but shaped or marked like a leopard, two long white fangs sticking down straight out of his upper jaw, back broad as a hippo, scaled like an armadillo, but colored and marked like a leopard, [with] a broad fin tail.”³¹ Hybridity, indeed!

Second, counter to Derrida, the responses to these encounters are not ubiquitously terrified. Rather there appears to be a strong mix of the kind of repulsion and attraction which Stephen Asma has written on.³² Viewers appear to feel fear and/or wonder at their encounter, such that I feel it necessary to label the emotion of this encounter as “awe.” For example, while the spelunkers seem to react with fear, “G. Bachelor” displays no fear of the creature and instead chooses to muse upon how it might have come to be.³³ Matthew Strong instead reports a confusing sense of both fear and wonder at the same time: “At first, I turned to call out to others to look on with me; but, before a cry could pass my lips, a second feeling of *selfish pleasure* that I alone saw that *fearful* thing seized me, and I turned my eyes again to the sea and kept them fixed there... I had been so absorbed in the *pleasing pain* of looking at the thing that I had quite forgotten the other people on board.”³⁴

Third, all of these encounters occur in spaces to which humankind is non-native. The deep jungle, open waters, the pitch dark of a cave – those “dark corners of the Earth” that Increase Mather claimed demons frequented. While for many these may be intuitively fearful situations, this cannot necessarily be said to be the common denominator: after all, there are groups of people who occupy all of these spaces to such an extent that suggesting humankind

²⁶ “Thrilling Time in a Dark Cave,” *The Bastrop Advertiser*, January 16, 1909, p. 5.

²⁷ Presumably, the use of the term “monstrous” here has to do with the size of the head rather than the head of a “monster toad.” “The Great Sea-Serpent,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1876, sec. p. 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Given the time frame, there is most certainly an imperial or colonial context that frames an English hunter encountering a monster in Africa. However, given the similarity of description between native guides and hunter (though, no doubt, coming from the hunter’s account overall) and the similarity of description between the hunter’s use of hybridity and the other texts surveyed, this colonial context does not appear to change overly the theater of the monstrous in this initial category (though it certainly would in the second and third).

³¹ “What Would St. George Do?,” *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, April 7, 1910, p. 6.

³² See for instance, Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and “Monsters on the Brain: An Evolutionary Epistemology of Horror,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2014): 941–68.

³³ “I am inclined to think myself that the wreck of the Titanic has something to do with the presence of this strange creature in water where nothing of the kind has ever been noticed before. Is it making food of the dead bodies below?” (“Makes Drawing of a Marine Monster,” *Upland Monitor*, November 20, 1913, p. 2).

³⁴ “The Great Sea-Serpent,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1876, p. 7. Italics mine.

always fears these locales would be ethnocentric. Instead, these are the spaces in which movements and senses are meaningfully compromised: the very capacities that we use to interact with and navigate the world are inhibited.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly considering the Derrida material, *none of the viewers address their monster as a monster*. That is, while the authors of the articles make the attribution (“Makes Drawing of a Marine Monster. Second Officer of the Steamship *Corinthian* Describes Fifty-Foot Sea Serpent”; “Thrilling Time in Dark Cave. Members of Exploring Party Encounter Strange Beast Which Attacks Them. Like Prehistoric Monster”; “The Great Sea-Serpent. The Fabled Monster Reappears”; “What Would St. George Do? African Hunter Face to Face with Monster Unknown to This Day Scientists”), the witnesses only reflect on the perceived hybridity of the things which they saw. In fact, Matthew Strong, when told by the captain that they had seen the fabled “sea serpent,” rejected this categorization, instead saying “the thing could not possibly have been a serpent.”³⁵ Similarly, Mr. Ershom seems to reject monstrous attribution as well when he states, “Whether the animal seen by us was one of the prehistoric monsters, some of which, it is asserted, were seen in the far north last summer, is a puzzle to us.”³⁶

I now come to my linking narrative: the so-called Mothman of Point Pleasant. While the Mothman would later rise to fame in John Keel’s 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies* (and opposite Richard Gere in the 2002 film of the same name), the first sighting of the Mothman was reported in the *Point Pleasant Register* on 11/16/1966 in the article “Couples See Man-Sized Bird...Creature...Something.”³⁷

Just like the encounters previously discussed, the first sighting of the Mothman conforms to the four traits laid out. The observers describe the object of their encounter by its marked hybridity: “It was a bird...or something. It definitely wasn’t a flying saucer.... It was like a man with wings... maybe what you would visualize as an angel.”³⁸ While the initial response of the observers is fear (“I’m a hard guy to scare...but last night I was for getting out of there”), this fear later gives way to wonder in the desire to find the creature again (“Are they going back out to look for the creature? ‘Yes,’ Mallette said, ‘this afternoon and again tonight.’”).³⁹ The encounter similarly occurred in the non-native spaces to which I referred previously: the “TNT area” referred to in the article is within the 3,655-acre McClintic Wildlife Management area, with 1,775 acres of that being mixed hardwood forest, in which the abandoned, unlit bunkers of the TNT area sit. The time of the encounter was listed at “about midnight.”⁴⁰ Finally, the observers reject the category of the monster for their encounter: “‘It was like a man with wings,’ Mallette said. ‘It wasn’t like anything you’d see on TV or in a monster movie.’”⁴¹ Similarly, “It was an animal but nothing like I’ve seen before.”⁴²

In this first category of monstrosity, then, the monster simply shows (*monstrare*) itself. There does not seem to be evidence to me of immediate attribution of cultural or social content, prodigious meaning, or internalized grave warnings or threats. Rather, our first response to the

³⁵ “The Great Sea-Serpent,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1876, p. 7.

³⁶ “Thrilling Time in a Dark Cave,” *The Bastrop Advertiser*, January 16, 1909, p. 5.

³⁷ “Couples See Man-Sized Bird...Creature...Something,” *Point Pleasant Register*, November 1966, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* Though not part of the original article, the label “monster” is swiftly applied to the creature, e.g., in Roger Bennett’s “Monster No Joke for Those Who Saw It,” *The Athens Messenger*, November 18, 1966, p. 1.

monstrous seems to me to be playful: a zoological “Rubik’s Cube” with an “aura of mystery”⁴³ presents itself, patterned with a confusing array of familiar colors in bewildering variety and the viewer sets about trying to make it conform to recognizable patterns or creatively imagines why it might not.

There are two benefits to this category. First, it opens the possibility of reassessing archival and first-person experiences of the monstrous in a new way, both those that are labeled as monstrous by the viewer and those that are not. For example, although the word “monster” is never used to describe the creatures later identified as cherubim in the first chapter of Ezekiel, I would argue that the same hybridity and awe can be seen in the passage as I have found in the newspaper articles above.

The second is more speculative. If the reaction to such encounters turns out to be relatively uniform across time periods and cultures, it would allow scholars to track which such encounters are coded as “monstrous” and which are not. Doing so would allow us to begin to develop theories on why such encounters might be coded as monstrous and how this changes temporally and culturally.

2ND- CATEGORY: THE MONSTER AS DIRT

The second category of monstrosity, The Monster as Dirt, is much more well-trod territory. It is these monsters that are most often represented in media of all ages and cultures, monsters that previous scholarship has rightly pointed out are representative of a society’s fears, dissonance, and undesired elements. These are the monsters of Cohen’s work, harbingers of category crisis molded from cultural phenomena that dwell at the gates of difference and police the boundaries of the possible.⁴⁴ They are the “skin shows” of Halberstam that reveal the “deviant sexuality and genderings”⁴⁵ of the modern Gothic monster; the alienation from Greco-Roman culture that produces the “monstrous races” in Friedman’s work⁴⁶; and the creatures that “structured the enslavement of African Americans, constructed notions of crime and deviance, and provided mental fodder for the culture wars of the contemporary period”⁴⁷ for Poole. In point of fact, the notion of monsters as representations of societal fears and discomforts is so widely known and has been so successful that it would be silly to attempt to revise the concept entirely.

Instead, I wish to offer two additional observations. First, while I believe it is useful to consider monsters as the products of culture, I find it even more useful to consider them products of dealing with dirt.⁴⁸ That is, monsters either analogously stand in for dirt or they symbolically

⁴³ Ruth Waterhouse, “Beowulf as Palimpsest,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 28.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25.

⁴⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 4.

⁴⁶ See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), xvi.

⁴⁸ This is a reference to Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002). I am not the first to make this connection between Mary Douglas’ work and monstrosity. For instance, Cohen acknowledges his indebtedness in fn. 37 of his “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”; Beal seems to be drawing on Douglas when he writes “They represent *the outside that has gotten inside*,

point towards dirt,⁴⁹ and I believe that the distinction between these two states is important. When monsters analogously stand in for dirt, we might consider them “bogeymen”; they warn, *monere*, by showing themselves. Here we might locate both Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, with intimations of the British fear of reverse colonization and loss of empire⁵⁰ and the perceived pollution of Jewish heritage,⁵¹ as well as Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), where one of the most salient fears of the 90’s, HIV/AIDS, plays out in all its sexual, blood-drenched, intravenous glory.⁵² Similarly, we might add Lycaon’s lycanthropic transformation – a mask for the greatest Greek monster, the tyrant – from Plato⁵³ and Ovid⁵⁴; as well as the threat of “the homosexual” in Waggner’s film *The Wolf Man* (1941).⁵⁵

When monsters symbolically point towards dirt, we might consider them “prodigies”⁵⁶; they warn by pointing towards that which they represent. That is, there is nothing inherently threatening about the “Papal Ass” or the “Monk-Calf” discussed so extensively by Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon; rather they are symbols whose interpretation points to the fact that dirt has invaded God’s Church.⁵⁷ Similarly, the “winged monster” and colt with a man’s face of which Ambrose Paré writes, testify to the “wrath of God” at the war between Pope Julius II and King Louis XII and the war between the Florentines and the Pisans.⁵⁸

While the distinction between the two might at first seem unnecessary, it is an essential one for outlining this particular theater of the monstrous. Bogeymen are “mobile” dirt: they threaten to invade the nomic universe and defile it. Thus the primary emotion that they engender is fear: the presence of the monster suggests a possible upending of reality, a transformation of the safety and order of the “home” into danger and lawlessness.⁵⁹ Yet, this threat is also avoidable: the monster can be killed, evaded, or stymied, and any of these outcomes likely result

the beyond-the-pale that, much to our horror, has gotten into the pale” (Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 4; italics mine); and Carroll’s concept of “art-horror” relies upon the notion of “impurity” (Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 31-32).

⁴⁹ Alternatively, this could be thought of in Berger and Luckman’s concept of a nomic universe. In this case, monsters represent a threat to the nomic order of the universe, metaphorical manifestations of disorder meant to eradicate the desired, ordered state.

⁵⁰ See Stephen D. Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: ‘Dracula’ and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990): 621–45.

⁵¹ See especially Judith Halberstam, “Technologies of Monstrosity: Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula,’” *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 3 (1993): 333–52; Jeffrey Weinstock, “Circumcising Dracula,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 12, no. 1 (45) (2001): 90–102; and Sara Libby Robinson, “Blood Will Tell: Anti-Semitism and Vampires in British Popular Culture, 1875-1914,” *GOLEM: Journal of Religion and Monsters* 3, no. 1 (2009): 16–27.

⁵² Frank Rich, “The New Blood Culture,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1992, sec. 9.

⁵³ Plato, *Plato: “The Republic,”* ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 279-80.

⁵⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1960), 8-11.

⁵⁵ Robert Spadoni, “Old Times in Werewolf of London,” *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 4 (2011): 3–20.

⁵⁶ From the Latin *prodigium* – a sign, portent, or omen.

⁵⁷ See for instance Arnold Davidson, “The Horror of Monsters,” in *The Boundaries of Humanity: Humans, Animals, Machines*, ed. James John Sheehan and Morton Sosna (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 37-40; Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Surekha Davies, “The Unlucky, the Bad and the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle (Burlington, N.Y.: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 49–75.

⁵⁸ Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L. Pallister (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5-7.

⁵⁹ Here I am partially invoking Beal’s discussion of “at-homeness” (Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 4-5).

in a symbolic return to order.⁶⁰ The bogeyman also need not be a “known” thing: even when the dirt cannot be identified, the monster is still effective.⁶¹

Prodigies, on the other hand, invert many of the bogeyman elements. The prodigy has no mobility, because it requires none: the threat that the prodigy points to must have *already* invaded the nomic universe. If this were not the case, then the prodigy could not be identified as a signifier. Similarly, this means that the threat to the nomic order, the dirt, that the prodigy points to must always be a “known” thing. Given that the prodigy is both known and represents a realized threat to order, it is more difficult for a prodigy to engender fear; instead the prodigy most often invokes wonder.

In both cases, it must be remembered that the individual human reaction to dirt is not always overwhelming disgust and avoidance: presented with the same disorder, some will react with revulsion and horror while others will not be bothered. Douglas signals this range of individual human reaction to disorder when she notes, “There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” and that she is “personally rather tolerant of disorder.”⁶² Instead, individual human beings negotiate their identity through tension between a complete lack of dirt and being totally mired within it; what one’s society identifies as dirt informs but does not necessarily limit one’s individual human reaction. Thus, this identification of monsters with dirt does not preclude being aroused by or desiring the monster.⁶³ As Cohen suggests, the giant in medieval England, “...signifies those dangerous excesses of the flesh that the process of masculine embodiment produces in order to forbid; he functions at the same time to celebrate the pleasures of the body, to indulge in wine and food and sex.”⁶⁴

Finally, I turn to the Mothman of Point Pleasant once more as both an example of this model and an example of elision from the first category of monstrosity to the second. Picking up the story where we left off, the wider national press began to spread the original report, individuals within the area claimed to see the creature, and others came from far and wide to attempt to catch a glimpse of the phenomenon.⁶⁵ At this point, the “Bird... Creature... Something” has been sufficiently domesticated that it has garnered the title of “monster”⁶⁶ and acquired another mark of domestication as well: its name.⁶⁷ From here, the monster is interpreted as *both* a bogeyman and a prodigy by different groups. On the one hand, the Mothman can function as bogeyman, and folklorist Jan Brunvand recorded several anecdotal narratives in

⁶⁰ It is this return to order that the dying Quincy Morris points to when he remarks “‘Now God be thanked that all has not been in vain! See! the snow is not more stainless than her forehead! The curse has passed away!’” (Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. A. N. Wilson [Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], 377-78).

⁶¹ I am reminded of when I teach post-9/11 films how surprised many of my students are to see the connections between their favorite zombie films and terrorism. For more on this link, see Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), esp. chapter 7, “They Won’t Stay Dead: The Ghosts, Zombies, and Vampires of 9/11.”

⁶² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

⁶³ I would suggest that arousal is limited to 2nd and 3rd category monstrosity. Desire and arousal ultimately exist within a framework of anticipation. If one is unable to anticipate (per 1st category), one is unable to desire.

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.

⁶⁵ “Everyone was now seeing *Mothman* or the ‘Bird,’ or so it seemed. Sightings were reported in Mason, Lincoln, Logan, Kanawha, and Nicholas counties. People were traveling for hundreds of miles to sit in the cold TNT area all night, hoping to glimpse the creature” (John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* [New York: Tor Trade, 2013], 82).

⁶⁶ See footnote 42.

⁶⁷ The earliest reference I have found is Pat Siler, “Mason Countians Hunt ‘Moth Man,’” *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, November 17, 1966.

which the Mothman supposedly dive-bombed the cars of teenagers parked in romantic, out-of-the-way spots or was formed from an accident in a chemical plant.⁶⁸ On the other hand, there are many who connect the Mothman with the Silver Bridge tragedy that occurred on December 15, 1967 in which 46 people were killed.⁶⁹ In this sense, the Mothman serves as a prodigy for the deaths that occurred after it was sighted.

The transition of the Mothman from the first to second category appears to me largely as a change of screens in the theater of the monstrous. While the initial sighting of “something” occurs in the non-native spaces previously discussed, the encounter with the Mothman that quickly becomes common is through a mediated social space: the newspaper. This brings crowds of people to attempt to have encounters with the creature and, based upon how often the newspapers of the time address the topic, creates conversations about the creature. Now, human beings are meaning-making machines, a conclusion that is foregone in Religious Studies and equally so in areas such as Semiotics, Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, and so on. To frame this within the previous discussion, human beings appear to crave a nomic universe, a home where dirt, if not absent, is at least controllable. Given this, we can read the attempted encounters with the Mothman and the conversations surrounding the creature as a search that attempted to classify the being as part of the nomic universe or as the dirt that need necessarily be discarded from it. Regardless of whether it stands as bogeyman or prodigy, the theater of the monstrous for the second category is the non-native social spaces of a community, the outside of the ordered, nomic universe. This classification of the monster leads to further domestication, labeling and parsing the unknown so that our fear and wonder can be more tightly-controlled.⁷⁰

The benefits of this category are primarily comparative in nature. By contextualizing monsters specifically as manifestations of dirt and anomie, the category invites comparison between monstrous and non-monstrous topics. Rather than monsters simply being compared with other monsters, monstrosity can be integrated into discussions of such topics as ritual purity,

⁶⁸ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Baby Train: And Other Lusty Urban Legends* (New York; London: WW Norton & Company, 1993). 98-100. The first clearly indicates that the monster is a bogeyman for the dirt of premarital/underage sexual activity. Brunvand takes it as a modification of the “The Boyfriend’s Death” urban legend. In the latter, the notion of monsters being created by the technological hubris of humankind is not new either: consider Godzilla, the popular bogeyman for nuclear energy (see for instance Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle, *Japan’s Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaiju Cinema* [Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2018]).

⁶⁹ For example, two of the most widely known writers on the subject, reporter John Keel and cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, suggest that there is a connection between the Silver Bridge disaster and the Mothman’s appearance. Keel (to my knowledge) never connects them directly, but his opening to the final chapter of *The Mothman Prophecies* is telling: “Thirteen months to the day (November 15, 1966-December 15, 1967) the Year of the Garuda came to an end. Like some evil specter of death, *Mothman* and the UFOs had focused national attention on quiet little Point Pleasant and lured scores of reporters and investigators like myself to the Ohio River valley. When the Silver Bridge died of old age many of these same reporters returned once again to the village to revisit old friends and to share the pain of that tragic Christmas” (John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* [New York: Tor Trade, 2013], 286). I might further suggest that the title invites such a connection: what are the “Prophecies” if not the supposed foreknowledge of the Silver Bridge disaster and its attendant predictions, and from where do they emerge if not the “Mothman”? Similarly, Loren Coleman in his book *Mothman: Evil Incarnate* connects the event and the creature in the first paragraph of his introduction: “*You do know about Mothman, don’t you?* This book assumes a basic familiarity with the large, mysterious, flying creature seen in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1966-1967 – a remarkable series of events that culminated with the collapse of the Silver Bridge, which killed 46 people” (Loren Coleman, *Mothman: Evil Incarnate*, Kindle [New York: Cosimo Books, 2017], Introduction, location 51; italics author’s).

⁷⁰ This impulse to order is discussed in Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 9-10.

sexual proscriptions, and dietary laws (dirt) as well as religious values, norms, and social constructs (anomie). Effectively, we can begin asking questions such as “In what way is monstrosity like X?” where “X” need not have monstrous content.

These questions have already begun to be asked within the field, but they tend to be posed in an idle fashion or not to be taken farther than the initial comparison. For instance, in his seminal *Religion and Its Monsters*, Beal notes that “monsters bring on a limit experience that is akin in many respects to religious experience, an experience of being on the edge of certainty and security, drawn toward and repulsed by the *monstrum tremendum*.”⁷¹ To reconfigure using the above: In what way is monstrosity or an encounter with monstrosity like a religious/mystical experience? Not only would this question make for an interesting article or book, but it also broadens the context of the monster to allow it to inform more traditional categories in the field of Religious Studies (and potentially, other disciplines as well).

3RD- CATEGORY: THE MONSTER AS SELF

And yet, monsters need not be only strange oddities emerging from the water, dripping hybridity and brine, nor only the dirt that we attempt to discard, the anomic blips within the nomic universe that we crave. As David Gilmore argues, monsters are “sources of identification and awe as well as of horror, and they serve also as vehicles for the expiation of guilt as well as aggression.... We have to address this issue of dualism, of emotive ambivalence, in which the monster stands for both the victim and the victimizer.”⁷²

I would take this one step further: in the third category, The Monster as Self, we can do away with negative associations of the monster entirely. While awe and our search for “at-homeness” can account for many monsters, the fact is that we sometimes identify deeply with the monster; we open the door and invite them in for a spell. Here we might place the growing community of individuals who identify as “Therianthropes”⁷³ and “Otherkin”⁷⁴; the various individuals and societies around the globe that classify themselves as vampires, either “sanguinary” or “psychic”⁷⁵; and even Robin Morgan’s 1972 feminist poem which encouraged women to see themselves as the titular “Monster.”⁷⁶ Clearly, monsters can be on the inside looking out just as much as on the outside looking in. The theater of the monstrous in this last category is the *native* social spaces of a community and the thresholds that exist between subcommunities.

I argue that this kind of identification is embraced when domestication is great enough that the monster no longer constitutes or points to dirt entirely (or, in some cases, never did). This often comes about from a restructuring of the nomic universe.⁷⁷ No longer is the monster

⁷¹ Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 195.

⁷² Gilmore, *Monsters*, 4-5.

⁷³ Venetia Robertson, “The Beast Within: Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 3 (2013): 7–30.

⁷⁴ Jay Johnston, “Vampirism, Lycanthropy, and Otherkin,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 412–23.

⁷⁵ Joseph P. Laycock, *Vampires Today: The Truth about Modern Vampirism* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2009).

⁷⁶ Robin Morgan, *Monster: Poems by Robin Morgan* (New York: Random House, 1972), 85-6.

⁷⁷ For example, the unicorn continues to be a popular monster in the contemporary period even though the dirt represented by the phallic horn has been all but forgotten. Similarly, I do not believe that members of the

entirely the Other or the Outsider: instead, the monster is a liminal figure, a liminality that allows it to slip between category distinctions like safe-unsafe, healthy-unhealthy, normal-abnormal, Self-Other, and so on.⁷⁸ Individuals or communities that seek to renegotiate their own social boundaries are thus able to identify with the liminal figure of the monster to accomplish this end. By adopting monstrous guise, individuals or communities give license to themselves and others to reformulate the way they are thought about, both personally and in relation to other socio-cultural structures. The hybridity of the monster becomes the hybridity of the group.

I return to the example of the Mothman of Point Pleasant to present two examples of this identification. The first example is a commodification of the monstrous: the town of Point Pleasant, WV has appropriated the Mothman as both an attraction and mascot of sorts. In 2001, the Point Pleasant Chamber of Commerce issued a Christmas ornament with a painted Mothman, an odd development given the “direct association between the Christmas-time collapse of the Silver Bridge and Mothman.”⁷⁹ This invocation of the monster in its prodigious role may have helped the community to “play” with the tragedy and achieve some measure of catharsis. It is equally possible that the town was seeking to preemptively capitalize on upcoming fame: *The Mothman Prophecies* (Pellington 2002) was released in January of the following year. Regardless of which (or both), the town quickly developed an association with its “resident” monster: the Point Pleasant “Annual Mothman Festival” began in 2002 and is still being held as of the time of this writing, the iconic 12 foot-tall statue of the creature (which interestingly enough looks nothing like the creature was described) by Bob Roach in 2003, and the Mothman Museum and Research Center opened in 2005. On some level, Mothman *is* Point Pleasant.

The second example is deeper than simple commodification. The Mothman has recently become one of the faces of the LGBTQ+ movement. In fact, a search on Google for “Mothman LGBTQ+” yields a deluge of monstrous images – well, sort of: there’s a “chibi” Mothman wrapped in a pride flag; a cartoon Mothman sharing a milkshake with the Jersey devil; an image of Mothman in a pink, white, and blue sweater that reads “Support Trans Kids;” a vinyl sticker/button produced on Etsy that reads simply “Mothman is Gay,” and many others. Commenting on this trend, John Paul Brammer writes that “Where I’m from, a small town in the middle of nowhere, the gay man was the bogeyman. He was constantly waiting to prey upon the hapless straights in their locker rooms, salivating at the prospect of converting them to the gay dark side with his bite.”⁸⁰ Brammer later draws a connection between his feelings of isolation

“worldwide mermaid community” (“Mermaid Magazine: About,” accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.mermaidmagazine.com/about/>) belong because they have an interest in being perceived “sexually or economically threatening” (Tara E. Pedersen, *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* [Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015], 15). Likewise, many born with handicaps that would once have caused the likes of Ambrose Pare to brand them “monsters” or P. T. Barnum as “freaks” can justifiably anticipate that modern Americans will not think of or address them as either (see section VI of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* [New York: NYU Press, 1996], which addresses the relocation of the latter theme).

⁷⁸ For instance, one has to assume that when individuals wear T-shirts proudly proclaiming “I am a Mermaid” that they are not thinking of the eponymous creature in the horror film *The Mermaid: Lake of the Dead* (Podgaevsky and Fantina 2018). Rather, the monster is evincing this same kind of liminal slippage, in that it can simultaneously be both benevolent Self and threatening Other (likely, Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* [1989] has something to do with this).

⁷⁹ Loren Coleman, *Mothman: Evil Incarnate*, Kindle (New York: Cosimo Books, 2017), Chapter 6, location 500.

⁸⁰ John Paul Brammer, “How Did A Bunch Of Mythical Monsters Become Queer Icons?,” BuzzFeed News, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jpbrammer/how-did-a-bunch-of-mythical-monsters-become-queer-icons>.

and persecution and the treatment of various monsters. He goes on to suggest that queer people draw strength from these monstrous associations.

This strength is not acquired through a simple commodification of the monstrous but rather emerges out of the depiction of queer individuals in monstrous roles (and vice versa). The root of this monstrosity begins in gothic literature, a medium that frequently conjoins the homoerotic and the monstrous.⁸¹ Harry Benshoff notes that the threads of the homoerotic in gothic literature are woven into the fabric of horror films in America. These films often constructed their villains and monsters around queer archetypes and styled their protagonists as heteronormative couples. Thus, the monster queer is depicted as a threat to the heterosexual patriarchal continuance of society by threatening “proper” reproduction.⁸² This changes in the late 60s as “the signifier ‘monster’” splits into two opposing ideas: “a traditional one which continued to posit the monster as a threat to the moral order of society, and another which saw the monster becoming increasingly domesticated.”⁸³ Focusing on this latter idea, shows such as *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* offered positive familial representations, albeit couched within a more “traditional” family structure. This domestication was somewhat reversed in the 90s as increased visibility of queer communities and panic over HIV/AIDS resulted in increasing backlash from conservative religious circles.⁸⁴

On some level, the images of Mothman and other cryptids continue the domestication that the 60s introduced with *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*. First, many of the images or slogans place cryptids in committed, romantic relationships either with one another or with the creator (e.g., Mothman sharing a milkshake with the Jersey Devil, the Babadook and Pennywise the Clown holding hands or sharing a kiss, the slogan “Nessie is my girlfriend”) or as singular maternal figures (especially, the Flatwoods “Momster”). Inasmuch as the domestic space in America is constituted around a committed, romantic relationship and these domestic spaces are often coded as maternal, these images refigure this space as a queer one. In effect, it performs the same domestication the aforementioned shows did in the 60s without relying upon “traditional” family values and ideologies, relying on the liminality of monstrosity to queer these roles.

These cryptids also share in the non-threatening monstrosity that *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* created. The overwhelming emotion that these images and slogans suggest (and if I am any indication, inspire) is happiness, a notable problem for theories of monsters that rely exclusively on fear and horror. Instead, these depictions represent *both* fear and wonder of Mothman as implicitly ridiculous and unwarranted. In turn, by identifying Mothman as queer, the fear and wonder that some people associate with members of the queer community becomes equally ridiculous and unwarranted. As an author for the site *Autostraddle*, “the world’s most

⁸¹ See for instance Christopher Craft, “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” *Representations*, no. 8 (1984): 107–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928560>; George E. Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); William Hughes and Andrew Smith, eds., *Queering the Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁸² It is interesting to note that Frank Franzetta’s cover art for John Keel’s *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975) seems to have been influenced by this trend in horror films as well. In the painting, a lithe, butterfly-winged Mothman menaces an attractive, heterosexual couple. While one might expect that the “Mothman” would code male, the positioning of its legs is most often mirrored by female characters in Franzetta’s work (e.g., his artworks “From Dusk til Dawn,” “A Princess of Mars,” “At the Earth’s Core”) while male characters are depicted in poses that suggest action or stability (e.g., “Day of Wrath,” “Fire and Ice,” and “Dark Kingdom”).

⁸³ Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 173.

⁸⁴ Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 237–38.

popular lesbian website,”⁸⁵ writes, “there’s a subversion in taking something unknown and feared and making it gentle and protective. In taking that which is labeled monstrous and naming it lovable.”⁸⁶

This subversive liminality is not only located in the LGBTQ+ community’s reconfiguration of Mothman and other cryptids but in other “monstrous” communities as well. For example, Venetia Robertson notes that “as animal-humans, Therianthropes are living contradictions: their identity is fragmented and liminal, but this is exactly the point.”⁸⁷ It is this fragmentary and liminal nature that allows them to “construct their identities as direct descendants of other threshold dwellers: tribal shamans, magic-workers, and superhuman warriors, who fully embodied the power of animals in the mythical past.”⁸⁸ Joseph Laycock seems to signal this move as well, writing that vampire communities are not only busy renegotiating their own identities but in some cases also as “energy manipulators” rather than “parasites,” a process of liminal renegotiation that he compares to the autistic community’s “neurodiversity movement.”⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted to articulate a framework to understand three different types of monstrosity, particularly with regard to domestication and the theater of the monstrous. In the first category, The Monster as Awe-ful, I argued that individuals who see creatures later identified as monsters do not typify their encounters as monstrous (i.e., the encounter is premonstrous), even to the point of denying the attribution of others. Instead of monstrosity, they stress the hybridity of their encounter and the awe (fear and/or wonder) that they feel. This appears to be most frequently set within a physical space in which humankind is non-native (but not necessarily a fear-invoking space). The second category, The Monster as Dirt, takes place within the non-native social spaces of the community, and the monster functions as either an allegory for the ruin of the nomic universe (bogyman) or a sign that said universe has already been compromised (prodigy). In the case of bogeymen, the key emotion is fear; in the case of prodigies, wonder.⁹⁰ The final category, The Monster as Self, takes place in the native social spaces of a community and the thresholds that exist between subcommunities. As monsters shed dirt (or are labeled as monsters apart from dirt) they figuratively approach the boundaries of the community. When the monster becomes the Self, these boundaries have become permeable enough that the monster can become part of the nomic universe. By identifying with the monster, those who might be excluded from the nomic universe (i.e., those perceived by the occupiers as “dirty” or “anomic”) can benefit from similarly permeable boundaries, allowing them to restructure their social identities and relationship to those understood as “normal” within the

⁸⁵ “What Is Autostraddle?,” Autostraddle, January 19, 2012, <https://www.autostraddle.com/about/>. Somewhat tellingly for the monstrous theme, this “About” page contains an image of a unicorn with a butch haircut and thick-frame glasses shaking hands with two humans wearing royal headwear.

⁸⁶ Sam Wall, “Nessie Is My Girlfriend: What Is It With Queer People and Cryptids?,” Autostraddle, May 24, 2018, <https://www.autostraddle.com/nessie-is-my-girlfriend-what-is-it-with-queer-people-and-cryptids-420335/>.

⁸⁷ Venetia Robertson, “The Beast Within: Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 3 (2013): 24.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Joseph P. Laycock, *Vampires Today: The Truth about Modern Vampirism* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2009), 164.

⁹⁰ Once more, arousal could be a factor in either emotion.

universe. The monster is at this stage entirely domestic, allowing members of the community to organize their identity around the monster rather than in opposition to it.

In all three cases, I used the Mothman of Point Pleasant as both an example of each stage and to illustrate the way in which monsters could occupy all three categories. In the first category, the creature is simply a “something” spotted by four people in a pitch-black forest. As newspapers pick up the story, the creature slips from the non-native physical space of the forest into the non-native social space of a media firestorm. The creature is named (and thereby domesticated), and people attempt to force encounters with it. As the conversation around the Mothman grows, narratives begin to build: that the Mothman attacks the cars of necking teenagers (bogyman) and that it was the prophetic herald of the Silver Bridge accident (prodigy). Decades later, the dirt of the incident has dissipated enough that the Point Pleasant community begins to celebrate the Mothman, and its (perhaps by now, his) fame reaches the point where the Mothman (along with several other “cryptids”) can be appropriated to “demonstrify” members of the LGBTQ+ community and construct domestic spaces as queer ones.

I think this is likely only the first step in a larger process of recognizing liminal monstrosity that theorists to this point have largely avoided. Acknowledging that monstrosity can not only engage fear and anxiety, but a wide variety of emotional responses, prevents researchers from leaping to conclusions about the content of the monstrous. And maybe, just maybe, it will cause someone to give Tōfu-kozō, that poor, lonely tofu boy, his moment in the spotlight.

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