



The Journal of Gods and Monsters

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Editors' Note

Welcome to another issue of *The Journal of Gods and Monsters*. We trust that you'll find plenty in this issue to unsettle the boundaries between the sacred and the monstrous.

As editors, one of the things that drew us to this topic was the wide variety of ways in which deities and monsters intersect, overlap, and help define each other, all while complicating any sense of stable boundaries or identities. As most who have studied religion know, the things we worship and the things we are afraid of are often difficult to distinguish from one another. This means that questions of Gods and Monsters can be found in a wide range of disciplines, over an abundance of texts, and in times both ancient and modern. Not only do these explorations question the boundaries between Gods and Monsters, but they also destabilize boundaries between academic disciplines, literary genres, and even so-called high and low culture.

But in the midst of this bewildering range of diverse topics, there are also fascinating thematic connections that keep bubbling to the surface. The three articles in this issue come from very different corners of the scholarly world: Matthew Goff's essay on the Enochic traditions, Steven Engler's study of the Brazilian religion Umbanda, and Gerardo Rodríguez-Galarza's exploration of how close attention to monsters can help unravel what the author refers to as "the colonialism of time." Even though they might seem to belong in very different journals – perhaps journals on the topics of Second Temple Jewish literature, religious studies, and postcolonial theory - these articles are brought together through the lens of monsters, and through the attention to what we can learn by analyzing the figure of the monster (and the narrative in which it appears) through a variety of lenses.

Perhaps most importantly, these articles pay attention to the myriad ways in which the figure of the monster announces a rupture in conventional thought, an anxiety which cannot be captured through traditional semantics – and which escape confinement by traditional modes of theological thinking. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has noted, the monster always escapes; in these three essays, that escape is something akin to Ricoeur’s “surplus of meaning,” an escape from an interpretation that can be exhausted through explanatory modes of thought. In essence, the monster calls to the places where intellectual understandings – of texts, of historical events, of religious practices, of the oppressive forces of colonialism – fall short. The monster begs us to interpret it, and through this act to come at least a few steps closer towards understanding the system that the monster inhabits.

--The Editors



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The Semantic Reduction of Spirits and Monsters

Steven Engler
Mount Royal University

Abstract: This article explores the semantics of spirits and monsters with reference to the Brazilian spirit-incorporation religion of Umbanda (and secondarily to the monster studies literature). Semantics is the study of meaning. The most common, and common-sense, view of meaning roots it in reference, in representation, in signification, in how words match up with things. This article argues that an alternative semantic theory – seeing meaning in interpretation rather than representation – has greater value for making sense of spirits, monsters and gods. The article first characterizes these competing theories of meaning, then discusses problems with the representational assumptions of monster studies, and finally proposes the concept of “semantic reduction” as a tool for interpreting Umbanda’s spirits (and by extension, monsters and gods). This concept notes how attempts to interpret spirits soon run into the expected, the constrained, the pre-established, the scripted. The speech and actions of spirits are semantically reduced because their meanings are constrained and delimited: the semantic networks that constitute these meanings are bound by the religion’s ritual, doctrinal, narrative, institutional and material frames. Making sense of spirits, monsters, and gods is no different than making sense of human beings in “normal” contexts, except for the additional methodological challenge of learning to take account of the former’s unusual contexts.

Keywords: Brazil, meaning, monster theory, monsters, semantic theory, spirits, Umbanda

During hundreds of hours patiently waiting to talk to spirits in Umbanda rituals, I have had lots of time to think about what they *mean*.¹ I have wondered if it matters whether those spirits *truly* exist. I have wondered whether Umbandists are *really* talking about something else when they talk about spirits. I have wondered what, if anything, the rituals *express*, seeing as they can’t *refer* to anything. These questions never got me anywhere. They are dead ends because of what they assume about the nature of meaning. They assume that “what spirits/monsters *mean*” is synonymous with “what spirits *represent*” or “what spirit-talk *refers to*.” That can seem obvious, even undeniable. We get by in our day-to-day lives by assuming that meaning is rooted in reference, in representation, in signification, in how words match up with things – just as we can get by if we assume that the sun orbits the Earth. But there is another way to think about meaning, a view that takes account of reference while moving beyond it.

This article argues that this alternative semantic theory – seeing meaning in terms of interpretation rather than representation or reference – turns out to be extremely helpful for making

¹ The first version of this article was presented in 2019 as part of the Study of Religion, Monsters, and the Monstrous Seminar at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego. Thanks to the organizers, participants and attendees for the valuable conversations. Thanks to *JGM*’s anonymous reviewers for helpful comments, especially the second, who commented on both drafts. Mike Heyes made some very helpful additional comments. Thanks, as always, to my friend, colleague and frequent writing partner, Mark Gardiner. Any errors of interpretation are mine. The article draws on two separate research projects (with ethics approval from Mount Royal University and the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo) during five years spent in Brazil, on and off, since 2005. The primary focus was Umbanda. Participant-observation and interviews were also conducted in rituals and with members of Kardecism, Quimbanda, Candomblé, popular and esoteric Catholicism and the Neo-Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

sense of spirits, monsters and gods. Philosophers draw subtle, technical distinctions between theories of different types. As a scholar of religion/s, I am interested in a basic decision that has already had direct positive impact on my research. I propose that we shift our ground, asking not what spirits, monsters and gods are, but *how* “spirit,” “monster” and “god(s)” come to have meaning. This draws our attention to the contexts within which those beings (real or not) present themselves.

The article first points to problems that arise from seeing meaning as a function of what words refer to and argues for the value of an alternative approach to meaning. It then notes that the monster studies literature implicitly presumes representationism and that this raises problems. Finally, it looks at Umbanda’s spirits, in order to propose the value of a novel concept – *semantic reduction* – that emerged from my research on, and my conversations with, these spirits. The basic idea of this concept is that the narrative, ritual, institutional, doctrinal, material and other contexts of our encounters with spirits (and monsters) constrain the range of viable interpretations of what they say and do.

TWO VIEWS OF MEANING

In everyday life, we tend to use two different ways to determine what words mean: one representational and one interpretational. These are not different types of meaning, but we use different, overlapping tools for interpreting the words and actions of others. Both ways are common-sense approaches to meaning, but we tend to default to the first. I suggest that the second is more useful for talking about spirits and monsters.²

In the case of objects or situations that are directly perceptible to our senses, we match what people say to what we can see, hear, etc. If someone says that it is raining, that a bowl of soup has too much salt, or that a certain rock is surprisingly light, we can look, taste or lift to see if those statements are true or not. This approach is representational, because the operating assumption is that words represent or point to objects or states of affairs in the real world. In terms of method, this leaves us matching a model we build from words to a model we build from our own bodily experience. On this view, truth is a matter of correspondence between word and world. This view is common sensical because we so commonly use our senses: even scholars spend most of their time dealing with the physical world and empirical objects. If I say that you are currently reading these words on a screen, how might you determine if that is true or not?

² This article draws on ideas from semantic theory. This is radically different from semiotics. (The latter presumes representationism. It discusses relations between signs and their referents, signifier and signified.) Philosophers of language frame the distinction between these two senses of meaning using complex arguments. The key philosophical sources are the work of W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson and Robert Brandom. The interpretational view of meaning is becoming increasingly important in the study of religion/s: see G. Scott Davis, “Donald Davidson, Anomalous Monism and the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 19, no. 3–4 (2007): 200–231; G. Scott Davis, *Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, “Ten Implications of Semantic Holism for Theories of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 4 (2010): 283–92, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006810X531067>; Nancy K. Frankenberry, “The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2014): 195–210, <https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjtheophil.35.3.0195>; Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler, *In the Beginning Was the Network: Semantics and the Study of Religion* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, forthcoming); Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler, “Semantics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Terry F. Godlove, *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Terry F. Godlove, *Kant and the Meaning of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Hans H. Penner, “Holistic Analysis: Conjectures and Refutations,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1994): 977–96; Hans H. Penner, “Why Does Semantics Matter?,” in *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 473–506; and Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

But what do we do when people speak of things that are less directly accessible to our senses? How do we interpret abstract concepts like justice, atonement, social structuration, *mana* or phenomenological reduction? How do we make sense of talk about (at least usually) non-empirical objects like gods, spirits and monsters? How do we match words to what they point to in such cases? There is no doubt that we do succeed in interpreting such talk, easily or with difficulty, rightly or wrongly, amiably or contentiously. It is not so obvious that we do this by matching words to world.

It is useful to start not theoretically but with an example of how we actually work with words. What steps do we go through in order, for example, to understand René Girard's meaning of 'sacred' in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977)? Do we try to find the thing that the word "sacred" points to or represents? Do we look up "sacred" in a dictionary? Do we introspect our own phenomenological experience of the sacred? No, we start by reading Girard's book and seeing how he uses the word.³ He tells us that the "sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over ... [us] increases or seems to increase in proportion to ... [our] effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these ... stands human violence.... Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred."⁴ This remains a very general view of what "sacred" represents, just the tip of an iceberg. To understand what Girard means by "sacred" we must read more. He connects "sacred" to "violence." So we must draw upon an understanding of "violence," which requires understanding other concepts, like "sacrifice," "purification" and "mimesis," not to mention less abstract and more observable things like physical harm, pain and death. We understand Girard's use of 'sacred' by tracing his uses of the word in relation to other words. (The book's index or word searches in a digital version turn out to be very helpful.) If we want to go further, we might read Girard's other books, or we might read Freud and Bataille. These practices – close textual work and the reading more widely to broaden the context of interpretation – are business as usual for scholars and students. We interpret words through their relations to a network of others to which they happen to be related in particular contexts: sentences, paragraphs, chapter, books, oeuvres.

In the case of abstract concepts and non-empirical objects – neither directly perceptible to our senses – we interpret words in their contexts. If someone says that a certain economic system is unjust or that a spirit sits on their left shoulder during rituals, our primary concern is to figure out what they mean, to interpret what they are saying. This approach is interpretational, because the operating assumption is that words mean what they mean through contextualized relationships with other words: we need to actively interpret, not passively perceive relations between words and world. In terms of method, this leaves us triangulating what others say, what we know, and whatever pieces of context, shared understandings, or furniture in the world allow us to get on with the task of *making sense*. On this view, meaning is no more and no less than what we end up with through processes of interpretation.

This view is common sensical because this is also what we do. This is how we make sense of what we study during fieldwork. This is how we try to make sense of discussions with a stranger in a café, when we have no mutual fluency in any language. It is easy to point to the sugar dispenser (using representational methods). It is harder to talk about politics (using interpretational methods). In this sense, from a methodological perspective, representational techniques fall under the more general category of interpretational ones. When pointing works, we use it; when we have nothing convenient to point to, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the more flexible work of interpretation.

Scholars of religion/s and anthropologists are familiar with part of this debate from Talal Asad's critique of Clifford Geertz. Asad takes Geertz to task in part for his representational

³ Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "Semantics and the Sacred," *Religion* 47, no. 4 (2017): 634–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1362784>.

⁴ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 31.

assumptions: Geertz links culture patterns to “extrinsic” and “external” phenomena; and he insists that “religion must affirm something specific about the nature of reality.”⁵ Asad criticizes that perspective, but he offers no clear alternative. His agenda leads him elsewhere: to a Foucauldian genealogical critique of the relation between knowledge and power in historical category formation. This offers an important answer to the question of the *nature* of categories, but it says little about the *method* of making sense of them. Timothy Fitzgerald – who extended Asad’s critique in this methodological direction – gets into trouble because of his own representational assumptions: his genealogical critique stands on interpretationist ground, but he does not recognize this.⁶ Like Fitzgerald, Asad seems to implicitly hold an interpretationist stance on meaning, with its emphasis on tracing semantic connections: “we might say ... that a symbol is not an object or event that serves to carry a meaning but a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together”; “religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order.”⁷

An interpretationist view of meaning resonates with Asad’s and Fitzgerald’s agenda, given its focus on exploring contingent semantic connections in specific historical and cultural contexts. Asad does not address the problem of interpretive methodology, which is what matters most to ethnographers or scholars of religion/s as they try to make sense of their fieldwork. Asad’s critiques give us another reason to consider not relying solely on representational views, but it does not give us any methodological tips on how to do this. Interpretationism does.

These two views of meaning are not obscure philosophical constructs. (Well, they are that too, but the practical points do not require immersion in philosophical debates.) They motivate and frame techniques that we use each day to make sense of our world and other people. The key point is that representationism raises problems for the study of religion/s and for monster studies. How do we make sense of what people mean when their words allegedly *refer* to invisible, supra-empirical or non-existent things? How can we double-check that their pictures (and our pictures of theirs) truly represent the world, when they are talking about invisible or non-existent things? As the following section argues, this view creates more problems than it is worth.

By contrast, interpretationism holds that meaning is what results from making sense of intentional behavior. On this view, the word-world relation is decentered: it is just one possible methodological path in the work of making sense of what others say and do. As a result, emphasis shifts from “*what in the world* are these people talking about?” to “what is my best path to interpreting what they are trying to say?” This view has two important implications. First, meaningful language is not limited to being descriptive or being labelled as true or false. Prayers, magical spells, metaphors, etc. can all be analyzed as meaningful. For interpretationists, meaning shifts away from what words describe, represent or refer to, in order to focus on how interpreters understand what speakers are doing. Second, meaningfulness extends beyond language to action. We interpret, understand and explain human words and actions in the same basic way, including ritual, whether accompanied by words or not.

In sum, both representational and interpretational views of meaning make common-sense, but one is more useful for talking about monsters. Religious people spend a lot of time talking about unusual or non-empirical entities, like gods, monsters and spirits. From a representationalist point of view, there is a profound gulf between empirical talk about things we can see, hear and feel – like animals, songs or a pat on the back – and religious talk about non-empirical things – like invisible spirits, the inner voice of God speaking to us, or the power granted by a vision. From an interpretationist point of view, there is no difference in kind, just more of a methodological challenge. We interpret religious language in the same way that we interpret all talk and action,

⁵ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 32, 45. Geertz’s essay presents a somewhat incoherent mix of representational and constructionist views; Asad critiques these on different grounds. Thanks to reviewer 2 for suggesting that touching base with Asad here would be a useful way to clarify this section.

⁶ Steven Engler, “‘Religion,’ ‘the Secular’ and the Critical Study of Religion,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40, no. 4 (2011): 419–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429811420406>.

⁷ Asad, *Genealogies*, 31, 42.

including the most trivial examples from daily life, with the difference that making sense of the *contexts* of religious language present a *relatively* greater challenge.

Both representationism and interpretationism make sense of reference and signification, but interpretationism is a broader view. It acknowledges that the search for meaning sometimes begins and ends with what language points to in the world: sometimes monsters really do exist. However, it does not insist that talk of monsters can *only* mean something if we can put our finger on *what it refers to*. It is that assumption that leads to the sorts of problems discussed in the following section. The choice lies in whether we *start and end* with representation or perhaps encounter it along the way. Why make representation the sum total of our view of meaning, when this raises thorny problems for non-empirical entities like spirits, monsters and gods?

MONSTROUS REPRESENTATION

I am primarily interested in spirits, but the literature on monsters helps explain the value of an interpretational view of meaning. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen characterize monster studies by pointing to “its premise of the monster as meaning generating.”⁸ But what sort of meaning is this? The monster studies literature implicitly presumes representationism.

According to the representational view of meaning, we interpret monsters by understanding what they represent, refer to or signify, i.e., what “monster X” points to in the world. (This is not the same thing as looking for what monsters symbolize, i.e., what “monster X” stands for in some cultural context.) This representational view is dominant in monster studies: “Monsters are meaning machines. They can *represent* gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body”;⁹ “...monsters may come and go, but what they *represent* persists”;¹⁰ “For the Greeks and Romans ... monsters *represented* the untamed forces of nature that presented a dangerous threat to orderly human society”¹¹; “‘Monsters’ ... *signal* borderline experiences of uncontainable excess, reminding the ego that it is never wholly sovereign”¹²; “Monsters lurked at the borderlands between the known and the unknown, heralded peril through their very presence, and *signified* jeopardy through their abnormal bodies”¹³; “The monster ... *represents* all that is beyond human control, the uncontrollable and the unruly that threaten the moral order”;¹⁴ “the monster can *represent* aspirations, even heroic ones.”¹⁵

⁸ Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen, “Introduction: Monsters and Change,” in *Monster Anthropology: Ethnographic Explorations of Transforming Social Worlds through Monsters*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1.

⁹ Jack [Judith] Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 21–22; emphasis added in this and all citations in this paragraph.

¹⁰ Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 284.

¹¹ D. Felton, “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 130.

¹² Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

¹³ Yasmine Musharbash, “Introduction: Monsters, Anthropology, and Monster Studies,” in *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 4.

¹⁴ David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 19, discussing Mary Douglas.

¹⁵ John Block Friedman, “Foreward,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), xxvii.

As Asa Simon Mittman implies, this is not a good place to start: “modernity ... generally define[s] a literal ‘monster’ ... as that which is horrible, but does not actually exist.”¹⁶ That leaves us in a bind, trying to make sense of what monster-talk points to when we hold that there is nothing that exists in the world for it to point to. It is a mistake to start by seeing the people who believe in these non-existent things as either pretending or irrational. The study of religion/s also falters if it starts off by labelling religious believers in this way. Why are we tempted to link religious rationality to the *existence* of certain entities, like spirits, gods and monsters?

Mittman tries to resolve the problem by shifting ground: “The question is not ... ‘Did people believe in monsters?’ – they did, and still do – but rather, ‘What is a monster?’”¹⁷ The problematic link between belief and existence remains a potential problem here: we don’t avoid ontological issues by asking what a monster is.

My emphasis here is on what monsters *mean*, not what they *are*. By criticizing representationism, I do not suggest that talk of monsters never refers to anything. I do not deny that people sometimes truly believe that certain monsters exist and stalk the world. Nor do I deny that some monsters exist. My point is that stopping here – with the idea that representation is *all there is* to the meaning of monsters – closes off valuable alternatives. What we need is an account that accepts that talk of monsters is sometimes about reference – to empirically or scientifically verifiable things, to imaginary landscapes, or through displacement to cognitive or social tensions – but often there is more. Interpretationism gives us that. It challenges us to start by tracing semantic connections, following leads, tracking meanings across a network of links between words and ideas. Sometimes this will lead us to one or other type of representation and we can stop here. But sometimes the process of interpretation leads us on, to seek the meaning of monsters against their broader contexts

Mittman’s emphasis on what monsters are and my emphasis on what monsters mean both raise a question: whose view of what monsters should we prioritize, given that religious people and scholars often diverge radically? We risk severing scholarly discourse from the discourse of the people we study if we shift focus from what our subjects say their language is about to our views of what they are *really* talking about or what they *really* mean, often despite themselves.¹⁸ This deflects reference: believers say that their monster-talk refers to real monsters, but scholars reinterpret that monster-talk as *actually* referring to danger, to the uncontrollable, to borderline experiences, to natural threats, etc.

This is another advantage of interpretationism. It tempers the temptation to always seek a tidy referent of monster talk, to reduce monsters to what they *really* refer to, once we grant that the alleged referents do not actually exist. Interpretationism insists that we take seriously what those who believe in monsters say, by tracing the contextualized networks of semantic associations. If, by contrast, we insist on finding a referent of monster talk, this risks leading us to translate what believers say into a disjunct register of scholarly discourse. That can be insightful. Yet, here be semantic dragons. Scholarly methods too often surgically remove talk of religious entities (spirits, monsters, gods, etc.) from their native networks of semantic associations and graft them onto an alien web of scholarly concepts and categories. They excise the monster from its home territory and relocate it on scholarly maps. This violent act of translation is what I call monstrous representation. If we then impose the assumption that monster talk must *represent* something, is it any surprise that it comes to be seen as referring to the sorts of scholarly concepts that constitute its new semantic context: “nature,” “sexuality,” “cognition,” “embodiment,” “chaos,” “apocalypse” etc.?

¹⁶ Asa Simon Mittman, “Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

¹⁷ Mittman, “Introduction,” 6.

¹⁸ Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, “Lincoln’s Clarion Call for Methodological Solipsism,” in *Journal of Ritual Studies*, ed. Aaron Hughes (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 159–63.

To focus on representationism, why do scholars insist that “like a letter on the page, the monster *signifies* something other than itself: it is always a displacement...”?¹⁹ They do so because, just as words on a page refer to things in the world, monsters must as well; and, given that monsters themselves do not exist, the things that monsters refer to must be something else. The logic is like this: what monsters mean is what they represent. But they can’t mean actual monsters, because these do not exist. What they actually represent is what the monster-scholars say they represent. Monsters mean what scholars say they are “about.” This is a monstrous representation, because it distorts what the people we study intend when they talk about monsters.

The problem of talking about things that do not exist leads many scholars to hold that monsters represent in an unusual way, negatively, inversely: monsters point to what is not; they reveal the paradoxical limits of representation; they both refer and do not refer. However, seeing the monstrous as an example of some unusual, nonstandard mode of representation does not escape problems with representational assumptions. It amplifies them.

These more complex views remain wedded to representationism. Slavoj Žižek, for example, suggests that “The crucial question is not ‘What does the phantom signify?’ but ‘How is the very space constituted where entities like the phantom can emerge?’”²⁰ He ends up in a conceptual *cul-de-sac* by framing the monstrous in referential terms. He ignores the historical and cross-cultural ubiquity of monsters due to his insistence that they represent a postmodern – and so historically situated – failure of representation itself. As Thomas Brockelman notes, in his paraphrase of Žižek’s answer to his own question: “Precisely because the tools of modernist representation cannot do justice to the ‘Thing’ created by modernity ... the ‘postmodern’ is the realm of monstrosity...”.²¹ Žižek is right to problematize representation, but wrong to settle on its failure. Problems with representationism should not be seen as representing representational paradox, but as motivation for seeking an alternative view of meaning.

Joanne Thurman problematizes representational views of monsters in a different way in her study of monstrous figures in the cultural world of the Mak Mak Marranunggu, an Australian Aboriginal people. She first echoes the standard representational view of monsters: “Monsters transgress social and cultural boundaries and defy cultural schematics and categorizations, a characteristic that makes them inherently dangerous. Monsters are, accordingly, often analyzed in terms of their “otherness”; as *representing* that which does not belong, and therefore marking particular cultural, social, and political boundaries.”²² She then notes that the monsters she studied do not fit this conceptual mold:

On the one hand, they can be considered as “other” to the Mak Mak Marranunggu cultural world. ... On the other hand, ... this does not mean they do not belong or are “other.” Rather than being marginal and separate, these monsters infuse the Mak Mak Marranunggu world with *cohesive meaning*, underscored by the roles they play in encounters with human strangers, those who do not belong in the true sense. ... Despite their classificatory distinctiveness or “otherness,” the Nugabig, Minmin Lights, and Latharr-ghun *do not represent* a disruption to the natural order; they are sentient beings of the country, of which the Mak Mak Marranunggu understand themselves to be a part, and through which they understand, articulate, and enact their sense of belonging.²³

¹⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears,” *October* 58 (1991): 63.

²¹ Thomas P. Brockelman, *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 127.

²² Joanne Thurman, “Cave Men, Luminoids, and Dragons: Monstrous Creatures Mediating Relationships between People and Country in Aboriginal Northern Australia,” in *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 35, emphasis added.

²³ Thurman, “Cave Men,” 35-36, emphasis added.

In sum, monsters are and are not “other,” because they represent and do not represent the disruption and reaffirmation of boundaries.

The idea that monsters represent anything has broken down at this point, along with the possibility of offering any viable interpretation beyond the affirmation that none is possible. Might it make more sense to start where Thurman ends, by investigating the “cohesive meaning” that these monsters produce, as opposed to insisting that they represent in paradoxical ways?

A comparable approach is to suggest that monsters refer ambiguously because they are inherently ambivalent. Margrit Shildrick analyzes monsters as “figures of difference,” as attempts “to represent ... unrepresentable otherness”:

Far from fitting neatly into the new epistemological categories constructed by the taxonomies of post-Enlightenment science, the otherness of the monster remains containable neither in its gross materiality, nor as the radically other which sets the limits of the human, and of the self. ... Insofar as neither the attempt to pin down nor the repudiation of the monstrous is ever complete, its disruptive signification persists. Though frequently cast as the absolute outsider, it is always both strange and external, and familiar, even intimate. It is the marker, then, not of the successful closure of embodied identity of the selfsame, but of the impossibility of securing such boundaries.²⁴

Interpretationism offers a more promising path for making sense of this ambiguity than does representationism.

For Žižek monsters reveal that the failure of representation is a sign of our times. For Shildrick, the failure of representation leads us to understand what monsters are: “Monsters haunt us, not because they represent an external threat ... but because they stir recognition within, ... as the anxiety-provoking double that haunts the margins of self-presence.”²⁵ Monsters represent monstrously because we deny our recognition that they really represent an aspect of ourselves.

This reads monsters as representing inversely, inside-out, via a topological Möbius twist. They represent what happens to representation when it signifies the wholly other. The logic is similar to that of taking the sacred as the radical other of the profane, and the shift from epistemological to ontological claims is paralleled here:

[the] most minimal ... definition of the sacred sees its meaning as constituted through a relation – albeit one of opposition and exclusion – to another concept, not as inherent in ‘sacred’ itself. ... It is one thing to view ‘sacred’ in terms of its conceptual opposition to certain concepts, to see its meaning as part of that package deal. It is something else to insist that the shadow or mirror pole of this relational binary – ‘sacred’ as non-profane, non-secular, non-mundane, non-ordinary, etc. – corresponds to an objective referent. This starts with an unusual form of holistic semantic relation, meaning-via-opposition, and re-reads it in referential terms, as being about a specific thing. The unusual semantic characteristics of the concept ‘sacred’ are read off as unusual ontological characteristics of a thing, the sacred. Where polarizers default to a common-sense referential semantics in this way, ‘sacred’ transforms from holistic placeholder (the other of ‘x’) to a very unusual referent, one that stands beyond all concrete description. A relative semantic beyond is flipped over to reveal an absolute ontological beyond, *et voilà!*: sui generis transcendence by semantic sleight of hand.²⁶

²⁴ Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE, 2002), 2, 31, 25.

²⁵ Shildrick, *Embodying*, 81.

²⁶ Engler and Gardiner, “Semantics and the Sacred,” 626, 629.

The sui generis nature of the monster is arrived at in this same way. We start by noting that monsters are both like and unlike certain “others.” We insist on reading this as a matter of reference or representation. This leads us to conclude that they refer in a strange way. We then shift from this epistemological register to an ontological one, concluding that they are a strange type of being. This is a vicious circle: monsters and gods are odd beings because they refer oddly; and they refer oddly because they are odd beings. The monstrous view of representation succeeds only in turning monsters into domesticated tropes of religious language.

What happens if we drop the representational assumption and take a different approach to meaning? It turns out that the most productive published approaches to “sacred” find its meaning not in what it refers to but in its relations to other concepts. Many scholars who have grappled with the complexities of religious language have ended up implicitly adopting interpretationist and holistic stances.²⁷

The same happens with monster studies. If we categorize the monster in terms of natural/unnatural and normal/abnormal binaries: monstrosity is physical and/or moral divergence from a norm. On this view, the meaning of monsters is relational. It is always paired to particular conceptions of the non-monstrous. The meaning of “monster” is best fleshed out by exploring that polarized network of associations: we trace context-specific ideas of the non-monstrous in order to see the monster that is reflected in them. In other cases, the network of association is broader and more contextualized. Andrew Sharpe, for example, argues that

the monster concept is not exhausted by the figure of the abnormal individual in the present. On the contrary, the monster concept also remains relevant in relation to the visible body. ... The monster is a category of the law; it has a legal life. ... There are at least two other concepts that bear a relationship to the monster. These are the concepts of natality and responsibility.²⁸

Might it not make more sense to stop thinking primarily in terms of representation and referring? What if we seek the meaning of monsters in the various semantic connections that they embody in specific contexts? On this view, there is no contradiction when we find semantic overlap between inside and outside, familiar and other, natural and non-natural, etc. In methodological terms, the meaning of monsters is not bound by our previous conceptions of what is or is not the case with certain boundaries. We face the challenge of seeing where the web of associations leads in each particular case. This allows us to build interpretations on a case-by-case basis, free of the assumption that some referent must be found or imposed. It opens new avenues for comparative work and for monster theory.

SEMANTIC REDUCTION OF BRAZILIAN MONSTERS

I will try to illustrate this with a brief discussion of monsters in Brazil’s “colonial xenobrazilian literature.”²⁹ For example, early folklorist Afonso d’Escragnolle Tauney wrote in 1934 of

²⁷ On “sacred” see Engler and Gardiner “Semantics and the Sacred.” On “comparison” see Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler, “The Semantics of Comparison in J. Z. Smith,” in *Imagining Smith: Mapping Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Barbara Krawcowicz (Sheffield: Equinox, forthcoming).

²⁸ Andrew N. Sharpe, *Foucault’s Monsters and the Challenge of Law* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2010), 143, 145, 146.

²⁹ Afonso d’Escragnolle Taunay, *Monstros e Monstregos Do Brasil: Ensaio Sobre a Zoologia Fantástica Brasileira Nos Séculos XVII e XVIII* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 1998), 221. The discussion that follows is not intended to follow the rigorous methodology and analytical models of the theory-rich field of Folklore Studies. I do not pretend to offer an accurate representation of the folkloric beliefs of any particular regional group in Brazil. I offer descriptions from a set of recognized secondary sources. For the sake of this argument, it is enough to stipulate that “monsters” refers to what is talked about in these texts. I ask how we can best make sense – how we might most effectively seek the meaning of – these “monsters.”

the demonic exploits of the evil spirits of the forest, assassins of the poor Indians, or their torturers. Thus, the *curupiras* who flogged them, tormented and killed them and whose victims, already dead, had been found in the woods by the missionaries; the *igupiaras* who lived in the waters, drowners of the natives and shipwreckers of their *igaras* and *ubás* [canoes]; the *boitatás* or fire snakes who sped quickly from one side to another, attacking the Indians and killing them like the *curupiras*. The *boitatatás* appeared with bright fire and nobody knew just what they were.³⁰

A representational stance would lead us first to ask whether these monsters exist. Then – stymied once again by the referential recalcitrance of talk of gods and monsters – it would prompt us to shift registers, arguing that these monsters *refer indirectly* to something else, perhaps views of normative embodiment or identity, or to culturally-constituted conceptual boundaries, etc. This approach would be piecemeal and *ad hoc*, each theme highlighting some monsters and ignores the rest.

What would happen if we bracket the issue of reference (which may or may not *turn out* to be relevant) in order to shift from asking what words mean, focusing instead on what people mean? That is, what do we gain if we stop asking what words refer to and start looking at the webs of semantic associations that allows us to interpret what people mean?

Monsters in Brazilian folklore tend to be characterized by their threatening, often deadly, actions. (Some are more ambivalent than horrible or dangerous, like the Saci Pererê, Matinta Perera and Cobra Norato.³¹) Here are four overlapping types of dangerous monsters:³²

Monsters that threaten those who venture into the *mato* (forest, wilderness):

- the Boitatá, the Mother-of-fire, a one-eyed, radiant, transparent fire-snake that eats the eyes of its victims.
- The related Mboi-tatá, who appears as a black bull. (Adulterous godparents can turn into this monster.)
- The Boiúna, a giant snake with eyes of fire that whistles or imitates the yelled orders and machine sounds of river boats, as it pursues fishermen and eats them.

Monsters that protect the forest from depredation and animals from hunters:

- the Anhangá, a spirit that appears as a fiery-eyed deer, killing those who do not respect the forest.
- the dwarf Curupira, with its backward-facing feet, who leads astray those who overhunt certain species. (Backward speech and walking are signs of a relation with Satan. Hunters leave tobacco and *cachaça* as offerings to appease the Curupira.)
- the Mother-/Father-of-the-Forest, a hairy giant that rides a huge wild boar. Like the Curupira, s/he leaves people *mundiado* (“worlded,” lost in the forest). (Unbaptized children are especially vulnerable to losing their way under this monstrous influence; godmothers can find lost baptized children by carrying their baptismal towel.)

Monsters that fool their victims by pretending to be humans:

³⁰ Afonso d’Escragnolle Taunay, *Zoologia Fantástica Do Brasil* (São Paulo: EDUSP/ Museu Paulista, 1999), 76.

³¹ See, for example, Raul Bopp, “Cobra Norato: A Nheengatu from the Left Bank of Amazonas,” trans. Christ Daniels, 1931, https://monoskop.org/images/5/5e/Bopp_Raul_Cobra_Norato.pdf.

³² Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Geografia Dos Mitos Brasileiros* (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2012); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Antologia Do Folclore Brasileiro*, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2014); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Antologia Do Folclore Brasileiro*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2014); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Lendas Brasileiras* (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2015); Francisco van der Poel, *Dicionário Da Religiosidade Popular: Cultura e Religião No Brasil* (Curitiba: Editora Nossa Cultura, 2013); Tauney, *Monstros e monstrenhos*; Tauney, *Zoologia fantástica*.

- the Boto, a river-dolphin who appears on-shore as an attractive man, seducing women.
- the one-legged werewolf-like Capelobo, who pretends to be an old friend before eating the heads of its victims.
- the Iara, who appear as a beautiful woman before dragging its victims to their deaths in the depths of rivers.
- Oiaras, spirit-beings that appear as friends or family members and then lure their victims to their deaths.

Monsters that harm problematic children:

- the Bag-Man, who carries off disobedient children.
- the Bicho-Papão, the Black-Faced Cow and the headless Tutu, who steal children who refuse to sleep.
- the Chibamba, eater of crying children.
- the Cuca, an alligator-witch who craves the blood of “pagan” children (those not baptized by the age of seven).

We could interpret certain facets of some of these Brazilian monsters – hybridity, nature/culture boundary, gender, morality, religion, etc. – to argue that they *refer* indirectly to views of normative embodiment, identity, belief, etc. However, this approach would be piecemeal and *ad hoc*: each theme would highlight some monsters and ignore the rest.

We arrive at a more complete and consistent interpretation if we ask, “what do these monsters mean to the people who believe in them?” This calls for a narrower focus. Brazilian folklore tells us little of these monsters beyond a few details of their appearance, the sounds they make and their characteristic actions. The actions are primary. Asking “what is the meaning of monstrous actions?” reveals a distinction between normal and monstrous actors.

In general, the network of associations that allows us to make sense of the intentional behavior of human beings is rich and unpredictable. We don’t know in what direction or how far it makes sense to follow the network of semantic associations. We stop when our interpretations work. We push further if we wish to arrive at a fuller interpretation. This process is reduced or constrained in the case of monsters.

Monsters are bounded actors. The meanings of their actions are semantically reduced. *The semantic reduction of monstrous actions consists in the fact that we cannot interpret them as far as we can human actions, and that this limitation is imposed by narrative and other frames.* The network of semantic connections extends only so far. Our push to find more meaning quickly produces diminishing returns. This reflects the fact that we are dealing with accounts of monsters, as opposed to observed behavior or interviews that we have conducted with monsters in the field. An interpretational, holistic approach to meaning highlights this difference. The meaning of human action (talk included) is more open-ended. By contrast, the meaning of monstrous action is limited in a specific way: the semantic network that constitutes that meaning is constrained by descriptions of them, which are all we have to study. (The same points apply to descriptions from informants in the field or those drawn, as here, from the secondary literature. We are interested in the meaning of these descriptions, not the truth about these monsters.)

We understand monsters by understanding the interpretative limitations of their actions as distilled from descriptions of them. The narratives provide an interpretive frame that pre-limits descriptions of the nature and extent of their actions. Monstrous actions are reduced or bounded in this sense. A “theory” of monsters rests on the specific ways that descriptions or narratives bind or reduce monsters.

An interpretationist stance makes sense of the prominence of boundaries in accounts of monsters. Boundaries are central in the reduced semantic web. Transgression looms large in the limited set of associations. Monstrous actions usually take place at and/or across spatial, geographical, cultural, cognitive, social and/or normative boundaries. This is not an issue of

common content across accounts of all monsters: no particular sort of boundary is found in all cases. It is a feature of many of the semantic networks that are involved. In semantic terms, we recognize these boundaries when our attempt to follow the associations of a given monster leads us into semantic domains that are most often kept distinct. Saying that monsters' actions transgress conceptual boundaries is to say making sense of monsters involves elements from both sides of customary semantic boundaries. Forest-protecting monsters darken wild spaces that make sense in contrast to human spaces; human-imitating monsters haunt both sides of the social boundary between friend and foe; child-punishing monsters wait just beyond the boundaries between proper and improper behavior. Not all monsters fit within attempts to spell out a given set of boundaries. But, in each case, these monsters *act* in a manner that *makes sense* only if we take account of semantic nodes (words, ideas) on both sides of a conceptual boundary.

We could read the web of associations – that which allows us to make sense of monsters – as referring to or representing the dangers of the forest, the threat of strangers, gender roles, hybridity, social change, category rupture, etc. But the particular references would shift from monster to monster and context to context, and they could be narrowed or broadened in each case, depending on our interpretive agenda. The attempt to specify *what monsters are* will always be ad hoc, unless some sub-set of monsters is privileged by fiat. It runs into the problems noted above with referential views. This approach can be insightful and valuable at times, especially for dealing with monsters in specific cultural contexts.³³

By contrast, the concept of semantic reduction foregrounds *how monsters mean*. It notes a particular mode of meaning-making that is common to all monsters. Of course, as the case of Umbanda below illustrates, semantic reduction is not limited to monsters. This approach is especially useful for looking at resonances between monster studies, the study of religion/s and related fields.

UMBANDA

It would be easy to construct a spiritual reading of spirits that echoed the representational reading of monsters: spirits are hybrid beings, eliding and reinforcing boundaries and identities; they don't exist, so what believers say of them cannot be taken at face value; it makes more (scholarly) sense to interpret them as representing and not representing excess, danger, nature, moral order, hope and healing. The end would be the same: a circular dance between unusual beings and the unusual ways we represent them. I will now explore an interpretationist path in more detail, looking at the spirits of Umbanda, suggesting that this path offers more promise for interpreting non-empirical entities.

Umbanda is a Brazilian Spiritist tradition that emerged in the early twentieth century.³⁴ "Spiritist" is an umbrella term for esoteric possession traditions in which members communicate with the spirits of the dead, as these incorporate in mediums. In addition to Umbanda, for example, the category includes Spiritualism (the nineteenth-century US séance tradition, now found in many countries), many types of *curanderismo* (folk healing traditions throughout the Americas), Icelandic spirit work (a distinctive offshoot of Spiritualism), Kardecism (the more philosophical nineteenth-century French offshoot of Spiritualism, now prominent throughout Latin America, especially Brazil), Cao Dai (a syncretic Vietnamese religion, influenced by Kardecism), and a wide variety of traditions throughout the Americas that mix Kardecist and Umbandist beliefs and practices with Afro-diasporic, Indigenous, popular Catholic and esoteric traditions.³⁵

³³ Musharbash, "Introduction"; Musharbash and Presterudstuen, "Introduction."

³⁴ For overviews in English, see Diana Brown, *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Steven Engler, "Umbanda," in *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Steven Engler (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 204–24; Lindsay L. Hale, *Hearing the Mermaid's Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2009).

³⁵ Corinne G. Dempsey, *Bridges between Worlds: Spirits and Spirit Work in Northern Iceland* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Janet Alison Hoskins, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

Umbanda varies greatly: “There is not one Umbanda but many Umbandas, with a great diversity in beliefs and rituals.”³⁶ Umbanda most often – but not always – incorporates elements of Afro-Brazilian religions, especially one of the variants of Candomblé. Umbanda’s core beliefs are Kardecist. God created all spirits equal and undeveloped, and their shared purpose is to evolve spiritually through multiple incarnations. Spirits develop at different rates. Some (like Jesus) are sufficiently advanced that they no longer need to incarnate, but they sometimes choose to incarnate, motivated by charity, in order to help less advanced spirits (i.e., we who live in this world).

The spirits of Umbanda incorporate in mediums during rituals, in which they offer one-on-one consultations, providing advice, consolation and ritual healing services. The majority of people attending rituals are non-Umbandists – usually Catholic or Kardecist – who attend for ritual services. A few dozen to several hundred clients might attend a given ritual, each being seen and spoken to by a spirit who has incorporated in one of the half-dozen to fifty or more mediums. The needs of the spirits (organizing clients, spreading incense, providing liquor, lighting a cigar, or fetching herbs for healing smoke) are catered to by *combones*, often mediums in training.

There are two main types of spirits in Umbanda: guides who perform acts of charity, and guardians who protect from dangerous forces (especially other, malevolent, spirits). Mediums generally work with a range of spirits, often seven, one for each spirit “line” or “phalange.” They cultivate (or are chosen by spirits for) a deep personal relationship with particular spirits of each type that their community/house works with. The most common guides or “saints” are *caboclos* (kindly but magisterial Indigenous spirits, specialists in healing) and *pretos velhos* (wise, elderly, Afro-descendent former slaves). Other spirits include *boiadeiros* (“cowboys”: hybrid Indigenous/white spirits), *crianças* (“children”: innocent and playful), *malandros* (rogues, womanizers, drinkers, gamblers, led by the infamous *Zé Pilintra* spirit-type, a trickster figure prominent in the indigenous-influenced religion of Jurema), *ciganos* (gypsies: happy, disorderly spirits, known for their work with crystals in esoteric groups) and *sereias* (mermaids).³⁷ Two other important types of spirits incorporate in some groups as guardian spirits: *exus*, a powerful male trickster figure; and *pombas giras*, a female spirit with a sexualized moral ambivalence (Silva 2015; Hayes 2011).³⁸ These spirits are central to the closely related tradition of Quimbanda. *Centros/terreiros* generally devote the rituals of a given day of the week or month to the incorporation of a given spirit (e.g., all mediums receiving “their” *caboclo* on Tuesdays).

Umbandist rituals and spaces are complex. An attempt to understand their meaning involves paying attention to many things: e.g., ritual form (before, during, and after the incorporation of spirits); body language (the stooped walk of *pretos velhos*; left hands twisted behind backs, indicating possession); indexical, non-verbal sounds (a medium’s yell as a spirit incorporates; the thoughtful grunts of *caboclos* or the high-pitched laughter of *criança* spirits); artefacts, images and symbols on altars, walls and floors (sculptures and murals of African slaves, Indigenous healers, Jesus, Mary and Catholic Saints; photographs of dead members of the local community; crucifixes, esoteric sigils, white fabrics, beaded necklaces, pipes, cigarettes, bottles, stools, canes and crystals); music, with its lyrics and instruments (conga drums, recorded New Age music, African *cantigas*, Catholic pop songs); architecture and spatial divisions (above all the sharp divide between the seating area of the *assistência*/clients and the main ritual area); clothing and its rules (mediums dress in white; clients avoid black and sometimes remove shoes); etc.

³⁶ Roberto Motta, “Religiões Afro-Recifenses: Ensaio de Classificação,” in *Faces Da Tradição Afro-Brasileira*, ed. Carlos Caroso and Jeferson Bacelar (Rio de Janeiro; Salvador: Pallas/CEAO, 2006), 25. All translations from Portuguese are by the author.

³⁷ Sullivan Charles Barros, “As Entidades ‘Brasileiras’ Da Umbanda,” in *Epiritismo e Religiões Afro-Brasileiras: História e Ciências Sociais*, ed. Artur Cesar Isaia and Ivan Aparecido Manoel (São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2011), 291–317; Maria Helena Villas Bôas Concone, “Caboclos e Pretos-Velhos Da Umbanda,” in *Encantaria Brasileira: O Livro Dos Mestres, Caboclos e Encantados*, ed. Reginaldo Prandi (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2001), 281–303; and Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, *Candomblé e Umbanda: Caminhos Da Devoção Brasileira*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2005), 118–25.

³⁸ Kelly E. Hayes, *Holy Harlots: Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, *Exu: O Guardião Da Casa Do Futuro* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2015).

Asking what any or all of this *refers to* is the wrong way to try to understand what it means. Instead, we need to dive in and start trying to interpret, to make sense, to make connections. This involves interpreting spirits in their contexts, not separating them out and pinning them down, not attempting to see what sort of “thing” Umbandists refer to with words like *caboclo* or *exu*.

SEMANTIC REDUCTION OF SPIRITS

The holistic side of interpretationism leads us to look for meaning not in terms of some essential, hidden core of individual words or concepts, but in their relations to an expanding web of associations to other words and concepts. We stop when our interpretation is good enough for present purposes.

When talking with spirits, I interpret their words and actions by tracing an expanding web of associations. The religion itself imposes certain limits to the interpretive process, through its doctrine, rituals, stories, material cultures and embodied dispositions learned during mediumship training. I pay attention to nuances of voice, posture, positioning, gesture, etc. I learn that spirits use words in slightly different ways. All this leads me to read more publications, to talk to more Umbandist mediums and clients, and to modify what I say myself as I continue talking to the spirits. I discover connections not present in scholarly publications: characteristics of individual spirits’ personalities, biographical details, idiosyncratic views of disease and healing, variations in stereotypical modes of speech, gesture and ritual form, etc. Making sense of these spirits feels a bit like making sense of a person, but always in a more bounded, limited manner. There are constraints on the process of interpretation. I began to focus on this, during the long hours of waiting to talk to spirits.

In general, the network of associations that allows us to make sense of the intentional behavior of human beings is rich and unpredictable. We don’t know in what direction or how far it makes sense to follow the network of semantic associations. We stop when our interpretations work. We push further if we wish to arrive at a fuller interpretation.

This process is reduced or constrained in the case of spirits. Spirits are bounded actors. The meanings of their actions are *semantically reduced*. The semantic reduction of their speech and actions consists in the fact that we cannot interpret them as far as we can with our fellow human beings, in *standard* social situations. When we watch a close friend performing on stage, even improvising, they are also semantically reduced. In normal contexts, our conversations are relatively unconstrained; we interpret each other within an extremely broad frame or set of constraints: “this is life.” We interpret what a friend says while they are acting on stage within a much more constraining frame: “this is a performance.”

In the case of Umbanda’s spirits, this limitation is imposed by doctrinal, narrative and ritual and other frames. The network of semantic connections extends only so far. Our push to find more meaning quickly produces diminishing returns. This reflects the fact that we are dealing with beliefs, stories and ritual encounters with spirits, not with observed behavior in the world at large. An interpretational, holistic view of meaning highlights this difference. The meaning of standard human talk and action is more open-ended. The meaning of spirits is limited in specific ways: the semantic networks that constitute that meaning are bound by their ritual, doctrinal and narrative frames.

What distinguishes the words and actions of spirits from “standard” intentional behavior? In methodological terms, what I encounter before, during and after an Umbandist ritual is a single body acting in two different modes: human medium and supernatural spirit. That is analogous to talking to a stage actor before their performance and then watching them perform – though there is a ritually-sanctioned blurring of the fourth wall in Umbanda. It makes little sense to ask whether spirits are “real” or “ontologically distinct.” It makes more sense to bracket representational questions and to focus on interpreting what they say and do.

I sometimes talk to one particular *caboclo* spirit who incorporates during rituals in a particular medium whom I know socially, in the “real” world. The body is the same; but the body

language is different (posture slouched, tension in shoulders, symbolic ritual gestures, stiff facial features). The body is dressed in the white clothes that the medium donned, because this is what the ritual dictates. The architectural space is divided between the seating area where the *assistência* sits (those who come to talk to the spirits) and the ritual space, with its altar and drums, where the mediums and spirits work. I am now one of the small number of clients who has crossed this boundary, moving into the main ritual space in order to speak to one of the spirits. The spirit I speak to, like many *caboclos*, greets me as he does all clients, with a forearm bump, right then left. The spirit holds the medium's body stiffly, rotating from the waist as our arms touch. The spirit's voice is the medium's voice, but greatly altered (a thick accent, more limited and ritualized vocabulary; grunts and other characteristic vocalizations of *caboclos*). The ritual context and all these indexical signs tell me that this is not a "normal" social interaction.³⁹ A bit earlier, I witnessed this and the other mediums entering trance states (usually with a yell, suddenly changing posture and voice, then using ritual props characteristic of *caboclos*: cigars, sometimes rum, herbs and candles, using a sawed-off section of tree trunk for a stool). Many other spirits talk in low voices to their clients around us, with similar stereotypical voices and postures, moving their hands in blessings and cleansings of "energies." *Cambones* walk quickly through the space, their pace contrasting with the smooth, deliberate motions of the spirits. The lighting is dim. Candles flicker. The strong, perfumed smell of incense underscores acrid fumes of tobacco.

In ritualized spirit incorporation, it is not the scholar who performs a semantic reduction, as if struggling with the ontological problems of distinguishing between medium and spirit, faced with a single body shared between them. The interpretative possibilities – clients' or ethnographers' paths to making sense of what the *caboclo* says and does – are constrained by Umbandist doctrine (nature/types of spirits), by cues in the ritual contexts (characteristic accents, discourse, noises, gestures, postures, etc.). Conversations with spirits are limited in a way that reflects their doctrinal description and ritual performance. This is comparable to the "open and say ah" limited conversation that we have with doctors. There is chit chat, but doctor's actions/words are reduced by their functional role: they speak to us from within their role as doctors, and we answer from within our roles as patients. Context and roles perform a semantic reduction in many of our daily interactions. There is no sharp divide between reduced and "normal" contexts. We can slide between the two in a single conversation.

I have tried to go off script with spirits. Sometimes I can elicit the spirit's name or even a few biographical details. This is marginal to the doctrinal and ritual frame, but spirits sometimes respond as if the question makes perfect sense. More often, I am ignored when I stray from a mutual discourse of wellness, energies, ritual and healing. The spirits perform their customary healing gestures as if my discursive divergence went unnoticed.

There was an exception once. One night, during the lead-up to the 2018 Brazilian Presidential election, a *cambone*, very unusually, pulled me gently out of the line of clients who were waiting to speak to the *caboclos*. She explained that she was waiting to take me to a spirit that I would more easily understand. (I am fluent in Portuguese, but some *caboclos* speak in heavy accents.) I was led to a powerful *caboclo* who incorporates in the senior assistant to the leader of the house. The spirit asked if I was having any problems. I said I was "worried about the election." He replied, "not just the American one." Both *cambone* and spirit demonstrated knowledge of my not being a Brazilian (though I am a Canadian, not a US citizen – something that Brazilian friends and Brazilian spirits seem to have trouble keeping straight). The spirit also appeared to be up to date on domestic and international politics. My attempt to make sense of this unexpected shift from healing discourse to current events led me to wonder if I was speaking to the medium or the spirit. Faced with a statement that did not easily make sense within the ritual frame, I moved automatically to extend the network of associations, treating the conversation more like a "normal" one. Then the

³⁹ On the role of indexicality in constituting the ritual frame, see Steven Engler, "Ritual Theory and Attitudes to Agency in Brazilian Spirit Possession," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 21, no. 4 (2009): 460–92, <https://doi.org/10.1163/094330509X12568874557298>.

script reasserted itself; the spirit and I were back on track; our conversation returned to the semantically reduced form that is “normal” within that ritual frame.

This example speaks to a normative moment in semantic reduction. Our attempts to interpret spirits, monsters and gods soon run up against pre-set frames of doctrine, ritual forms, stories, traditions, embodied dispositions, material culture, etc., and these are productive resources for making sense of these entities. Beyond this, however, one of the functions of these frames – one of the characteristics of semantic reduction – is to sharply distinguish this interpretive context from the wider world, to define what is normal ‘here.’ We are discouraged from seeking meaning outside these frames. They lead us to pre-established, semantically reduced wells or webs of meaning. They make “abnormal” our normal processes of looking further for meaning. Within the frames, contextually defined “normal” paths of interpretation are laid out for us to follow. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are more than rules to follow, more than a list of mandated options. They force and delimit the expanding exploration of semantic networks. In other words, they constrain the very process of interpretation that produces meaning.

The way that spirits speak and act is a reduced version of a standard, human interlocutor: you can’t get them to diverge from ritualized norms, because, in an important sense, they *are* their ritual role. They are bounded by it. Attempts to interpret the meaning of their speech and actions runs quickly into the expected, the constrained, the pre-established, the scripted. In a sense, it would be *wrong* for a *caboclo* to act/talk much outside their role, because (1) then they would not be doing what they are supposed to be doing in terms of following a ritual script and (2) they would be less distinguishable from the medium.

At the same time, the clients who attend rituals to speak to spirits also adopt a semantically reduced posture. Their words and actions are constrained by the ritual context. Going “off script” is as unusual for them as it is for the spirits. It is easy to imagine that, on occasion, spirits talking to me became confused about whether they were speaking to a client or an anthropologist. My responses, and even more so my questions, did not follow the client script. To some extent, all acts of interpreting talk, text and action are semantically reduced: there are always contextual constraints on how far we normally explore the contingent network of associations that emerge in interpretive contexts. In ordinary cases, these constraints are minimal and conventional. With doctors, actors and classroom teachers, they are greater. Much of the challenge of doing research in religious contexts is making sense of the relatively greater degree and types of semantic reduction.

MAKING SENSE OF SEMANTIC REDUCTION

We understand spirits and monsters by understanding the interpretative limitations of their actions as distilled from formally constrained ritual and narrative contexts. Rituals and narratives provide interpretive frames that pre-limit descriptions of the nature and extent of the speech and actions of these entities. What they say and what they do is reduced or bounded in this sense. A “theory” of spirits or monsters rests on the specific ways that doctrinal, ritual, and narratives frames bind or reduce meaning as we attempt to interpret them.

Semantic reduction is relative, a sliding scale indexed by doctrinal, ritual and other frames. (Illustrating this sliding scale, I am semantically reduced in the classroom, to a lesser extent than doctors, but for comparable professional reasons.) There can be a reduction within or beyond an initial reduction. Umbandist spirits are semantically reduced echoes of people. Neo-Pentecostal versions of Umbandist spirits are further reduced. In Neo-Pentecostal churches allegedly the same spirits, called by the same names, are categorized as demons.⁴⁰ As mid-century healing Pentecostalism began to shift into combative Neo-Pentecostalism in the 1960s and 1970s, these spirits were occasionally seen as monsters. Canadian Pentecostal minister, Robert McAlister

⁴⁰ Artur Cesar Isaia and Elizete da Silva, “A História de Uma lalorixá Sob a Ótica de Um Pastor Canadense: Robert McAlister e as Religiões Afro-Brasileiras,” *Interfaces Brasil/Canadá* 19, no. 3 (2019): 104–24; Edir Macedo, *Orixás, Caboclos e Guias: Deuses Ou Demônios?* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal, 2001).

(founder of the New Life Christian Church in 1961) wrote, “I began to face this monstrosity considered only folk belief and I began to use the Name of Jesus in prayer to free the oppressed from these ‘caboclos’ and ‘orixás’ [the incorporating divinities of Candomblé] who are nothing more than evil and demonic spirits.”⁴¹

The process of interpreting these “same” beings in a different religious context leads to a far more reduced network of associations. “Semantic reduction” refers to this doctrinal and ritual interpretive shift, to the narrowing of semantic connections that emerge as we try to interpret certain types of speech and action in certain contexts. In Umbanda, spiritually evolved, charitable spirits of a wide range of types, incorporate in mediums as more individualized spirits, each with its own history and personality, and the spirits conduct healing and consultation rituals of various sorts. In Neo-Pentecostalism, a generic malevolent demon, sometimes unnamed, is exorcised, and, according to Neo-Pentecostal theology, these are the same entities. Within the Neo-Pentecostal frame, the transgression of a single boundary becomes central, that between godly and demonic, between Jesus’ and Satan’s spheres of influence. There is less meaning to be found in the *caboclos* of neo-Pentecostal ritual than in the *caboclos* of Umbandist ritual.

Semantic reduction makes sense of the prominence of boundaries in accounts of monsters. Transgression looms large in the limited set of associations. Monstrous actions usually take place at and/or across spatial, geographical, cultural, cognitive, social and/or normative boundaries. This is not an issue of common *content* across accounts of all monsters: no particular sort of boundary is found in all cases. It is a feature of the semantic networks involved. In semantic terms, we recognize these boundaries when our attempt to follow the associations of a given monster leads us into semantic domains that are most often kept distinct. We are right to recognize that monsters transgress boundaries. But we would be wrong to conclude that this reflects an unusual mode of representation. What it tells us is that representation is not the issue: making sense of monsters involves a semantic network that includes elements from both sides of the boundaries in question. Monstrosity reflects cultural reification of those boundaries, as if “normal” semantic networks always stayed neatly on one side of that semantic demarcation. Returning to the monsters of Brazilian folklore, forest-protecting monsters darken wild spaces that make sense in contrast to human spaces and human-imitating monsters haunt both sides of the social boundary between friend and foe. Different monsters cross different boundaries; this undermines attempts to say definitively just what it is that monsters represent; and this in turn leads to views of monstrous representation. But our interpretations of monsters, spirits and gods – our attempts to find meaning in what people say of them – invariably lead to a network of associations that fails to respect conceptual boundaries and that is semantically reduced.

The concept of semantic reduction can also be useful from a representational perspective, because it underlines that representation is also relative to doctrinal, narrative and ritual frames. This is clearest in rituals, where the denotation or reference of a given word depends on whether we look at it from inside or outside the ritual-frame. Representation is relativized and contextualized:

frames shift denotations in a manner that swings free from issues of reference.... That is, we get a more nuanced view of the frame when we recognize that the issue of what is true is relative (i.e., it depends on whether one is talking about inside or outside the frame). “This is the body of Christ,” said by the Catholic priest holding up the wafer, is *true* as long as the denotations of the terms “this” and “the body of Christ” coincide. Outside of the ritual-frame – in the “normal” context – “this” denotes a thin piece of bread and “the body of Christ” denotes a body which would bleed if cut, and those things are simply not the same; i.e., this claim is false (viewed from outside the ritual-frame, from with the “normal” context).

“Real” or “really” are terms whose denotations are similarly affected depending on whether

⁴¹ Robert McAlister, *Mãe de Santo: Georgina Aragão Dos Santos Franco, – a Verdade Sobre o Candomblé e a Umbanda* (Rio de Janeiro: Empreendimentos Evangélicos, 1968), 12.

they are in or out of a given frame: viewed within the ritual-frame, this (i.e., the object held by the priest) *really is* the Body of Christ.⁴²

Meaning depends on contexts, and some contexts, like rituals, constrain or delimit our processes of interpretation.

The example of ritual illustrates that the choice between interpretationism and representationism does not hinge on accepting or denying that words mean what they mean because of how they refer to things. Both views make sense of reference, representation and signification, but interpretationism does not start or end there. Or do we accept a more pragmatic view, that reference is just one of the tools we use as we make sense of what others say and do?

The foundational commitment of interpretationism is to the process of interpretation itself. From that perspective, all meaning, including referential or representational meaning, is the result of interpretive work in specific contexts. The concept of semantic reduction highlights one implication of this. Granted that interpretation involves tracing networks of semantic associations, that process is sometimes channeled in certain directions, constrained from extending further, by formalized structures of pre-established beliefs and actions. In making sense of spirits, monsters and gods, we run up against frames of ritual, doctrine, stories, material culture, etc. By analogy, our attempts to make sense of actors on a stage lead us first to a script and to the institutional norms of theatre. Our attempts to make sense of spirits, monsters and gods lead us first to frames of doctrine, ritual, narrative, etc. The difference from “normal” contexts of interpretation is relative, not absolute. There is a whole world beyond an Umbandist ritual that takes place in a certain place on a certain night, and that world is not irrelevant to making sense of the spirits who appear there. But the religion’s beliefs, spaces, rituals, gestures, stories, sounds, smells, lights, shadows, artefacts and images – all centered on those spirits – provide a pre-packaged network of semantics associations. The degree of investment that religions make in preparing that interpretative ground – and in dissuading us from looking further – is in itself a strong reason to weigh the potential value of interpretationism.

CONCLUSION

The concept of semantic reduction foregrounds *how* spirits and monsters mean what they mean. It highlights a particular mode of meaning-making. Interpretation is reduced, constrained or bounded, and that reduction takes place in different ways and to different degrees with different cases. Since spirits, monsters and gods are semantically reduced, what they say and do is more thinly describable than is the case with standard human interactions. The reduction occurs not through scholarly selection and categorization but as an effect of doctrinal, narrative, ritual and other frames. There is only so much sense to be made within the limits of those frames.

The particular ways in which rituals frame efforts to make sense of the talk and actions of spirits (and how descriptions frame the interpretation of monsters) are constraints on meaningfulness. These contexts differ from most “ordinary” ones because the general range of constraints that they provide can be understood ahead of time. Doctors and actors are also semantically reduced, but less than spirits and monsters: our formalized interactions with them are less constrained from blurring into “ordinary” contexts.

Understanding differences between semantic reduction in different contexts is part of the research process. An interpretational view of meaning informs a different conception of what we are doing when we interpret the phenomena we study: we investigate a network of semantic associations, as opposed to searching for (or substituting) referents. This view also informs a different understanding of explanation. In the case of spirits and monsters our goals include explaining *how* and *why* their contexts are reduced in specific ways. This is also crucial to understanding the context within which meaning takes shape – “takes shape” in both the sense of

⁴² Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, “Re-Mapping Bateson’s Frame,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2012): 12.

being constituted and the sense of coming into view. From an interpretationist perspective, these are two sides of the same coin of meaning.

An interpretational approach to meaning helps us avoid problems rooted in representational assumptions, and it offers distinct advantages. It offers a fuller account of why we choose the interpretive methods that we use as scholars. Its basic focus on interpretation sidesteps the issue of whether spirits, monsters and gods exist. At the same time, it recognizes that representation and reference are sometimes relevant to interpreting what people tell us about the entities that they believe in. It clarifies these beings' relationship to boundaries: monsters, for example, are hybrid not because *they transgress* reified boundaries, but because *we encounter* a network of associations bridging relatively distinct semantic clusters. It recognizes that the process of arriving at the meanings of words and actions is ongoing, always correctable, yet not relativist: some accounts are better than others, even though there is no single "true" one.

This approach is especially useful for looking at resonances between monster studies, the study of religion/s and related fields. Semantic reduction is characteristic of supernatural entities in general. Interpretation of these entities is constrained by doctrinal, ritual, narrative, artifactual and other frames, and their actions generally take place across significant boundaries (i.e., drawing on relatively distinct semantic clusters): death and life, heaven and earth, illness and disease, ignorance and knowledge, wilderness and civilization, order and disorder, good and evil. This approach offers a promising path for making sense of spirits and monsters, not least because it moves us past debates of what monsters really represent, portray or refer to.

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Monstrification through Displacement in Space and Time: Coloniality, Racism, Neoliberal Rhetoric of Time and Jordan Peele's *Get Out*

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Abstract:

Throughout U.S. history monstrous language has been deployed against racialized individuals. This essay examines the classification of monster by analyzing rhetoric on the racialized *monster*, the film *Get Out* (2017), and *coloniality of time* strategy discourses. While there are multiple dimensions to this topic, for this essay, I argue that *monster* rhetoric applied to racialized subjects shed light on the insidiousness embedded in the *coloniality of time* strategy as expressed discursively; *monster* rhetoric makes the effects of the *coloniality of time* discourses palpable in ways that unveil the overpowering dimension of the violence inflicted through racism. In order to identify and resist deployments of *coloniality of time* strategy through monstrification rhetoric, decolonizing *time* is an essential task to continue the difficult work of dismantling white supremacist tactics of oppression in order to support constructive philosophical-religious analysis rooted in antiracist foundations.

Keywords: Racism, Decolonialism, Coloniality of Time, White Supremacy, *Get Out*

Despite important advances in critical race/ethnic studies, the dynamics of oppression continue to morph and pervade institutional structures and practices. The rhetoric of *monsters* can shed light on a dimension of oppression that provides insight into societal structures, which perpetuate white dominance. It is important to address rhetoric that fails to account for the power of horror and the monstrous because such rhetoric challenges a positivistic, divine-focused aesthetics in religious projects. In this essay, I explore the classification of *monster* by analyzing rhetoric on the racialized *monster*, the film *Get Out* (2017), and *coloniality of time* discourses.⁴³

While there are many dimensions to this topic, for this essay, I argue that *monster* rhetoric applied to racialized subjects unveils the insidiousness embedded in the *coloniality of time* as expressed discursively; *monster* rhetoric makes the effects of the *coloniality of time* strategy discourses palpable in ways that expose the overpowering dimension of the violence inflicted through racism. It remains crucial for philosophical-theological accounts which center aesthetics to take stock of the monstrous embedded in racist, antiblack, discourses to continue identifying and countering the overpowering effect such tactics inflict on the victimized.⁴⁴ This article focuses on the foundation needed so that philosophical-religious reflections against racialized monstrosity— as advanced by white supremacist ideologies—can support the work to identify, resist and dismantle such deployment of the monstrous. The foundation I explore—which extends beyond religious-theological analyses—is critical in order to support antiracist frameworks in genuine allyship with black and brown scholars in liberationist traditions.

I argue for the decolonization of time as a key strategy to challenge the racist

⁴³ During this essay, I italicize the term “monster” when used in reference to rhetoric of racialization in order to decenter the term and not confer a normative status to the term within the dynamics of racism.

⁴⁴ Some critical works on aesthetics, justice and theology include: Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); Nichole Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

monstrification of black and brown communities.⁴⁵ First, I establish the role of monstrification in racist, antiblackness discourses publicly disseminated and embodied in U.S. society. Then, I address the significance of naming *coloniality of time* as an imperialist ideology that facilitates the monstrification of otherized communities. I follow up by analyzing how the tactics of monstrification depicted in the film *Get Out* intensifies the horrors and effects of enslavement through the lens of *coloniality of time*. I conclude by demonstrating how the cinematic depiction of the *coloniality of time* strategy in *Get Out* mirrors the ways this historical-philosophical concept further entrenches and sustains educational-legal-economic-political-religious white supremacist ideologies against black lives, especially, in the United States.

RACISM AS MONSTRIFICATION

Monster as a category in racist discourses raises questions of ontology, being. *Monsters* are creatures that defy easy classification and which represent a “threat to ‘conformity to the dominant social norms’” through characteristics and ideologies that exceed society’s understanding of the ‘human’ or ‘nature.’⁴⁶ A specific starting point for this analysis is the recorded testimony of a police officer who defended his action of shooting Michael Brown by describing the teenager as disproportionately larger than himself and that he looked “like a demon.”⁴⁷ In what sense can we analyze the reality that emanates from the usage of *monster* rhetoric? First, one should acknowledge from an academic sense that that racism as monstrification is rooted in historical-material culture that is dynamic and enduring across centuries.

Yet, the individual that attacks racialized citizens with *monster* rhetoric uses such language as if it is ontologically true. There is a material-historical fluidity to the concept, while its usage is codified by the targeting individual as absolute at the moment of its projection unto another being. Ontological violence takes place against the victim precisely because the epistemological-ontological framework of the assailant materializes within the racist act. It is important to identify both analytical possibilities in order to clarify the historical impact of *monster* rhetoric, and, address the significance of the linguistic violence deployed in specific contexts by individuals who internalize and vocalize racist ideologies within ontological frameworks.

As manifested historically, *monster* should be taken as a serious category that exists beyond the individual psyche.⁴⁸ In relation to the topic of racism, *monster* rhetoric develops within historically rooted imaginaries, which extend beyond metaphorical signification while not arriving at an ontology that reifies race biologically.

Our understanding of *monster* is not just a personal metaphor, but constitutive of our personal worldview which has real implications for our behavior and relationships in the physical

⁴⁵ Capitalization of Black, Brown and White takes place when referencing the conceptual ideologies that invest meanings and values to Whiteness or Blackness associated with a hierarchical designation of superiority whereas non-capitalization of the terms is applied when used as an adjective. The terms refer to racialized groups valorized within society based on deeply entrenched material and ideological socio-cultural structures developed over time, not biological-genetic essentialized realities.

⁴⁶ Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” *Robin Wood on the Horror Film*, Robin Wood, Richard Lippe, Barry Keith Grant (Wayne University Press, 2018), 83; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 6.

⁴⁷ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony>

accessed 7/26/2021. [Transcript of: Grand Jury Volume V, Case: State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, Gore Perry Reporting and Video, St. Louis, MO: September 16, 2014, pp. 212, 224-225 \(https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1370569-grand-jury-volume-5.html#document/p216/a189399\)](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1370569-grand-jury-volume-5.html#document/p216/a189399)

⁴⁸ Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7, 13.

world.⁴⁹ The consequences are much more devastating when monstrous rhetoric becomes appropriated and integrated into the frameworks that affect the welfare and security of historically minoritized communities. In agreement with W. Scott Poole, the historical record demonstrates the formative and deeply embedded nature of monster narratives in the U.S. Monsters, Poole asserts,

“are more than the dark side of the human personality or the dark side of popular culture. They are part of the genetic code of the American experience, ciphers that reveal disturbing truths about everything from colonial settlement to the institution of slavery, from anti-immigrant movements to the rise of religious fundamentalism in recent American politics. They are more than fantastical metaphors because they have a history coincident with a national history.”⁵⁰

The historical data reveals the physical impact monster rhetoric inflicts on marginalized populations: *monster* language has justified the marginalization, mutilation, torture and murder of innumerable human beings.⁵¹ There is a material history as a result of *monster* rhetoric in the U.S. Communities directly targeted by the rhetoric of *monster* suffer physical-mental harm and are more likely to be physically traumatized, attacked, or killed by members of the dominant group and their allies.⁵²

Monstrosity in connection to race, on the one hand, is the result of social dynamics, while on the other hand, it exceeds those social dynamics once it is enshrined within structural institutions in society that systematically privileges one group over another. Once embedded within a system of oppression, *monster* rhetoric holds cultural-social power beyond the single individual’s prejudices. Socio-political institutions validate *monster* rhetoric against marginalized individuals and, conversely, *monster* rhetoric can fuel state-sanctioned policies and practices against historically minoritized groups.

On the other hand, *monster* rhetoric deployed by white supremacists invests ontological significance to the term; a racist usage of *monster* rhetoric employs the term as if the target truly embodies a *monster* figure. While racial monstrification proceeds from the minds of oppressive social dominant group members who invest the category with ontological significance, we can analyze the effects of such essentializing racial rhetoric without accepting the claim to ontological certainty.⁵³ Dominant members project ontological significance to their assessment of the racialized individual, as an effort to render her/him/them a *monster*. The racialized individual is depicted as a larger than life threat, and thus becomes designated a *monster*. The normativity of Whiteness takes

⁴⁹ Ibid., 13; Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, “Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language,” in *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980): 453-486.

⁵⁰ W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 18; Slavoj Žižek, “Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach,” in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 86-101; Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 263; Jonathan Lake Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

⁵¹ Pamela A. Patton, *The Art of Estrangement: Redefining Jews in Reconquest Spain* (Penn State Press, 2012); Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp* (Cambridge University Press, 2001): 127-157. Lester D. Friedman, “The Edge of Knowledge: Jews as Monsters/Jews as Victims,” *Melus* 11:3 (1984): 49-62; Elizabeth Young, *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵² According to the FBI 2019, while hate crimes are underreported, statistics on hate crimes reveal anti-White violence victims constitute 16.8%, while victims of anti-Black violence constitute 48.7% <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2019/topic-pages/tables/table-1.xls> (accessed 7/26/2021).

⁵³ The scholar can study the contextualized dimensions of concepts such as sacred, profane and monster; one can study the ways individuals declare their worldviews in society without assenting to claims of ontological significance. See for example, Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, “Semantics and the sacred,” *Religion* 47 (2017): 616-640.

place at the expense of Blackness: “[t]he metaphysical infrastructure that supports the fiction of the white human is sustained by antiblack violence.”⁵⁴ The language of *monster* on this topic must be addressed to acknowledge the enduring trauma and violence against black(ened) and brown(ed) people, which is sanctioned, explicitly or implicitly, by all sectors of society. The racialized individual is monsterified to perpetuate rhetoric and narratives of danger to white citizens.

Ontological language with regard to racial monstrosity must be resisted because it presents the current racial conflicts as inevitable and irresistible. Despite the challenge to ontological discourses on race, white supremacist ideologies operate under assumptions of ontological categories. The view that racial extermination is necessary because of irreconcilable differences is present clearly at the beginning of the U.S. in the writings of Thomas Jefferson.⁵⁵

This particular myth of inevitable racial war-violence has been sustained throughout the history of the U.S. It is borne in Whiteness to reflect the anxieties and will to dominate at the core of Western consciousness. This myth monsterifies black(ened) and brown(ed) bodies and engenders material actions and policies that suppress and immobilize the victimized communities. The reality that produces the racialized *monster* impacts social organization, welfare, and opportunities for minoritized members of the community: the *monster* is real. Historically minoritized members are excluded and relegated to the undesirable spaces.⁵⁶ The monstrification of racialized peoples carries real world implications.

The claim generated that, on account of racialized conflicts in the U.S., the various races will always remain at odds needs to be countered on two grounds: it is untenable because the violence against black and brown individuals is grounded in the historical development of European enslavement of African peoples and the conquest of the Americas; secondly, this claim continues to ontologically support and justify racialized differences and their significations. It is important to recognize “the deeply problematic practice of reducing blackness to a fixed essence or identity.”⁵⁷ By permanently separating peoples through racialized differentiation, it removes the historical contingencies that hold it in place. If racialized differentiation is understood as ontologically permanent, it excludes the discussion from the area of ethics, which requires agency and subjectivity on the part of the agents.

While addressing the contingency of racism against ontological frameworks is necessary, the physical-psychological-emotional trauma exacted on the victimized negates any easy dismissal of the metaphysical claims from such frameworks. As Calvin Warren has demonstrated, it is critical to analyze the categories of blackness and Being because “black being incarnates metaphysical nothing, the terror of metaphysics in an antiblack world.”⁵⁸ Abjection ascribed to black(ened) humanity truly undermines liberal discourses on humanity. While Warren will argue that such abjection is based on the ontological terror of nothingness, Zakiyyah Jackson argues that such abjection “casts black people as ontologically plastic.”⁵⁹ While Warren and Jackson resist and

⁵⁴ Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 54.

⁵⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1783), 147: “Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.”

⁵⁶ Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994); Chiquita A. Collins and David R. Williams, “Segregation and Mortality: The Deadly Effects of Racism?,” *Sociological Forum* 14 (1999): 495-523; Tracey Banivanua Mar, “Belonging to Country: Racialising Space and Resistance on Queensland’s Transnational Margins 1880-1900,” *Australian Historical Studies* (2012): 174-190.

⁵⁷ Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crises of Modernity* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 285.

⁵⁸ Warren, 5.

⁵⁹ Zakiyyah Imani Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 18; Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, translated by Laurent DuBois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 17.

question antiblackness violence through different lenses, they are in agreement that the root cause is found in the unquestioned epistemologies and ontologies grounded in Whiteness.

Thus, it is necessary to recognize the historical foundations of our racialized society, while at the same time attend to the pervasive and complex manifestations of racism through all institutional structures. Addressing the ontological designation of racialized black and brown peoples as *monsters* by white supremacist ideologies is a necessary task. Yet, while the monstrosity of racialization cannot be rendered permanent upon a subject, at the same time, it cannot be moralized alone. The category of *monster* allows us to reflect more critically on the enduring violence of racialized language and avoid reductionist analyses. The legacies of monstrous language remain with us and continue to shape the matrices of relationships people develop in the U.S.

COLONIALITY OF TIME AS A STRATEGY OF RACIAL DOMINATION

Coloniality typically recalls the historical imperial colonial expansion efforts from the fifteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, but as a philosophical concept, coloniality exists deeper than the outward, self-proclaimed national projects of human and territorial subjugation. Coloniality refers to the enduring tactics that preceded the projects of colonialism, and which continue operating without explicit acknowledgment by governments and multinational corporations, but are just as violent and genocidal in nature. As First Nations authors remind us, “war has been the major motif of Indian life over the past five centuries.”⁶⁰ Dominant societies have convinced its citizens that the state no longer practices colonialism, yet subaltern communities personally know the duplicitous nature of such statements. Beyond the initial illegal possession of foreign territory, “settler colonialism as a structure necessarily has to shift and adapt in order to meet the insatiable need of the state for land and resources.”⁶¹ While settler colonialism is distinct from coloniality of power, they share similar patterns and methods.

Coloniality as a theory identifies and questions all tools and mechanisms that undergirded the colonial projects beginning in the fifteenth century, yet continue to be adopted by state powers. Coloniality “has survived these manifestations to establish a global system of power relations relative to knowledge and being.”⁶² At the foundation of the ir-rational justifications for the current world order was the subjugation of black(ened) and brown(ed) communities outside of Europe as lower biological beings in contrast to European citizens.⁶³ Coloniality of power, as developed by Aníbal Quijano refers to the reality that

[a]s a matrix of power, coloniality came to operate in Abya Yala, and subsequently elsewhere, in multiple spheres, exercising control over humanity, subjectivity and being, gender and sexuality, spirituality, knowledge production, economy, nature, existence and life itself.⁶⁴

Coloniality of power is more expansive than just direct physical and military possession of territories and peoples; it identifies the goal of the aggressors, through direct violence or “benevolence,” as aiming to dominate the totality of the subjugated peoples’ being.

⁶⁰ Paula Gunn Allen, *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (New York: Facett Books, 1989), 21.

⁶¹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 46.

⁶² Melissa Pagán, “Cultivating a Decolonial Feminist Integral Ecology: Extractive Zones and the Nexus of the Coloniality of Being/Coloniality of Gender,” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 22 (2020): 7.

⁶³ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1 (2000): 534.

⁶⁴ Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 23; Quijano, 536. Abya Yala is the name of the land given by the Kuna-Tule people from Colombia and Panamá.

Alejandro Vallega builds upon the coloniality of power and being by proposing the *coloniality of time* as tactic that reinforces the coloniality of power. This concept, the *coloniality of time*, is rooted in the fact that various communities operate under multiple time registers.⁶⁵ When the Spaniards and Portuguese invaded the inhabited continent, there was not just a clash over land and wealth, but also times. Europeans imposed their political-economic-military might upon the conquered, but also imposed the domination of time that privileged the conquerors. By imposing a *coloniality of time*, the victimized were stripped of their histories, their past, and denied agency within this new world order, their present and futurity. The Western sensibility of a linear teleology ordering of time is a cultural product to subjugate subaltern communities.

Vallega designates “‘time’ to refer to the broadest fields of experiences of temporalities, while ‘temporality’ refers specifically to the sense of time that arises from the configuration of specific systems of power and knowledge.”⁶⁶ Under Vallega’s model of analysis, ‘time’ refers to a pre-rational sensibility on how we experience the world, while ‘temporality’ refers to the act of shaping time to serve a particular end typically ordered towards the benefit of an agent. In his work, Vallega states that the aim is “to expose the sense of temporality that operates as a fundamental sensibility under the coloniality of power and knowledge, which I will ultimately call the coloniality of time.”⁶⁷

The *ego cogito* and the *ego conquero* at the beginnings of modernity set the parameters for the model and ideal human. This ideal becomes internalized and defended against all non-Europeans. Such internalization ultimately

reduces rationality to a self-recognition that, even in its most critical moments, will affirm and remain committed to the centrality, to the single originality and determining power, of Western thought over all senses of being human and all ways of understanding existence.⁶⁸

All other civilizations, while theoretically recognized, become subsumed and evaluated against Western hegemonic criteria. The present links primarily to past European accomplishments and the potential of future possibilities are based on the prioritized white imaginary. Thus, *coloniality of time* becomes a strategy that facilitates the monstification of racialized individuals excluded from inscription into the timeline and temporality of dominant white exceptionalism.

Religions complicit in the *coloniality of time* strategy sacralize racist, hegemonic rhetoric, policies, and violence against minoritized communities. The historical links between colonial and missionary violence demand that religious groups, Christians particularly in the U.S., evaluate the ways their religious narratives and practices operate under the epistemic-ontological frameworks of coloniality in the current moment. While white, Eurocentric Christians publicly acknowledge the category of sin with regard to racism, many still minimize the overpowering effects of racism.⁶⁹

The following analysis on the monstification of racialized individuals through the lens of *coloniality of time* reveals the impotency of some religious responses that do not fully account for the traumatizing effects of systemic racism. In order to identify and resist deployments of *coloniality of time* through the monstrous, decolonizing *time* is an essential task to continue the difficult work of dismantling white supremacist tactics of oppression in order to advance philosophical-religious responses rooted in antiracist foundations.

⁶⁵ Alejandro A. Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 101.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁹ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010): “Race is far from being an insignificant reality in American life. It remains our deepest national obsession; it is still a principal and all too often decisive lens through which we filter our perception and understanding of the world. We continue to live in a highly racialized society, that is, ‘a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships,’” 8.

U.S. RACIALIZED HISTORY AND THE MONSTROUS

Some individuals have justified, through the media and the legal system, the killings of unarmed black men through discourses that distort and deny their humanity via narratives that attributed beast-like qualities to the victims. Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who shot and killed an unarmed Michael Brown on August 2014, described the encounter as follows:

“And when I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a 5 year old holding onto Hulk Hogan...and [he] had the most intense aggressive face, the only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked.”⁷⁰

Wilson, an adult police officer, feels justified in dramatizing the confrontation to portray himself as an innocent, childish victim at the mercy of an oversized, violent, demonic being despite the fact that his confrontation was with a high school graduate ten years his junior. By claiming his self-image as a child, “he appropriates for himself the child’s innocence, offering himself as someone in need of saving, as well as casting Brown as a more-than-child, more-than-(hu)man figure.”⁷¹ To begin thinking critically on the real life experiences of racism whereby individuals are rendered monstrous in order to gain, at best, sympathy from the public and, at least, engender doubt among the majority, one cannot ignore the discourses of savageness that have been used to further the causes of colonial and neocolonial agendas in U.S. history.

Darren Wilson’s statement is consistent with the historical rendering of black and brown bodies as monstrous throughout U.S. history. The tactic of monsterifying black(ened) and brown(ed) citizens by dominant, white society in the U.S. goes back to the beginnings of the violent colonial project and chattel slavery. It continued through the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass appealed to monstrification of the enslaved within the U.S. system as a way to reclaim the humanity of black enslaved peoples from the authoritative judgment and practices of white peoples.⁷² Douglass intends to subvert the enslavement apparatus by naming how practices linked to enslavement monsterified black peoples. Prior to the disclosure of the actual details of the 1870 Marias River Massacre of Blackfeet Nation peoples by U.S. military units that came to light, the *Helena Daily Herald* defended the commanding officer, “General Sheridan ordered men to hunt them down, just as we hunt down wolves. When caught in camp they were slaughtered, very much as we slaughter other wild beasts, when we get the chance.”⁷³ In both these instances, one in the name of rehumanizing enslaved people and the other in dehumanizing Blackfeet peoples, animalistic monstrous language is taken as normalized.

Animality and monstrosity are two separate categories that deserve more attention because animality does not always imply monstrosity. Animality does not immediately equate with

⁷⁰ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony> accessed 7/26/2021. Transcript of: Grand Jury Volume V, Case: State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson, Gore Perry Reporting and Video, St. Louis, MO: September 16, 2014, pp. 212, 224-225 (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1370569-grand-jury-volume-5.html#document/p216/a189399>)

⁷¹ Robert Larue, “Holding onto Hulk Hogan: Contending with the Rape of the Black Male Psyche,” *Jordan Peele’s Get Out: Political Horror*, edited by Dawn Keetley (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020): 175.

⁷² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: 1845), 63-64: “O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute.”

⁷³ https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/sunday/blackfeet-remember-montana-s-greatest-indian-massacre/article_daca1094-4484-11e1-918e-001871e3ce6c.html Accessed 7/26/2021.

monstrosity. Monster categorizations as such can carry a large range of significations,⁷⁴ which can exceed humanity as much as represent a debased form of humanity.

With regard to racism, language of animality applied to humans creates a new category of being that serves the role of a threatening *monster* in racist discourses. Applying the terms *beasts*, *brute* and *wolves* among others on racialized human communities projects unto the racialized a new way of being that is no longer simply human, but it is neither a different animal species.⁷⁵ The individual has now been reified into the discourse as a hybrid creature no longer simply human. The being becomes a “fusion figure [who] is a composite that unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in *unambiguously* one, spatiotemporally discrete entity.”⁷⁶ The language applied to racialized groups signifies a new form of hybrid existence that threatens the security of white citizens; the individual is rendered monstrous and deserving of exclusion, abuse and extermination.

The concepts of humanity and animality are biopolitical realities, neither strictly demarcated through biology, nor culture. Black scholars across political borders have addressed the reality that “all must define themselves in a globalizing antiblack order that raises ‘the animal question’ as ultimately an existential one.”⁷⁷ Statements across time reveal the racist assumptions that “black people are animals occupying the human,” that blackness represents “*the emblematic state of animal man, as the nadir of the human.*”⁷⁸ When abject animality is imbued into human populations, the resulting representation recreates humanity into a monstrous agent of terror.

One important link of this historical manifestation of racist narratives resides in a sensational play in the early nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, the play that inspired D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, *The Clansman*, portrayed black men as beasts. A theater critic declared that Thomas Dixon Jr.’s play conveyed the message: “‘Hate the Negro; he is a beast; his intention is to rob and murder and pollute; he should be transported or annihilated.’”⁷⁹ Another critic in Virginia observed the dynamics of the performance between the stage presentation and the audience, “‘But between the audience and that black shadow, sneaking with the quiet and caution of a beast of prey, there is a child—a white child. The act is called ‘In the Claws of the Beast.’”⁸⁰ This portrayal of the black man as beastly and predatory of white citizens—especially the threat against the white child resonates with Darren Wilson’s own self-portrayal—was intended to move the audiences toward a state of fear and panic that their lives are under threat.

In the subsequent film adaptation of the play, *Birth of a Nation*, an actor in blackface depicts the black man as a threat to the virginal purity of the white woman. The character Gus is characterized as a military black man who incessantly pursues and stalks a white woman, Flora. When Gus encounters Flora alone in the woods, the film presentation and techniques convey an

⁷⁴ Michael Heyes, “Domestication in the Theater of the Monstrous: Reexamining Monster Theory,” *Journal of Gods and Monsters* 1 (2020): 36-54.

⁷⁵ There have been some philosophical reflections on ‘beast’ language in connection to racism, but a few studies have reflected on the link between humans and animality. Some studies look at animality from a non-threatening perspective to investigate human distinctiveness from other species: Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1995); G. E. R Lloyd, “Humanity between Gods and Beasts? Ontologies in Question,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17 (2011): 829-845. Zakiyya Jackson, *Becoming Humans*, articulates a powerful resistance to the *human* as a category that stands in opposition to the *animal* in Western liberal humanist traditions.

⁷⁶ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 43.

⁷⁷ Jackson, 34.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁹ The State (Columbia), October 9, 23, 1905 as quoted in John Hammond Moore, “South Carolina’s Reaction to the Photoplay, *The Birth of a Nation*,” in *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (Charleston, South Carolina Historical Association (Charleston: South Carolina Historical Association, 1931: XXXIII, 32-33 cited in “The Clansman on Stage and Screen: North Carolina Reacts” by John C. Inscoc, *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 64 (1987): 143

⁸⁰ John A. Morosco, ‘The Clansman,’ *Public Ledger*, Norfolk, and ‘Race Line in ‘Clansman’, in *Richmond and Manchester News Leader*, Richmond, Virginia, September 23, 1905 in “Restirring and Old Pot: Adaptation, Reception and the Search for an Audience in Thomas Dixon’s Performance Text(s) of *The Clansman*” by Stephen Johnson, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* (Winter 2007): 17.

experience of transformation, “from human to beast—in a metamorphosis from normality to abnormality.”⁸¹ As Regester notes, through the cinematic representation of the threat to white female purity, the film “chose to represent blackness as a threat to the safety of whiteness, embodied in the preservation of the white South—blackness must be excised in order for the white South to exist and reclaim its position of power.”⁸² As Michael Rogin declares, this particular trope of black maleness interlocked with sexual deviancy as threat is a violent, white supremacist power tactic against black males and white women: “White supremacists invented the black rapist to keep white women in their place.”⁸³ Racial and gendered subjugations are interconnected.

The play’s popularity decreases within a decade,⁸⁴ but the monstrous narratives it engendered were transmitted and captured through the film *Birth of A Nation*. Some rejected the brazen racism publicly, but many also held on to the implicit criminalization narrative of black men in private. This is evident continually through narratives in U.S. history all the way to the present where black male criminality and inhumanity remains unquestioned by dominant white society and internalized by some peoples of color.⁸⁵ Tommy Curry points out the resulting dominating narrative that claims the black male ontologically “to be malicious and contrary to civility, so he exists as the physical manifestation of evil—bestial—where any violence imaginable becomes a possible action or atrocity that a Black male would commit.”⁸⁶ Such one-dimensional, deadly visions target the very being and challenge the existence of brown and black individuals.

It is not a coincidence that, whether consciously or unconsciously, former officer Darren Wilson chose to appropriate the language of the monstrous to elicit sympathy from the public. As sociological studies demonstrate, Wilson is not alone in portraying black and brown male bodies as disproportionately massive in size and threat.⁸⁷ It is clear that his chosen imagery is targeting the sympathies of the dominant, white members of his community. The appeal of racial distress is a recurring tactic to elicit emotions of terror on the listener and emotions of sympathy for his supposedly terrifying ordeal.

There is a legitimate need to delve further on the ways that the monstrous resides within the dehumanizer, but in this initial exploration, the focus is on how the monsterified victim continues to be targeted in U.S. society.⁸⁸ Critically identifying the strategies of oppression is crucial in order to

⁸¹ Charlene Regester, “The Cinematic Representation of Race in ‘The Birth of a Nation: A Black Horror Film’ in *Thomas Dixon Jr. and the Birth of Modern America* edited by Michele K. Gillespie and Randal L. Hall (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2009), 170. See also the analysis by Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 11-17.

⁸² Regester, 166.

⁸³ Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*” in *The Birth of a Nation*, ed. Robert Lang (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 267.

⁸⁴ Insoe, 155.

⁸⁵ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 165-168.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 167. As Julia Kristeva points out, “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (“Approaching Abjection” in *The Monster Theory Reader* edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 96.

⁸⁷ Colin Holbrook, Daniel Fessler, and Carlos David Navarrete, “Looming Large: Racial Stereotypes Illuminate Dual Adaptations for Representing Threat versus Prestige as Physical Size,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37 (2016): 67-78.

⁸⁸ It is important to acknowledge that prophetic voices have attempted to subvert and redirect language of monstrosity towards the oppressor. Frederick Douglass denounced chattel slavery as a monstrous institution. While we tend to focus on the attacks leveled by the dominant colonial-settler descendants, the marginalized declare the institutions and people participating in slavery as monstrous. Douglass called out slavery as the *monster* and demonic beast sanctioned by the U.S.: “The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels’ robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: 1845), 120; In “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” delivered on July 5, 1852 Douglass declared: “Oh! Be warned! Be warned! A horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creation is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; for the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous monster, and

craft the decolonizing strategies that can undermine the tactics of oppression and dehumanization.

Despite the ideals upheld in the rhetoric at the beginning of the U.S., the nation was built through the trafficking of humans and exploitation of peoples of color, and there is a persistent impetus to eliminate such designated individuals—physically, economically, culturally, emotionally—when the possibility of integration appears on the horizon. Monstrosity in this sense aligns with Jeremy Cohen’s observation that “[r]epresenting an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic.”⁸⁹ While Cohen aligns this observation with the abuse against First Nations peoples, it is applicable to similar dynamics in all foundational events in the U.S. connected to the peoples of Africa, China and Mexico. Once the particular demand that fueled exploitation of non-whites decreases, U.S. institutions adopt policies and actions to deny the peoples’ humanity and implement policies to displace, disempower and eliminate the minoritized communities.⁹⁰ The film *Get Out* provides a cinematic representation that embodies the experience of displacement, exploitation, and eradication of the black subject.

MONSTERS, RACISM, *COLONIALITY OF TIME* in *GET OUT*

Some mainstream films have explored the horror of racism enacted against members of black and brown communities. *Get Out* (2017) in particular “recalls the memory of slavery, while projecting contemporary ignorance and racism that persist in American culture and society under the guise of neoliberalism.”⁹¹ All individuals must wrestle with the forces that propel and sustain a racist *modus operandi* in society while experiencing a transfiguration that descends into the monstrous.

A key insight in *Get Out* is found in its depiction of the *sunken place*. The *sunken place* provides a visual depiction of racialized individuals targeted and monsterified through displacement in space and time. I contend, against some theological interpretations, that robust theological readings of the film cannot minimize or rationalize the concept of the *sunken place* because such readings fail to take into account the overpowering insidiousness of racism.⁹² They fail to produce effective means of resistance to the violence inherent in racism. *Get Out* fleshes out through visual storytelling how minoritized peoples are systematically disempowered through words, emotional manipulation and physical aggression.⁹³ The film reveals by the end how a malevolent family systematically disarms their victims through verbal microaggressions, emotional manipulation

let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!”). Douglass called out one of his enslavers “savage monster” in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 5.

⁸⁹ Cohen, 8.

⁹⁰ State sanctioned policies such as Indian Removal Act (1830), Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), Jim Crow laws, Operation Wetback (1954).

⁹¹ Melba Joyce Boyd, “Double Entendre and Double Consciousness in the Cinematic Construct of *Get Out*,” *Black Renaissance Noire* (Fall 2018): 43; Jada Yuan and Hunter Harris, “The First Great Movie of the Trump Era,” *New York Magazine*, February 19-March 4 (2018): 34; Michael Jarvis, “Anger Translator: Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11 (April 2018): 98.

⁹² There are few analyses within religious-theological publications. I am engaging the available analyses by Delonte Gholson, “‘*Get Out*’ Contains a Theological Lesson that is Easy to Miss,” *Relevant Magazine* (March 6, 2018): <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/get-contains-theological-lesson-easy-miss/>; Lawrence Rodgers, “#GetOut of Sunken Place Theology,” *Patheos* (March 9, 2017): <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rhetoricraceandreligion/2017/03/get-out-of-sunken-place-theology-html> Accessed: 7/12/2021; Kenji Kuramitsu, “The Theology of Suspicion: What ‘*Get Out*’ Can Teach White Christians,” *Sojourns* (March 17, 2017): <https://sojo.net/articles/theology-suspicion-what-get-out-can-teach-white-christians> Accessed: 7/26/2021.

⁹³ While the film *Get Out* subversively re-presents to the viewer the monstrosity of racism, I explore how the representation of the *Sunken Place* reflects the power dynamics of monstrosification from the perspective of white dominant oppressors. From a minoritized perspective, the horror is the act of being categorized and treated as an aberration of the “norm” of humanity and thus monsterified. From a minoritized perspective, being rendered a ‘monster’ is the true horror whereas the dominant whites unquestioningly label the racialized-other ‘monster’ in ways that support and regenerate the structures which ensure their social dominance. The monstrosification of racism and white supremacy could be further explored with Annalee Newitz’ insights on *The Birth of a Nation in Pretend We’re Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press 2006): 101-105.

based on personal tragedies, and finally through physical aggression and anti-ethical medical experimentation.

While the film exposes the *monster* as systemic, institutionalized racism to the ethical viewer, I analyze how the actual actions of willing and unwilling participants monsterify the racialized individual within the narratives of the dominant members of a society.⁹⁴ The film exposes the true monster, yet it is by subverting the ways black individuals are first monsterified by the aggressors. This analysis aims to unpack the consistent historical record where racism continues to be adopted as a viable and persuasive option by dominant whites despite the incongruence with general liberal-humanistic ethical statements that repudiate inequalities within the human race.

Jordan Peele's *Get Out* begins with an interracial couple—a black boyfriend and white girlfriend—preparing to meet the woman's parents for the first time at a remote lake house.⁹⁵ Chris, the male protagonist, is a professional photographer who experiences awkward racial microaggressions and conversations with his white in-laws and their black employees. The twist in the film occurs as an extended family annual reunion takes place during the weekend visit. The family guests are actually gathering to place auction bids to purchase the body of Chris in order that one of them may transmigrate their brains into his body. In the twist of the film, *Get Out* is a film of resistance that inverts the legacies of *Birth of a Nation* by transposing the *monster* threat figure from the black male to the white female, the white family.⁹⁶

The main character discovers that his girlfriend and her immediate family have developed a brain surgery operation to transmigrate the consciousness of the elder white aggressor into the body of a young black victim. The emphasis on this procedure, as developed by the secret white society, is based on their understanding of time as a reality that is meant to serve them. The *coloniality of time* strategy here becomes expressed in the desire of extending their own life expectancy through any means necessary. For the community in the film, this extension of life is directly dependent on the deprivation of the black subject's own autonomy and futurity: the black subject is displaced from their own body both in space and time.

The monstrification of the black body here is realized by the valuation of their corporeality as useful through the rejection of their full personhood and individuality. The haunting dissonance is clear when members of the extended family express their perceived understanding of African American life as a life of comfort, and renewed acceptance in society. Yet, for the white characters, through their actual praxis, African Americans are valued solely based on the benefit that they provide to the trafficking buyer.⁹⁷ By extricating the idealized physical qualities from the full personhood of black Americans, the minoritized individual is denied coexistence with the dominant whites within the same time continuum, temporality.

The film introduces the *sunken place* as the location in the human psyche that remains to be colonized. In the *sunken place* the individual is excluded from participation in time by the loss of their motor skills. The victimized is also displaced in space because they are no longer able to rightfully occupy their own body. The *sunken place* refers to a moment in the film when Chris is hypnotized by his supposed mother in law. The family prepares their victims by first hypnotizing

⁹⁴ Karen Idelson, "A View to Thrill," *Variety* (February 8, 2018): 24; quoting Jordan Peel, "As I was writing the movie, the more I realized the monster is the system at play."; Yuan and Harris, 30; quoting Jordan Peele, "The bad guy is society..."; Michael Lane, "Living in the Sunken Place: An Analysis of 'Get Out,'" April 20, 2018:

<https://lewislitjournal.wordpress.com/2018/04/20/living-in-the-sunken-place-an-analysis-of-get-out/> Accessed: 7/26/2021.

⁹⁵ While the interracial relationship can be analyzed more in depth, the relevant point for this analysis is that, while the white girlfriend will turn out to be the aggressor, the premise of this relationship exploits prejudicial judgments against black men that will be subverted through the finale of the film.

⁹⁶ This is a fascinating contribution by the film that deserves further study on its own in order to analyze monstrosity at the intersections of race and gender relations in U.S. history. Boyd, 37, connects the film's interracial theme to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), starring Sidney Poitier, which adds another layer for inquiry. Boyd also provides an initial analysis of Rose, the girlfriend, on page 41.

⁹⁷ Boyd, 36. Lane 2018: "...Peele lambastes our society's objectification of black bodies and white people's damning appropriation of black culture."; Jarvis, 100.

them to debilitate their ability to resist prior to the moment of the surgery. Through hypnotization, Chris is paralyzed physically. While visually Chris can still experience reality, he is unable to respond (in the film, the event is represented by showing the body of Chris eternally free falling down into a dark abyss away from access to his vision periphery and unable to control his motor abilities). The *sunken place* “is an intensification of ‘double consciousness,’ where the person is helplessly trapped, experiencing a world from afar, while suffering within.”⁹⁸

The *sunken place* is a state of paralysis where his consciousness retains awareness, but he is incapable of responding or resisting. The *sunken place* stands in for the reality of the dispossession of one’s own being, and agency while self-witnessing the trauma inflicted on the body, mind and soul as victim.⁹⁹ Monstrification through the *sunken place* occurs by the separation and dislocation of Chris from his own body through the experience of powerlessness and exploitation. The victim is stripped of voice and the power to resist the violation of her own freedom and bodily autonomy. As Wilkinson notes, “*Get Out* draws on the visceral experience of being objectified or colonized by another consciousness.”¹⁰⁰ Again, the Black subject is denied free, personal agency to respond within chronological time with the white subject. In the end, a new hybrid is introduced where the white mind resides in a black body.

Eurocentric Christian theologies in the U.S. bear a specific responsibility on the dehumanization of peoples because of its complicity in the larger trans-Atlantic slave trafficking and colonial abuses. While not fully recognized by current Christian religious analysis of the film, taking seriously the *sunken place* as reflective of the debilitating and traumatic experiences of powerlessness and violence against the racialized victim is the main task of a robust understanding of oppression. Delonte Gholson provides an important critique of the failures by U.S. Christianity in its complicity, directly and indirectly, in the exploitation of black communities, but Gholson’s emphasis on the link between abusive anti-somatic theology to *sunken-place* theology shifts the focus from the victim to the victimizer. All of a sudden, the victimizer becomes the one in the *sunken place* who must *get out*; this interpretation unintentionally recenters whiteness.¹⁰¹

Lawrence Rodgers considers the theological significance of the *sunken place* by asking the reader to question whether a “theological teaching bring[s] further oppression to myself or my community or does it bring liberation?”¹⁰² While Rodgers reflects deeply on the violent and destructive nature of the *sunken place* as bearing both physical and cultural death, the final takeaway, which ignores the systematic nature of oppression, renders analysis of the *sunken place* as limited to the human will.

Both readings fail to take seriously the disproportionate violence inflicted on the racialized body; both readings minimize the impact of the *sunken place* metaphor by linking it too closely to the oppressor or the victim’s will. They become reductive interpretations that moralize the monstrification of the victim and fail to take into account how the *monster* transgresses beyond individualistic renderings of racism. In the *sunken place*, the *monster* is now attached to dynamic webs of oppression beyond the control of any one individual.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 39: “The view of the world from Sunken Place is like a view through a telephoto lens that extends the human eye and frames a scene in the distance. But unlike photography whereby Chris controls the mechanism of the camera, The Sunken Place is like a space of suspended animation.”

⁹⁹ Yuan and Harris, 34: quoting Tananarive Due, “...he realized that it represented the prison-industrial complex.”; Boyd, 39, 41-42; Lane 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Alissa Wilkinson, “*Get Out* is a horror film about benevolent racism,” Vox (February 25, 2017): <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/2/24/14698632/get-out-review-jordan-peepe> Accessed: 7/26/2021.

¹⁰¹ Gholson, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/get-contains-theological-lesson-easy-miss/>: “Sunken-place theology is a theology that separates the key matters of the soul from the equally important matters of the body, and in America it privileges a soul-obsessed gnostic Christian whiteness over a biblical Christian witness. Thus any theology that is concerned about a person’s soul but could leave their bodies trafficked and sold is a sunken-place theology...To a sunken-place theology rooted in white supremacy, Jesus says get out. To those who exchanged the cross of Christ for a lynching tree or police brutality, Jesus says get out,” Accessed: 7/26/2021.

¹⁰² Rodgers, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rhetoricraceandreligion/2017/03/get-out-of-sunken-place-theology-html> Accessed: 7/26/2021.

Another commentary from a religious angle argues that the presentation of the *sunken place* serves as a salutary warning: “Approaching white people with a deep awareness of the harm they are prone to inflict can better prepare people of color to resist all manner of physical and psychological violence.”¹⁰³ Kuramitsu rightly recognizes the insights from the *sunken place* in connection to white domination and subjugation of black and brown people. Kuramitsu arrives closer to the larger point that the violence is real, persistent, personal, communal, and often overpowering.

I contend that it is crucial to not undermine the sinister intentionality that undergirds the *sunken-place* at the hands of the oppressor and through systemic policies across institutional social structures. While some theological analyses make valid points, their focus of placing the onus on the victim misses the larger point of the concept. The significance of the *sunken place* lies precisely in the violence and debilitating effects from institutionalized structures and practices against the racialized victim that renders them unresponsive within the confines of historical time. The victimized are denied agency in spaces and times where their humanity is denied.

COLONIALITY OF TIME: STRATEGY OF MARGINALIZATION, DISPLACEMENT AND DOMINATION

Discourses based on premises linked to *coloniality of time*, coined by Alejandro A. Vallega, legitimize and support the domination and subjugation of minoritized communities. Strategies based on defending sanitized re-tellings of history, linear based teleologies, pro conquering apologetics, criminalization or imputation of immorality unto an entire ethnic-racial group, erasure of the victimized, and indifference to the plight of the minoritized enable and justify the monstrification of the racialized subject. Racial monstrification discourses rely on the domination of time.

The emphasis on time, *coloniality of time*, stands as a core strategy of monstrification. The representation of time as a linear movement with “white progress” as the hallmark identifier renders void the experience of marginalized peoples. Such narratives are founded on

“teleologies of progress that rank economic practices and political institutions, making it impossible to imagine coexistence and harmony or even come to terms with the implications of the fact that there are multiple temporalities co-existing in interdependent relation to one another.”¹⁰⁴

The movement of “progress” is tied to narratives of dueling groups and conquest by dominant white peoples. The conditioning of the dominant group in society through narratives of victorious conquest at all generational levels perpetuates supremacist ideologies that monsterify minoritized black and brown individuals.

The elevation of sanitized discourses through a virtuous, nationalistic lens prohibits others from questioning their legitimacy. Vallega points out that the “West as a principle of universalization recognizes itself in advancing over the other in a continuous expansion.”¹⁰⁵ The winners are rendered virtuous and the conquered deficient in moral character and human capabilities. The conquered fail to live up to the moving goalpost set by the conquerors, are considered less than as humans, and end up being projected as monstrous obstacles within the sanctioned and sanitized

¹⁰³ Kuramitsu, <https://sojo.net/articles/theology-suspicion-what-get-out-can-teach-white-christians> Accessed: 7/26/2021.

¹⁰⁴ Linda Martín Alcoff, “Vallega, Dussel, and Radical Exteriority,” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* 8:2 (2017), 14.

¹⁰⁵ Alejandro A. Vallega, “Towards a Situated Liberatory Aesthetic Thought,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 9:2 (2017): 189.

historical record of the victors. Later, the state of affairs is justified as the natural reality and no action is taken to rectify and reconcile the effects of such actions because under the banner of “progress” society has moved on. *Progress* functions to both justify the actions of dominant whites, and negate redress of injustices.

Through the philosophical lens of the *coloniality of time*, it becomes clear that marginalization and desecration of the racialized individual is connected to the will-to-dominate inherited from centuries old colonial practices in our continent. Euro-western temporalities are dependent on specific tropes developed to enshrine and preserve the superiority of European ways of reasoning, living and governing. This artificial understanding of self-identity, presented as neutrally objective, is not based on logical argumentation but rather on a “...specific sensibility grounded on the temporality that accompanies the ordering of existence under the coloniality of power and knowledge” (2014b, 103).¹⁰⁶ Through the lens of power, the *ego conquero* becomes the dominant arbiter of truth. Truth becomes that which is told from the perspective of the dominant, victorious group. Euro-western intellectual descendants take for granted that history is written by the winners, and uncritically accept that such results are “natural.” There is no room to consider setbacks, mistakes, or failures. Discourses based on the *coloniality of time* strategy are committed to controlling the narrative and resisting multiplicity of narratives.

If the conqueror is morally justified in domination and continued subjugation of racialized individuals, the dominant group feels compelled to craft a narrative to support their dominance. The racialized individual is precluded from participating in the linear narrative of “progress” espoused by the colonial dominant. The racialized individual is relegated to the sphere of death—the non-living. The dominant group, labeled as *homo oeconomicus* by Sylvia Winter, preserves their status by the “consolidation of the figure of the racialized Other as symbolic death.”¹⁰⁷ The racialized individual is rendered monstrous—living dead, an abject outcast—by the dominant group. In order to justify such exclusion, totalizing narratives are created to rationalize the marginalization of the otherized individual.

Narratives linked to the *coloniality of time* strategy reify the subordinated groups through pro conquering apologetics of innocence. With regard to African Americans in the U.S., the dominant group must assert that “Black males—specifically, heterosexual Black males—exist, then, as the depository of other’s negativity, the scapegoats for all social and ethical ills in America.”¹⁰⁸ In the *coloniality of time* strategies, we see historically how problems in society are projected upon marginalized communities. Narratives based on pro conquering apologetics of innocence present a linear narrative where minoritized groups simply exist to interrupt and derail progress; narratives from minoritized groups that challenge the dominant group are not valid.

Specifically, the *coloniality of time* strategy facilitates the criminalization of minoritized peoples. For African Americans in particular, “barbaric caricatures of Black maleness are historically salient in the minds of scholars and policy makers precisely because they are thought of as the same figures throughout the centuries—the rapists and killers of women.”¹⁰⁹ Through the willful neglect to analyze the social realities of institutional racism, U.S. rhetoric primarily associates crime with non-white populations in a static time continuum. The historical and persistent legacies of housing-living segregation are never part of the conversation. Thus, since

“racialized bodies are confined to inhumane living conditions that nurture

¹⁰⁶ Omar Rivera, “Reading Alejandro Vallega Toward a Decolonial Aesthetics,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 9 (2017): 163; (Vallega 2014b, 103); Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas* (1995) and “Anti-Cartesian Meditations” (2014). “This co-determination between sensibility and temporality is the “coloniality of time.” It is constituted through a linear historical *narrative* attached to the image of the conquerors of the Americas and its corresponding mode of subjectivity, the *ego conquero*” (Dussel 1995, 2014).

¹⁰⁷ Tiffany N. Tsantsoulas, “Sylvia Wynter’s Decolonial Rejoinder to Judith Butler’s Ethics of Vulnerability,” *Symposium* 22:2 (2018): 167.

¹⁰⁸ Curry 2017, 167.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

violence and despair that become attributed to the savage nature of nonwhites and evidence of their inhumanity, the deaths of these dehumanized peoples are often measured against the dangers they are thought to pose to others.”¹¹⁰

While monsters are not the strict opposite of dehumanized peoples, dehumanization enables the monstrification of minoritized peoples. Monstrification becomes the preferred tactic precisely because empirically, there is no absolute correlation between genetics and race; there is no absolute genetic distinction between dominant and non-dominant group members. The political-ethical ramification of dehumanization of the human “other” renders non-dominant members incapable of belonging as equals within society. The otherized groups are labeled as uncivilized, amorphous, hybrid abnormalities that transgress the boundaries of humanity and exist within a separate category that is more closely aligned with the violent hybrid monstrous. *Coloniality of time*, as a strategy, codifies the dominant-based-imposed reality unto an entire people and denies them their humanity by censoring non-criminalized narratives from the community that is monsterified or contemporary narratives of their diversity.

Finally, in these narratives the racialized outcast is denied any place in the future of the country. The denial of futurity is experienced through the exclusion in socio-political participation in the governance of society and, most powerfully, state sanctioned violence and death. As Tommy Curry notes, “Black male death places Black men and boys within a horizon of finality. They are confined to the present by the denial of futurity.”¹¹¹ Thus, we can see how the racialized other is one whose survival and integration cannot be envisioned by the dominant group.

In the film *Get Out*, Jordan Peele, the screenwriter and director, had intended to conclude his film emphasizing that the black hero never has a chance of succeeding in advocating for his right to life. Peele had intended to conclude his film *Get Out* with the main character picked up by law enforcement agents and facing the criminal justice system. Peele’s vision intended to portray the futility and persistence of antiblackness in U.S. society, but the ending did not play well with test audiences.¹¹²

The original ending, argues Ryan Poll, “is the true ending—the ending that stays with the philosophy of Afro-pessimism.”¹¹³ It is the ending that affirms the Afro-pessimists’ warning “against narrative fantasies that seek to escape the foundational truth that capitalist/colonial modernity is predicated on black slavery.”¹¹⁴ It is in Peele’s original ending that Afro-pessimism’s philosophy and *coloniality of time* are most palpably experienced, yet Peele is unable to deliver that particular vision precisely because it clashes with the neoliberal capitalist interests of Hollywood. Peele had to contend with the forces linked to the *coloniality of time* as his vision was threatened.¹¹⁵

The monstrosity projected unto black(ened) and brown(ed) bodies throughout the colonial history of empire in the United States is based partly on this intransigent defense of a linear narrative, linked to Manifest Destiny, as onward progress. If this image of progress is attached to Whiteness, then anything ascribed to non-Whiteness cannot share in the narrative and must be rendered monstrous. There is a deep sacralization of time in connection to Whiteness in the national identity of the U.S., that whenever it is threatened, the response is to monsterify the racialized citizen. Thus, the *coloniality of time* serves as one dimension that needs to be deconstructed continuously to challenge narratives of racialized monstrification and the persistence of racism in our society.

¹¹⁰ Tommy J. Curry and Gwenetta Curry, “On the Perils of Race Neutrality and Anti-Blackness: Philosophy as an Irreconcilable Obstacle to (Black) Thought,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77 (2018): 658.

¹¹¹ Curry 2017, 185.

¹¹² Yuan and Harris, 33.

¹¹³ Ryan Poll, “Can One ‘Get Out?’ The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 51 (2018): 93.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹¹⁵ One may consider Peele’s alternate ending as an act of capitulation, but historically marginalized peoples should not bear full blame for the results in a system that operates under frameworks steeped in racism.

The *sunken place* in *Get Out* replicates the domination that takes place through *the coloniality of time* on black subjects. The mother-in-law hypnotizes her victims by tapping her sugar spoon to her teacup, which triggers the descent of the subject into the *sunken place*.¹¹⁶ The victimized becomes paralyzed and dis-abled at the tap of a spoon. The monstrification of the racialized subject results in a new *monster* when their body becomes ruled by the white mind. Such form of domination is at the heart of the colonial enslavement project that continues to haunt the U.S. A dimension of the efforts to disenfranchise minoritized groups is rooted in ideologies that employ the *coloniality of time* strategy where brown and black people are denied genuine participation in the present initiatives to build, reform, or replace the relevant socio-political structures.

Any philosophical-religious vision that seeks to become antiracist must resist and challenge the monstrification of black(ened) and brown(ed) through *coloniality of time* frameworks. Theological and philosophical reflection cannot dismiss the overpowering effects that result from racist tactics of oppression. Any such reflection is not authentic, and ultimately is deficient because it fails to account for the socio-political realities of marginalized communities. For philosophical-religious scholars, anti-racist frameworks cannot coexist with strategies of *coloniality of time*; genuine anti-racist, decolonial efforts—in all religions—must disrupt it to advance coequal and dialogical spaces and times committed to the liberation of all. These spaces have been forged in black and brown communities since the first acts of resistance against land theft and enslavement in the Americas, yet they have been historically marginalized.

Decolonization of time is one of the tasks that must take place in the work of dismantling racist hegemonic rhetoric and structures. *Coloniality of time* is an intentional, targeted strategy of domination that erases agency and diversity of historically minoritized communities. The *coloniality of time* strategy further supports arguments that racism in our society is not based solely on reason but is an oppressive anti-ethical strategy. In this model, racism is not irrational, it is anti-rational. Deconstructing the *coloniality of time* strategy yields important insights when considering how racist tropes from enslavement to a play in the early twentieth century of monsterified black men threatening white children resurface violently in Darren Wilson as the police officer who shot an unarmed Michael Brown through the second decade of the twenty first century.

¹¹⁶ Boyd, 39, notes the link of tea drinking with Southern gentility.

When Monsters Walked the Earth: Giants, Monster Theory, and the Reformulation of Textual Traditions in the Enochic *Book of the Watchers*

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Abstract: This article examines an Early Jewish text entitled the *Book of the Watchers* that is part of a larger work known as *1 Enoch*. The *Book of the Watchers* offers a vivid and disturbing portrait of the excessive violence on earth that led to the flood, attributing the situation to destructive giants. *Watchers* expands and interprets the account of the crisis that precipitated the flood in Gen 6:1-4. Comparison of the two texts demonstrates that *Watchers* in particular expands the description in Genesis 6 of the giants (sons of the angels) and the violence they perpetrate. Exegesis, however, alone cannot explain this phenomenon. Appeal to monster studies can help us better understand the issue. This article argues that the retelling of the flood story in the *Book of the Watchers* was popular in ancient Judaism because it offers a compelling construction of the known world, and social customs that are normative within it—including a prohibition against murder and the delineation of norms regarding of food—by offering a shocking description of the antediluvian world, before divine regulations regarding such behavior were promulgated. The heinous and cannibalistic violence of the antediluvian era as presented in the *Book of the Watchers* helps justify the current (post-diluvian) order by presenting a coherent account of how it came into being in a way that legitimates God’s dominion over it. The essay also explores how attending to the theme of the monstrous can provide insight into the *Book of the Watchers* in relation to older mythic traditions embedded in Genesis 1 and the Babylonian creation poem, the *Enuma Elish*. The article also contends that *Watchers*’ reformulation of the flood story with its heightened monstrosity can be profitably explained against the backdrop of cultural anxieties that were pervasive during the Hellenistic era during which it was written.

Keywords: Exegesis, Cannibalism, monster theory, Giants, *1 Enoch*, *Book of the Watchers*

The *Book of the Watchers* offers a disturbing account of life on earth before the flood:

They devoured the labors of men. And when they were unable to supply them, the giants grew bold against them and devoured the men. They began to sin against birds, animals, reptiles and fish, and to eat the flesh of each other. And they drank the blood. (*1 En.* 7:3-5)¹¹⁷

While *1 Enoch* is relatively unknown today, it was an important work in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. One legacy that testifies to the importance of the book in antiquity is that it remains

¹¹⁷ This essay is an extensively revised and expanded version of a paper I delivered at a conference in 2014 on Animals and Monsters at St. Andrews, Scotland. An earlier form of this research can also be found on the “Flood of Noah” website. This essay uses for the text and translation of *1 Enoch*, with modification, in George Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch* (Hermeneia; 2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001-12). For a basic overview of this composition, see Matthew Goff, “1 Enoch,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible* (ed. M.D. Coogan; 2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.224-37. Feedback from the anonymous reviews of this article have enriched its content. I also thank Alana Zimath for her assistance with this essay.

to this day in the canonical Old Testament of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the oldest forms of Christianity. For this reason the work in its entirety is preserved only in Classical Ethiopic (Ge'ez). The *Book of the Watchers*, the first section in the text of *1 Enoch* (chs. 1-36), is a Jewish work written in the third century BCE. We know that it was composed originally in Aramaic, since fragments of the composition, along with Aramaic fragments of other works now in *1 Enoch*, were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Book of the Watchers* puts forward a shocking description of the days before the flood. The cannibalistic crimes recounted in *1 Enoch 7* are committed by giants who rampaged across the world. According to most Ethiopic manuscripts of *Watchers*, they are of incredible stature: 3,000 cubits tall, or well over a mile. Both their bodies and their crimes transgress norms. The *Book of the Watchers* teaches that the giants are an important catalyst in the crisis that led to Noah's flood.

The portrayal in the Enochic *Book of the Watchers* of the antediluvian crisis that triggered the flood leaves readers with a clear question. The account of the flood in Genesis 6 never describes cannibalistic giants causing havoc on the earth. So why would an ancient Jewish text offer such a monstrous depiction of the flood? In this essay I would like to explore this issue. There is clearly an exegetical aspect to *Watchers'* presentation of the flood. While this conclusion is common in biblical studies, I would like to highlight a key issue that is often not stressed—that *Watchers* reconfigured the flood story in a way that transforms it into a much more monstrous tale than anything in the book of Genesis.

This leads to the other key point of this article: that reflection on the cannibalistic giants of Enochic literature can be informed by the burgeoning field of monster studies. This is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that develops theoretical frameworks which help us comprehend how and why humanity has been and remains interested in tales about horrifying and disturbing creatures. Scholars of this field of knowledge often engage the issue of cannibalism—monsters who devour human beings. As we shall see below, they often understand this issue by means of psychoanalytic theory. They also emphasize that societies circulate stories about monsters as a way to articulate norms of conduct since such tales recount the disturbing creatures who lurk beyond the boundaries of what is known and accepted. In this way monster studies, as I would like to show, can help us understand how *Watchers* recounts the flood, and in particular how it thematizes eating. The essay will then suggest that examining the theme of the monstrous can illuminate how *Watchers* can be interpreted in relation to mythic traditions in Genesis 1. This chapter is profitably compared to the Babylonian creation account, the *Enuma Elish*, in which the chief god Marduk kills a sea monster named Tiamat and fashions the known world out of her body. Genesis 1, formulated in the context of the Babylonian exile, appropriates older mythic traditions in a way that does not highlight any monstrous creature along the lines of Tiamat. The reformulation of Genesis traditions in *Watchers*, by contrast, accentuates and heightens the monstrous. This return of the monstrous, I suggest, can be helpfully situated against the backdrop of the Hellenistic age during which it was written. As experts in monster theory discuss, the creation and dissemination of stories about monsters should be expected from cultures dealing with moments of intense anxiety or crisis. While it is common to understand the formation of the *Book of the Watchers* in terms of political violence perpetrated by Hellenistic empires, the cultural climate of the early Hellenistic age, as I discuss below, is a conducive context for the increase in monstrosity evident in *Watchers*.

TEXTUAL REFORMATIONS OF AN ANTEDILUVIAN CRISIS

The monstrosity of the account of the antediluvian period in the *Book of the Watchers* can be demonstrated by comparing it with Genesis 6, in particular its first four verses:

When people began to multiply on the surface of the earth, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and

also afterward—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. They are the mighty men who are of old, the men of renown (הַגְּבוּרִים אֲשֶׁר מְעוֹלָם אֲנָשֵׁי הַשָּׁם).¹¹⁸

This passage has long struck commentators as perplexing. These verses contain the first story in the Hebrew Bible about angels. It is also arguably the oddest story in the Bible about angels. They are referred to as “sons of God,” a common ancient Hebrew idiom for divine beings (e.g., Ps 29:1; 82:6).¹¹⁹ It construes them as coming down to earth to have sex. The offspring of the “sons of God” and the women are called הַגְּבוּרִים, literally “the mighty ones.” The ambiguous Hebrew term *naphîlîm* can be understood as also signifying these children, but this is not clear on the basis of Genesis 6 itself. The word derives from the root נפל (“to fall”) and has in the history of interpretation been variously understood. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, for example, interprets the term as signifying the angelic fathers; they “fell” (נפלו) from heaven.¹²⁰ Compilers of the Torah presumably took the term *naphîlîm* of Genesis 6 as signifying instead the children of the angels, as did its ancient Greek translators since they employ the same word to translate both *gibbōrîm* and *naphîlîm*—*gigantes* (“giants”; more on this below). The word *naphîlîm* occurs only one other time in the Hebrew Bible (Num 13:33), to signify one of the original and gargantuan peoples of Canaan, the Anakim. The odd locution in Gen 6:4 that the Nephilim were on the earth then “and also afterwards” (וְגַם אַחֲרֵי-כֵן) seems to reflect awareness that they appear later in the Bible, implying, on the basis of Num 13:33, that the antediluvian *gibbōrîm* are the distant ancestors of the Canaanite giants. The root נפל on several occasions in the Hebrew Bible denotes soldiers who have fallen in battle (as in, for example, Judg 8:10 and 1 Sam 17:49). The term גבור likewise often describes elite and accomplished soldiers (e.g., 2 Sam 23:16). In that sense *naphîlîm* would be a fitting term for soldiers who ‘fell’ long ago (“the fallen ones” or “the ones who are fallen”). This is a reason why it is often suggested that the *gibbōrîm* of Genesis 6 allude to an otherwise lost Israelite epic tradition of legendary warriors.¹²¹ The relationship between the *gibbōrîm* and the *naphîlîm*, however, remains an ambiguous point.¹²²

Genesis 6:4 does, however, make two things clear about the *gibbōrîm*: that they are “of old”

¹¹⁸ Ronald S. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1-11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 132-33.

¹¹⁹ For the present discussion it suffices to note that these creatures are from the heavenly world. While how exactly they were understood when Genesis 6 was initially produced cannot be recovered, the text presumes that they are transmundane and that their sexual interaction with women constitutes a violation of a designated boundary between the realms of heaven and earth. This is suggested by the unusual offspring that are produced and the subsequent flood. Such sexual activity is not presented as a sanctioned or regular occurrence. For the broader issue of the development and variety of conceptions of angels in ancient Israel and the Second Temple period, see Annette Reed, *Demons, Angels and Writing in Ancient Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 65-81; Simon B. Parker, “Sons of (the) God(s),” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999), 794-800; R.M.M. Tuschling, *Angels and Orthodoxy: A Study in Their Development in Syria and Palestine from the Qumran Texts to Ephrem the Syrian* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Michael Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien des jüdischen Engelglaubens in vorrabbinischer Zeit* (TSAJ 34; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

¹²⁰ This late antique text uses Enochic traditions as an interpretative lens with which to understand Genesis 6, also specifying that the “fallen ones” in question are Shemhazai and Azazel, the two key angels who descend to earth in Watchers. See Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 213; P.S. Alexander, “Targumim and Early Exegesis of ‘Sons of God,’” *JJS* 23 (1972): 60-71.

¹²¹ For an overview of this issue, see Brian R. Doak, *The Last of the Rephaim: Conquest and Cataclysm in the Heroic Ages of Ancient Israel* (Boston/Washington, D.C.: Ilex Foundation/Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2012), 54-66.

¹²² For discussion of this issue, see Matthew Goff, “Warriors, Cannibals and Teachers of Evil: The Sons of the Angels in Genesis 6, the *Book of the Watchers* and the *Book of Jubilees*,” *SEÅ* 80 (2015): 79-97 (82); Doak, *The Last of the Rephaim*, 54-66.

(מעולים) and are “men of renown” (literally “men of the name”; אנשי השם). Interestingly, both expressions are reasonably understood as positive, denoting that “the mighty ones” were on the earth long ago and had a great reputation. What they did to achieve this fame is, however, not specified. The emphasis on their fame is a core reason they are understood as warriors, as is their lineage. This can be likened to Greek epic. The military prowess of the legendary Achilles is attributed to the fact that he was not an ordinary human but rather a semi-divine being, with one human and one divine parent (his mother was Thetis, a Nereid, and his father King Peleus). The famous warrior-king of Mesopotamian tradition Gilgamesh likewise has a mixed human-divine parentage. So too the *gibbōrîm* of Genesis 6.¹²³ Understanding “the mighty men” of Genesis 6:1-4 in relation to such comparisons can elucidate the odd fact that the passage describes them in positive, if brief, terms.

But when one turns to the very next verse, the reader is confronted with a problem—wickedness, Gen 6:5 states, spread throughout the earth. This raises an exegetical issue—how should the legendary warriors of verse 4 be related to the increase of evil of verse 5?

It is possible that the location of Gen 6:1-4 as prefacing the rest of the flood account may indicate that some ancient scribes considered the children of the angels to be evil, despite the passage’s somewhat laudatory description of them. The first four verses of the chapter are often understood in biblical studies as an independent text that had some sort of editorial development and tradition-history that are different from the rest of the flood narrative.¹²⁴ Its placement at the beginning of the flood narrative may reflect the opinion that the *gibbōrîm* are evil, and that the sexual dalliance between angels and humans was inappropriate. This textual theory would offer a coherent explanation of the question at hand, namely, how the angels and their sexual encounter on earth should be understood vis-à-vis the flood. Understood in this way, it was the offspring of the angels and the women who increased the evil on the earth that led to the flood. This understanding of the giants as inherently negative may also help us understand why the Hebrew word *gibbōrîm* is translated with *gigantes* in the form of Gen 6:4 found in the ancient Greek translation of the Torah.¹²⁵ In Greek myth, the *gigantes* are rebellious and vicious; they attempt and fail to challenge Olympian rule.¹²⁶ The translation choice, carried out in the third century BCE, is a kind of *interpretatio graeca*. The translators’ appeal to the *gigantes* as a way to understand the children of the angels conveys that they understood them very negatively. It is perhaps possible to delineate a negative view of the offspring of the angels that predates *Watchers*, suggesting that its reformulation of the tale may be in continuity with an older, pre-Enochic interpretative tradition. In any case, despite what we can infer about how ancient transmitters of Gen 6:1-4 understood it, its positive but terse account of the *gibbōrîm* remained and this is what was preserved in the Masoretic text. The story as we have it leaves open the key issue of how the evil that triggered the flood started or what form it took.

The Torah in ancient (pre-Christian) Judaism was quite fluid in terms of its textual form. Nevertheless, some writings from the period seem to engage versions of Torah passages that do not

¹²³ For an important effort to situate the sons of the angels in a broad comparative context, see Doak, *The Last of the Rephaim*, 222-30.

¹²⁴ The scholarship on this point is extensive. See, for example, Doak, *The Last of the Rephaim*, 60; Ronald Hendel, “Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 13-26 (esp. 16); Gerhard von Rad, See his *Genesis: A Commentary* (rev. ed.; London: SCM Press, 1972 [orig. pub., 1949]), 113; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. M.E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997 [orig. pub., 1901]), 59; Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957 [orig. pub., 1878]), 317. See also Archie T. Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits: The Reception of Genesis 6:1-4 in Early Jewish Literature* (rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 51-96.

¹²⁵ This explains the conventional description in English of the sons of the angels in Genesis 6 as “giants,” a broad term used to describe a wide range of creatures that appear in the mythology of various cultures. Here the term has a specific referent—the sons of the angels described in Genesis 6.

¹²⁶ Françoise-Hélène Massa-Pairault, ed. *Géants et gigantomachies entre Orient et Occident. Acts du Colloque, Naples, 14-15 Novembre 2013* (Naples: Centre Jean Bérard, 2017).

appear to be substantially different from their form in the Masoretic text. The *Book of the Watchers* constitutes a good example of this issue. This composition can be plausibly understood as telling a similar but more expansive version of the flood story in Genesis.¹²⁷ Genesis, for example, never specifies how many angels came down to earth. None of the angels are named in Genesis; the book also does not state where on earth they arrived when they descended from heaven. The *Book of the Watchers*, however, is clear on all these points. It asserts that the total number of the angels who descended was 200, and the names of their twenty chiefs are given. *Watchers* divulges further that the arrival point of the angels on earth was Mount Hermon, a fitting locale, given that, as a large mountain, it is a point on earth close to heaven.

The *Book of the Watchers* exhibits very little interest in the flood itself. The concern of the text is rather for the spread of evil and violence on the earth before the flood. According to *1 En.* 10:2, God sent an archangel to explain to Noah that it was coming, but there are many core details of the flood story as found in Genesis that are not in *Watchers*. These include the building of the ark, its measurements, the number or kind of animals present on the vessel, and the chronological length of the flood. *Watchers* is primarily interested in the flood as the means of punishing the watchers and their offspring; the flood also serves as a model for eschatological judgment (*1 Enoch* 10-11).

When it comes to the evil that preceded the flood, *Watchers* by contrast offers more narrative than Genesis. *1 Enoch* 8 recounts that the angels disclosed supernatural and unsanctioned knowledge on various topics.¹²⁸ In this way, *Watchers* provides an etiology for several types of knowledge that are critical for human civilization (more on this below), such as metallurgy, that is, how to acquire metals from the earth and how to make weaponry from this resource; they also reveal knowledge about types of ornamentation used by women; these include antimony, a metallic compound used in antiquity for the production of cosmetic eye-paint, and gems from the earth (8:1).¹²⁹ This is a gendered iteration of the angelic revelation that for *Watchers* plays a central role in the antediluvian crisis that led to the flood. It has a ‘male’ aspect, in that being able to produce destructive weapons triggered more violence, and a ‘female’ aspect, in the sense that innovation in female beautification, in the androcentric mindset of the text, led to more temptation and promiscuity.¹³⁰ Excesses of violence and sex characterize the antediluvian period, according to *Watchers*.

Watchers provides vivid and disturbing details about the children of the angels that are not found in Genesis. The Enochic text appears to show awareness of the trope that they are warriors, refashioning their martial prowess in horrific terms. They are no longer “men of renown.” They are unspeakably violent. They do not just murder people—they eat them. This unsettling portrayal of the angelic offspring offers a clear way to understand how they should be related to the rise of evil and violence that necessitated the flood—they are its prime cause. Above I observed that it is unclear in Genesis how to relate the *gibbōrīm* of Gen 6:4 to the increase of evil stated in verse 5 which precipitated the flood. *Watchers*, by contrast, is clear on this point. The Enochic reconfiguration of the *gibbōrīm* into terrifying, cannibalistic giants can be understood as offering a solution to an exegetical problem.

As is clear from the description of the antediluvian acts of the sons of the angels in *1 Enoch* 7

¹²⁷ This important issue is explicated in more depth below.

¹²⁸ For an overview of this theme, see Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 24-57.

¹²⁹ Fritz Graf, “Mythical Production: Aspects of Myth and Technology in Antiquity,” in *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* (ed. R. Buxton; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 317-28.

¹³⁰ Matthew Goff, “Male and Female, Heaven and Earth: Claude Lévi-Strauss’ Structuralist Approach to Myth and the Enochic Myth of the Watchers,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Study of the Humanities. Method, Theory, Meaning: Proceedings of the Eighth Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies (Munich, 4-7 August, 2013)* (ed. S. Thomas, B. Hartog, and A. Schofield; STDJ 125; Brill, 2018), 77-91; Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Gendering Heavenly Secrets? Women, Angels, and the Problem of Misogyny and Magic,” in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in Antiquity* (ed. D. Kalleres and K. Stratton; Oxford: Oxford University Press), 108-51.

that was quoted at the outset of this article, they consumed blood. It is notable that the text emphasizes this point. Since they are devouring humans, one could readily assume that they swallow blood when they do so. The legal code in Leviticus asserts that blood is holy and belongs to God, not the person in which it flows.¹³¹ It is an embodied way to conceive of life, and the act of being alive, as under divine control. Leviticus 17:11 claims that the soul (שׁוֹפָר) is in the blood; blood was conceptualized as the seat of life. This ancient theorization of blood makes intelligible why it is treated with such reverence in the sacrificial worship of ancient Israel and other religious traditions of the ancient Near East. Understood against this religio-cultural backdrop, the ingestion of blood does more than break a food taboo. It is affront against God. Describing the giants as consuming blood is a way to depict them as evil and opposed to God.

Watchers' assertion that the giants ingest blood can also be understood as having an exegetical aspect. It makes sense in relation to the account in Genesis 9 of God's covenant with Noah and his sons after the flood. Genesis 9:1-6 states:

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life (שׁוֹפָר), that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed.”

This pericope is generally attributed in biblical scholarship to the Priestly source.¹³² In it God asserts that he will never send another flood and that humankind will maintain power over other creatures on earth, provided that they keep two rules. People are not to eat blood or kill other people (9:4-6). These commandments are found within a larger passage in which God grants humankind the right to consume meat, a visceral expression of human dominion over other animals (v. 3). It may strike readers as odd that God's promise to never send another flood is based on people agreeing to never ingest blood. *Watchers* can be plausibly interpreted as a consequence of reflection about the diluvian laws God gives to humanity.¹³³ This ban in Genesis 9 against consuming blood, its linkage between killing and the swallowing of blood, and the fact that it brings up the issue of eating meat at all, become easier to understand if the reader imagines the crisis that led to the flood as it is presented in *Watchers*. With regard to the evil on earth that triggered the flood Genesis provides relatively few details. *Watchers* offers an antediluvian narrative that is informed by some form of Genesis 9. Additionally, because Gen 9:4 constitutes the first time the Hebrew Bible states that humans can

¹³¹ I engage this issue in more depth in Matthew J. Goff, “Monstrous Appetites: Blood, Giants, Cannibalism and Insatiable Eating in Enochic Literature,” *JAJ* 1 (2010): 19-42. Consult also Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual: Origins, Context, and Meaning* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014).

¹³² For a helpful overview of this scholarly tradition, see the discussion of Genesis 9 in Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 28-45. Those interested in a recent and extensive examination of the Priestly source can consult Liane M. Feldman, *The Story of Sacrifice: Ritual and Narrative in the Priestly Source* (FAT 141; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

¹³³ Samuel L. Boyd has recently argued that *1 Enoch* 7 (and also the iteration of the flood story in *Jubilees* 5) makes explicit this same key point, which he argues is implicit in the Priestly text of Genesis 9—that animal consumption plays a major role in the violence that triggered the flood. See his “The Flood and the Problem of Being an Omnivore,” *JSOT* 43 (2019): 163-78.

consume meat, the era before the flood can be imagined as a time of vegetarianism. This context would make the giants' cannibalistic violence even more shocking.¹³⁴

As I have sought to demonstrate, interpreting the *Book of the Watchers* as an exegetical text can be an instructive exercise. We should not, however, anachronistically assert our modern notion of canon onto ancient Jewish literature. It is evident that in the late Second Temple period there was an extensive interest in traditional writings that were considered to have a form of authoritative status. Many Jewish works from this period, including the *Book of Jubilees*, the *Animal Apocalypse*, the *Temple Scroll* and the *Genesis Apocryphon*, in myriad ways explore and reconfigure specific texts and themes of the Pentateuch. The *Community Rule* states that when at least ten members of the Dead Sea sect are together, one of them must be reciting or expounding the Torah, day and night (1QS 6:6-7). But there is not in this era a "Bible," in the sense of the fixed canon of the Old Testament. Rather there was a loose body of traditional lore in textualized form with which Jewish scribes could and did display a great degree of literary creativity. Hindy Najman many years ago offered to explain the textuality of ancient Judaism not through appeal to anachronistic biblical or scriptural categories of analysis but rather what she termed "Mosaic Discourse."¹³⁵ The Dead Sea Scrolls offer a crucial window into a lost Jewish textual world, in which scripture is important but before the Bible (a term never found in the scrolls) comes into being as a textual and theological category.

The material in *Watchers* from the third century BCE offers a fleeting glimpse into this lost textual world. *Watchers* does not present itself as exegeting a scriptural text, in contrast to rabbinic midrash, a genre that emerges later and is self-consciously modeled as a verse-by-verse exposition of a sacred text. Rather *Watchers*, by using the pseudepigraphic device of attributing authorship to Enoch, whom the text extols as a righteous scribe from the antediluvian age, presents the watchers myth as what actually happened long ago, as an etiology of the flood, and as events witnessed and recorded by Enoch.¹³⁶ *Watchers'* presentation of the watchers and their violent offspring betrays an abiding concern with the deep past (an issue to which I return below). The composition's articulation of antediluvian events reflects reliance on early forms of Genesis texts—but not simply reliance on them. *Watchers* expands and enlarges their content. As discussed above, the book of Genesis for example never provides the names of the angels or much detail regarding the violent rampages on earth that triggered the flood. To make this assessment one must posit that the scribes who produced *Watchers* had access to a form of Genesis 6 that is by and large similar to the Masoretic form of the text that became part of the Bible. This is, in my view, a reasonable position. While the Dead Sea Scrolls show a great deal of variety regarding how they engage Genesis traditions, they also include several manuscripts of Genesis that are quite similar to the later Masoretic versions of these texts, suggesting that Genesis had a degree of textual stability in this period, as George Brooke has stressed, that one does not find in this period with, say, the Psalms.¹³⁷ Other compositions such as *Jubilees* or

¹³⁴ Yael Shemesh, "Vegetarian Ideology in Talmudic Literature and Traditional Biblical Exegesis," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 9 (2006): 141-66.

¹³⁵ Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). See also Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); *ibid.* "The Hegemony of the Biblical in the Study of Second Temple Literature," *JAJ* 6 (2015): 2-35.

¹³⁶ Matthew Goff, "Reading Jewish Wisdom From Before the Flood: Authorship, Prophecy, and Textuality in Enochic Literature," in *Authorschaft und Autorisierungsstrategien in apokalyptischen Texten* (ed. J. Frey, M.R. Jost and F. Tóth; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 171-91; Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Pseudepigraphy and/as Prophecy: Continuity and Transformation in the Formation and Reception of Early Enochic Writings," in *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* (ed. Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 25-42.

¹³⁷ George J. Brooke, "Genesis 1-11 in the Light of Some Aspects of the Transmission of Genesis in Late Second Temple Times," *HeBAI* 1 (2012): 465-82 (471). While the Dead Sea Scrolls present Genesis as having some coherence as a book (4Q8 [4QGen^b] for example indicates that it could at that time circulate as a book with a title [ברשית] that is in accord with its title in later Judaism, בראשית, it is not clear that Psalms existed as a single book in this period, as Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination*, 51-85, argues.

the *Genesis Apocryphon* tell stories about the patriarchs which show detailed engagement—a kind of ancient textual scholarship—with forms of Genesis texts that are again similar to what became the book of Genesis.¹³⁸ Annette Reed, who has justly criticized scholarship on Second Temple Judaism for its overemphasis on biblical categories, emphasizes this point with regard to *Watchers*. Speaking specifically about Gen 6:1-4, she writes: “What is allusive and unexplained in Genesis, however, is expounded in spectacularly specific detail in the *Book of the Watchers*.”¹³⁹ The overarching goal of the composition was not necessarily to fill out an incomplete story in a scriptural text, or to demonstrate that Genesis, when properly retold, is a consistent and comprehensive narrative.¹⁴⁰ Rather *Watchers* constitutes reflection about the deep past that is informed by textual traditions found in Genesis. Its presumed brief and incomplete account of antediluvian events constituted an opportunity for creative reflection on this period.¹⁴¹ The transformation of the warriors of renown in Genesis 6 into cannibalistic giants of the *Book of the Watchers* can be reasonably understood as a form of exegesis on texts of Genesis, with “exegesis” employed here as a second-order term of analysis, an etic rather than emic characterization of the content of *Watchers*. If it is interpreted in this way, the composition’s disturbing, violent giants constitutes an odd, and monstrous, form of exegesis.

FORAYS INTO A MONSTROUS FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE

It is reductive, however, to limit the significance of *Watchers* to exegesis. There is more to the story. Although most people today have never heard of the composition, this was not the case in antiquity. The Dead Sea Scrolls, on the basis of the fact that the composition was copied and reworked, attest that some Jews in the second and first centuries BCE considered *Watchers* to have a type of authoritative status. The New Testament Letter of Jude quotes from it, presuming that it has some sort of authoritative status, and this comportment towards *Watchers* is continued in early Christian writings. The core tale of *Watchers*, that angels descended from heaven to have sex with women and produce children, was reconfigured and reimagined by numerous other ancient Jewish texts, including the *Animal Apocalypse*, the *Book of Jubilees* and the Qumran *Book of Giants*. They all came up with their own depictions of the giants, the sons of the angels. While scripture was an important cultural category in ancient Judaism, the appeal and popularity between 200 BCE and 100 CE of such material—in part because none of these works explicitly frame themselves as exegeting citations of *Watchers*—cannot be wholly explained through appeal to exegesis.

I would like to suggest that we can arrive at a plausible understanding of both *Watchers*’ portrayal of violent, destructive giants and the popularity of stories about these antediluvian creatures in ancient Judaism through engagement with scholarship on monsters and the monstrous.

¹³⁸ For an annotated translation of *Jubilees* that explicates how it reformulates material in Genesis (and Exodus) see Matthew Goff, “Jubilees,” in *The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha* (ed. J. Klawans and L.M. Wills; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1-97.

¹³⁹ Reed, *Demons, Angels and Writing*, 199. For her criticism of forms of anachronistic applications of biblical perspectives onto the study of Second Temple literature, see, for example, pp. 23-25. Reed’s sentiments regarding *Watchers* vis-à-vis Genesis 6, with differing degrees of nuance, are common in biblical studies. See for example Julie Galambush, *Reading Genesis: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 40; James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge MA/London: Belknap Press, 1997), 110-12.

¹⁴⁰ In part to avoid such conclusions, scholars of ancient Judaism generally now no longer or only very sparingly use “Rewritten Bible” as a category of analysis, which used to be employed with much more regularity. See Daniel Machiela, “Once More, with Feeling: Rewritten Scripture in Ancient Judaism—A Review of Recent Developments,” *JJS* 61 (2010): 308-20.

¹⁴¹ As discussed below, *Watchers*’ engagement with the primordial period is fully in accord with the intellectual currents of the early Hellenistic period.

What are monsters? The term denotes a second-order category of analysis used to interpret creatures from a vast range of cultural and historical contexts. The term, as scholars of monster theory (monstrologists?) know, originates from the Latin word *monstrum*, which can be related to the verb *monere*, “to warn”; Augustine connects the noun instead to *monstrare*, “to show,” explaining that the term denotes signs that “show by signifying something” (*Civ.* 21.8).¹⁴² The word *monstrum* often was invoked to interpret something strange or unusual as some sort of ominous portent. The birth of a child with a defect or the sighting of an odd creature could easily be construed as an omen, indicating some sort of future calamity or hardship.¹⁴³ As Jeffery Jerome Cohen has emphasized, a monster is a signifier; it points to something that is beyond itself.¹⁴⁴ Timothy Beal offers in his valuable book *Religion and Its Monsters* (2002) the definition of monsters as “personifications of the *Unheimlich*.”¹⁴⁵ This conception of the monstrous utilizes the Freudian locution that is normally rendered as “uncanny.” A more literal translation would be “un-home-ly.” Following this thread, monsters are creatures which cannot be bounded or confined within a normative sense of place. They disrupt epistemological and taxonomic categories that conceptualize and articulate what is normal. So understood, monsters constitute “threatening figures of anomaly.”¹⁴⁶ The term “monster” frequently refers to mixed, hybrid creatures that reconfigure component parts of actual animals in ways that do not occur in nature, as with the sphinx or centaur.¹⁴⁷ To this end Cohen argues that the monster signifies a kind of “ontological liminality”; that is, the term can be applied to an entity that transcends and is unconstrained by normativizing categories of classification.¹⁴⁸ For this reason, he aptly observes, one should discern a rise in interest in monsters during times of crisis. Political and military events and forms of disaster, because they are moments of turmoil, change, and violence, compel people to re-examine the world and the categories they deploy to understand it. This perspective is quite valid with regard to ancient Judaism (a point I return to below).

The interest people have in monsters is extensive and is not restricted to moments of crisis. Cohen emphasizes that the monstrous as a cultural category offers an effective way to articulate, and demonize, alterity. Monsters can represent the “dialectical Other,” and as such they do not only offer us a way to conceptualize enemies who are invading.¹⁴⁹ Monsters also offer a way to understand

¹⁴² Terry Kirk, “Monumental Monstrosity, Monstrous Monumentality,” *Perspecta* 40 (2008): 6-15 (7). For the key passage, see St. Augustine, *The City of God* (trans. Henry Bettenson; New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 982.

¹⁴³ D. Felton, “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (ed. A. Simon Mittman and P. Dendle; Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 103-32 (104).

¹⁴⁴ Jeffery Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (ed. J.J. Cohen; Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25 (4). See also Georges Canguilhem, “Monstrosity and the Monstrous” (trans. T. Jaeger), *Diogenes* 40 (1962): 27-42.

¹⁴⁵ David Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁴⁶ Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

¹⁴⁷ Asa Simon Mittman, “Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion*, 1-16 (5); Gilmore, *Monsters*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 6. See also idem, “Postscript: The Promise of Monsters,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion*, 449-64 (452). Noël Carroll articulates the idea that monsters ignore and break through normative cultural categories in his well-known study of horror films by terming this trope “fusion”—the blending of things together into one entity that are in conceptually different categories, such as the zombie (which is both living and dead). He also stresses that another common recurring characteristic feature of monsters is “magnification”—the increase of a creature’s size far beyond biological norms. Since the giants of the *Book of the Watchers* are 3,000 cubits tall, they excessively exemplify Carroll’s trope of “magnification.” See his *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 43-52. For discussion of the gigantic and the grotesque, consult Susan Stewart, *On Longing; Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

¹⁴⁹ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 7.

places which are far away and different from the ones we consider normal. Lurking at the edge of the known world, as map makers of earlier eras often asserted, *hic sunt dracones* (“here be dragons”).¹⁵⁰ Monsters in this sense demarcate the boundaries of normative space. They can do so by providing a glimpse of how strange things are on the other side. Stories of this sort were often told in the ancient world. Writers such as Herodotus and Ctesias, for example, gave expression to India in the Greek imaginary as a region populated with fantastic creatures. They include cynocephali (humans with heads of dogs or other animals), ants larger than foxes that burrow into the ground for gold, or the *martikora* (manticore), a creature with a human face, a lion’s body, and the tail of a scorpion.¹⁵¹

Such writers also told stories about far-flung tribes to construct ethical norms that help define civilization, by offering lurid depictions of the monstrous conduct beyond the pale.¹⁵² For example, Herodotus claims that the Messagatae, an Iranian nomadic tribe that lives in Central Asia, devour and sacrifice their elderly (1.216; cf. 3.25). He further asserts that other remote peoples such as the Scythians are cannibals who have no conception of justice or law (4.18, 102, 106). Strabo around the turn of the common era makes similar comments about the people of Ierna (Ἰέρνη), or Ireland. In his construal, the Irish are cannibals who consume the bodies of their fathers when they die and that among them incest is routine:

Besides some small islands round about Britain, there is also a large island, Ierne, which stretches parallel to Britain on the north, its breadth being greater than its length. Concerning this island I have nothing certain to tell, except that its inhabitants are more savage than the Britons, since they are man-eaters as well as heavy eaters, and since, further, they count it an honorable thing, when their fathers die, to devour them, and openly to have intercourse, not only with the other women, but also with their mothers and sisters; but I am saying this only with the understanding that I have no trustworthy witnesses for it; and yet, as for the matter of man-eating, that is said to be a custom of the Scythians also, and, in cases of necessity forced by sieges, the Celts, the Iberians, and several other peoples are said to have practiced it (4.5.4; cf. 7.3.6).¹⁵³

In this lurid mode of ethnography, the shocking conduct on the edge of the known world to the west

¹⁵⁰ Chet Van Duzer, “Hic sunt dracones: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion*, 387-436; idem, *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps* (London: The British Library, 2014).

¹⁵¹ For the large ants referred to by Herodotus, see 3.102. Aulus Gellius, in *Attic Nights* 9.4 (second century CE), asserts that he read in Ctesias (fourth century BCE) and other works that there are “marvels in the Far East,” signifying India, including men who have dog heads, monocoli, who hop around on one leg, and pygmies. Consult Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and James Robson, *Ctesias’ History of Persia: Tales of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 2010), 110 (also 33). For the *mantikora*, see Felton, “Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous,” 125. Note further Rudolf Wittkower, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters,” in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 159-97 (160-61).

¹⁵² I also discuss this material in “Deep Time, the Monstrous, and the Book of the Watchers in the Hellenistic Age,” in *Notions of Time in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature* (ed. S. Beyerle and M. Goff; Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming).

¹⁵³ Horace Leonard Jones, *Strabo, Geography, Vol. II: Books 3-5* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 261. Diodorus likewise construes the Scythians and the Irish as cannibals (5.32.3). Pliny asserts that the Scythians engages in cannibalism and likens them to barbarian tribes north of the Alps (*Nat. His.* 7.2). For more on the topic of cannibalism, consult Cătălin Avramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* (trans. A. Ian Blyth; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Mark P. Donnelly and Daniel Diehl, *Eat Thy Neighbour: A History of Cannibalism* (Stroud: Sutton, 2006).

reminds Strabo of the horrors in the distant east (Ireland and Central Asia, respectively). In either direction, when one goes beyond the fringes of civilization, one encounters monstrous forms of life. A similar presentation of imagined distant space is found in the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* (third or fourth century CE). In this account the apostle Andrew travels to the mysterious city of Myrmidonia, whose inhabitants “ate no bread and drank no water but ate human flesh and drank their blood. They would seize all who came to their city, dig out their eyes, [and] make them drink a drug prepared by sorcery and magic” that would make their victims behave like animals.¹⁵⁴

One countervailing impulse in the study of the monstrous is to reflect not on the strange creatures that roam in faraway lands but on the monster within. And one can note the odd relationship between them. Beal’s conception of the monster as expressing *das Unheimliche* can be helpful here. He wants to say more than that monsters embody a violation of a person’s normative values. *Das Unheimliche*, the un-home-ly, is not just out there. As the saying goes, the call is coming from inside the house. He terms this the paradox of the monstrous.¹⁵⁵ David Gilmore in his *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (2002) makes a similar observation. He promotes a psychoanalytical perspective with regard to monsters. He avers that the monster is “not simply a political metaphor, but also a projection of some repressed part of the self.”¹⁵⁶ The monster represents the *id*, the classical Freudian term for the disturbing and animalistic instincts that are found deep within the human unconscious, but in an externalized form. This understanding of the issue offers a psychoanalytic way to explain the cross-cultural trope that monsters, while conquered by heroes, typically survive to fight another day.¹⁵⁷ In this construal of the topic, the monster and his overthrow constitute a projection of the *id*. It is effectively repressed but nonetheless remains, lurking in the shadows of the human mind. The universality of the trope, in this line of thinking, accords with the assessment that, despite the diversity of human cultures, the physical nature of the brain and thus its inner workings remain constant.

MONSTROUS, ANTHROPOPHAGOUS, ANTEDILUVIAN GIANTS

The key question for the matter at hand, however, is not how the brain works. Rather it is - how can monster theory assist our efforts to interpret the giants of the *Book of the Watchers*? A Freudian, psychological perspective towards the issue strikes me as interesting. But very little is known about whoever wrote the literature of *I Enoch*, which complicates speculation about their psyches. The story of *Watchers*, however, clearly accords with the cannibalism that is a prominent object of study in monster theory. Our own culture’s on-going obsession with the zombie apocalypse, as evident in shows such as *The Walking Dead*, underscores this point. Gilmore hypothesizes that cannibalism is “the primary form of human aggression.”¹⁵⁸ In his perspective, cannibalism represents

¹⁵⁴ See David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 77. For an edition of the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, see Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of Cannibals* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990). Consult also Lautaro Roig Lanzillota, “Cannibals, Myrmidonians, Sinopeans or Jews? The Five Versions of the Acts of Andrew and Matthias and Their Sources,” in *Wonders Never Cease: The Purpose of Narrating Miracle Stories in the New Testament and its Religious Environment* (ed. M. Labahn and B. J. Lietaert Peerbolte; London: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 221-43.

¹⁵⁵ Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 4.

¹⁵⁶ Gilmore, *Monsters*, 16. See also Jeffery Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xii.

¹⁵⁷ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 4.

¹⁵⁸ Gilmore, *Monsters*, 186.

our desire to eat laid bare, revealing it to be a primordial, animalistic impulse that can be clearly discerned as such when cultural norms about what one is supposed eat are removed. Gilmore asserts further that the ubiquitous human fear of cannibalistic monsters attests the existence within the mind of a primary desire, the raw and unmitigated urge to eat, which is then projected onto an external entity, the monster.¹⁵⁹ He also thinks that guilt is a core human response to having this disturbing and yet essential desire. Following this theory, myths and lore about cannibalism signal a kind of psychological drama, or perhaps fantasy, in which people wrestle with the urge to be both the eater and the eaten, the expression of cannibalistic impulses and an interest in being devoured, as a product of the guilt of having alimentary urges that are so disturbing.

It is not necessary to endorse Gilmore or his orthodox Freudian approach to cannibalism *in toto*. His perspective, however, underscores a key point—that the anthropophagous monsters of the *Book of the Watchers* can be profitably understood as a way to engage a topic that might be described as the ethics of food. It is *de rigueur* in biblical studies for scholars to understand that a central or core theme in the literature of *I Enoch* is the origin of evil. But it is not evident, in my opinion, that “evil” is the best descriptor for the behavior of the giants or their motivation, but it depends on how one defines the term. They are not driven by a malicious intent to kill or harm people. Their actions are not an effort to carry out a malevolent plot or a master plan to dethrone God. Instead, according to *Watchers*, the crisis on earth that necessitated the flood was motivated by the base, animalistic urge of the giants to eat, run amok (*I Enoch* 7). The act of eating food is an essentially destructive activity that is simultaneously necessary for life to continue. However, the consumptive act with regard to the giants is harmful for all life on earth. Their horrific rampages occur because their appetites, in a very literal sense, are unconstrained. They devour the food of humankind, then humans and then each other. As already discussed, Genesis 9 highlights the perspective that the re-creation of the world after the flood is predicated on the establishment of restrictions on eating practices. God exhibits genuine concern about what the people of Israel should put inside their bodies, as is evident from the copious laws in the Pentateuch regarding diet. One can reasonably interpret the *Book of the Watchers* as highlighting this key point, with monsters. The composition offers an intriguing example of how monsters can help articulate and enforce social norms, a point often emphasized by scholars of the monstrous.¹⁶⁰ *Watchers* does so with regard to food, by articulating a disturbing account of what happened on the earth long ago when the desire to eat was wholly unimpeded.

THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED? *ENUMA ELISH*, GENESIS 1, AND THE *BOOK OF THE WATCHERS*

I would like to suggest one other way that attending to the theme of monstrosity can help us better understand the *Book of the Watchers* in relation to older textual materials in Genesis. As is well-known in biblical studies, a broadly attested creation motif is the so-called *Chaoskampf*, the depiction of the formation of the world not as *creatio ex nihilo*, as many hold today, but rather as asserting that the creator god heroically defeated some form of powerful monster who is associated with chaos.¹⁶¹ While this scholarly trope is plausible, one should stress, as Debra Ballentine reminds us, that utilization of the word “chaos” to denote the era before the reigning god assumed control construes the perspective of his own dominion as an objective and neutral term of scholarly

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶⁰ Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 12, argues that “the monster polices the border of the possible.”

¹⁶¹ Gregory Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters—And Other Backstories of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 16-33.

analysis.¹⁶² The parade example of the ancient Near Eastern trope of creation via the killing of a monster is the Mesopotamian text the *Enuma Elish*, a work often understood as having been produced in the late second or early first millennium BCE.¹⁶³ This composition was for centuries recited at the Akitu festival, a major ceremony in ancient Babylonian religion. It was celebrated twice a year to commemorate the spring and fall equinoxes. The spring Akitu festival is also a ceremony for the New Year. Its most visible and central component involved a procession of a cult statue of Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, along other deities and the king out of the city, and their return three days later. This gave spatial and physical expression to a triumphant renewal of the religious-political order after a brief period of chaos, re-asserting the legitimacy of the normative order with Marduk and the king at the center.¹⁶⁴ This public procession articulated core elements of the drama of the *Enuma Elish* itself, the reading of which was a component of this festival.¹⁶⁵ In this work the stability of the world and the rule of the gods is endangered because of the machinations of Tiamat, a monstrous sea dragon who became the mother of a horde of other monsters. They include snakes and dragons, along with various hybrid creatures such as scorpion men, fish men, and bull men. Together they contest the rule of the gods (1.134-46).¹⁶⁶ The problem they pose to the gods is resolved by the deity Marduk. He does more than slay her. He segments her body into pieces and forms the known world out of those portions. Marduk's grand victory over Tiamat constitutes the etiology of his enthronement as king of the gods and provides a rationale for his centrality in the cult of the city of Babylon.

Genesis 1 is generally and plausibly thought in biblical studies to have been initially written in the sixth century BCE by priestly scribes (to whom the so-called P source of the Pentateuch is attributed), in the context of the Babylonian exile.¹⁶⁷ The scribes responsible for it would very likely have known about the Marduk-Tiamat creation motif of Babylonian religion found in the *Enuma Elish*. As mentioned above, this was not an obscure text but at the center of a major Babylonian

¹⁶² Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 186.

¹⁶³ For discussion of the dating of the composition of the *Enuma Elish*, see W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 439-44. This source also includes a text and translation of the text (pp. 50-133). One can also consult Philippe Talon, *Enūma Eliš: The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005), and, for an accessible English translation, Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 228-77.

¹⁶⁴ Lauren Ristvet, *Ritual, Performance and Politics in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 153-58; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi īrub: die Kulttopographische und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1994). See also Paul J. Kosmin, *Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (London/Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018), 30-34.

¹⁶⁵ There are different scholarly reconstructions as to how public the recitation of the *Enuma Elish* was during the Spring Akitu festival. Compare, for example, Ristvet, *Ritual, Performance and Politics*, 153 (who describes the ceremony beginning with a priest publicly reading aloud the *Enuma Elish*) with Takayoshi Oshima, *Babylonian Prayers to Marduk* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 36 (who describes the high priest of Esagila, the central temple to Marduk in Babylon, reciting the poem during the Akitu without any audience). See also Anette Zgoll, "Schauseite, verborgene Seite und geheime Deutung des babylonischen Neujahrsfestes. Entwurf einer Handlungstheorie von ‚Zeigen und Verbergen,‘" in *Die gezeigte und die verborgene Kultur* (ed. B. Streck; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 165-89. As is clear from the discussion below, my argument does not hinge on whether the text was recited publicly or not.

¹⁶⁶ Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters*, 18.

¹⁶⁷ For a concise overview of why biblical scholars attribute Genesis 1 to a Priestly source, see Rofé, *Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch*, 18, 36. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

festival, the Akitu.¹⁶⁸ How the Babylonians praised and described the dominion of Marduk changed how the Israelites in exile extolled their own deity, particularly with regard to creation. With the priestly authors of Genesis 1, they incorporated some core aspects of the *Chaoskampf* myth but at the same time sought to avoid recounting a scenario that was too similar to that of Marduk and Tiamat.

According to Genesis 1, the foundation of the normative order of the cosmos testifies to the ability of God to exert his will over the primeval waters which is associated with unformed matter (*tohu va-vohu*; NRSV: “a formless void”; Gen 1:2). The term “deep” in Gen 1:2 (*tehom*), signifying the watery abyss, is generally regarded as related to the Akkadian name Tiamat. The Bible (to my chagrin) does not begin with a battle royale between God and a sea dragon. Tiamat, however, lurks beneath the surface. The chapter puts forward an abstract iteration of this conflict, perhaps to avoid the suggestion that there is no creature, however powerful, who poses a legitimate threat to God’s control. This move also avoids the direct inference that there was a time when God was not in control. But Genesis 1, despite its theological hesitations, incorporates the core idea found in the *Chaoskampf* tradition as exemplified by the *Enuma Elish* by repeatedly asserting that God has full and unfettered control over the waters, as is clear from Gen 1:6-9, and also by the fact that “the great sea monsters” (*ha-tanninim ha-gedolim*) were the first creatures he fashioned—without any sense whatsoever that they pose a threat (v. 21; cf. Job 40:19). Other biblical texts do not share the same restraint with regard to asserting that God killed a dragon when he created the world. Psalm 74, for example, praises his manipulation of the waters during his creation in a way that poetically combines it with his defeat of a sea monster: “You divided the sea by your might, you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters; you crushed the heads of Leviathan” (vv. 13-14; cf. 89:10-12; cf. Isa 51:9). The motif of creation à la Genesis 1 utilizes older ancient Near Eastern creation traditions but, when compared to the *Enuma Elish*, the battle with monsters is absent. The *Book of the Watchers*, through its effort to portray the flood as the divine defeat of transgressive giants, writes monsters back into the story. Creation and the flood are thematically parallel in that both delineate the formation of the world via divine control over water. The *Book of the Watchers* reasserts the theme of monstrosity not with a sea dragon but rather through its violent giants and the re-creation of the world through the flood. The popularity and appeal of monsters offers a way to understand how the monstrous re-emerged into accounts of the primordial past (the return of the repressed?), after some scribes, such as the priestly intellectuals responsible for Genesis 1, sought to neuter this theme.

THE MONSTROSITY OF THE HELLENISTIC AGE

¹⁶⁸ Even if one does not hold that the *Enuma Elish* was publicly recited during this festival, it is still likely that exiled Judeans in Babylon, along with the city’s population in general, knew at least the basic story of the *Enuma Elish*—that the natural order was established by Marduk’s defeat of Tiamat, and that this conquest was deployed to legitimate the authority of the king, by homologizing him with Marduk. The affinities between the *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 do not require that Judean scribes engaged in a close and careful textual study of the former composition to write the latter, only that they knew core elements of its narrative. Since the *Enuma Elish* provided mythic backstory to the very public procession of the spring Akitu festival, this is a reasonable view.

Also note that the *Enuma Elish* itself advocates the teaching of its core theme of the kingship of Marduk to people at all levels of Babylonian society. It concludes by stressing that one is to teach the fifty names that extol the dominion of Marduk: “The wise and learned should confer about them, a father should repeat them and teach them to his son, one should explain them to shepherd and herdsman” (VII.146-48; Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 133).

Because of the political utility of the cosmogonic myth of the *Enuma Elish*, that the victory of Marduk over Tiamat can legitimate monarchic power, there is also some evidence that the composition was adapted to other spheres of political power in a Syro-Mesopotamian context. There is for example an Assyrian version of the *Enuma Elish* that was promoted by that monarchy which prioritizes not Marduk but Ashur, the state deity of the Assyrian monarchy. This evidence for the spread and reception of the *Enuma Elish*, aside from its utilization during the Akitu festival, also speaks to the possibility that the core narrative elements of the composition were broadly known in the Mesopotamian world and not restricted to an esoteric priestly elite. See W.G. Lambert, “The Assyrian Recension of Enūma Eliš,” in *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten: XXXIXe rencontre assyriologique internationale, Heidelberg, 6.-10. Juli 1992* (ed. H. Waetzoldt; Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag, 1997), 77-79.

It is helpful, however, to explain the expansion of the monstrous in *Watchers* beyond that of Genesis not simply through appeal to a universalist, perennial interest in monsters. It is interesting to inquire if any more specific insights can be acquired by examining why we see this renewal of the monstrous in the third century BCE, the time when *Watchers* was written.¹⁶⁹ A traditional explanation of the giants and their violence is that of Nickelsburg. He argued that they represent the *Diadochi* (“successors”), the generals of Alexander the Great who fought brutal wars with each other in the Near East in the fourth century BCE after the death of the conqueror and the dissolution of his empire.¹⁷⁰ Such an interpretation is possible. But it offers no compelling way to explain why a representation of these brutal generals would be set in the primordial period. A leading reformulation of the interpretation of the giants offered by Nickelsburg has been more recently put forward by Anatheia Portier-Young. She argues that *Watchers* constitutes “symbolic resistance to imperial violence and hegemony.”¹⁷¹ This constitutes one part of her larger scholarly project, to articulate Jewish apocalyptic literature and its origins as a form of theological resistance to empire.¹⁷² The core move is not to stress the *Diadochi* as did Nickelsburg but rather the contemporary difficulties of living under an empire—violence perpetrated by the state, and its concomitant humiliation and indignation, that are a natural result of being a subject people under the thumb of a hostile power. In the context of the third century BCE, Judea was controlled by the Ptolemaic Empire of Egypt and in 198 BCE dominion over the region shifted to the Seleucid Empire. In Portier-Young’s formulation, Jews in the third century BCE were powerless to overthrow their unjust rulers by force, so some launched more cerebral forms of resistance. *Watchers* offers, according to her formulation, an anti-imperial alternative construal of the world. Important in this perspective is that *Watchers* appropriates Greek myth—the traditional lore of the hegemonic rulers—and repurposes it so that the story now disrupts their worldview. *Watchers*’ account of the giants for her represents an inversion of the gigantomachy of Greek myth, the basic contours of which were laid out above. The Greek *gigantes*, like the children of the watchers in *I Enoch*, are violent and upend the normative order. The appropriation of this myth however in her reading constitutes a type of inversion in that in *Watchers* the violent giants represent Hellenistic rulers. The Greeks are recoded as the true barbarians.

I am, to some extent, sympathetic to the perspectives on the giants offered by Nickelsburg and Portier-Young. The third century was a time of strife in Judah and was the central site in which a long series of wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires, often called the Syrian Wars. It is certainly possible that the violence of the giants represents the violence of the period. But this interpretation does not square well with key aspects of *Watchers* itself. It has already been mentioned that this viewpoint does not offer a good explanation why the narrative is set in the time of the flood. Also *Watchers* very much does relate the antediluvian crimes of the giants to its contemporary world—but not to Judah’s Ptolemaic overlords, or any other sort of king. The bodies of the giants are destroyed but their spirits are condemned to roam the earth and harass humankind as evil spirits (*I Enoch* 15). This is an etiology of demonic forces in the world, not of political opponents. While it is not difficult to construe imperial opponents in demonic terms, a move clearly made for example in the book of Revelation, the evil spirits of *I Enoch* 15 do things that one finds attributed to evil spirits cross-culturally, not imperial rulers. The evil spirits for example in particular attack pregnant women,

¹⁶⁹ See also my “Deep Time, the Monstrous, and the Book of the Watchers.”

¹⁷⁰ Nickelsburg, *I Enoch* 1, 170.

¹⁷¹ Anatheia Portier-Young, “Symbolic Resistance in the Book of the Watchers,” in *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. Angela Kim Harkins, Kelley Coblenz Bautch, and John C. Endres, S.J.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 39-49 (here 39). See also eadem, “Constructing Imperial and National Identities: Monstrous and Human Bodies in Book of Watchers, Daniel, and 2 Maccabees,” *Interpretation* 74 (2020): 159-70.

¹⁷² Anatheia Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

because they, as *1 En.* 15:12 states, resent that they themselves were born from women. Fearsome demonic creatures, such as Lamashtu in a Mesopotamian context, or Obyzouth as described in the late antique *Testament of Solomon* (ch. 13), take particular pleasure in harming women during the liminal moment of giving birth. It was a way in antiquity to explain the dangers of giving birth by positing that particularly powerful spiritual forces would go after pregnant women. The giants do in *Watchers* represent and explain problems that contemporary people faced in the third century BCE—but the difficulties that are enumerated involve topics such as disease and problems in childbirth, not violence or injustice perpetrated by the state. Portier-Young's idea that *Watchers* reconfigures the Greek gigantomachy works only if one starts from the perspective that the giants represent Hellenistic rulers. This is a possible but not necessary starting point.

Moreover, understanding the giants of *Watchers* as representing the violence of Hellenistic empire does not fit well with the basic point elucidated in the previous section of this essay—that Genesis 1 in its account of creation writes the monsters of the *Chaoskampf* out of the story, whereas *Watchers*, in its account of the re-creation of the world through the flood, puts them back in. Genesis 1, as mentioned above, was likely written in the context of the Babylonian exile. The priestly scribes responsible for this text were among the elites taken there when the powerful Babylonian empire destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and conquered Judea. The *Enuma Elish* was a core part of the majority religion in the context of the exile in Babylon, while the Jews were a minority community. In this context, as I have already suggested, the priestly writers of Genesis 1 took on elements of the core act that legitimated Marduk's sovereignty, his defeat of Tiamat, and applied them to their own deity while avoiding an explicit and overt connection to the creation myth of the city and its empire that was subjugating them. The people responsible for Genesis 1 in the sixth century BCE and *Watchers* in the third century BCE were both under the thumb of empire—the Babylonians and the Ptolemies, respectively. In the former case the monsters were written out the story but in the latter they were written back in. This suggests to me that appeal to living under empire, and all the violence and injustice which that entails, is in and of itself not sufficient for explaining the watchers myth of *1 Enoch* and its giants.

In terms of how to move forward here too monster studies can be instructive. As mentioned above, scholars such as Cohen have argued that we should expect a rise in monsters and interest in them in times of crisis, moments in which normative and conventional explanations are easily seen as insufficient. The Babylonian exile was humiliating and traumatic. Some biblical texts reflect the raw emotions of that difficult period. Psalm 137, for example, offers a form of revenge fantasy, . It depicts Israelites weeping by the rivers of Babylon while being taunted, wishing that Babylonian infants be bashed to death against rocks. But the Hellenistic period was a crisis of a different sort. Political violence and imperial aggression were clearly part of the Hellenistic era, as the work of Portier-Young emphasizes. But the challenges and anxieties of the period should not be reduced to state violence.

While the Hellenistic era is a macro-descriptor, a label that extends to several centuries and very different cultures, two overarching factors can be stressed. One, the Hellenistic period constitutes an expansion of the boundaries of the known world. Alexander the Great had extensive military campaigns in India, and the cultures of a vast area, from Egypt to what is today Afghanistan, came under the influence of a set of similar cultural factors. Despite their differences people were exposed, often in the medium of the Greek language, not only to Greek culture but also that of other peoples in a new way. Space does not permit a comprehensive treatment of this complex issue but this cultural situation led to a degree of epistemological uncertainty and anxiety. Conventional claims regarding ethnic self-identity had to contend with a new pluralistic environment in which conflicting constructions of knowledge were in circulation. Berossus (third century BCE), for example, was a priest of Marduk who wrote in Greek the *Babyloniaca*, an account of the early history of the world that prioritized Mesopotamian traditions. He drew on the archaic Mesopotamian *apkallu* tradition. These ichthyomorphic, antediluvian sages were revered as custodians and originators of antediluvian wisdom. According to Berossus, foundational aspects of civilization such as writing, mathematics and agriculture, were bestowed to humankind by a giant fish monster, by the name of Oannes. In the

Hellenistic era such claims were contested and debated by intellectuals, as part of a vibrant discourse about the origins of civilization.¹⁷³ The Egyptians, or at least some Egyptian intellectuals, bristled at such accounts, as they conflicted with Egyptian accounts of early human history. One Hellenistic Egyptian philosopher, Chaeremon, also writing in Greek, claimed that this the Babylonian story about Oannes is a type of ‘fake news’. He asserts that the putative sea monster was really a king of old disguised in a fish costume.¹⁷⁴ Hellenistic culture is defined not simply by the spread of Homer and Greek ideas throughout the Near East. Various national traditions that had been developed as a way to make the world intelligible were challenged when the boundaries of the world became larger. Different scribal intellectuals wrestled with ways to construe human history in universalistic terms and the origins of knowledge evident throughout the Hellenistic world, such as writing and astronomy. A common move was to engage in a type of heurmatography by positing a single source of such knowledge, a culture hero, from whom it disseminated outward to other cultures and the rest of the world.¹⁷⁵ As with Berossus on Oannes, scribes often extolled cultural heroes in a way that gave pride of place to their own indigenous mythic traditions.

This raises a second important overarching factor regarding the Hellenistic era. A people generally regarded, even by themselves, as young (the Greeks), conquered several peoples regarded as much, much older—not just the Jews but also the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and Iranians. Age and antiquity were important values and were accorded value and respect. In this perspective there was something ‘backward’ about the Hellenistic era—particularly from the perspective of the ancient peoples under Greek rule. Not only do they not have national sovereignty—they have more wisdom and knowledge than their upstart rulers. The son has dominion over the father. This is not only a political crisis but a cultural one.¹⁷⁶ The problem is not simply state violence but also a more unsettling sense of *Unbehagen*—a pervading sense of unease and anxiety about the status quo.

The factors under discussion help explain why there was a renewed interest in the distant, primordial past in the Hellenistic Near East. It served as a cultural space in which intellectuals of various ethnicities could highlight the accomplishments and traditions of their own people, while presenting the knowledge of other cultures as secondary and derivative. At roughly the same time as Berossus, Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the goddess Neith, wrote a chronology of Egyptian kings that stresses the profound antiquity of this monarchic tradition.¹⁷⁷ While their writings are only preserved in later sources, the *floruit* of both Berossus and Manetho makes them roughly contemporary with the *Book of the Watchers*. It offers a cultural context that explains why Jewish scribes in the same period were interested in the primordial epoch, and in articulating it terms of their own national traditions. Enoch becomes valorized as an antediluvian sage—a viewpoint never espoused in the Hebrew Bible—whose knowledge is preserved. The book of *Jubilees* asserts that Enoch was the originator of writing and was the first to acquire genuine astronomical knowledge (4:17); the latter claim is implicit in the other booklet of *1 Enoch* written in the third century BCE, the *Astronomical Book* (chs. 72-82). Both writing and astronomy were common topics in Hellenistic discourse about the origins of civilization. The desire of these contemporary intellectuals to reach

¹⁷³ I deal with this issue at more length in “A Blessed Rage for Order: Apocalypticism, Esoteric Revelation, and the Cultural Politics of Knowledge in the Hellenistic Age,” *HeBAI* 5 (2016): 193-211. See also William McCants, *Founding Gods, Inventing Nations: Conquest and Culture Myths from Antiquity to Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sandra Blakely, *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁴ Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Chaeremon: Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 10-11.

¹⁷⁵ Leonid Zhmud, *The Origin of the History of Science in Classical Antiquity* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 23-44.

¹⁷⁶ Interpreting the Enochic literature of the early Hellenistic age in terms of cultural concerns rather than only state-sanctioned violence is also endorsed by Reed, *Demons, Angels, and Writing*, 102-5.

¹⁷⁷ John Dillery, *Clio's Other Sons* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

back to the deep past and describe it in a way that emphasizes their own native lore testifies to a type of cultural anxiety evident in the Hellenistic Near East.

Understanding the Hellenistic era as a time of cultural crisis helps explain why we see a return of the monstrous in this period. This is not to dismiss the thrust of Portier-Young's work that imperial violence and injustice play a role in understanding Enochic literature. My sense is that one should also consider other cultural factors in order to understand *Watchers* and its giants. That sense that something is out of place or not quite right is, as scholars of monsters such as Cohen have emphasized, a time when we should expect a rise in monstrosity. The cultural backdrop of the early Hellenism of the Near East, with its anxieties about the new political norm and emerging interest in the primordial past, offers a way not just to understand why *Watchers* reformulated traditions found in Genesis 6 in a way that made them more monstrous but also why the scribes carrying out this textual work were interested in the antediluvian period in the first place. This also provides a way to understand the valid parallels that Portier-Young observes between the Greek *gigantes* and Jewish traditions about antediluvian sons of angels (which were also recognized in antiquity, as is clear from Josephus [*Ant.* 1.73]). The relationship between the two myths involving the defeat of primordial colossal warriors is not necessarily one inverting the other. As is clear from the Pergamon altar, in the second century BCE the *gigantes* of Greek myth were depicted in monstrous form, as having snakes for legs and wings, the hybrid combination of elements of various animals.¹⁷⁸ If one looks at older visual depictions of the depictions of the gigantomancy, the *gigantes* are not anguipedes but rather hoplites, that is, humanoid warriors, as at the Siphnian Treasury in Delphi (6th century BCE) or in the description of them in Hesiod (*Theog.* 185), whose writings are often dated to the 8th century BCE.¹⁷⁹ With the *gigantes* one can discern an increased monstrosity in the Hellenistic period. This does not contrast but rather complements the move from the sons of the angels in Genesis 6 as legendary warriors to the monstrous giants recounted in *Watchers*. Both the Greek and Jewish examples testify to a cultural environment during the Hellenistic age in which traditions about the primordial past could be re-imagined in a way that made them more monstrous. The issue surely requires further elaboration, but here I have attempted to sketch out the basic cultural contours of the period in which these developments can be understood.

CONCLUSION

One can reasonably understand the Enochic *Book of the Watchers* as engaging in a kind of monstrous exegesis. The scribal intellectuals who produced the work in the third century BCE reconfigured older textual traditions regarding the flood in a way that made the sons of the angels much more monstrous. The composition reinvents the *gibbōrîm* from legendary warriors into cannibalistic giants. As I have tried to show, this development is not simply an exegetical issue. I have also attempted to demonstrate that this transformation is intelligible in the Hellenistic context in which the book was written. The field of monster studies helps us understand the giants' anthropophagous rampages as not only acts of profound violence but also a way to delineate social norms and conduct, especially regarding food, by putting forward disturbing portrayals of life on earth before such norms were in effect. The heightened monstrosity of the *Book of the Watchers*,

¹⁷⁸ Carlos A. Picón and Seán Hemingway, eds. *Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016); Erich Gruen, "Culture as Policy: The Attalids of Pergamon," in *From Pergamon to Sperlonga: Sculpture and Context* (ed. N.T. de Grummond and B.S. Ridgway; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 17-31; Max Kunze, *Der Pergamonaltar: Seine Geschichte, Entdeckung und Rekonstruktion. 1992, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Antikensammlung Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (Mainz am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1992).

¹⁷⁹ Richard T. Neer, "Framing the Gift: The Politics of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi," *Classical Antiquity* 20 (2001): 273-344; Livingston Vance Watrous, "The Sculptural Program of the Siphnian Treasury at Delphi," *AJA* 86 (1982): 159-72.

discernible when compared to older Genesis traditions, becomes intelligible in the context of a climate of cultural anxiety and epistemological uncertainty that was pervasive in the early Hellenistic period. It is a valuable exercise to engage ancient Jewish literature through the lens of monster theory.

**JOURNAL OF GODS AND MONSTERS, VOLUME 2, NUMBER 2
REVIEWS**

Edited by Eleanor Beal & Jonathan Greenaway, *Horror and Religion: New Literary Approaches to Theology, Race and Sexuality*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019. 224pp, cloth. £45.00.

From a wider societal perspective, horror and religion might appear to be strange bedfellows, with theology often being perceived as dealing in moral absolutes while appeals to morality can usually be found within any cultural panics regarding on-screen violence. Many of the moral panics and criticisms of the horror genre's supposed negative impact upon culture involve at least some degree of religious motivation. In such situations, horror fiction is positioned as the enemy of religious commentators, with a 'fondness for violence, illicit or non-normative sexualities and heterodox spiritual belief' (Beal & Greenaway, 2019: 2). Eleanor Beal and Jonathan Greenaway recognise and address this conflict from the very start, their introduction noting the 'outcast' nature of the genre within British and American literature. This status as the black sheep of fiction goes beyond literature, and into film, television, and comics, where the genre has also provoked outrage, claims of sensationalism, and of causing the moral decline of society.

Yet horror scholars from across different disciplines have attested to the genre's effectiveness in dealing with cultural fears, and the nature of evil itself, frequently drawing on psychoanalytical theory. Beal and Greenaway argue that despite the 'tradition of suspicion' towards the genre, its 'persuasive popularity and... engagement with religious themes has remained (2019: 4). The persistence of these themes, they argue, means a theological approach can be just as effective as a psychoanalytical one, whilst they also raise the question how exactly the notion of 'theology' should be defined. They draw on the work of Graham Ward and 'his definition of theology as the speaking of the God who is believed in' and argue that contemporary horror fiction is centred around 'tensions between secular modernity and the still persisting religious impulse' (2019: 4-5). Theology is as varied in its interpretations and iterations as the horror genre itself is, a strength that allows for the wide variety of approaches and ideas explored in 'Horror and Religion'. Focusing on race and sexuality, two areas often highlighted in horror, this is a timely book that will interest academics and teachers alike.

The book opens with perhaps one of its most important chapters, one with relevance not only in literary studies but across many creative disciplines. Neil Syme's chapter entitled 'Headlong into an Immense Abyss', an appropriate moniker for the book's first entry, explores the influence of Calvinism in American horror. This influence stems most notably to the works of H. P. Lovecraft, himself considered one of the most influential horror authors of the twentieth century. Syme draws links between Calvinistic theology which implies a God that is 'uncaring, unfathomable and effectively inhuman or alien' and the Cthulhu Mythos of Lovecraft (2019: 17). The chapter draws on other horror writers and fiction including the equally influential Stephen King, and the argument is well evidenced and convincing. The chapter argues that Lovecraft's Old Ones replicate 'in horrific form the cold, unfathomable judgment of the God of Calvin', already proving the books conjecture that theological approaches to horror can open up new avenues (2019: 27). Syme's chapter draws on earlier work by Ingebretsen to emphasise direct parallels and historical influences from Calvinism into Lovecraft's work, offering a theological perspective that has previously been largely overlooked. As Lovecraft's work is often perceived as distanced from religious belief, and given its prominent influence in the genre across all mediums, Syme's work is a must read for all horror scholars.

The vampire, perhaps the monster most directly associated with religion, is foregrounded in two chapters in this book, each taking a unique approach. Mary Going examines the possible anti-Semitic origins to many of the tropes of vampire fiction, and how it has appropriated anti-Jewish propaganda. This chapter also explores depictions in both literature and film, and links the figure of the vampire with the stories of the Wandering Jew and Cain who are 'often woven together'; both figures are 'punished with immortality'. Whilst Going connects the vampire to the figure of Cain, Rachel Mann's chapter draws direct connections with Jesus Christ. An evocative exploration of 'exciting, queered possibilities for Christian sacramentality', Mann draws on queer theory to explore the monstrous vampiric body (2019: 79). Mann emphasizes that 'Christ's body is no mere heteronormative, white male body of patriarchal fantasies' but 'bears all the marks of torture and crucifixion.... the representations of violation as well as signaling new transformed power' (2019: 82). This powerful, striking interpretation is guaranteed to spark discussion, and forces us to consider the visceral power and affect of horrific imagery within the Bible. Both chapters highlight the book's goals of varied theological approaches to horror, and successfully open up discussions that disavow tired stereotypes of theology as monolithic.

Further chapters cover a range of subjects, from examining the notion of Decadence in Victorian fiction, to the death of God in late twenty-first century horror fiction, to post-colonial interpretations of the Bible. Zoë Lehmann Imfeld argues that authors who seemingly embrace an ideology of either immorality or amorality, are in fact 'seeking an alternate morality' (2019: 58), whilst others try to write within the Decadent tradition whilst still adhering to Christian morality. This chapter makes for interesting reading for anyone exploring the history of how fiction has been seen to have the power to corrupt. Imfeld identifies how Victorian horror texts could be perceived as a lower form of literature, and there are some interesting links that could be drawn with more contemporary criticisms of the value of horror. It provides further illustration of the horror genre's long history of discussions based around morality, and the influence it has on wider society.

Scott Midson explores the impact of technology and cyborgs in a chapter that is likely to spark debate around the degree to which we rely on electronic devices in contemporary culture. Collection editor Eleanor Beal explores the novel *Jonestown*, and its post-colonial themes, which raises discussions of the intersection of horror, religion, and race. Simon Marsden discusses the idea of the 'death of God', a significant idea that remains somewhat nebulous in the myriad of ways it can be defined. Marsden thus explores the variety of ways that the 'death of God' has been interpreted and dealt with across different literary texts. Some offer the potential of hope, and others imply it signals the decline of humanity. The book references widely known literature, including the works of King and Lovecraft, *Frankenstein*, *The Exorcist*, *Interview with the Vampire*, whilst also highlighting less culturally known texts. This broad mix both expands the scope and depth of the book, whilst allowing for some key touchstones that will be familiar to readers new to the field.

Editors Beal and Greenaway have set out to create a collection that reassess 'the place of the religious in dominant histories of Horror and reintegrate marginalized theological and religious lines of enquiry into Horror history'. Greenaway's own chapter highlights this desire, challenging the idea of the gothic as 'an anti-Catholic mode of writing' through a case study of the novels of Andrew Michael Hurley. This pairs well with Syme's early chapter, as both question the established orthodoxy of the genre's relationships and influences from religion.

The final chapter, written by Andrew Tate, brings the collection to a close with a discussion on post-secularism, positioning religion as a human creation. This chapter would make for an excellent starting point for any discussion of humanism and its relationship to theological themes and morality. The variety of subjects covered are unified by their engagement with contemporary issues in culture, with the chapters that look to the past doing so to shine greater light on where society finds itself now. This book will go a long way to convincing those unsure whether horror can offer anything to theological discussion, whilst also offering new openings into under-explored and intriguing areas of study for those who already recognize its importance. Rachel Mann's chapter succinctly epitomizes the theme of the book as a whole; 'religion can no more escape horror, at least in its Christian foundations, than horror can escape religion' (2019: 90). On the evidence of this excellent collection,

theology and horror is an area worthy of further research and academic exploration.

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**William Brown and David H. Fleming, *The Squid Cinema from Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Cthulumedia*.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 320 pp, cloth.
\$120.00.**

When I unlock my phone, my eyes immediately move towards my social media apps. I have a Facebook, twitter, Instagram, linked in, and academia.edu account. All of which present my identity in different ways. I use Facebook to communicate with family and friends. Twitter to follow celebrities I admire, Instagram for pictures of those close to me. This does not include the three separate email apps that clutter my phone's home screen. They are all each different arms jutting out from my phone reaching into my consciousness; changing me as I change it. Once I have received the appropriate dopamine response for which I was searching, I return the phone to my pocket for safekeeping. My phone never leaves my side. It is an extremity of me- a third arm- a tentacle that contains its own tentacles; all a part of me. This premise lays the foundation for William Brown and David H. Fleming's new book *The Squid Cinema From Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Cthulumedia*.

Squid Cinema is a book about the blurring of boundaries. Brown and Fleming lean heavily on Donna Haraway's concept of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene (32). The Anthropocene refers to the era where anthropoids roamed the Earth, living amongst the animals and participating in the life cycle. The Capitalocene refers to the era in which Capitalism emerged and dominated the Earth. The Capitalocene is marked by an abundance of categories and possession. If someone can label something then it can be possessed. The Chthulucene (Haraway deliberately spells Chthulucene differently than Lovecraft's Cthulu in order to differentiate her Chthulucene as a return to the "chthonic" and not a direct referent to Lovecraft (32) is the era Haraway posits we are moving into. While Haraway tries to distance herself from Lovecraft, Brown and Fleming are not as opposed to Lovecraft's tentacular monster. The rise of Lovecraft's Cthulu creates a "radically other, nonhuman universe." Brown and Fleming's subject is a "horribly philosophical cinema of tentacles that touches us, and which pulls thought into dark, nonhuman realms, where many of the traditional boundaries, borders, and divisions no longer pertain" (33). For Brown and Fleming, the Chthulucene is an era marked by the human race losing its power and learning to live sustainably or ceasing to exist. Brown and Fleming explore how media is a metaphor for the Chthulucene, where boundaries dissolve into an interconnected web of tentacles, all working for the common survival of the whole.

Squid Cinema From Hell is Brown and Fleming's attempt to take Haraway's (and Fleussar's and a wide array of other philosopher's) ideas on the Chthulucene and apply it to media studies. This book at times reads as a list of every movie that has a cephalopod in it, but the book is much more than that. It is an attempt to "look at the contemporary media-drenched world from the perspective of/as if it were a cephalopodic universe" (1). In other words, this book is not simply a study of squids in cinema but a study of cinema through squids. Brown and Fleming examine the anatomy and nature of the cephalopod as a way to connect bridges to our media and culture, such as the cephalopods' ability to change their skin or live in darkness. The authors are trying to shift their perspective from an anthro-perspective to that of an animal, namely the squid. Only then can a move from to the Chthulucene occur. This is done through eight chapters including the extended introduction. It is not always evident how each chapter works together but by the end, it becomes clear that each chapter was working as an interconnected part of the completed whole.

Chapters 2, "Pulp Fiction and the Media Archaeology of Space," argues that cephalopods are media and media are cephalopods. The skin of a cephalopod acts as a display screen, connected to the brain/camera, displaying images for whatever purpose the scenario requires. Cephalopods can change the color of their skin for the purpose of attracting a mate or for camouflage (46). In a similar way, some televisions carry such powerful pixels that the screen will hide itself as a work of

art. Only when the time is appropriate will the screen reveal itself as a screen and not a painting (47). The screen becomes whatever the object choose to display to the viewer. Cinema is an intelligent being already camouflaging its message of the singularity to its viewers (50). Brown and Fleming expound on this point in Chapter 3, “Encounters with a 4DX Kino-Kraken.” They begin the chapter analyzing William Castle’s 1959 film *The Tingler*. The film is famous for Castle attaching machines that would shock certain audience members during the film, scaring them to the amusement of those surrounding them. *The Tingler*’s climax includes a scene where the monster is crawling through a cinema before entering the projection booth. A short clip is framed so the audience will believe that the titular creature is in their theater with the audience. The experience becomes four-dimensional. Brown and Fleming use this scene to suggest that the camera itself is a “fear machine” (86). The camera is always behind us, displaying an image before us. The audience lies in the liminal space between camera and image, becoming a part of the media. The boundary between media and audience dissolves as the media’s tentacles flatten and slither through our consciousness, dragging us into the deep.

Chapter 4, “Actorly Squid/Sets and Cephalopod Realism” is an examination of Scarlett Johansson and her filmography. Brown and Fleming use Johansson as an example for two reasons: 1. She is a megastar who is constantly in the public eye, and- 2. Her movies have a common theme of technological shape shifters. When we see Scarlett Johansson in a movie, we are aware that that is Scarlett Johansson. Yet, when she tweets or makes a public appearance, she is separate from the characters that she portrays in films. However, we still associate her with those characters. Brown and Fleming then point out the use of CGI and deep fakes in Johansson’s movies that digitally alter the actor on the screen. Thus the boundary between Johansson the actor, Johansson the person, Johansson the human, all begin to blur together. They are all tentacles jetting out from her being. They are all separate but all make up one being, thus complicating her identity in media and the public sphere. The whole of her being is made up of discernable parts. While Brown and Fleming use Johansson as an example, the chapter is an exercise in how boundaries blur between media and reality in various connection intersections. There is a fluidity between the actor’s roles, their public identity, and themselves.

Perhaps the strangest chapter in the book is chapter 5. “The Erotic Ecstasy of Cthulhu” examines the presence of squids and octopuses in sexual taboo media, the most famous of these being hentai tentacle porn. However, Brown and Fleming go further and examine sexual encounters with Cephalopods in media such as *the Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* and *The Untamed* (2016). The chapter then analyzes the squid-eating scene in Park Chan-wook’s *Oldboy* (2003), a film where the protagonist unknowingly enters into an incestuous relationship. For Brown and Fleming, Cephalopods represent taboo sexual relationships. The slithering appendages of the cephalopod represents the breaking of boundaries of repressed society and entering a world of freedom (144). Yet, it is not just about accepting sexual taboos, but rather learning to see the world from the perspective of the cephalopods and experience orgasms as they do (149). That is to reject the constant search of perpetual youth and learn to embrace the joy of the Earth’s life cycle.

In the final three chapters of *Squid Cinema From Hell*, Brown and Fleming take on the task of moving us from the Anthropocene and Capitalocene to the Chthulucene. The foundation of this thought is based on biophilosophy arguing “no one really dies” since RNA is constantly recreated (154). Our bodies are made up of tentacle cells creating webs of networks, sharing information. Thus, our own bodies are an alien world of Cephalopods. “If a cell, thus, could think, it, too, would understand that all knowledge- all that it knows- is a result of tentacular interconnections, and that knowledge is not disembodied and ‘out there,’ but thoroughly embodied in a universe of entanglement” (157). This leads to Chapter 7, which is largely an analysis of the 2016 film *Arrival*. Brown and Fleming use the film to engage in a conversation about the tentacular nature of time. The protagonist’s ability to look forward and backwards in times leads into a discussion on the connected web of all things. The authors call for a universe where all things are entangled in a universal web. To destroy one tentacle is an attack on the entire being.

Brown and Fleming’s *Squid Cinema From Hell* is a mind-boggling, often confusing,

exploration of Cephalopods in media and media's nature as a cephalopod. The book is quite dense in post-humanist philosophy and aimed at scholars of media studies well versed in post-humanist conversations. While I think the book does its best to help those out who are not familiar with some of the foundations of Flusser and Haraway, there is a bit of a learning curve at the start. However, for those who dare to allow its tentacles to take hold, the authors have something quite profound to say. As I read this book, I was often struck with the thought that the Capitalocene is marked by labeling everything according to its perceived value. Under Capitalism, everything has a value assigned based on its ability to breed more capital. Everything is defined. The Chthulucene is about blurring those definitions and breaking down the borders. For Brown and Fleming, media shows that the Capitalocene is not sustainable and that a new era is on the horizon. The Capitalocene will collapse beneath itself or we will see the world in a new way, as Louise Banks does in *Arrival*. The end of Capitalocene is coming but it is not the end. Just as Lovecraft's Cthulu rises from the waters to mark the end of humanity, the Chthulucene rises from the depths of ourselves to announce a new era. An era marked by love and kindness. One that lives in sustainability with all things.

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**Edited by Ellen Goldberg, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins,
*Bollywood Horrors: Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears in
 India*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 246 pp,
 hardcover. £76.50.**

As suggested by its title, instead of analyzing horror as a singular form, this edited collection by Ellen Goldberg, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins discusses *horrors* in the plural. While the three renowned volumes on Indian horror films (the monographs by Merah Ahmed Mubarak, Meheli Sen, and Mithuraaj Dhusiya) preceding *Bollywood Horrors* focused primarily on supernatural horror, this collection broadens the parameter of Indian horror cinema by devoting its last section to the discussion of Bollywood horror films of non-supernatural kind. Though this review will mostly refrain from commenting on this particular section of the volume, keeping the journal's focus in mind, the aforementioned section is by no means an appendage.

The collection begins with a detailed Introduction (1-18) by the editors. Along with cogent discussions on the volume's overall scope and structure in its final section, this chapter offers insightful overviews of Indian horror films as well as the existing body of critical discussions in its first two sections. While this discussion is not exhaustive, it certainly adds surplus value to the volume and helps to orient the reader who may be unfamiliar with Bollywood horror. In the third and fourth sections, the editors explain the volume's methodology of analyzing Bollywood horrors using a framework that draws both upon Indian religion and *Rasa* theory. On the one hand, this framework uses a comparative method which involves mapping the presence of Indian religious figures, and the myths featuring such figures, in Bollywood horror films. On the other hand, as the editors explain in the fourth section, their collection is also about reading Bollywood horror using the concepts of *bhayanaka* and *bibhatsa*, among the *rasas* as explained by Bharata's *Natyasastra*.

In Indian aesthetics, the *rasas* refer to essences or core ideas that evoke emotional responses in audiences, when used in various art forms like poetry, music, sculpture, theatre, etc. Among the nine *rasas* described by Bharata, *bhayanaka* and *bibhatsa* stand for the sources of shock effects. While *bhayanaka* signifies the scary elements that evoke fear, *bibhatsa* refers to the gruesome that creates repulsion. This introduction explains these quite cogently (see 10-13) but when it comes to utilizing these ideas as a lens, the collection as a whole somewhat falls short as only two chapters (1 by Collins and 3 by Erndl) read Indian horror by drawing upon the concept of *bhayanaka* and the concept of *bibhatsa*. This appears in two chapters (3 by Erndl and 6 by Goldberg) and only very briefly. Nevertheless, the sections offer interesting insights and the following paragraphs will outline these.

The first section, comprising two chapters by Brian Collins, discusses Bollywood horror films mostly by moving beyond the boundaries of the films on screen. Chapter 1 "Monsters, Masala, and Materiality: Close Encounters with Hindi Horror Movie Ephemera" (21-43) in particular surprises by offering a layered analysis of the poster of the horror film *Darawani Haveli* (1997) and song booklets of numerous other Bollywood horror films. Collins's analysis explains how elements from both cult Hollywood films and Indian arts are mingled in this poster in question by highlighting traces of Hitchcock's *Psycho* as well as a particular mode of narration found in Buddhist architectures are mixed to lure viewers. Borrowings from Hollywood and Indian culture are highlighted in song-booklets too by drawing attention to the lifting of images from the poster of *Evil Dead II*, or the film *Monster on the Campus* in booklets of *Khatarnak Raat* (2003) and the allusion to a vedic demoness in the song booklet of *Daayan* (1998). This chapter identifies two tropes associated to Bollywood horror films as well as their promotional materials, namely, the fierce female figure and the devouring mouth.

The second chapter by Collins “Vampire Man Varma: The Untold Story of the ‘Hindu Mystic’ Who Decolonized *Dracula*,” (44-65) despite its interesting premise, appears comparatively underexplored. While the premise, that is, an assessment of the contribution of the underrated (and at times misinterpreted, see 55-59) Indian horror scholar Devendra Prasad Varma in Indianizing the vampire figure promises of a much awaited discussion, towards the end the analysis becomes sketchy. For instance, when Collins claims Verma’s association of Tantra and vampirism influenced Bollywood horror films like *Bhayaanak* (1979), *Veerana* (1988), *Bandh Darwaza* (1990) he speaks of the presence of “Indian cinematic vampires” (46) in each of these films but instead of discussing these films and the vampires featured therein individually, he focuses only on the film *Bandh Darwaza*. Collins argues that the Eastern fanged deities of Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia are the source of the western figure of the vampire. But rather than argue this fully, Collins limits his discussion merely to the analysis of Varma’s writings (59-61). Even Mary Hallab’s brief and slightly sarcastic assessment (*Vampire God: The Allure of the Undead in Western Culture*, p. 71) of Varma’s observations regarding the Eastern lineage of vampires mentioned how Varma drew parallels between the vampire and Eastern deities like the Nepalese God of Death, but Collins’s chapter ignores even this kind of detail.

The first two chapters of the second section (Chapter 3, “Divine Horror and the Avenging Goddess in Bollywood” and 4, “Horrorifying and Sinister Tantriks”) further explore the presence of figures from Indian religion in Bollywood horror films by devoting separate chapters to the figures of the avenging goddess (a figure that Collins’s first chapter traces to a vedic demoness) and evil *tantriks*. Along with these, this section analyzes re-writing of Indian myths in Bollywood horrors in Chapter 5 “Do you want to know the Raaz?: Tropes of Madness and Immorality in Bollywood Horror” (94-111) using Vikram Bhatt’s *Raaz* (2002) as a case-study. Chapter 3(69-77) by Kathleen M. Erndl, published posthumously, offers notable insights like the mixing of all the *rasas* in the *Masala* Bollywood films and an exploration of select avenging goddess films of Bollywood that studies how these films create effects of horror utilizing the *rasas* known as *bhayanaka* and *bibhatsa*.

Chapter 4(78-93) by Hugh B. Urban moves the discussion from the goddesses to their ruthless followers known as *tantriks* in his study of the Bollywood films *Gehrayee* (1980), *Jaadugar* (1989), *Sangharsh* (1999) and the Telugu film *Ammoru* (1995). The chapter captures a number of notable features of Bollywood films featuring evil *tantriks* like their final defeats in the hands of the embodiments of holiness (like the holy *sadhu*, the virtuous trickster or the goddess herself) and their cultural appropriation of Hollywood horror classics like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, etc. Despite such remarkable insights, Urban’s chapter ultimately ends up offering a homogenized view of the portrayal of *tantriks* in Indian popular films and literature. Going by Urban’s chapter, *tantriks* appears only as a charlatan figure in traditional Sanskrit literature as well as comparatively recent Bollywood films or famous literary texts like *Kapalkundala* (1866) which completely ignores examples of famous films like *Bhoolbhulaiyaa* (2007) or the stories featuring Taranath Tantrik, where the *tantrik* figure appears as the savior.

Adding variety to the section, Aditi Sen’s chapter on the surprise hit film *Raaz* discusses the film’s re-writing of traditional Indian myth of Satyavan and Sabitri, thereby highlighting a subversive potential of Bollywood horrors. This otherwise well-knit discussion, however occasionally leads the readers astray when it finds a parallel between Malini’s (the antagonist of the film) craving of sex and the *Petni*’s (a folkloric female ghost popular in Bengal) craving of fish or when it claims that Stoker’s *Dracula* is *clearly* borrowed from the Indian legends of *Betaal* in an endnote. In both cases, these conclusions are tenuous and require more full support.

Overall, the collection marks a promising start of critical discussions of the connections between Indian religion, myth, and Bollywood horror films. Apart from helping the global horror enthusiast take a notable step toward exploring the wide variety of Bollywood horrors, these essays will aid scholars of religious studies by drawing attention to the notable afterlives of the avenging female goddess of Hindu religion as well as the vilification of *tantra* and its followers across cultures. Most importantly, the collection caters to the cross-cultural approach of religious studies

when it explains the notable similarities between the male viewers of Bollywood horrors and American slasher films (43). Such references indeed bear the potential for furthering the study of horror films across the globe through the lens of religious studies.

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***Howling Village*. Written by Daisuke Hosaka and Takashi Shimizu, and directed by Takashi Shimizu. Toei Company, Ltd., 2020.**

Howling Village (Japanese: *Inunaki-mura*) is a Japanese horror film by Takashi Shimizu, beautifully filmed on-site in Fukuoka Prefecture. It is the first film of Shimizu's *Villages of Dread* series, to be followed in February 2021 by *Suicide Forrest Village* (Japanese: *Jukai-mura*). Shimizu is best known for the *Ju-On* franchise, which began with his first feature-length film, the direct-to-video *Ju-On: The Curse* (Japanese: *Ju-On*) (2000) and became internationally well-known through the success of the third film of the franchise, the theatrically released *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Japanese: *Ju-On*) (2002). While family plays a thematic role through domestic violence and abuse in the *Ju-On* franchise as well as in Shimizu's *Innocent Curse* (Japanese: *Kodomo Tsukai*) (2017) and, to an extent, *Reincarnation* (Japanese: *Rinne*) (2005), the family-centered story of *Howling Village* expands urban legends concerning a village in Inunaki (literally meaning "Dog Barking") into a complex narrative concerning bloodlines and borderlines. It thereby draws audiences to face their own identity and the nature of their humanity.

The film's story follows young clinical psychologist Kanade Morita (Ayaka Miyoshi), who lives with her parents, older brother Yuma (Ryota Bando) and elementary-school age brother Kota (Hinata Kaizu). After Yuma and his girlfriend Akina (Rinka Otani) venture through the old, blocked-off Inunaki Tunnel into Inunaki Village, Akina's behavior becomes strange and she soon dies. While Yuma, along with Kota, goes missing after returning to the tunnel, Kanade is troubled by her experiences of seeing what seem to be ghosts. At the heart of this is her maternal family history, which seems related to what has happened to her brothers and Akina, to prejudice from others in the town against her family, and to difficulties in her parents' marital relationship.

As the film progresses, Kanade learns about both her maternal and paternal ancestries. Her maternal grandmother, who had the same experience of seeing spirits, had been abandoned as an infant, likely from Inunaki Village, which was destroyed through flooding due to the construction of the Inunaki Dam. The people of the village had long been ostracized and objects of prejudice, but a group from outside entered and seemed to desire to help them. Secretly working for an electric company, however, they came deceptively to have the dam constructed in disregard for the village and the lives of its people. They treated the people of the village with brutality, and to further increase hostility against the village, locked up its young women and spread rumors that these women engaged in bestiality with dogs. One of the prominent members of this group was a paternal ancestor of Kanade.

Throughout this narrative, the determined nature of bloodlines, along with their resultant construction of identity and relationships, play a prominent thematic role. *Howling Village* is not a narrative of acting on ambition, determining self, or fulfilling dreams, but rather one that revolves around the determined and unchangeable nature of self, family, and community. Bloodlines are neither chosen nor necessarily known, and at times, they appear to be in conflict. At the beginning of the film, even though some of her experiences result from her ancestry, Kanade knows neither her bloodlines on her mother's side nor on her father's side. The knowledge that unfolds as the film progresses allows no opportunity to choose between them or alter them.

Kanade's maternal ancestry places her and her family in a position of prejudice and, to an extent, the bestial or monstrous in the view of others, but not because of anything that she has done or over which she has control. Kanade hears insults of her family's blood. She finds her family's house marked with graffiti calling her family murderers with dirty blood. Kanade's father admits to her that his at times harsh patriarchal disposition comes from his own fear of her and her mother. And, finally, Kanade and her mother's own dog-like characteristics and behavior reveal that the effects of her maternal bloodline extend not only to how Kanade is viewed subjectively by others, but to her own unchangeable nature.

At the same time, Kanade's paternal ancestry is that of the deceiver, the persecutor, the ostracizer, the slanderer, the one who has murdered a community for financial gain. As shown by the continued prejudice and mistreatment of her family within the community outside of the village, these are not merely matters of the past, but continue as an underlying disposition of her town toward her in the present. Kanade's conflicting maternal and paternal ancestry are not bloodlines to be escaped, but are her own predetermined identity and the predetermined identity of her family whom she loves.

Howling Village's blurring of several conventional borderlines in its narrative world contribute to the complexity of its treatment of human nature: urban legend and reality, natural and supernatural, living and dead, present and past, and insider and outsider. Most significantly, however, the film focuses its audience on the blurring of the border of human and animal and thereby forces its audience to face both the existence of that border and the horror unique to being on the human side of it. The animality of humans in a naturalistic evolutionary understanding of human development often provokes little reaction in a classroom or an account of natural history, but *Howling Village* will not allow such disinterested neutrality.

Many of the most disturbing moments of the film are those in which humans behave like dogs or show the characteristics of dogs, causing the audience to face its presupposition that humans are different from beasts. Shimizu has previously blurred the borderline between human and animal through Toshio's meows in the *Ju-On* series and through the animalistic behavior of F and the dero in his Lovecraftian *Marebito* (2004). The effectiveness of these scenes in *Howling Village*, however, is heightened by how they feature characters toward whom the audience has first been drawn to feel affection and sympathy. The POV for much of the opening eight-minutes draws the audience to view Akina from Yuma's perspective as he films his bright and playfully cheerful girlfriend while they venture into Inunaki Village. As an audience, we therefore feel all the more sorry and embarrassed for Akina when she later urinates on herself while walking along the road. We would have no similar reaction toward a dog that urinates on the street when taken on a walk. Similarly, when Kanade's mother eats off the floor directly with her mouth, the portrayal of her doing so is disturbing because of her very humanity. Even Maya is presented as an ordinary woman who is Kenji's lover until her transformation as the film's climax. The chilling final moment of the film is the sight of Kanade herself, whom the audience has followed throughout the film's narrative, as she holds her hand up to her mouth like a dog's paw. The audience's sense of the dignity of humanity is what makes each of these moments in the film disturbing.

Yet, as much as dog-like behavior in humans is disturbing, a more disturbing characteristic of human nature appears at the point where the film's thematic use of bloodlines and borderlines cross. Which is superior, or which is more monstrous? The people of the village, who do indeed have bestial characteristics but are victims of prejudice, hostility, slander, and, in the end, murder through the construction of a dam for company profit by a group who betrays them; or that group and its community outside the village? If the question is one of which is more bestial, the answer is the people of the village, who indeed have characteristics of dogs. Yet, paradoxically, they are also more like beasts than those outside of their community in that the group from the power company and their community are more wicked than dogs could ever be. They differ from dogs by the atrocity of their actions, showing a distinguishing characteristic of humanity: wickedness.

Howling Village is not explicitly "religious" in the presentation of its story (although its temporal non-linearity may take hints from the Buddhist cyclicism from which Shimizu draws in the *Ju-On* films and, more explicitly, in *Reincarnation*). Nevertheless, the questions with which it faces its audience concerning determinedness, identity, and the dignity and wickedness of humanity are the material of philosophy, ethics, and, indeed, of religion. As an audience, we are drawn to consider again who we are as humans, our discomfort of being made to feel we are like animals, and whether we have more reason to fear the inhuman or to fear ourselves. We cannot change our humanity and its characteristics, nor the particularity of ourselves, our families, and our communities as part of that humanity. Within that particularity we recognize humanity's dignity and love for our family, exemplified by Kanade risking her life to save her brothers and by Yuma's

sacrifice of himself for her. Yet, even if we view ourselves as different from beasts by that dignity and love, the internal conflict of our humanity is the presence of a human characteristic worse than bestiality. While we may recoil at the thought of being more like dogs than we wish to admit, *Howling Village* invites us to consider if, even more horrifyingly, we may be less like dogs than we wish to acknowledge as we distinguish ourselves from them by the wickedness we commit against each other.

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***Ju-On: Origins*. Written by Hiroshi Takahashi and Takashige Ichise, and directed by Sho Miyake. Netflix, 2020.**

Created and released at the height of J-Horror, *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002), written and directed by Shimizu Takashi (note: all Japanese names given Japanese-style, surname first), offered a variant on the onryō film – an onryō being a vengeful yūrei (ghost), usually female, who takes the form of a dead girl with long black hair and a dirty white robe or dress, often but not always wet. Many books have been written in Japanese and English about the late-twentieth, early twenty-first century explosion of onryō films, citing the social, artistic, and cultural forces that created these films and their subsequent influence on global cinema, not to mention the ensuing Hollywood boom in J-Horror remakes. As with other horror films, Shimizu's movie did not merely spawn sequels but instead is now a franchise unto itself, and even a universe like *The Conjuring*: reboots, echoes, remakes, tangential films, interactions with other franchises followed the original and created an entire world affected by the original cursed house.

At heart, the *Ju-On* series has a high concept, simple idea: a house is so cursed, so haunted, that even if someone leaves the house, or only visits it for a few minutes, the evil in the house follows and kills that person, usually horrifically. The original film was episodic in nature, detailing the curse that murders any and all who enter the house. The newest series on Netflix maintains this basic set-up but offers a different approach. The series repurposes the visuals in a new way and does not merely ‘reboot’ the series, but reimagines the relationship between series and original film in a manner that allows the story to begin again without the trappings established by the “*Ju-On* universe.”

At the series' beginning, the narrator intones, “*Ju-On* was inspired by a true story” over visuals of first responders removing dead bodies from the cursed house, presented in a documentary style which will continue to echo through the series. This announcement does two paradoxical things simultaneously: it announces its connection to the original film and the universe it spanned while concurrently denying an actual presence in that world. “*Ju-On* was fiction inspired by the real story we will tell here.” This announcement thus also allows the creators to both supersede the original while claiming the new narrative is the correct one and any differences are because the original is fiction. Artistically, it is a clever gambit that allows the series to be *Ju-On* and not *Ju-On*, keeping what works with no promise of consistency with the series.

Indeed, perhaps in the biggest change, gone is Kayako, the series' emblematic uncanny female ghost, replaced by “The Woman in White.” The curse remains, as does the protagonist seeking to understand why the house is cursed and people die, but the longer duration of the narrative allowed by a series as opposed to a 90-minute film allows for much greater exploration of the characters, how the house has affected their lives in a daily sense, and how the larger curse of the house unfolds over a decade.

The six half-hour episodes focus on an actress and a paranormal investigator who have personal reasons to investigate the cursed house (she because it killed her fiancé; he because he lived there as a child and his entire family except him died in the house), and upon an unusual couple whose futures were set when they visited the house as school students and experienced a traumatic encounter. These paired stories interweave with each other throughout the series. Three important elements recur over and over in the series, which seem to frame the narrative. Repeatedly throughout the episodes, televisions broadcast a story of violence: two school children killing their friend, a young woman murdered, a serial killer strikes again. It seems that the horrors of everyday life are both a part of and supersede the violence of the house. One need not enter a cursed house to find murder, violence, cruelty, the series seems to say: just turn on the television. The opening shot of the show, done television style, seems to enforce this idea, that the cursed house is just one of

dozens of atrocities each week in the greater Tokyo area. Conversely, it also suggests there is much more to the story in each of these cases than in what the television news reveals.

This idea is reinforced when Odajima visits the serial killer M in prison. “Occult fans can’t really come up with ideas,” the killer tells the paranormal writer, “Actual criminals like me need to help out.” It is true – M knows where the cursed house is because he was the only one who saw the news reports of deaths in the house and linked them together. One must think like a killer to see the supernatural pattern (which may not be so supernatural).

The second new element is the shift from Kayako to the Woman in White. While Kayako has been an uncanny avenger who is responsible for death, madness, and injury, the Woman in White is more a of a presence, a harbinger instead of an onryō. She shows Haruka where the house is. She is present when bad things happen, but it not the cause of them. Indeed, most of the atrocities in the series are not from the supernatural but from human evil: Yudai killing Kiyomi’s mom and beating his own son into a coma, Kiyomi pushing Yudai to kill and then drowning him in her tub herself, the girls and Yudai tricking Kiyomi to the house in the first place to rape her, Nobuhiko and Chie planning to murder their spouses with the end result of all four individuals dead, and the list goes on. While an argument can be made for the supernatural influence of the house over all of them, the series shifts away from onryō-driven curses and focuses on human evil and its cost. Linked with the recurring images of television news reporting horrible crimes, the series places a higher focus on human capacity for causing harm.

The third and final element is the “long game” of both the protagonists and the house. Whereas the original film unfolds over a few days, the series takes place over half a century, with the majority of the events occurring across a decade near the end. The characters who have been affected by the house all continue to live their lives and do their jobs, but come together repeatedly as the house continues to exert influence. With each new atrocity they come back together to seek more answers. Yudai and Kiyomi live under fake names, and manage to stay together despite his sexual assault of her at the beginning of the relationship over the six years it takes for the entire arc of their relationship to play out. Most horror films play out the events of one crazy weekend; in contrast, *Ju-On* the series is concerned with ongoing horrors, with perhaps even literalized metaphors. Kiyomi literally lives with the reality of her rape every day. Haruka, despite her fame, is deeply troubled by the loss of her fiancé, which literally haunts her. Odajima continues to attempt to discover why his entire family died. In each case, the survivor lives with the aftermath of horrible tragedy, it continues to shape and guide their lives. Not everyday, but often enough that it dominates their existence. The horror of *Ju-On: Origins* is the horror of the survivor; the origin of the horror is literally the beginning of something that will occupy a place in the lives of all it touches.

Japan and North America share an ambiguous relationship with their own hauntings and cultural sense of the supernatural. The United States had a television program entitled *Celebrity Ghost Stories*, on which Hiruka would have been perfectly at home, and certainly we revisit our famous hauntings, especially ones in which violence has played a part (see: The Amityville Horror; the Lizzie Borden House, The Winchester Mystery house). Inevitably a trope in both cultures is the idea of the ghost hunter who finds “new” information about previously known hauntings that reinvest them with a sense of the uncanny, and bring them back into the public eye. The *Ju-On* universe is powered by this sense of recurring urban legend/folklore.

The original *Ju-On* demonstrates both the failure of the family unit in post-industrial Japan, as well as the failure of conventional wisdom to solve problems. As with many of the J-horror films of the late nineties and early oughts, solving the mystery of the ghost’s origins and identity does not stop the haunting. If anything, it intensifies it and allows it to continue further afield. *Ju-On* shows an irrational world in which no solutions are possible. *Ju-On: Origins* reminds the audience that the world remains irrational and dangerous. At the heart of that modern irrationality is the idea of blaming a curse for decades of family tragedies. Still, that explanation makes about as much sense as those offered by adherents of Q-Anon or other conspiracy theories that have blossomed in the last few years. Curses make as much sense as any other irrational belief.

The horror of *Ju-On: Origins* is thus also that the curse does not end. Even burying the recording at the end of the series does not save Haruka from the ghost of the kidnapper. Nothing we can do ends the curse. At best we can survive, haunted by what has happened. The only solution is to avoid the house altogether, which is not a very satisfactory message, yet one that seems entirely apt for 2020.

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