

The Monster in the Mirror: Self-Identification with the Radical/Resistant Monster

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Religions and Cultures

Abstract

The Monster in the Mirror: Self-Identification with the Radical/Resistant Monster

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This dissertation examines the social function of the figure of the monster in science-fiction, fantasy, and horror available in the western market. Its focus is on contemporary texts in a variety of media that position the monster as a character with which marginalized people are intended to identify, and it primarily examines texts authored by marginalized individuals. It employs a comparative, thematic approach that provides an impressionistic evaluation of a specific cultural trend, and makes the argument for a new category of monstrous affiliation under the title of the radical/resistant monster. The works under consideration are united in that they position the monster as a figure of resistance that retains its dangerous characteristics and outsider status in order to embolden marginalized audiences. The monster thus serves to reify group identity, shoring up sites of perceived difference between marginalized communities and an imagined mainstream. In specific, it examines the online monsterfucker subculture in the context of trans erotic literature, an emergent queer ecofeminist trend I have named the EcoFabulous, and Jeff VanderMeer's use of the radical/resistant monster to imagine nonhuman animal positionalities. These texts stand in contrast against a parallel phenomenon: the rise of the assimilative monster in genre fiction, identified by Catherine Spooner. The assimilative monster, by comparison, gestures toward the capability of social outsiders, including minority and self-identified marginalized communities, to likewise assimilate to the dominant culture. The thesis examines works largely produced from 2010-2025.

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Dedication

For Lucas, who is still waiting for a ceramic horse. I love you.

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Introduction

A Monster of One's Own

"Shelley's monster said it best:

'I have love in me the likes of which you can scarcely. Imagine. And rage the likes of which you would not believe. If

I cannot satisfy the one, I will indulge the other.' And that's exactly what we do in humanland. Exactly what we do." — Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris, "Monsters, Desire, and the Queer Creative Body."¹

"Are you a wolf dressed up in a girl's skin? Are you a boy held together with bolts? Do you dream of night, or do you fear the dark? Do you long to be dangerous?," – Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant, *Monstrous Affections*.²

When I was a child, monsters were a kind of glue that knit the world together. Playing on the rocky beaches of Conception Bay South, Newfoundland, my sister and I made imaginary friends of a quartet of werewolves. Wolfie, Sarah, Veronica, and Thomas lived on the outskirts of a graveyard that looked out on the Atlantic Ocean. We would act out their adventures—absurd, banal, epic, and always splendid—on an outcrop of precarious seagrass that was in danger of avalanching into the sea. On nights when the wind blew fierce enough to shake the house (as it is wont to do in Eastern Canada), I would imagine Wolfie—or some less legible creature—as a vicious force come to protect my family. In the childish mind, wolves are known for their ability to blow down houses; it stands to reason they can choose to do the opposite.

¹ Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris, "Monsters, Desire, and the Queer Creative Body," *Continuum: Journal of Cultural and Media Studies*, 30, n. 5: 518-530, 525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1210748>.

² Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant, *Monstrous Affections: An Anthology of Beastly Tales* (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2019), .

Like so many monsters, werewolves are changelings, known for shifting shape but also meaning, a challenge to binary, ordered systems that maintain that it is only ever possible to be real if you are one of two things (by which is meant, it is only possible to be worthwhile if you are one of one thing).

The Little Mermaid was a childhood obsession, with its themes of transformation, yearning, and the status of the outsider. Though this was not unusual for someone my age in the wake of the release of the 1989 Disney adaptation, trans identification with the character, as well as with stories of transformation in general, is a noted phenomenon.³ Children's books, movies, and television shows from the late eighties and early nineties often emphasized that it was not the dragon who must be slain, but the tyrant king demanding the dragon's death who ought to be deposed (or, at the very least, sternly questioned). While there were stories that maintained a connection between moral repugnance and physical appearance (weight, race, disability, gender performance, religion, sexuality, class, et cetera), a large enough number of works promoted the message that those historically perceived as monstrous were really just like everyone else and could, given the chance, happily assimilate to White, Christian, heterosexual society. What were blue, pink, or scaled skin but opportunities for a makeover montage? What was Hanukkah but a funny way of celebrating Christmas? And later: what were gay people, but tragic asexual lovers, whose chaste adoration ought not to bar them from home ownership in the suburban community and the acquisition of a fine assortment of pastel sweaters from American Eagle? For a child with a foreign accent, weird food in his lunchbox, and as yet undetermined queerness and neurodivergences setting him apart from his fellow kindergartners, the promise that I could become that treasured thing—normal, unremarkable—was at once a gleaming hope and an unshakeable terror. If you are not normal, the easiest way to blend in is not to speak, not to eat (in front of others), and never to want beyond what others want for/from you.

Stories in which the dragons won certainly spoke to me, and yet the monsters who populated my

³ Lizette Gerber, "Transgender Bodies in 'The Little Mermaid' and *Swim Thru Fire*," *University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal* 4: 1 (2017).

personal childhood fantasies never quite managed to shrug off the markers of their difference to melt into the comforting indistinction of the rustic North American stewpot. Playground bullies have never cared much whether the PSAs tacked on to the end of their favourite television shows tell them to be nice, and mean girls and boys alike are quick to co-opt marginalized protagonists if it means they get to keep playing the game of main character. Like my popular peers, I seemed incapable of learning the lessons such programming prescribed (in my case, the importance of blending in). Silence, hunger, and denial are meagre morsels. My monsters needed teeth and claws if they were to protect themselves.

So often, when we dream up a monster, the entity that results—embodied, spectral, or something still stranger—is a product of our personal, cultural, or national anxieties. For varied others, however, the monster is not something to fear, but a home to curl up inside—a creation that combines and reconstitutes the disparate, disparaged parts of bodies and minds marked by what is often sadly received as an inappropriate performance of humanness. This dissertation is concerned with those varied Others and their monsters, and in particular with the ways in which contemporary authors, artists, and audiences who find themselves relegated to the outskirts of mainstream Western society are newly claiming the monsters once used to demonize them. These stories, whether beamed onto the cinema screen, scrawled in notebooks, or digitally inked as the panels of online webcomics, are not stories of assimilation, but stories describing the means by which monsters might *resist* assimilation. Insofar as these representations promote or express the refusal of their monsters to disavow their monstrosity and the signs of their marginality in favour of human traits, they are treated as radical in a broad sense, and received as both radical and resistant by their intended audiences.

The works I analyze in this dissertation are a small selection of what has emerged as a robust and ongoing cultural shift in the social function of the monster in a primarily (though not exclusively) Western context. That is, the bulk of my research focuses on science fiction, fantasy, and horror available in the Western market in order to examine and identify new developments in how we engage with the figure of the monster. While identification with the monster is not itself novel, the specifics of these new modes of identification are meaningful,

indicating what I argue is the advent of a new, queer, monstrous perspective that expands on pre-existing features of monstrous representation, and specifically the archetype of the sympathetic monster.

I primarily examine texts authored by marginalized individuals in order to speak to the ways in which marginalized authors, artists, and their audiences are themselves redescribing the figure of the monster using a recuperative lens, specifically identifying the monster as a tool through which they can express resistance against oppressive social systems either real or perceived.

I contend that this radical/resistant monster archetype has developed concurrently with a mode of Gothic expression that Catherine Spooner identifies variously as the monstrous/cute, the assimilative monster, and the happy Gothic. As in the case of the monstrous/cute, the radical/resistant monster emerges from the Western cultural milieu of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, during which time there was an increase in representations of the sympathetic monster as a figure.⁴ While the monstrous trends in Spooner's work gesture toward the capability of social outsiders, including minority and self-identified marginalized communities, to assimilate to the dominant culture, the radical/resistant monster deliberately rejects attempts to absorb it into mainstream or normate society.⁵ Instead, radical/resistant monster works position both the monster and the real-world groups or individuals it represents,

⁴ Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance, and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 85.

⁵ The term "normate" was coined by Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. It denotes a constructed cultural identity produced through the Othering of undesirable body types (e.g. female, Black, disabled, et cetera) to contrast with the normate as a desirable ideal. The American normate body, Garland-Thomson clarifies, is Protestant, Northern, white, male, urban, well-complexioned, and so on. It "designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings," and thus excludes from the category of the human those bodies that do not conform to this ideal. In the context of my own analysis in this chapter, we might extend the normate to mean those bodies considered "persons" and not simply "human." Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Colombia UP, 1997), 8.

as hostile to the human society from which (or against which) they emerge. This hostility may take the form of a desire or drive to destroy that society, or it may manifest through the monster's capacity to infect and thus eradicate human beings through a process of contagion. That the radical/resistant monster retains its dangerous characteristics and outsider status is often used to embolden marginalized audiences. The resistant/radical monster thus serves to reify marginalized group identity, shoring up sites of perceived difference between marginalized communities and an imagined mainstream. This narrative of resistance is then engaged with by online fan communities and individuals on social media.

Through my examination of radical/resistant monster works I engage with a variety of subtrends. These trends include: the use of the monster to express oneself through autobiography, non-assimilative monsters that continue to live alongside yet apart from human beings, monsters that must flee the human world in order to survive, trans engagement with monsterfucker art that depicts the opportunity for trans people to transition through sexual intercourse with the monster; the development of queer articulations of what I call the Ecofabulous—queer identification with monstrous Nature—and, lastly, the use of monster figures to represent nonhuman animals in a post-apocalyptic context. As I collated lists of works that fit within the frame of the radical/resistant monster, these themes stood out as meaningful trends that have gone largely unmarked in extant scholarship, and it is for this reason, along with their resonance with each other, that I have chosen to focus my attentions on them to the exclusion of other works. My own positionality as a trans, neurodivergent academic⁶ and author, as well as the current onslaught of attacks against trans people and our ability to thrive has likewise influenced my choice of focus.

My analysis combines a close literary reading of my chosen texts with cultural analyses that identify the works discussed as part of an ongoing and informal movement within science-fiction, fantasy, and horror. It employs a comparative, thematic approach that provides an impressionistic evaluation of a specific cultural trend through reader response. It further argues

⁶ I acknowledge the redundancy of “neurodivergent academic.”

that this trend is a result of shifts in marginalized identification and expressions of authenticity borne from a sense of the necessity to resist mainstream attempts to flatten identity-based difference. It does not argue that all marginalized artists and audiences identify with monsters, nor that, when they do identify with monsters that such identification is expressed along identical lines. Rather, it gives name to a specific and significant development within the context of sympathy for monstrous figures.

Organization and Synopsis of Chapters

My analysis is broken into four main chapters that each deal with thematics at play within the context of the queer radical/resistant monster. These chapters have been deliberately arranged so that the degree of hostility toward, and resistance against, human society increases with each selection of works, with Chapter One examining the concept of the radical/resistant monster in the broader context of Monster Studies. Along these lines, my final chapter, an analysis of author Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* trilogy, centres on the end of the (human) world as we know it.

Chapter One, "Naming the Beast: Monstrous Others for a New Millennium" is a literature review of both the field of Monster Studies and of relevant works and subrends within the purview of an analysis of the radical/resistant monster. In particular, the chapter establishes the central interests of Monster Studies, locating its origins within a diverse array of scholarly disciplines while gesturing toward Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work as a significant development in the establishment of Monster Studies as a distinct field of academic inquiry. It further considers the contributions of Catherine Spooner in more depth, placing her articulation of the monstrous/cute in conversation with the work of prominent Monster Studies, Horror Studies, and Gothic scholars such as W. Scott Poole, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, and Jack Halberstam. In this capacity, Chapter One also presents a brief overview of the history of the use of monsters in the process of social Othering. The chapter closes with an analysis of several microgenres under the category of the radical/resistant monster. These include autobiographical identification with the monster, such as in the work of Riva Lehrer, Sarah Myer, and Matt Lee; escapist monsters who must flee to nonhuman realms in order to survive as in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

and Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*; representations of monsters who retain their monstrous Otherness while dwelling alongside humans as in Robin Gow's *Dear Mothman* and Ava Reid's *The Juniper Tree*, and the monster as violent avenger as in Bridget Liang's "Delicate Bodies."

Chapter Two, "Fuck Not With Monsters Lest Ye Be Fucked: Monstrous Genders and Sexualities in Monsterfucker Art," analyzes the rising popularity of so-called monsterfucker subcultures and artworks by specifically examining trans-centered stories in which sexual intercourse with—and/or transformation into—the monster acts as the means by which trans characters are able to physically transition. These narratives, images, and videos, most of which can be classified as pornography, represent a small fraction of monsterfucker output, and my analysis here is supplemented by material sourced from popular online fora such as Reddit. Using Jack Halberstam's work on queer temporalities alongside material from Trans Studies, and with a nod to Kristeva's abject, I analyze the ways in which monsterfuckery engages with issues of visibility and embodiment through the figure of the monster. The majority of the chapter is taken up with a close textual reading of InCase's erotic webcomic, *The Invitation*, and Lee Mandelo's horror novella, *The Woods All Black*, though I combine this analysis with an examination of online audience engagement with monsterfuckery as community, philosophy, and identity. In the examples under analysis, transition by monster is coupled with either violent revenge against human, cisgender society, or the presentation of trans monstrosity as the means by which total human corruption can take place on a global scale. The discussion of *The Woods All Black* leads into Chapter Two through its concern with the relationship of monstrosity and queerness to the concepts of Nature and the sacred.

Chapter Three, "Out of the Closet and Into the Woods: Ecofabulism and Queer Constructions of the Monstrous," introduces Ecofabulism as an emergent subgenre that intersects with the radical/resistant monster narrative. Ecofabulist works, I contend, merge ecological, environmental concerns with the queer monster in order to draw a connection between queerness and Nature. This problematizes the ways in which anti-queer discourse often focuses on queer embodiments and sexualities as less Natural than heterosexual and cisgender ones. It proposes that marginalized flourishing requires embracing an untidy notion of selfhood that re-enforces

links between the queer character(s) and the Natural world even as it severs connections between the queer character(s) and urban, human spaces. In these narratives, queer monster characters are able to achieve authenticity through identification with Nature as monstrous, and in their newly monstrous states represent a direct threat to human or dominant society. In this vein, and with reference to previous scholarship in the field of the ecoGothic and queer Gothic, as well as Mel. Y. Chen's *Animacies*, I analyze Elliott Gish's lesbian horror novel, *Grey Dog*, Rivers Solomon's queer horror novel *Sorrowland*, Rory Power's Young Adult novel *Wilder Girls*, and Aliya Whiteley's postapocalyptic horror novella, *The Beauty*. These last two works are apocalyptic and postapocalyptic in setting, providing a connection to my final topic in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four, ““Human is a Stronghold that Hides a Weakness”:⁷ Hyperobjects and Monster Futurities,” is the most theoretically dense of my three chapters and depends on the work of Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, Mel Y. Chen, and Lindsay Kelley as part of an analysis of Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* trilogy. VanderMeer's three *Borne* books are set in a postapocalyptic pocket universe in which the landscape is brutalized by the vestiges of the human corporations that facilitated its construction. All three books deal with monstrosity in the context of both global warming and the nonhuman animal, centering questions of nonhuman animal consciousness and arguing for movement away from anthropocentric forms of both understanding and of governance. While a concern with and for environment permeates all of VanderMeer's work, in the *Borne* trilogy, a focus on selfhood in the context of monstrous, nonhuman animals and the use of monstrosity within the narrative as the means by which nonhuman animals achieve a degree of freedom from human control, makes them the most relevant of VanderMeer's fiction to an analysis of the radical/resistant monster. This chapter builds on material introduced in Chapter Two that examines the possibility for the radical/resistant monster to both withstand the human-authored eschaton, and to deal the killing blow against the anthropocene. Through rejecting the human as a category, the *Borne* trilogy shifts the conversation to one centred on further problematizing personhood. It suggests that

⁷ Jeff VanderMeer, *Dead Astronauts* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019), 259.

monstrous kinship with environment and rejection of the human (and “person”) as a discrete category are the only dependable means of sustaining life in a postapocalyptic ecosystem. Its chimeric protagonists, altered and/or created through bioengineering, draw attention to real-world injustices perpetrated against nonhumans.

My conclusion further contextualizes my research in light of ongoing threats to marginalized well-being in the Western world.

Methodology and Theory

When I initially conceived of this study around 2016, the phenomenon I proposed to map was in its infancy. As someone active in horror and speculative fiction spaces and who had been following trends, developments and creative expression in genre fiction, I became aware of an increase in not only marginalized identification with monsters, but a specific new breed of identification that I felt confident in predicting would only increase in the immediate future. That new breed has indeed proved fecund. It is not only that radical/resistant approaches necessitate comment using prior theoretical models, but that they demand the development of new theoretical concepts in order to wrestle with the impact they have had on the figure of the monster. As such, while I depend on the work of a great number and variety of previous scholarship, much of my analysis is concerned with developing a queer monster theory for the early twenty-first century—one that attends to new challenges and changes that transcend speculative genres and even media formats.

My research takes the form of a thematic, comparative reading of relevant texts through reader response. It contributes new data to existing research on the use and symbolism of monsters by acknowledging and examining trends and developments in representations of the monster relevant to contemporary political and social conversations, and combines literary, socio-cultural, and historical approaches to engage with the larger *phenomenon* of identification with the monster. Along these lines, each chapter employs the theoretical lens(es) most suited to the material under consideration. For instance, in my analysis of online monsterfucker subcultures, I

make use of techniques developed in the field of media analysis to examine fan engagement on websites such as Archive of Our Own and Reddit. This research is conducted through the use of targeted searches oriented around key terms and hashtags related to monsterfuckery,. By comparison, my third chapter, which focuses on queer, monstrous relationships with the Natural world, will employ in part Mel Y. Chen's fusion of affect theory and animal studies. Chapter Four uses Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* as a lens through which to interpret VanderMeer's work, while drawing on Donna Haraway's reframing of the concept of chimerically entangled animal-human relationships proposed in her monograph *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, as well as Lindsay Kelley and Eva Hayward's concept of the tranimal. I likewise make generous use of Disability Studies scholar Sunaura Taylor's research on disabled and nonhuman animal consciousness, identity, and affinity, as a means of articulating the ways in which the *Borne* trilogy problematizes ableist and speciist perspectives that prioritize normative and (so-called) human characteristics over behaviours and embodiments that do not appear to fit a normate definition of the human. Throughout, my dissertation engages relevant critical terms and theoretical models such as Julia Kristeva's abject, Jack Halberstam's approaches to queer temporality and the Gothic, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work on monsters and the monstrous.

This multi-theoretical approach is similar in many ways to Chen's own deployment of what they call a "feral" methodology. In Chen's analysis of American and Chinese points of contact in popular culture, language, and the health industry, they therefore draw on a variety of chapter-specific theoretical lenses (e.g. queer theory, linguistics, and cultural studies) to create an examination of key encounters that resists what Chen identifies as "domestication".⁸ Such a messy approach (what Chen also calls a "rangy, somewhat unruly construct") captures in many ways the essence of the monstrous as something hybridized, impossible to pin down. In this way it brushes shoulders (or perhaps tail feathers) with the methodologies at play in much Monster Studies scholarship. This is, in part, necessary due to the diversity of texts under consideration,

⁸ Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 18-20.

as well as the variety of authors that are considered. Canadian, American, British, Australian, queer, disabled, Black, and Jewish authors (among others) are all featured to lesser and greater degrees, and with intersections among these identities. The diverse contexts of the works and their authors makes it essential to apply a variety of approaches.

The diversity of media I am analyzing, as well as the specific genres (horror, fantasy, and science fiction primarily from Britain, Canada, and the United States) that I examine, demands a thematic, comparative approach. Noted scholars of the fantastic, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, best articulate the necessity of such an approach in scholarship of the fantastic: “what becomes clear . . . from wide-ranging reading in the genre, is the degree to which an awareness of the conversation between authors and texts is one of the defining characteristics of the form.”⁹ Fantasy, and the related genres of horror and science fiction, are inherently intertextual.

This effect is further intensified through the re-appearance of certain tropes across speculative genres—texts in conversation with one another that form, if not a sub-genre of their own, then a meaningful trend within the publishing industry. In *Wilder Girls*, for example, several events in the novel recall images, locations, and figures from the 2018 dramatization of Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel, *Annihilation*. Both works combine the spectre of environmental catastrophe with the threat of monstrous transformation at the cellular level to produce horror and fascination in their audiences, and both the *Annihilation* adaptation and *Wilder Girls* feature prominent scenes during which the protagonists are attacked by mutant bears with half-rotted skulls instead of faces. Rather than being viewed as plagiarism, the use of these motifs and themes in *Wilder Girls* occasions a positive write-up from VanderMeer on the dust jacket of Power's novel. Likewise, Riva Lehrer's memoir, *Golem Girl*—discussed in Chapter One—references horror movie and

⁹ Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. “Introduction.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012, 2.

story titles in its chapter headings, while Matt Lee's memoir, *The Backwards Hand* similarly alludes to classic Hollywood monster characters.

The goal of such thematic criticism, is "to create clusters of texts which can be discussed together," deconstructing these works to explore "a text's deeper meaning," while accounting for reader response so that it, "contributes an extra layer to the text."¹⁰ This insight sheds lights on what I understand to be an emerging and ever-shifting trend in the representation of marginalized people and monsters in genre fiction. This trend is historically and culturally contingent, speaking to a specific political atmosphere of resistance emerging amongst marginalized and minority communities in the Western world and online. As the venue for identity formation, expression, and performance increasingly shifts from the analog to the digital world, political movements associated with marginalized identity likewise look to online spaces as digital landscapes in which to promote their messages and form counterpublics.¹¹ These counterpublics are established as alternative digital spaces in which marginalized people can gather, communicate, and form discourses that run counter to dominant conversations. Prior to Elon Musk's takeover, Twitter in particular was a fertile environment for the conception of online activist movements, proliferating hashtags related to marginalized resistance and criticism at a speed that is nearly impossible to track (e.g. #weneeddiversebooks, and #ownvoices as movements in publishing that argue for more books by marginalized authors that draw on the authors' own marginalized experiences). Similarly, popular social movements like #blacklivesmatter, #cripthevote, #metoo, and #extinctionrebellion, draw on the language popularized by Twitter to help proliferate their messages. Many of these movements and the people who formed them have abandoned Twitter in the wake of Musk's purchase, gathering instead on private servers, fora, and on newer social media sites such as Bluesky.

¹⁰ James and Mendlesohn, 125.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman and Rein Raud, *Practices of Selfhood*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

While for the purposes of limiting the number of works under analysis, I have limited my lengthier readings to written fiction, the nature of contemporary popular culture as a multi-layered series of relationships between different forms of media (film, literature, video games, fan engagement, *et cetera*) means that it is necessary to draw comparisons across media in order to contextualize the works under discussion and acknowledge the role of cross-pollination between artworks and discourses.

My approach here also owes much to Catherine Spooner's work on Gothic.

Of the genres under discussion, it is perhaps worth defining Gothic more particularly. Here, I am indebted to a rich body of scholarship. According to Jack Halberstam, whose work undergirds much of my own analysis, Gothic, “may be loosely defined as the rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader.”¹² Yet in Catherine Spooner’s articulation of the happy Gothic, we find much of Gothic’s fraught contemplation of the morbid transformed into the whimsical. Gothic becomes, rather, an aesthetic mode to which one might declare affiliation through fashion choices or the advertisement of one’s film and music tastes. In Fred Botting’s influential *Gothic*, meanwhile, he defines the mode as “a writing of excess.”¹³ Generally tracing its origins to the eighteenth century, but metamorphosing consistently throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, Gothic is, according to Botting, a literature preoccupied primarily with themes of transgression and anxiety. For Botting, Gothic writing “remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic.”¹⁴ Often recognizable based on recurring motifs: haunted, precipitous castles or manors; hidden chambers; misty moors; spectral figures (ghostly or technological); and monsters of all shapes and kinds, the Gothic mode might be otherwise called the mode of the monster. As such, Gothic features heavily in my analyses, though the focus of my dissertation is not on the Gothic *per se*.

¹² Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke UP: Durham, 1995), 2.

¹³ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

As Spooner explains concerning her own monograph, “it is less interesting to investigate what Gothic *is* than what it *does*: what different sets of writers, directors, readers, and audiences make it mean in different locations and historical periods . . . This book does not assume that Gothic is inherent in its object: the texts chosen here are ones that critics, journalists, advertisers, readers, viewers and participants have designated as Gothic.”¹⁵ Similarly, my analysis examines what the monster does in the texts under consideration, both within the narratives themselves and in terms of online audience reception. While I make use of my own proposed definition of the monster, I am interested primarily in how the discourse of the monster is organically used in culture by stakeholders (and we are all of us stakeholders).

What *is* at stake, in many of the works under analysis, is legibility. In this way, the monster in radical/resistant monster texts participates in an ongoing project related to marginalized self-expression of authenticity. Following Charles Taylor, a framing of an idealized ethics of authenticity can be meaningfully used to develop a unique yet socially-implicated sense of self. I contend that radical/resistant monster stories are constructed and engaged with on the basis that they both promote the formation of alternative community spaces and allow marginalized people to communicate and explore identity. As Taylor describes:

On the social plane, the understanding that identities are formed in open dialogue, unshaped by a predefined social script, has made the politics of equal recognition more central and stressful. It has, in fact, considerably raised its stakes. Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, according to a widespread modern view. The projecting of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that it is interiorized. Not only feminism but also race relations and discussions of multiculturalism are undergirded by the premiss that denied recognition can be a form of oppression.¹⁶

¹⁵ Spooner, 10.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord: Anansi, 1991), 50.

Identity, and, in particular, authentic identity, is formed not in isolation but through dialogue—not simply literal conversation (although that as well), but through engagement with what Taylor, following George Herbert Mead, calls “significant others,”—people and even works or distant historical personages that, in one way or another touch us and we them.¹⁷ For the marginalized people who interact in one way or another with the radical/resistant monster, the monster itself acts as just such a significant other—a figure to speak through and walk with.

At last, following Jeffrey Jerome Cohen—a giant of the field who, by the outline of his shape on it, has helped define its bounds in the style of the monsters that form his analysis of nation-building in his monograph, *Of Giants*—I recognize the categories, terms, and ideas I propose here not as part of a treatise inked in blood, but “breakable postulates,” that offer themselves up to be monstrously shattered and recombined.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 32-34.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Chapter 1

Naming the Beast:

Monstrous Others for the New Millennium

*Since childhood, I've been faithful to monsters. I have been saved and absolved by them. Because monsters, I believe, are patron saints of our blissful imperfection, and they allow and embody the possibility of fail and live. — Guillermo del Toro*¹⁹

*Whether you create a portrait or a child, you can't make another's body except by pulling it through your own," — Riva Lehrer, Golem Girl*²⁰

It's 1931. The creature on your movie screen growls, soon-to-be-iconic bolts protruding from his undead neck, arms outstretched. All this happens to a chorus of unintelligible jeers from the torch and pitchfork-wielding crowd outside, who swarm the windmill where the monster has sought refuge. The creature, in contrast, is eminently intelligible, in affect if not in speech. His growls as he lunges for Henry Frankenstein are born not only of vindictiveness, but of the desperation, loneliness, and isolation that director James Whale has built up over the course of the film's narrative, priming the audience not only with fear, but with a deep empathy for Boris

¹⁹ Guillermo del Toro, "2018 Golden Globes 'Best Director' *Shape of Water*," NBC, January 8, 2018, video, 2:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykv23HpruCo&list=PLDOVCATJxmoV14U5EpJzV-sxxr_MQ4XAI&index=11.

²⁰ Riva Lehrer, *Golem Girl* (New York: One World, 2020), 349.

Karloff's creature. The camp sensibility of the picture manages somehow not to deflate the terror on screen, nor its pathos.²¹

It's 1954. The creature emerging from the troubled waters of the Black Lagoon on your movie screen, ambles, dripping, from his aquatic home. He lunges for David, the human lover of the beautiful scientist Kay. Kay, supine on the large boulder where the creature has draped her, has perhaps been placed this way to lure the hero to its cavern. But unlike his ill-fated colleague, the villainous Mark (characterized by his desire to capture, kill, and study the creature), Dr. David Reed shows mercy when the moment comes to strike the killing blow. "No. No more. Let him go," pleads Dr. Reed, as David and Kay's would-be rescuers empty their cartridges into the creature's armoured body.²² The creature stumbles out of the cave and into the trees, disoriented from the blasts. Its agonized attempts to suck in air as it plods homeward toward the lagoon recall the dying gasps of a newly caught fish. Suddenly, the creature has become the prey (or was this the case all along?). Kay and David certainly seem to agree, and their consistent argumentation on behalf of the creature's well-being and safety is mirrored in the film's final moments, when David reaches out and nudges down the barrel of a gun directed at the fleeing monster. "No," David instructs, once again. The creature plunges into the water, free at last, if only for a moment, before the grace that returns to its movements is seemingly replaced by the stiff rigor of death. It drifts, face-down, into the deep.²³

²¹ *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale (1931; Universal, 2014), DVD. On the marketing of, and audience responses to, *Frankenstein*, see: Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 216; W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*, second edition (Waco: Baylor UP, 2018); and Elizabeth Young, *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor* (New York: New York UP, 2008), 172-182.

²² *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, directed by Jack Arnold (1954; Universal, 2014), DVD.

²³ *Ibid.*

It's 1983. Two young teenagers are outside at a summer camp. It's night. "Let's go swimming," says the girl. "What about our clothes?" "Take them off." Facing away from her beau but in view of the camera, Angela begins to unbutton her clothes. The young teenage boy, Paul, doesn't need to be told twice. He grins as the screen snaps to a shot of the remaining counsellors, who search the darkened campgrounds with flashlights. There's a killer on the loose. The remaining children are in danger and must be located. As the frantic search continues, tension mounts with the shrill tremor of the film's soundtrack. The counsellors' flashlight battery has gone dead, and a child—Angela—is found humming to herself as she sits cross-legged on the ground. "Angela, are you all right?" asks one of the counsellors. They approach, but before the audience can catch a glimpse of what Angela is doing, the image on screen changes to a surreal, dreamlike flashback. A child with a bandaged head stands contritely before their mother—a prim woman in a red and white dress. The mother laments that she has always wanted a daughter. When the camera returns to the present day, the frame shift is abrupt: Angela, growling, leaps up, wide-eyed and feral from the ground. Paul's severed head tumbles from her lap. As the camp counsellors, along with the camera, perceive Angela, her naked body is revealed: hairy, broad, and with a penis. Her head is that of a young woman superimposed upon the body of an older male actor. Despite being a child, she manages, somehow, to loom in the distance, mouth wide and still emitting that hiss-growl from before. Her grotesquely masculine chest is splattered with blood, the knife she used to sever Ricky's head still glinting red in the moonlight. "How can it be?" remarks Ronnie, one of the counsellors, as he stares in horror at the scene. "My god, she's a boy!"²⁴

What Is a Monster?

The word "monster," from the Latin verb *mōnstrāre* (to show, to demonstrate) and *monēre* (to warn/to advise), pulses at its core with warning and with revelation. According to Jeffrey

²⁴ *Sleepaway Camp*, directed by Robert Hiltzik (1983; Shout, 2014), Blue-Ray.

Andrew Weinstock, monsters “are ontological puzzles that demand solutions. They are things that should not be, but nevertheless are—and their existence therefore raises vexing questions about humanity's understanding of and place in the universe.”²⁵ Through their ability to *demonstrate*, to warn, and to puzzle, then, they act as heuristic devices that provide a key for parsing our environment, our relationships with the world, and the people who cohabit on that world with us. By using the monster as a device by which we measure, code, and assess human behaviour and characteristics, we simultaneously outline those behaviours and characteristics we consider inhuman.

Defining the monster is slippery, much like Kay and David's creature. Attempts to fix the monster according to its physical qualities (enormous size, sharp teeth and claws, a dietary preference for human flesh) quickly stumble over the usual “*what abouts*,” for every medieval troll under the bridge there is a microscopic virus with the power to render rotting corpses mobile. For all the slathering jaws chomping at our doors, there are amorphous slimes oozing through our pipes. For each anthropophagous beastly there is a glittery teen vampire subsisting on fancy rats while fretting over who to ask to the prom. Nonetheless, certain traits emerge from a sea of possibility: monsters are hybrids, combining a multitude of parts or characteristics; they are excessive (whether excessively large, small, rapacious, beautiful, or grotesque), and they are threats to *someone* or *something*.²⁶ They are also liminal, residing along the borders and boundary lines of communities, or appearing only at the edges of twilight or at the turn of a

²⁵ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction: Monsters are the Most Interesting People,” in *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (New York: Ashgate, 2016).

²⁶ For an examination of the variety of forms the monster can take, as well as the significance of those manifestations, see: David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009); Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progency*; Surekha Davies, “The Unlucky, the Bad, and the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle (New York: Ashgate, 2012); Poole, 147-176,

blighted hour. Their tendency to occupy transitional states—halfway between human and nonhuman animal or machine—likewise grants them the power and foreboding of liminality. Yet, as is most famously articulated by Timothy K. Beal, the monster often also brushes shoulders with the sacred, embodying a numinous quality and, through the archetype of the chaos monster, form:

paradoxical representations of radical otherness appearing within the order of things, the otherworldly within the worldly, the primordial within the ordial. They lurk on the thresholds of the known . . . revealing deep insecurities within a cosmos that trembles in the balance between order and chaos.²⁷

Beal also outlines the ways in which such a configuring of the chaos/order binary posits a destabilizing monstrosity that lies at the heart of the divine itself, specifically in the context of the Hebrew Bible and its exegesis.²⁸ This alliance of the monstrous with the divine through experiences of the numinous and Rudolph Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, is a perspective on monstrosity that has gained increasing traction specifically through radical/resistant monster texts, as marginalized people represent interactions with and transformation into the monster through recourse to religious language and symbolism.²⁹

According to Stephen T. Asma, monsters are also unintelligible, unable to be understood, interpreted, or incorporated into the human sphere. The designation of certain persons or behaviours as monstrous, and of those individuals as monsters, sets them outside the bounds of

²⁷ Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

²⁸ This theme forms a throughline in *Religion and Its Monsters*, but in particular, see Beal's analysis of the biblical Book of Job and the relationship between God, Leviathan, and Behemoth: Beal, 35-55.

²⁹ Beal, 63-54. For my analysis of religious symbolism in radical/resistant monster texts, see in particular my analyses of *The Invitation* and *The Woods All Black* in Chapter Two, and my analysis of *Grey Dog* and *Sorrowland* in Chapter Three.

what we consider to be *imaginable* or *thinkable* from a moral standpoint and communicates the total rejection of those individuals by a society.³⁰

The capacity of the monster to be used as a tool to Other our fellow human beings has, of course, a bloody history. Withholding the category of the human, as I argue throughout my work, allows persons and groups to be treated inhumanely. The discourse of monstrosity is thus not only implicated in the history of mythological, religious, or folkloric creatures like dragons, trolls, and Japanese *yōkai*,³¹ but is intertwined with those people(s) historically designated as monsters by those with greater social capital. As Debra Higgs-Strickland's influential analysis of the representation of European medieval Others makes clear, for example, Jews, Muslims, Mongols and other religious or racialized groups were depicted in medieval visual art as monsters through the implementation of a complex and sophisticated visual language that further entrenched racist and anti-Semitic prejudices in lay audiences. This monstrous investiture could then be mobilized by authorities with a material interest in the oppression, murder, and/or exile of those persons. That interest might result from a need to scapegoat a population in order to distract or satisfy the public, personal greed and vendetta, or a need to portray rival empires as monstrous in order to rouse public interest in their military conquest and national defense.³² More recently, an upswing

³⁰ Asma cites several examples, including Pol Pot and the torturers of the Khmer Rouge, but also American child murderer Jerry Hobbs. Asma, 7-11.

³¹ See: Daniel Ogden, *The Dragon in the West: From Ancient Myth to Modern Legend* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021); John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014); and Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015). None of this is to say, of course, that fantastical creatures cannot, have not, and do not also act as symbolic stand-ins for real-world peoples. As one example, William Sayers's analysis of medieval Icelandic literature, presents a compelling case for the ways in which anxiety surrounding queer and foreign Otherness underpins many of the motifs at work in sagas that feature Icelandic revenants (amongst which trolls are numbered). William Sayers, "The Alien and the Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 242-263.

³² Debra Higgs-Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton

in sympathetic monster stories that call into question the justness of such social Othering, speak to yet another facet of monstrous discourse—one that is undergoing its own radical metamorphosis in the twenty-first century and particularly from around 2010 onwards.

Given the variety of forms the monster may take and the roles it can play, attempts to define the monster, thus often take the form of cluster definitions. Such definitions identify a series of common characteristics that hover phantasmically about the category. The above list of characteristics typically populates such clusters, with an emphasis on the monster's capacity to provoke anxiety, as well as on its size and its anthropophagy. Yet even these seemingly stalwart traits are not universal. Increasingly, the discourse of the monster has formed a branching set of structures, with major (though sometimes interlocking) off-shoots focused on what we might call “traditional” monster narratives that emphasize physical monstrosity and a threat to human bodies, narratives that are meta-textually aware of the monster's symbolic import and that explicitly and intentionally use the monster to comment on social and psychological issues,³³ and works that focus in one way or another on the relationship between the history of monstrosity's relationship to the construction of societal Others.

To contend with this variegated development, and as part of my analysis of the monster, I offer my own definition: Monsters are *embodiments or manifestations of perceived aberration (physical, moral, and/or psychological), that threaten to enter into and/or disrupt normative conditions and behaviours*.

UP, 2003).

³³ Consider, for example, director Jennifer Kent's use of the monstrous Babadook in the film of the same name, to externalize and embody both grief at a sudden and tragic loss and the challenges of parenting. *The Babadook*, directed by Jennifer Kent (2014; Seville Pictures, 2015), DVD. For an analysis of motherhood in the context of *The Babadook*, see: Amanda DiGioia, *Childbirth and Parenting in Horror Texts: The Marginalized and the Monstrous* (London: Emerald Publishing, 2017), 37-54.

Critically, the threat need not be acted upon, nor need the aberration be actual, and the bestiary of twentieth-century monsters is rife with examples of characters and figures presented heroically or sympathetically (consider, for example, the titular character of Edward in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*). Regardless, the monster must be viewed as a threat by *someone*, or to *something*. I emphasize perception, here, to allow space for analyses of so-called “real” monsters (serial killers and mass murderers, yes, but also the history of the demonization of a variety of communities and individuals who might have been viewed as monsters in the past but no longer are). I consider this important insofar as the application of the term (and its many cousins) speaks to a broader discourse of monstrosity: it is important not only to examine our fictional, mythological, and religious monsters, but how monstrosity as a quality is made to attach to real human beings and is continuously employed in news media, and in popular parlance as a tool of dehumanization.³⁴

Monster, as is the subject of this study, is also a term that people apply to themselves.

Whether someone chooses the monster or is marked as monstrous, the monster is a creature that appears upon first glance to gesture ever outward while in truth pointing ever inward. In analyzing monsters, it is not so much something external about which we learn, but internal: the study of the monster is really a study of those who create it, and therefore the construction of the

³⁴My reasoning for considering the discussion of so-called real monsters as being within the purview of *Monster Studies* is twofold. On the one hand, as noted above, it allows for relevant historical material to be included in a survey of how the discourse of the monster shifts cross-culturally and over time, as well as what that data might tell us about how our definition of the human likewise shifts and changes. On the other, including these conversations as part of an analysis of the monster forces us to contend with and justify the use of dehumanizing language in discussions about real people. This includes self-reflection on the dangers of reading monstrosity onto those we consider morally deplorable, since in doing so, we rhetorically distance ourselves from that behaviour and avoid culpability for immoral acts of which humans writ large are capable. It of course also promotes awareness of the ways in which monstrosity as a dehumanizing force has been, is, and likely will be, made use of.

human—our fears, our anxieties, our desires, our hopes. In the words of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who essentially inaugurated the field:³⁵

Monsters are our children. . . . they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.³⁶

The analysis that I undertake in this dissertation builds on the promise of the monster articulated here. As a subject of the twenty-first century, and particularly as a trans person who has often felt not just the tug of the liminal, but its inexorable pull toward spaces unknown and thinly-bounded, I have had the benefit of an intimate affinity for monsters and the discourse that surrounds them.

³⁵ Asa Simon Mittman, “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 (New York: Ashgate, 2012), 2. Although the publication of Cohen’s landmark essay is, arguably, the most significant development in the field, it is worth noting that scholarship focusing on the monster predates 1996. Even excluding the pseudo-scientific study of monsters in historical contexts, for example, several scholars from different academic fields have made monsters their subject. For example, J. R. R. Tolkien’s 1936 lecture, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” is retroactively considered to form part of the Monster Studies canon. Additional contributions include Horror Studies scholar Noël Carroll’s, *The Philosophy of Horror*, Carol J. Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, and Nina Auerbach’s *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, to name a select few. J. R. R. Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 4-18; Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992); and Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³⁶ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 25.

The Rise of the Sympathetic Monster

In observing the ways monstrous language has been mobilized, as well as how that mobilization has changed over time, I have become aware of significant shifts in the ways monsters not only speak to us, as Cohen suggests, about why they were created, but are newly *spoken through* by those communities most historically impacted by the discourse of the monstrous, and who rally about the figure of the monster as a symbol of resistance to the systems that oppress them.

This *speaking through* is representative of a counter-trend that has developed in parallel with what Gothic Studies scholar Catherine Spooner has identified as the development of the “happy Gothic,” the “whimsical macabre,” the “monstrous/cute,” and the “assimilative monster.”³⁷ In her monograph, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, Spooner traces the rise, beginning in the 1990s and continuing through the 2000s,³⁸ of Gothic narratives and popular culture artifacts that represent their monster subjects as compatible with, and friendly toward, human society.³⁹ In her analysis, Spooner emphasizes in particular the importance of aesthetic concerns to all modes of the Gothic, but especially their importance to the new forms of Gothic expression and

³⁷ Spooner, 85; 102-104.

³⁸ Although Spooner’s study was published in 2017, there has been no sign of an abatement in the popularity of these forms of the Gothic or the monstrous. Along these lines, the newly-framed “cozy horror” subgenre has ignited considerable interest and debate in online spaces. This article by *The Mary Sue* contributor Julia Glassman marked a rise in interest in cozy horror, but faced significant criticisms from within and without the horror community. Nonetheless, it is an example of the way cozy horror (which I read as a popular attempt to wrestle with and give name to the happy Gothic), is understood in a mainstream media context. Julia Glassman, “Instead of Arguing About This Horror Genre, Why Not Curl Up and Enjoy It?,” *The Mary Sue*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.themarysue.com/instead-of-arguing-about-this-horror-genre-why-not-curl-up-and-enjoy-it/>. For a direct rebuttal of Glassman’s article, see: Simon McNeil, “In Praise of Discomfort,” June 8, 2023, <https://simonmcneil.com/2023/06/08/in-praise-of-discomfort/>.

³⁹ Spooner, 49-66; 104.

merchandizing to which *Post-Millennial Gothic* draws attention.⁴⁰ These aesthetic concerns are visible in works and properties as diverse as the oeuvre of director Tim Burton and the *Monster High* franchise of children's dolls, TV shows, and movies.

Critically, many of these new forms market themselves using a shallow appeal to difference, originality, and authenticity, while implicitly rejecting those aspects of monstrous discourse that speak to the monster's destabilizing potential. In Spooner's analysis of the monstrous/cute, for example, she highlights the language used in the marketing of the Monster High dolls and its antifeminist messaging (something she notes the dolls were criticized for upon release). As Spooner explains, the packaging of the werewolf doll, Clawdeen, reads: "Plucking and shaving is definitely a full-time job, but that's a small price to pay for being scarily fabulous!" while the brand simultaneously attempts to ally itself with feminist concerns with calls to, "Be yourself. Be Unique. Be monster."⁴¹ Here the monster is not to be feared, but lionized—something that perhaps ought, given the history of the application of monstrosity to marginalized people, be cause for celebration. Yet, as Spooner contends, the monstrous/cute largely disavows the radical potential of the monster, falling back instead on harmful stereotypes and an emphasis on traditional (and exacting) beauty standards.

Catherine Spooner's happy Gothic and its associated concepts are, to invoke the framing of family resemblance popularized by Wittgenstein, a cousin to (and offshoot of) the sympathetic monster.⁴² In contrast to monsters we may loathe and fear, these monsters are ones for whom we

⁴⁰ Ibid., 36-38.

⁴¹ Ibid., 103-104.

⁴² In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, he uses the concept of family resemblances in language to explain, in part, his concept of the language-game. According to Wittgenstein, we might recognize certain individual things as being linked by overarching categories but without each individual thing within that category sharing all their characteristics. Games, to use Wittgenstein's own example, are a broad category under which Snap, Go, Fish!, and *Super Mario* might fall, but while each one of the three shares some characteristics with the others, they do not share

may feel pity and empathy. While there have always been sympathetic monster narratives—stories in which we come to understand the monster’s point of view, or in which we come to empathize with the monster due to their circumstances—this archetype saw a dramatic rise in the late twentieth century.⁴³

As Spooner does with the happy Gothic, Xavier Aldana Reyes identifies the sympathetic monster as a specifically post-millennial phenomenon,⁴⁴ though his examples, which also include the works of Tim Burton, date to the late eighties and early nineties. Nonetheless, sympathetic monster works cluster largely around the turn of the millennium, and Aldana Reyes’s characterization of the post-millennium as witness to a sea-change in the discourse of the monstrous is correct. Significantly, for my purposes, Aldana Reyes remarks of post-millennial sympathetic monster narratives that:

all their characteristics. Historically, definitions of *monster* have followed this example, drawing on family resemblances rather than universal criteria for inclusion. Wittgenstein’s language-games refer to the ways in which meaning is imparted to words, phrases, and sentences based on context. Depending on the language-game in which a phrase, word, or sentence is spoken, we might respond to it differently. Family resemblance is thus one tool we might use to determine context, and therefore the specific language games (or set of games) at play. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 320.

⁴³ For example, the medieval lay, *Bisclavret*, of Marie de France, is quite sympathetic to the werewolf’s plight. See: Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2003) 95-98. Of the many twentieth-century examples of the sympathetic monster, one might gesture toward James Whale’s aforementioned *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* (a dramatization of the life of the real-life freakshow performer, Joseph Merrick), Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*, John Gardner’s 1971 *Beowulf* retelling, *Grendel*, or Jewelle Gomez’s Black vampire tales in the *The Gilda Stories* (1991).

⁴⁴ Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Contemporary Body Horror* (Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 2024), 15.

The incorporation of the other, oftentimes of a feared nightmare, can lead to self-understanding and personal growth in an echo of the ‘non-human becomings’ that post-structuralist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorised as reciprocal zones of creation as well as of collective action.⁴⁵

Writing in the mid-nineties, Jack Halberstam identifies and anticipates this shift in our treatment of the monster in his influential Gothic monograph, *Skin Shows*. In his introduction, Halberstam observes of late twentieth-century Gothic and monster narratives, that:

Within postmodern Gothic we no longer attempt to identify the monster and fix the terms of his/her deformity, rather postmodern Gothic warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence. The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities.⁴⁶

While Halberstam’s closing points here are in tension with several of the developments Spooner notes in *Post-Millennial Gothic*, his overarching argument, that the discourse of the monstrous has shifted to one in which we are now suspicious of accusations of monstrosity, is an important one. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock further remarks in his book chapter, “Invisible Monsters,” what develops at the same time is a “decoupling of monstrosity from appearance,” that marks, “an important cultural shift that aligns monstrosity not with physical difference, but with antithetical moral values.” What follows from this decoupling, Weinstock explains, is a renewed emphasis on his titular *invisible* monsters—morally corrupt humans such as psychopaths, terrorists, and even the CEOs of corporations (or the corporations themselves), whose inner monstrosity may be disguised by an ordinary or—even worse—desirable physical appearance.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 27.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture,” in *The Ashgate Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (New York: Ashgate, 2012), 276. Note that Weinstock’s argument does not mean that monsters have never been viewed as invisible. Fear

With physical monstrosity decoupled, in many sympathetic monster texts, from moral or psychological monstrosity, late twentieth and twenty-first-century texts are free to use the monster as a vehicle through which to express the dangers of Othering discourses and often take the perspective of the monster and the marginalized group(s) it represents. Popular Western television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *True Blood* (2008-2014), *Being Human* (2009-2013), *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017), and *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019-2024), present monsters (particularly vampires, werewolves, witches, and demons) as being just as likely to be heroes as they are villains. These works, aimed at both the Young Adult and Adult markets, do not consistently present the monster as sympathetic, but rather, take the position that the moral correctness or failure of the monster is unrelated to its physical differences.

Despite marginalized enjoyment of the TV shows listed above, as well as their creation, in some cases, by marginalized people,⁴⁸ their deployment of the monster as a metaphor for marginalized identity is not without its contradictions. In many of these works, the monster characters on

of hidden communists, queers, and other ne'er do wells was at the heart of many mid-twentieth century horror offerings, which often suggested the danger of hidden alien intruders into an idealized suburban American life. See: Poole, 125-142.

⁴⁸ In the case of HBO's *True Blood*, for example, the show draws repeated parallels between vampire rights and queer rights. From the show's premise that vampires have finally, "come out of the coffin," to the depiction of political debates in the show's American setting that focus on whether or not vampires ought to be afforded equal status in American society, not to mention its use of homoerotic imagery in its marketing and storylines, the connection being made between queerness (particularly lesbian and gay positionalities) and vampirism is clear. The show's creator, Alan Ball, is notably himself a gay man. Yet, as I argue above, the show's allegorical use of the monster to cast real-world queer people in a positive light, dissolves rather quickly given the fact that *True Blood*'s vampires are presented as a genuine, physical danger to human characters, and are shown in many cases to be perfectly content to murder and maim with abandon. For an analysis of queerness, race, and citizenship in *True Blood*, see: Dale Hudson, "Of Course There Are Werewolves and Vampires: *True Blood* and the Right to Rights for Other Species," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2013): 661-687.

screen are meant to rehabilitate the Other in the eyes of mainstream society while using monsters as an allegory for the mistreatment of marginalized people, yet in many cases the same TV shows confirm the threat presented by the monster to human life. In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for example, although witchcraft and werewolfery act as symbols of sexual and religious Otherness in an American context, the sympathetic witch and werewolf characters in the show are repeatedly demonstrated to be not only threatening to local bullies or bigots, but to human society more broadly, with witches and werewolves guilty of murdering innocent bystanders, and Jewish lesbian witch, Willow, ultimately (though temporarily) becoming the show's main antagonist in *BTVS*'s penultimate season.⁴⁹ Unlike in radical/resistant monster texts, these series, while sympathetic to the monsters they represent, maintain an investment in the assimilation of the monster, neither committing fully to assimilation nor resistance of the same. In this way, they form part of the development of the radical/resistant monster without fully falling within its purview.

In general, whether monsters are represented sympathetically within the texts themselves, marginalized people have been willing historically to engage in counter readings that prioritize the perspectives of monstrous characters and recognize kinship between monsters and their marginalized human counterparts. In this vein, Harry M. Benshoff notes of queer audience reactions to early Hollywood horror films that, "many homosexual spectators of the genre would perhaps be more likely than heterosexual ones to identify with the figure of the monster or villain, even as he or she was eventually vanquished by the narrative's heterosexist agents."⁵⁰ Along these lines, Benshoff argues, queer audience members were quite content to ignore Hollywood endings that prioritized the well-being of straight characters and relationships,

⁴⁹ *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 6 Episode 20, "Villains," written by Marti Noxon and directed by David Solomon, aired May 14, 2002, on Fox.

⁵⁰ Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), 37.

focusing instead on the queer possibility of the vampires, Creatures, and werewolves on screen.⁵¹ Such queer connections between audience and monster were made possible in part by a mutual recognition of queerness, covertly expressed by queer directors such as James Whale, through the figure of the (often high camp) monster. Such affinities, in the context of film, built on the pre-existing use of Gothic and monster narratives by Victorian and Edwardian authors to communicate queer desires and gendered expressions.⁵² To use another example, through a similar process, and a concurrently-formed monstrous genealogy, Jewish artists and audiences have developed a sense of kinship and recognition with the figure of the werewolf.⁵³ Indeed, in much the same way that queer audiences often lay claim to the vampire,⁵⁴ Jewish affinity for werewolves as sources of representation have permeated popular discourse, with articles from Jewish news sites and cultural critics taking note of the trend.⁵⁵ According to one of these authors, Jeremy Wexler, the reasons for this are obvious:

The decline of the modern-day werewolf should be of concern, since it is largely a metaphor for being

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 36.

⁵³ I am indebted to Dr. Naftali Cohn for initially introducing me to this trend.

⁵⁴ Queer vampire stories include, of course, J. Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1872) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), but more recently count amongst their number the aforementioned *Gilda Stories* by Jewelle Gomez (1991), the trans radical/resistant vampire movie, *So Vam* (2021) directed by trans filmmaker Alice Maio Mackay, and the most recent (and explicitly queer) adaptation of Anne Rice's *Interview With a Vampire* (2022-Present), to name only a few of the plethora of queer (and queered) vampires stories. Queer interpretations of vampires, including Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, predate, of course the twenty-first century. For a recent analysis of the queer vampire as a metaphor for queer time, see: Kimberly J. Lau, "The Vampire, the Queer, and the Girl: Reflections on the Politics and Ethics of Immortality's Gendering," *Signs* 4, no. 1 (2018), 3-24.

⁵⁵ See, for example: Jeremy Wexler, "Should Jews Save the Werewolf from Extinction?" *Jewish Journal*, October 26, 2006, <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/13884/>; Susan King, "'Wolf Man' Writer Reflected Wartime Jewish Experience," *L. A. Times*, February 3, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-feb-03-la-et-classic-hollywood3-2010feb03-story.html>; Esther Saks, "What's So Jewish About Werewolves?," *Jewcy*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.jewcy.com/arts-and-culture/whats-jewish-werewolves/>; and Jeremy Weiss, "Jewish Werewolves of London," *Temple of Miriam*, 2021, <https://templeofmiriam.com/blog/jewish-werewolves-of-london>.

Jewish in the twentieth century. Consider the modern werewolf narrative: A hairy young outsider becomes saddled with an identity he doesn't want or particularly like, the meaning of which is told to him by an old European lady speaking a lot of mumbo jumbo. He is in love with a blonde girl who loves him back, but their love is doomed. Eventually he gets chased and killed by a bunch of peasants with pitchforks and torches. And, oh, yes, he feasts on human blood, but it's not his fault.⁵⁶

Wexler need not have feared, as it turns out, the death of the Jewish werewolf (something he marks with the departure of the werewolf character Oz on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), for only three years later in 2009, Jewish werewolf George Sands graced the small screen in the supernatural horror drama, *Being Human*. Jewish werewolf stories continue into the 2020s, including in a more child-friendly form, as in Michelle Franklin's picture book, *Werewolves Don't Celebrate Hanukkah* (2022).⁵⁷

Jewish werewolf stories predate these contemporary interpretations, with scholars such as Astrik Lembke writing on an Early Modern Jewish story that features a werewolf rabbi,⁵⁸ and as each of the articles I gestured to above establishes, Curt Siodmak, the Jewish screenwriter for Universal Studios' genre-defining *The Wolf Man* is cited as having been directly inspired by his experiences of the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany. Likewise, Jewish American director John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) makes its connection between Jewish identity and werewolfery direct and obvious by centering two explicitly Jewish protagonists—David Kessler (David Naughton) and Jack Goodman (Griffin Dunne)—and through the inclusion of a nightmare scene in which a group of Nazi werewolves burst inside David's home and massacre his family.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Wexler, "Should Jews Save the Werewolf."

⁵⁷ "There are two werewolves inside of you," reads the book's back cover, "one eats all the latkes, and the other hides the presents." Michelle Franklin, *Werewolves Don't Celebrate Hanukkah* (self-pub, 2022).

⁵⁸ Astrik Lembke, "The Raging Rabbi: Aggression and Agency in an Early Modern Yiddish Werewolf Tale (Mayse-bukh 1602)," in *Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish history: From the Middle Ages to Modernity*, ed. Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁵⁹ *An American Werewolf in London*, directed by John Landis (1981; Video Service Corp, 2019), Blu-Ray. For an

In analyzing marginalized identification with the monster it is, however, important to note, to quote Jack Halberstam, that, “within the history of embodied deviance, monsters always combine the markings of a plurality of differences.” In this way, while one might associate the vampire with queerness, the werewolf with Jewishness, or the zombie with class struggle,⁶⁰ each of these monstrous figures contains multiple layers of meaning. Halberstam, for example, and as

academic discussion of *The Wolf Man* and *American Werewolf in London* see: Craig Ian Mann, *Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2020), 30-31. It is worth noting, however, that while Mann briefly addresses the influence of Jewish identity on *The Wolf Man*, it is not the focus of his analysis. Likewise, in his examination of *American Werewolf in London*, although both “Nazi scenes” are addressed, Mann does not bring up that David is Jewish and does not spare much space discussing David’s nightmares. Indeed, the terms “Jewish,” “Judaism,” “LGBT,” “Homosexual,” and “Trans” do not appear in the book’s index at all (“Nazism” does, however, appear). I bring this up not to lambast Mann (although upon first reading the monograph I experienced the absence of meaningful discussions of marginality quite striking), but rather to emphasize that, regardless of marginalized interest in, affiliation for, and association(s) with the monster, monstrous figures can be (and are) also read through a more universalizing lens. Wexler’s assertion that the werewolf’s transformation recalls specifically Jewish experiences of adolescence might, for example, be contrasted against a reading that sees such bodily changes as relevant to all adolescents. This does not suggest that queer, Jewish, disabled, or other marginalized interpretations of these texts are always performing counter-readings, but instead, I would argue, speaks to the ways in which art is encoded with any number of small, nuanced signals that are likely only to be recognized by their intended audience.

⁶⁰ See, as only one example, Tavia Nyong’o, “The Scene of Occupation,” in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 316-331. One might also consider feminist reclamations and recuperations of a variety of monsters, such as in Rachel Yoder’s *Nightbitch* and its recent film adaptation (2024). In the novel, Yoder’s protagonist—a woman experiencing post-partum depression and anxieties—transforms nightly into a dog, forming a connection with kindred, “Siberian WereMothers,” who exhibit a combination of witch and werewolf-like characteristics. *Nightbitch* falls within the purview of the radical/resistant monster. As the character relates, “there was something so enticing and exhilarating at the thought of rejecting all established society for something remote and magical, for a community suited particularly and only to the community’s needs. Was being free to do what you needed and be who you wanted—truly free—monstrous? If so, it was not a wrong kind of monstrous, but a beautiful one. A way of being to celebrate rather than run from.” Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), 179.

I note elsewhere, suggests a Jewish reading of *Dracula*, while trans horror author Logan-Ashley Kisner expresses a specifically trans affinity with the werewolf.⁶¹ Importantly, the monster makes room; it is capacious, and it welcomes all.⁶²

Studying Monsters

Each of these developments is significant to the rise of what I have called the radical/resistant monster. Alongside the popularization of Catherine Spooner's happy Gothic and monstrous/cute has been a corresponding interest within marginalized communities in identifying not with the monster's assimilative potential, but with the monster's *inability* to be assimilated. These works, which emphasize the ability of the monster to resist, as per Halberstam, are noteworthy for the fact that, unlike Edward Scissorhands or Clawdeen of the Monster High dolls, monsters not only do not desire to become part of the human world, they are ultimately *unable* to. In fact, most of them are quite insistent it be dismantled, destroyed, and stripped for parts.

Rather than promoting a negative understanding of both monstrosity and Otherness, the character-focused narratives in these works construct monstrosity as a tool for self-exploration,

⁶¹ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 86-106; Logan-Ashley Kisner, "Made to Be Monsters: *Ginger Snaps*," *Medium*, May 7, 2021, <https://atranslog.medium.com/made-to-be-monsters-ginger-snaps-ae98d06a4b9a>.

⁶² To gesture even further back, we might consider the trial of self-proclaimed werewolf, Old Thiess, as an example of Early Modern identification with the monster. According to trial transcripts presented by Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln, in 1691, a peasant named Old Thiess described the process by which werewolfery was transferred to him by another man, as well as the important social role werewolves played in the defense of local communities that were under siege by purported witches (and rival, foreign, werewolves). Nor was Old Thiess alone in his belief that he was both a werewolf and a defender of Christianity against witches and wizards; similar cases suggest, via Ginzburg and Lincoln, a connection with pre-Christian cultic practices in Europe. Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln, *Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case of Comparative Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

much akin to Aldana Reyes's framing of the sympathetic monster as a tool for becoming, with the critical element being the author's identification with the monster. This, in turn, is appropriated by the audience, as measured through online audience engagement with the material and its related concepts, and investment by/in fan communities surrounding these works. In this way, queer, racialized, disabled, and Othered populations read and depict monsters as embodied forms of resistance against social control. Since I first began my research into this parallel development, artist and fan responses to it have veritably exploded, with far more books on shelves, films in theatres, and games on computer or TV screens, than I could possibly analyze in a project twice this length.

My research assesses how and why these twenty-first-century reappropriations of monsters function in their roles as symbols of community and resistance for marginalized creators and audiences. For the characters in these works, and by extension the real-world communities represented by them, "human" is an impossible standard. The monster stories told through the works that I examine therefore maintain a suspicion of the categories of "human" and "person," constructing new identities via the figure of the monster. These works simultaneously critique how the category of human has been policed in order to exclude particular populations from access to certain rights, spaces, opportunities, or from conversations, while also calling into question the usefulness of the category itself. Even in the mildest of these monster narratives (those that suggest monsters can live alongside humans), the authors and their monster protagonists typically reject the category of the human as one that speaks to their experience, though certain texts may propose the broadening of the category of person.

As part of its resistance to homogenization, authors and creators appropriate the transformational potential represented by the ambiguous and mutable body of the monster. Use of the monster in this way forms part of a discourse by marginalized people that centralizes embodiedness and, specifically, the place of marginalized bodies in the world, forming what Nancy Fraser has called a subaltern counterpublic. Fraser's subaltern counterpublics describe alternative spheres of public participation and culture carved out by subaltern populations, including women and

minorities, which develop alternative discourses and vocabularies in comparison with a dominant public culture.⁶³ They likewise engage in a form of what philosopher Richard Rorty, building on the work of Mary Hesse, calls “metaphoric redescrptions.” That is, changes in the valences of particular words, phrases, or vocabularies that alter the meanings of language and recognize language’s contingency.⁶⁴ Rorty is careful to frame these redescrptions not, as he explains it, as progressions in a movement toward a more accurate means of describing an external (or internal) nature/reality, but simply of different methods of articulation that prompt us to ask new questions.⁶⁵

⁶³ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: *A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*,” *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), 67.

⁶⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 16.

⁶⁵ Historically, metaphoric redescription has arguably occurred to ill-effect in the case of many marginalized persons. This is evident in the case of Julia Pastrana, described and interpreted by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Garland-Thomson’s work examines the life of an indigenous Mexican woman called Julia Pastrana, who is most widely known as a nineteenth-century freak show performer. The exhibition of Pastrana began in 1854 and did not end with her death in 1862. Instead, Pastrana’s corpse was put on display for public entertainment into the 1970s. As Garland-Thomson argues, the pathologizing language used to redscribe Pastrana’s body over the course of both her life and death depended heavily on monstrous language that placed emphasis on her physical deviance from normate embodiment, and rendered her an object of wonder, pity, and horror. As I argue elsewhere, “none of this language got at who, or what, Julia Pastrana was in an essential sense, nor does it communicate much of anything about her own subjectivity and lived experience. Instead, the metaphoric redescription deployed through monstrous language communicates something about the social context in which her identity was (and is) constructed by her audience.” Elliot Mason, “A Eugenics of Disability: Transformation, Futurity, and the Disabled Monster Body in *Resident Evil*” in *Projecting Human: Representations of Disability in Science Fiction*, ed. Courtney Stanton (Wilmington: Vernon, 2023), 25-50. “While her exhibition made money,” explains Garland-Thomson, “it also made meaning. In an age of mechanical reproduction, social instability, and economic transformation, it circulated narratives of human bodily variation that played into the sociopolitical concerns of the historic moment.” I would only add that this process of metaphoric redescription, imposed from outside rather than sought out by Pastrana herself, is ongoing. Even the redescrptions offered by Garland-Thomson or myself are readings-onto Pastrana, renderings of her as symbolic or representative of the supposed experiences of disabled bodies displayed in freak shows. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Making Freaks: Visual Rhetorics and the Spectacle of Julia Pastrana,” in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 129-28.

The counterpublic formed by, and participated in, the monster texts that I analyze proposes that marginalized people must use their embodied difference to distinguish and distance themselves from the dominant public, rather than assimilating to mainstream culture or ways of being, through a recognition of the importance of contingent language and the implementation of metaphoric redescription. In radically emphasizing group difference, texts such as *Juniper and Thorn* (Chapter One), *The Invitation* (Chapter Two), and *Wilder Girls* (Chapter Three) suggest that normative culture might itself be transformed by marginalized communities, in a reversal of the insistence that marginalized people assimilate to normative society.

Equally important to the counterpublics encouraged by these texts is philosopher Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. Alongside Freud's uncanny, the abject represents one of two critical apparatuses used with horror, Gothic, and monster texts to produce an affective response in their audiences. If the uncanny, I argue, is felt as a *frisson* along the spine, then the abject is the gag reflex. Briefly, the abject can be understood as the Other within the Self, a part of ourselves (often literalized in the form of bodily fluids, squelching organs, and cavernous orifices) we simultaneously wish to disavow but are called toward and drawn inside like a vortex. Disturbingly physical, upsettingly embodied, the abject disturbs as it attracts, reminding us of those things we would prefer not to think about: our porousness, our mutability, our mortality. When applied to persons, abjection is a form of distancing and of repudiation. Abject(ed) bodies tend to be those that disturb and fascinate, and the figure of the monster is the most abject of them all.⁶⁶ In contrast to the monstrous/cute, which in many ways attempts to erase the spectre of the abject from its redescription of the monster, the authors and artists featured in my analysis more commonly embrace it.

⁶⁶ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

Monster texts that fall within the purview of this study are characterized by a strong sense of marginalized identification with the monster. They propose that monstrosity is a vivid and ongoing means of exploring marginalized authenticity and ways of being, and position the marginalized monster as radically opposed to, and incompatible with, human society. In this way, following Charles Taylor's work on authenticity and postmodern constructions of the self, the monster is used by marginalized creators as a means of articulating (and thus exploring) the authentic self. Taylor states:

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfilment or self-realization in which it is usually couched.⁶⁷

Identification with the radical/resistant monster, whether as artist or audience, thus forms part of the marginalized author/spectator's constant reformulation and assessment of the self, as well as a creative exploration of one's relationship to the world. In a context in which recognizability and visibility are both desirable and dangerous, the radical/resistant monster, following the monster's robust associations with strength and possibility, becomes a powerful and potentially empowering tool. Increasingly, these works gesture toward monstrosity as a means of resisting hegemonic control within capitalist society, of rejecting attempts to cater to mainstream and normative tastes, and of articulating marginalized perspectives in new and generative ways. The monsters in these stories struggle to find purchase in mainstream human society and may attempt to flee it, to alter it, or to destroy it.

"A Snake, Am I?"⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Taylor, 29.

⁶⁸ *Aladdin*, directed by John Musker and Ron Clements (1992; Disney, 2020), DVD.

This quotation, spoken by the villainous sorcerer Jafar in Disney's animated *Aladdin*, followed up with the taunt, "'Perhaps you'd like to see how snakelike I can be?'" has always spoken to me. Even as a child, I could tell in many ways that, regardless of how hideous Jafar was morally (he does, after all, attempt to force Princess Jasmine into an unwanted marriage), I was of Jafar's party.⁶⁹ A challenge and a manifesto, this quotation reads as a summary of the radical/resistant impulse I have witnessed emerging in marginalized monster texts. Instead of expressing rage or sadness at being named monster, Jafar rather wears the moniker like a badge, physically transforming himself to fit the monstrous shape presaged by Aladdin's taunt. In many respects, such a response is analogous to those shouted—or growled—from the jaws of the radical/resistant monster and those who would identify with them. As a kernel of marginalized defiance in the face of a parade of straight heroes, in some ways it formed the early inspiration for this study, through my own childhood identification with similar monstrous and villainous characters.

The following section contains a brief overview of microtrends within the purview of the radical/resistant monster—works that, in the spirit of Jafar's rebuff—do not deny the lived realities and authentic expressions of the marginalized monsters they portray but instead revel in the expansive possibility of the monstrous. They are works that, due to constraints of space and time (as well as the necessity of curating chapters so that the works considered cluster around their topics), I have been unable to fold into the main body of the dissertation. Nonetheless, this ragtag miscellany presents significant and still-emerging themes for consideration, and demonstrate the scope of marginalized affiliation with the monster.

⁶⁹ Perhaps it was the exaggerated eyeliner and his impressive commitment to an aristocratic twink aesthetic.

Among these are several subspecies of the radical/resistant monster: the monstrous autobiography, the escapist monster who does not destroy or change society but who rejects it in favour of more wondrous (and hospitable) landscapes, narratives in which monsters remain living alongside humans while refusing assimilation, and finally that of the monstrous avenger.

The first of these, the monstrous autobiography (or, we might say, the monstrous memoir), includes stories by marginalized authors who explicitly identify with the monster through a retelling of their lived experiences. Examples of these include Carmen Maria Machado's *Dreams in the Witch House*, Riva Lehrer's *Golem Girl*, Sarah Myer's *Monstrous: A Transracial Adoption Story*, Jami Nakamura Lin's *The Night Parade*, and Matt Lee's *The Backwards Hand*.⁷⁰ The most explicit form of monstrous identification, monstrous autobiography directly addresses the ways in which the authors' lives have been impacted both by marginalization and monsterization, leaning in to the metaphors that have been used to oppress them as ways to articulate, come to terms with, and validate their experiences. They also, in many ways, sit the most uneasily within the category of the radical/resistant monster, and the forms of identification and affiliation they outline are not uncomplicated. Rather, they speak directly to and about lived experiences, while also including experiences of oppression that may be directly tied to representations of them as monstrous. This frequently emerges in monstrous autobiographies as a discomfort with monstrosity that runs parallel with recuperative readings of the monstrous.

In disabled Jewish author Riva Lehrer's *Golem Girl*, for example, Lehrer reflects upon distinctions between the monster and the figure of the freak, tracing the problematic

⁷⁰ Carmen Maria Machado, *Dreams in the Witch House* (New York: Strange Light, 2019); Riva Lehrer, *Golem Girl*, (New York: One World, 2020); Sarah Myer, *Monstrous: A Transracial Adoption Story* (New York: First Second, 2023); Jami Nakamura Lin, *The Night Parade: A Speculative Memoir* (New York: Mariner Books, 2023); Matt Lee, *The Backwards Hand* (Evanston: Curbstone Books/Northwestern UP, 2024).

undercurrents of enfreakment for disabled and racialized people. “‘Am I a freak?’” Lehrer, who has spina bifida, asks,

“Let’s say I am a freak . . . A freak has a real human body. A monster’s body is imaginary. The monster is a space in which we consider the boundaries of the acceptable. What is proper behavior? What is allowable desire? What is condonable appearance? A freakshow takes a person and makes it into a monster; I work to take the freak and make it a human being.”⁷¹

Here, Lehrer pushes back against monstrosity. Instead, she reclaims a measure of the human for herself and for the disabled artists whose portraits she paints and that mark each of her chapters. Lehrer’s relationship with the monster is not as simple as rejection, however, and meditations on the relationship between the monster and the disabled body litter the text. The connections Lehrer here draws between disabled Jewish embodiment and affinity for monstrous potentiality are explicit even in *Golem Girl*’s structure. Lehrer titles each of her chapters according to a different horror movie or story, with the majority of chapters including one of her portraits of disabled subjects. The combination of the titling alongside the portraits serves a complex function. On the one hand, the portraits are lively, vibrant, and impressionistic while nonetheless refusing to erase or hide the subjects’ extraordinariness. Combined with titles such as, “The Bride of Frankenstein,”⁷² “Cat People,”⁷³ and “American Horror Story,”⁷⁴ however, they draw deliberate attention to the monsterization of the bodies being depicted, situating them within not only Lehrer’s history, but the history of horror cinema, literature, and their monsters.

⁷¹ Lehrer, 351.

⁷² Ibid., 215.

⁷³ Ibid., 293.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 301.

In the same chapter as her reflection on humanity, monstrosity, and enfreakment, Lehrer compares her paintings—a great source of joy and self-expression—to the monster: “A handmade artwork is the product of the body (or bodies) that made it happen. That makes a portrait a species of monster. A chimera, built of illusions—that the subject is present and the artist absent. In reality, the two bodies blur as one. (Add the viewer, and you get a three-headed hydra).”⁷⁵ Hybridity, here, is a fecund and monstrous feature of the portrait—a monstrous outpouring of the artist that melds with subject and with audience and that in so doing, creates a new, third thing.

Although each of Lehrer’s chapters uses a different monster or monster text as a frame through which to discuss different facets of her identity and experiences (as well as the identities of her subjects), she returns again and again to the figure of the golem. In her introductory prologue, she contrasts the golem’s status as a made thing, fashioned from clay, with her own body that, “insisted on aberrance.”⁷⁶ In Lehrer’s analysis of Jewish legend, the golem, “will only be allowed to exist as long as it remains useful to men.”⁷⁷ Troubled by the emphasis in golem stories on the productivity of the monster and the importance of its subservience to its masters, Lehrer emphasizes the fact that in those same narratives, “it is the nature of a Golem to wake up.”⁷⁸ In so doing, the golem may continue its quest for personhood and away from a conception of the self as object. “I am a golem,” Lehrer asserts, “My body was built by human hands. And yet—If I once was *monere*, I’m turning myself into *monstrare*: one who unveils.”⁷⁹ In many respects, the golem as a figure was a consistent precursor to the modern (or postmodern) radical/resistant monster. A source of terror and wonder, yes, but also a stalwart avenger and defender of the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., xv.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 365

⁷⁸ Ibid, xv.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Jewish communities it was summoned to protect.⁸⁰ In Lehrer's identification with the golem, while she acknowledges the value in the justice it embodies and the injustices it marks (*moneo/monere* – to warn), she dreams of the golem's ability to speak, to create, to exist as a self. As the opening to the memoir, then, her reflections on the nature of the golem, along with its purpose, emphasize the ways in which the memoir acts in just this fashion: through its chapters, through its monsters, and through Lehrer's (often brutally) intimate anecdotes, both the golem and Lehrer are able to speak and to articulate their identities.

One notable exception to continued identification amongst the autobiographical monster texts is Sarah Myer's *Monstrous*, in which the monster—a metamorphosing and oozing figure that looms, hovers, and leers from the corners of the panels in Myer's comic—is reincorporated into the self through its symbolic destruction and transformation. Near the conclusion of the book, Myer, a transracial Korean-American adoptee, and neurodivergent nonbinary author, comes to terms with those qualities they possess that have been maligned by a largely White, straight, neurotypical community. A consummate, self-described “nerd,” Myer envisions this process of self-actualization through a giant kaiju battle between a heroic mecha version of themselves and the monster that represents their self-hatred. “My opponent in this fight was *most* terrifying,” writes Myer. “The monstrous part of me. And I was the one who'd created her. So I was the *only one* who could destroy her.”⁸¹ In the end, however, as the monster is smashed into a puddle of goo, a small child emerges from the viscous blackness in imagery evocative of Samara/Sadako from *The Ring/Ringu*. From beneath the stringy, dripping sludge that spills, like hair, over the figure, a child version of Myer appears. The Myer in the mech suit is alarmed—the monster was their traumatized child-self all along. As the adult Myer reaches down to pick Sarah up, they remark,

⁸⁰ For an analysis of the Golem as protector and avenger, see Maya Barzilai, *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters* (New York: New York UP, 2016) 3;145-185. For an analysis of the threat of the golem, along with its use in critiques of militarization and the dehumanization of the combatant in the context of Israeli masculinity, see: Barzilai, 107-144.

⁸¹ Myer, 237.

“So *that’s* where you’ve been.”⁸² Although this work arguably falls outside the scope of the radical/resistant monster, I read its conclusion as more slippery than a simple call for either assimilation or rejection of the monstrous—it therefore, in my estimation, has its feet firmly planted in two camps. While Myer does transform their monster self into a human shape, notably, they do not assimilate, nor do they totally reject the monstrous part of themselves, but instead reincorporate it into their being with a newfound understanding of its meaning and purpose.

Like Lehrer’s *Golem Girl*, Matt Lee’s *The Backwards Hand* uses recurring references to monsters and monster films as a framework through which to express his experiences and the broader association between monsters and disability. Passages that reference the monster are set side-by-side with descriptions of life events that mirror or complement Lee’s lyrical analyses of the monster. Writing about invisible disabilities, for example, Lee reflects that, “Monsters can hide in plain sight. They live among us. Take our shape. . . . If a monster might be anybody, who can we trust?”⁸³ He pairs this with a discussion of the meaning of visibility for disabled people, drawing attention to its attendant risks and dangers, as well as alternative approaches to hiding or revealing one’s disability in order to become invisible or avoid invisibility.⁸⁴

Lee’s accounting is marked by interventions in which he parallels the horrors of the Holocaust, and the systematic murder of disabled people by the Nazis, with slivers of autobiographical detail that highlight his fears, anxieties, and hopes. Throughout these passages, so-called physical monstrosity, or the monstrosity associated with disability writ large, is contrasted against the horrors committed by murderers, rapists, and bigots. That tension—the question of how to define

⁸² Ibid., 240.

⁸³ Lee, 53.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

the monster, and who claims ownership of its attendant terminology, finally culminates in the following reflection upon the birth of Lee's son:

We laugh and cry as the nurses cheer. They whisk the baby away for a bevy of tests. There's nothing wrong. A perfectly healthy baby boy. Not a monster. Might he become one? A possibility. Could a monster come take him away? A chance. My boy is pure potential.⁸⁵

Here, as in *Golem Girl* and *Monstrous*, Lee concludes on a note of possibility, taking account of the different ways that the discourse of monstrosity can manifest and impact our lives. It is a reckoning with his own self-effacement and self-worth, alongside a recognition of the ways in which we have such little control over our lives.

A second microgenre within the context of the radical/resistant monster, is that of the escapist monster. Guillermo del Toro's 2017 monster movie, *The Shape of Water*, is perhaps the most famous contemporary example of the sympathetic, radical/resistant monster, and is also a monsterfucker text (as per the works discussed in my second chapter).

The movie, a period piece that takes inspiration from, among other works, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*,⁸⁶ follows a mute cleaning lady named Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) who works at a secret government facility. Set during the Cold War, the film brims with images of a paranoid time and place, when communists lurked around every corner and you never could tell who was secretly sleeping with an amphibian man with a really nice butt (Doug Jones).⁸⁷ Over

⁸⁵ Ibid., 220.

⁸⁶ Gina McIntyre, *The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2017), 131.

⁸⁷ During the design process for the amphibian man, del Toro was particularly insistent that the character be tailored

the course of the movie, Elisa falls in love (and lust) with the amphibian man, who is being held captive at her workplace. She and her friends (a Black cleaning lady named Zelda, played by Octavia Spencer, and a closeted gay commercial illustrator called Giles—played by Richard Jenkins) manage to smuggle the monster out, but are ultimately tracked down. Elisa is shot and possibly killed, though the amphibian man executes Elisa’s bigoted murderer (her former boss), before leaping into the ocean with Elisa’s body.

The final scene depicts Elisa and the amphibian man floating beneath the water. The amphibian man grazes his fingers across Elisa’s neck, where three slashes in her skin mark the supposed cause of her muteness. As the amphibian man caresses her, the slits unfurl to reveal gills: Elisa’s disability, the symbol of her Otherness, is actually the revelation of her monstrosity and the source of her salvation. Elisa awakens to the creature’s touch. As the music builds, Giles narrates over the closing scene, expressing that he does not know whether Elisa lived, but he likes to believe that she did.⁸⁸

In this text, monstrosity is ultimately incompatible with the human world, one that the amphibian man (and with him, Elisa), must escape in order to flourish.⁸⁹ This style of narrative, in which salvation through monstrosity requires flight from the human world and the discovery or establishment of new monstrous geographies, appears in another radical/resistant monster text, Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep*. In the novella, which is adapted from a song by the hip-hop group

for the female gaze and routinely consulted his wife and daughters on its relative attractiveness. ““Every female in the del Toro household was crucial,”” according to the director. ““Too much derriere, not enough derriere, the shoulders are not beautiful enough.” McIntyre, 45.

⁸⁸ *The Shape of Water*, directed by Guillermo del Toro (2017; Fox Searchlight, 2018), Blu-Ray.

⁸⁹ It is important to note that *The Shape of Water* has been critiqued by some disabled filmgoers on the basis of Sally Hawkins’s casting (she is not herself mute), as well as its linkage of monstrosity with disability. For example, see: Jessica Slice, “The Shape of Water Failed the Disabled Community,” *Medium*, March 14, 2018, <https://medium.com/@jessicaslice/the-shape-of-water-failed-the-disability-community-cdb9e6816b07>.

clipping, Solomon tells the story of an aquatic people called the Wajinru, who are the descendants of the pregnant slave women thrown overboard during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In a reversal of the narrative structures of most sympathetic monster stories, it is not monstrosity that must be reclaimed, but rather, the protagonist, Yetu, is a monster who must instead reckon with the horrors related to the Wajinru's human ancestry.⁹⁰

In contrast with both these works, Ava Reid's *Juniper and Thorn*—a retelling of “The Juniper Tree”—and Robin Gow's *Dear Mothman*—a Middle Grade novel about two trans boys who find commonality with the elusive cryptid Mothman, examine the ways in which the monster can rebel against systemic oppression and resist assimilation while maintaining lives in human spaces.

Reid, a nonbinary, neurodivergent Jewish author who is a survivor of childhood sex abuse, uses a secondary fantasy world based on Odessa to comment on neurodivergence, womanhood, and Jewish identity. While in my third chapter, I analyze queer works that link monstrous salvation with Nature, in *Juniper and Thorn*, Reid instead associates urban life and the diversity of the city with marginalized flourishing. Reid's protagonist, Marlinchen, is kept a prisoner by her tyrannical abusive father, who treats and views his three daughters as property, using their affinity for magic spells to fund an endless, enchanted hunger that keeps him from ever being satisfied. Marlinchen's father is physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive. As the meekest of the three witch sisters, Marlinchen is reluctant to break his strict rules. Unlike her sisters, who are more daring, Marlinchen has few companions, and those she does have are made up of a series of monsters who dwell inside the untamed yet enclosed garden that attaches to their home.

⁹⁰ Rivers Solomon, *The Deep* (New York: Saga, 2019).

When Marlinchen does sneak out of her house with her more traditionally beautiful sisters to watch a ballet, she falls in love with a Yehuli (Jewish)⁹¹ ballet dancer named Sevastyan.

Unbeknownst to Marlinchen, however, she is not only a witch, but an anthropophagous monster capable of great strength and violence (but whose memory of that violence is erased when she returns to human form). Marlinchen has been stalking the city streets and feeding on humans.

On the first night Marlinchen sneaks out of her father's house, she says of both the city and Sevastyan: "Was this the magic that kept pulling my sisters out of the house? In that moment it seemed almost as strong as Papa's spellwork. The city was a song that crooned unceasingly in my ear, and if my mind was a compass, Sevastyan's face was true north."⁹² Notably, this passage, which waxes lyrical about the city of Oblya and about Sevastyan, is accompanied by a reflection by Marlinchen on the threat of the monster.

Like Marlinchen, Sevastyan, too, is a prisoner, forced to dance by his manager, who is also sexually abusing him, and the frequent recipient of anti-Semitic attacks on his character.⁹³ When Marlinchen's father learns of their courtship, he hurls slurs against Sevastyan on the basis of his

⁹¹ *Yehuli* is derived from the Hebrew *Yehudi*, meaning *Jewish*. Reid's work—both *Juniper and Thorn* and her debut novel, *The Wolf and the Woodsman* (2021)—are set in a secondary fantasy world based on our own. In Fantasy and related genres, a secondary world is one distinct from our own, with its own internal logic, history, and culture, and which can be considered complete in and of itself. Secondary fantasy worlds often occur in Fantasy stories that fall under what Farah Mendlesohn has called "immersive" fantasies. That is, immersive fantasy, "presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonist and for the reader." Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008), xx.

⁹² Ava Reid, *Juniper and Thorn* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2022), 17.

⁹³ One of the novel's central antagonists is a phrenologist who sexually assaulted Marlinchen when she was a child and who Sevastyan's manager paid to assess his protégé. According to the manager, the phrenologist, "didn't give me much help. He told me that the Yehuli's brains were adapted to capitalism—well, you only need to look down *their* streets to surmise as much. Their businesses are thriving!" Reid, 26-27.

Yehuli identity, and the pair are repeatedly torn apart.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, at night Marlinchen has been stalking the city streets, ripping Marlinchen and Sevastyan's enemies to pieces. Where Marlinchen and Sevastyan lack the ability, as humans, to stand up for themselves or against their abusers, monster-Marlinchen has the power and ruthlessness to protect them from perceived threat. Upon learning of her monstrosity from one of her sisters, Marlinchen is aghast, but recognizes the reason for her choice of victims: "Her words were terrible, but they were true. My monstrous form had still thrummed with all my human desires."⁹⁵ Recognizing that the monster is, however, something that has formed within her against her will—potentially there since birth, potentially a defense mechanism resulting from her father's abuse and "calcify[ing] . . . like a pearl," inside her,⁹⁶ Marlinchen ultimately decides to curse her father with the same monstrosity.

At the end of the novel, Marlinchen frames her father for the murders, but not before exacting revenge on Sevastyan's abusive manager. The novel closes optimistically, with the promise that together Marlinchen and Sevastyan will start a new life in Sevastyan's home of Askoldir, free from oversight by their abusers, and accompanied by one of the monstrous creatures from her father's garden. *Juniper and Thorn*'s final paragraph provides a capstone to the novel with a reflection of Marlinchen's that combines monstrous and urban imagery. As the pair enter the train station, Marlinchen remarks in narration that the station, "arced over us like the rib cage and vertebrae of some extraordinarily large creature soldered from iron. I imagined that with every train that left, the creature was amputating one of its finger bones, a little piece it wouldn't miss until the train came back again."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 275.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 301.

Reid's use of urban, rather than Natural, geographies to signal freedom is deliberate, as is her negatively-veiled depiction of the magical world associated with Marlinchen's father. As Reid notes in an interview:

Magic in *Juniper & Thorn* represents the old world, a world that is regressive and stubbornly resistant to change. When Marlinchen gives examples of her father's transformations, they are always instances in which he turns something dynamic or technologically advanced into something lifeless or outdated: a swan into a swan-vase, an electric lamp into a candle. His transformation is reaching backward while the city around them leaps forward. I think it's inherently anti-modernity. It parallels the way a lot of contemporary European ethnic nationalists imagine their countries' mythic pasts' magical, in touch with the natural world and of course devoid of any 'foreign' or 'corruptive' element. Is there a place for this way of thinking in the modern world? Unfortunately, yes, but ideally, these prejudicial, violent attitudes would go the way of the spinning wheel [*sic*].⁹⁸

She further links these urban spaces with vibrant and diverse life, in contrast with how Eastern Europe is typically represented in fantasy novels: "bleak, wintry, remote, forested and very culturally homogeneous."⁹⁹ That the city is also associated specifically with Jewishness is also critical to understanding Reid's positive framing. Says Reid, "Early 20th-century Odesa, Ukraine, the city upon which Oblya is based, was considered the jewel of the Russian empire. It was an entirely planned city that became a regional hub of immigration, export and industry. It is also a city where a large number of Ashkenazi Jews lived, including my own family."¹⁰⁰ Given that Reid's initial plan in retelling "The Juniper Tree," was for the novel to be focused on accusations of blood libel against Jews during the Black Death,¹⁰¹ these considerations feel anything but incidental, despite that it is Sevastyan, rather than Marlinchen, who is Jewish. The

⁹⁸ Laura Hubbard, "Ava Reid Unearths the Darkness at the Root of Fairy Tales," *Bookpage*, July 2022, <https://www.bookpage.com/interviews/ava-reid-interview/>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

city, then, rather than the wilderness, becomes a source of escape, and a monstrous representation of the things that mark both Marlinchen and Sevastyan as Other.

In *Dear Mothman*, meanwhile, a closeted trans boy named Noah grieves the death of his best friend (and fellow trans boy), Lewis. Lewis's death in a car accident has left Noah lost and alone. Due to Lewis's obsession with the cryptid monster Mothman, Noah becomes fixated on the figure, writing letters to Mothman in order to process both his grief and his confusing feelings about gender and sexuality. Over the course of the book, Noah faces mockery in the classroom for his belief in the monster, with whom he comes to identify. However, Noah eventually befriends several queer classmates, whom he gradually draws into his fantasies about locating Mothman. When Noah finally journeys into the woods in search of the cryptid, he finds himself lost, but he is ultimately saved by the (ambiguous) intervention of Mothman himself, as well as the daring of his new best friend. Upon his rescue, Noah describes, "wondering what it means that I came too close to the world of monsters and that I came back."¹⁰² Rather than being a disavowal of the monstrous, this reflection on the part of Noah gestures toward a newfound confidence in Noah that is connected with his acceptance of queerness as monstrosity (and vice versa). As Noah ponders how to articulate both the nature of mothman, as well as his own trans identity to his classmates, Noah comes to the conclusion:

Do I really want to show my class everything? To show them everything not just about Mothman but what being a monster means—how it's like being a queer person? That I'm a queer person. The beauty of the unknown darkness and wild magic of a creature so few people get to see.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Robin Gow, *Dear Mothman* (New York: Amulet), 278.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 290.

Throughout the book, Noah's transness is consistently linked with monstrosity, and specifically with Mothman's cryptid status. Along these lines, Noah writes, "I do think I know what it's like to feel like you only exist if people believe in you. I think a lot about how I stop being a boy in the wrong places because people stop seeing me as a boy."¹⁰⁴ As in the trans stories I analyze in Chapter Two, Noah's concerns are related both to visibility and legibility as a trans person, something he is able to realize gradually through the figure of the monster. And, as in Reid's *Juniper and Thorn*, realization comes with a denial of assimilation, flight, or destruction: ultimately, Noah, Marlinchen, and Sevastyan are able to carve out space for themselves within the human world. As Noah notes:

It seems to me that 'monsters' are almost always misunderstood—that 'monster' is what people become when other people are afraid of them for being different. People like me are called monsters sometimes. . . . Sometimes it's hard to feel real. It's even hard to feel trans because people don't believe us, but I know who I am. I know you believe in me though. Your fellow 'monster,' Noah.¹⁰⁵

Unreality is thus an important tether that links Noah with Mothman and, arguably, that operates within *Juniper and Thorn* through the contrast Reid draws between Marlinchen's invisibility when she is locked inside her father's house and her visibility when she meets Sevastyan in the city. Nonetheless, as Noah's later reflections make clear, his queerness is, much like the cryptid Mothman's ability to vanish into the woods, something he may choose to disclose all or some of at will, and to which his cisgender peers are not owed unlimited access (or knowledge of).

The monster as avenger cross-pollinates throughout many radical/resistant monster stories, including some of those already discussed. Here, it also anticipates my analysis of trans monsterfucker stories, in which trans characters find gender euphoria and affirmation through monstrous embodiment. In disabled, mixed-race, transfemme author Bridget Liang's "Delicate

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 90.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 78-79.

Bodies,” monstrous vengeance is especially bloody, brutal, and uncompromising. The story, collected in *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*, an anthology of speculative works by trans authors, follows a transfemme protagonist named Beryl, who is situated in Toronto during a zombie outbreak. Over the course of the short story, Beryl is scratched by, and then turns into, a zombie.¹⁰⁶

However, Beryl’s transformation is rendered in the work not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity for Beryl to enact cathartic revenge on the White, cisgender gay men who have rejected and demeaned her. One man in particular—Dan—has treated Beryl horribly, and becomes a fixation for her. As she posts a photo of her newly discolouring skin on Facebook, Dan types a panicked comment asking whether she’s been bitten. The reactions of friends and family remind Beryl of her disastrous coming out as trans:

The responses reminded her a bit too much of coming out as Beryl. She’d come so far over the past year. She’d lost some friends, and some (mostly queer ones) had stuck with her. But the shitty memories stuck with her too. Especially of people “mourning” the loss of the boy she never was. And now she was becoming a zombie and Facebook was making her feel shitty all over again!¹⁰⁷

As Beryl debates the merits of anthropophagy (is it really cannibalism if you’re not only no longer human, but have never been treated as human?),¹⁰⁸ her transformation continues. As Beryl wanders Toronto, she encounters a cis White gay boy named Sean who she believes once ghosted her in favour of another cis White gay boy. After Sean tries to kill Beryl, Beryl rapes him, forcing him to accept fellatio from her, and finally bites off his penis: “swallowing his growth, she imagined it was a veggie dog. She decided to end it.”¹⁰⁹ Beryl goes on to avenge

¹⁰⁶ Bridget Liang, “Delicate Bodies,” in *Meanwhile, Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy From Transgender Writers*, ed. Cat Fitzpatrick and Casey Plett (New York: Topside, 2017).

¹⁰⁷ Liang, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 16.

herself on other men with whom she has had poor relationships, before dramatically announcing on Facebook that she believes the zombie plague has something to do with York University—the institution where Liang is herself a grad student. Eventually, Beryl is proven correct: sinister psychologists at York started the plague by experimenting on homeless people. By the story’s conclusion, Beryl has found happiness with a trans, disabled, Brown polyamorous man named Aaron, who is respectful toward her (indicated, in part, when he asks her pronouns). The story closes with Beryl reminiscing that:

she didn’t regret a thing. Yes, she was wretched and people would wish her dead but how was that different from before? They were the wretched, the unwanted. Perhaps this zombification was a blessing in disguise. It gave her a way to fight back. She was the wretched through and through. She was among her kind.¹¹⁰

Perhaps the most uncompromising of the miscellany I have constructed here, “Delicate Bodies,” is certainly the most direct and the most violent. Its camp horror framing is here used both to draw attention to, and soften, the elements of trauma visited upon both Beryl’s victims, and, most significantly, Beryl herself. In a story brimming with rage and, one might argue, loathing, Liang directly invokes the power of the monster, aware in the writing of the story of the ways monstrosity has been used by cisgender, White, and able-bodied audiences to parse non-normative bodies. It persistently and aggressively reclaims the monster on behalf of its marginalized heroine and, based on Beryl’s similar positionality to Liang, on behalf of Liang herself.

“Delicate Bodies,” in many ways anticipates the works I engage with in the rest of the dissertation, emphasizing as it does the inherent intersectionality of the monster, as well as showcasing the radical/resistant monster at its most violent. Its fusion of the monster with sexuality and, specifically, queerness, alongside its positioning of the monster as a force

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 28-29.

inherently opposed to the normative, are echoed in the monster texts analyzed in my subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

It's 2024. Browsing Twitter, recently rebranded as X, you come across a post by the independent science fiction author Devon Eriksen. You know *of* him, though you do not know him personally. One of his books is currently being judged in an independent science-fiction contest. The accompanying AI-generated image gets you first: a massive golem with Hebrew letters inked all over its skin, including its arms (though notably not its forehead, where they ought to be),¹¹¹ rampages down a street that, several AI-scraped photos ago, may or may not have once been Prague. The golem is muscular and hypermasculine, save that on top of its bulging chest it wears a floral dress with considerable padding in the bodice, as well as a floppy pink hat. The golem stampedes toward the viewer, threatening a bevy of twirling historical figures—largely women in billowing dresses. “Do you see it now?” Eriksen’s post reads,

Do you see the big picture? It's not about men in dresses. It's the whole thing. You created a golem. Not alone, but it's likely that your hands helped shape the clay. You made it fearsome, and you made it strong, and you armed it with weapons, and you set a *shem* in its mouth to give it life, and you set it loose in the streets of Prague, commanding it to defend the oppressed and protect them, and elevate their voices, and redress their grievances, and obey their commands, and smite their enemies. And at first, the golem fought for you. But now it does not. You see, you commanded the golem to fight for the oppressed. But who are the oppressed? The oppressed are whoever can convince the golem they are the oppressed. . . . Whoever can string together the most convincing argument suddenly commands the ultimate power in Prague. . . . The appearance of victimhood has now become the ultimate weapon. And all the factions of Prague strive not to be strong, not to build, not to produce, not to be

¹¹¹ In order to function, to awaken, the golem must have *emet*, truth, inscribed upon its forehead. To send the golem to sleep, one must write *met*, death. Barzilai, 15.

admired, but to be pitied. . . . You had no problem with this when you commanded the golem, but now that men in dresses have seized control of it, it has turned on you. . . . I am not against you because I am straight and you are gay, but because I am against the golem and you are not. What do I want? It's simple. The golem of the Jews of Prague was stopped when the leading letter aleph (א) was blotted from its *shem*, turning the word *emet* (truth, אמת) into the word *met* (dead, מת). Well, the sacred word on the *shem* of your golem is "equality." Blot the leading letter.¹¹²

This post, along with several more in which Eriksen suggested it was natural to fear, repudiate, and expel racialized people; immigrants; Muslims; Jews; and trans people (an impressively comprehensive list of social Others), alongside one in which he states, "If you keep equating every good thing to Nazis, then pretty soon people are going to start saying, 'you know, maybe those Nazis weren't all bad after all?'"¹¹³ were the basis of his disqualification from the science fiction contest. One might assume that a relatively unknown author whose opinions were, at even a brief scan through his social media history, alarmingly blatant about the extremity (and ubiquity) of his hatred for marginalized Others, would have disappeared never to be discussed in writing circles again. Yet, to draw on my personal experience of these events, what transpired instead was a mass exodus of other (largely White, male, cisgender, gentile) authors from the contest in solidarity with Eriksen's right to free speech. Those authors saw a disturbing boost in the sales of their books following their exodus.

The crevasse created in the independent writing community, of which I was—and to some extent *am*—a part, cannot be overstated. Entire review websites were blacklisted by one another depending on their allegiance with or against Eriksen, promotional interviews were cancelled, and friendships ended. When it transpired that the editor of a volume of short stories I was to contribute to was hosting Eriksen on his YouTube channel, fully aware of Eriksen's views and

¹¹² Since leaving Twitter, the link to this post (along with Devon's other posts) is unavailable to me, though I retain a screenshot sent by a friend. Devon Eriksen, "Do you see? . . ." X, April 10, 2024.

¹¹³ Devon Eriksen, "If you keep equating. . . ." X, April 10, 2024.

what platforming him would mean, I left the volume, losing friends in the process, many of whom lamented the days when we could “all just get along.” Later, I was informed that these same friends had messaged the editor personally to make sure that he was all right and that I had not upset him. I share this rather personal, informal anecdote, to paint a picture of the ways in which the discourse of the monster still touches us, alongside the recognition of how, historically, the monster is never, as Jack Halberstam articulates, ever simply one thing.¹¹⁴

The history of the monster is thus the history of all those peoples Eriksen would expel, and in recent decades, it is becoming the history of those who are just a little bit pissed off about it.

In *Golem Girl*, reflecting back on a manuscript she had written prior to the Covid19 pandemic, Riva Lehrer states, regarding her past optimism about a burgeoning and creative community of disabled activists, artists, and persons, that Covid-19

has revealed the machinery of the world. This is the brutality of ableism on full display: a government willing to sacrifice human lives for the sake of the illusion of economic growth, via the assumption that only able bodies are productive, and that all others drain our country’s strength. I can hardly believe that seventy-five years after WWII, we are once again defined as a disposable population. Who will be the next group deemed too weak to live? Coronavirus, awful as it is, must be understood as a dry run for global upheaval. . . . I fear that unless we work on radical visibility, this current era may be looked back on as the Golden Age of Disability. . . . Sometimes the monster is the one who saves us. It takes a monster to fight back.¹¹⁵

In an increasingly unstable West, new horrors peer around every temporal corner. I for one, am glad we have monsters with us, to walk beside us in the dark.

¹¹⁴ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 6.

¹¹⁵ These observations, when read alongside not only her disabled identity, but her Jewishness, thrum with an especial power and foreboding. Lehrer, 370-371.

Chapter 2

Fuck Not with Monsters, Lest Ye Be Fucked: Monstrous Genders and Sexualities in Monsterfucker Art

*“My gaze lingers on the curve of her mouth
as she says monster. I imagine latching on with lips and teeth,
with no intention of ever letting go. That night, I trace
my own body, itself an organism on the cusp of truth
and imaginary, a shadow I want with all my might to believe in.
Under eyes that demand proof of existence, I shed classification
like scarred skin, exclude myself from the taxonomy of either-or,
that in her sight, I may find myself equally desired.”* – Jessica Cho, “Declassified”¹¹⁶

*“To all the MonsterFuckers out there, This is for you. Don’t pretend that you’ve never wanted to be
railed by some human eating, dark entity that has a skull for a face—you saw the cover, you knew
what you were getting yourself into, and you still chose to open this book and read it.”* – Opal Reyne,
*A Soul to Keep*¹¹⁷

Introduction: A Brief History of Fucking Monsters

When I was around fifteen or sixteen years old, I sold my soul to a succubus.

¹¹⁶ Jessica Cho, “Declassified,” *Queer Little Nightmares*, ed. by David Ly and Daniel Zomparelli (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), 11.

¹¹⁷ Opal Reyne, *My Soul to Keep* (self-pub., Kindle Direct Publishing, 2022) 1.

Lying in bed, half asleep and gazing up at the *Sin City* poster pinned to my ceiling, the leather-clad figure of Jessica Alba in the role of kidnapping victim-cum-erotic dancer must have merged in my sleep-addled brain with the demonic figures so many teenagers find themselves enthralled by. Whatever the cause—possibly demonic obsession, most likely hormones—I imagined a crimson-skinned demoness appearing to me and offering herself in exchange for my immortal soul. Barely lucid, I had a dim sense that this was not an equal exchange. Still, caught in the moment and fairly confident the offer was more a promise of good dreams than anything actual, I accepted. I do not (and did not) believe in either God or demons, and yet the event (if it can be called that) remained with me.

There is nothing particularly novel about desire for the demonic body. As long as there have been demons to think about, humans have thought about having sex with them. In Athanasius's *The Life of Saint Antony*, Satan appears to Antony in the forms of a woman and an Ethiopian child¹¹⁸ as explicitly sexual temptations, while both the demons Ashmodai and Lilith are associated specifically with sexual and marital deviance in Jewish and Christian folklore.¹¹⁹ Such

¹¹⁸ The racial and ethnic implications of Satan's choice of form are discussed at length by David Brakke in *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006), 157-181.

¹¹⁹ In most folktales and legends in which Ashmodai appears, the character is framed as sexually deviant or inappropriate, usually in contrast with a sexually upstanding human character. Though the individual tales associated with Ashmodai may change certain aspects of the character's physical appearance, the themes of sex and sexuality remain near-constants in his narratives. In this way, Ashmodai stories participate in what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls the monster's tendency to "police the borders of the possible." That is, Ashmodai's sexcapades are used as a means of policing what is considered permissible in sexual situations, as well as in the more specific context of meaningful rites of passage that centralize sex and the marriage bed in a primarily Jewish context. In the apocryphal Book of Tobit, Ashmodai terrorizes a woman named Sarah by killing each of her prospective husbands before her marriage can be consummated. It is only Tobias, her predestined groom, who is able to defeat Ashmodai and claim Sarah as his own with the aid of angelic intervention. Tobit presents Ashmodai as a deadly obstruction on the path to the restoration of Tobias's fortune and happiness. In this case, sexual misconduct (the murder of Sarah's husbands, as

stories are unsurprising considering the long history of supernatural myths and folktales about gods, goddesses, and diverse spirits either ascending or descending into the human world to procreate with (and sate their lust upon) *homo sapiens*.¹²⁰ As Maximilian Rudwin asserts in his

well as the ominous suggestion of sexual violence that might be perpetrated against her by Ashmodai) acts as something that must be overcome through display of Tobias's proper sexual conduct. In a twentieth-century retelling of a sixteenth-century kabbalistic folktale, called "Helen of Troy," collected by Howard Schwartz, the story follows the exploits of a devout scholar, Joseph della Reina, and his failed attempts to assist God by capturing and subduing Lilith and Ashmodai. Although della Reina begins the tale as a holy man, he is corrupted when he is moved to pity by the pleas of the captive demons. After freeing Ashmodai and Lilith, della Reina is thrown a great distance by Ashmodai (a recurring motif from Solomonic literature), and survives only after Lilith catches him. Queen Lilith reveals to della Reina that she had sensed "an ember of evil" in him, and so decided to spare his life. Della Reina marries Lilith and falls into self-indulgence and debauchery. The nature of della Reina's debauchery is two-fold, as he commands Lilith to retrieve all kinds of exotic and extravagant fruits for him, eventually asking that she also procure for him a beautiful queen called Dolphina. "Nor was Lilith jealous of this," writes Schwartz, "on the contrary, she encouraged him to fulfill his every lust." The narrative continues with a description of how Queen Dolphina is brought by Lilith's magic every night to della Reina's secret hideout. There he rapes her, before she is returned to her palace each morning. Eventually her husband finds her, though della Reina escapes. The once-holy scholar's depraved adventures continue as he attempts to transport Dolphina through time so that he can continue to assault her, but by accident her corpse is transported instead of the body of a beautiful woman. The tale concludes with della Reina throwing himself from a cliff to escape the spectral, skeletal apparition of his "Helen," only to fall into her arms rather than to his death. Later, della Reina reappears, transformed into a black dog, the very shape taken by Ashmodai and Lilith upon their capture. Not only has Lilith, then, ignited the "ember of evil" in della Reina's breast, but she has also awoken a demonic nature in him, that changes his outward appearance as much as it has his inner being. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" 4; Howard Schwartz, *Lilith's Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 40-50.

¹²⁰ There is little need to list the full library of texts that feature divine-human copulation. A few key examples that include not simply divine/human sexual congress, but specifically monstrous encounters, include the story of the Watcher angels' descent to earth and procreation with human women in the 4th-1st century BCE pseudepigraphal text, 1 Enoch. This encounter results in the birth of monstrous hybrid children and the descendants of these illicit unions torment the humans that surround them. In Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, countless tales of bodily transformation involve sexual encounters between humans, beasts, and divine or quasi-divine beings. During so many of Zeus's liaisons with human women, he takes the form of an animal (e.g. a swan in the case of Leda), and it is Pasiphaë's illicit union with a bull that leads to the birth of the monstrous minotaur Asterion.

analysis of the theme of demonic-human love in the Middle Ages, “the loves between demons and humans is a theological interpretation of the ancient belief in cohabitation of gods with mortal women,”¹²¹ and fixation on the theme would only continue and increase in the centuries to come.

While interest in human-demon sexual activity generally purported to arise from a position of concern for the morality of the act and its potential in a religious context to indicate or lead to the desecration of the human soul, the intensity of the obsession has often been understood to gesture to a prurient fascination with this type of illicit sexual activity. During the European witch trials, for example, accused witches were often thought to have consummated or otherwise been initiated into their demonic covenants through sexual intercourse with demons, with a lurid interest in the sexuality and genitalia of the accused a potential motivator in the often extended, dehumanizing, and sometimes public examination of women’s sexual organs.¹²² Indeed, some scholars further link such an interest with sexual sadism and voyeurism on the part of investigators.¹²³

¹²¹ Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1959), 222.

¹²² See Joseph Klaits, *Servants of Satan: The Age of the Witch Hunts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), 56-57.

¹²³ It should be noted that, alongside an interest in the salacious details of human/demon intercourse (and female erotic pleasure more generally), a voyeuristic and/or sadistic impulse has been read as a motivating factor in the torture used to extract confessions from accused witches, as well as during the execution of those witches. For some examples of scholarship dealing with this phenomenon, see Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 131-132; Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New York: Yale UP, 2004), 59, Julia M. Garrett, “Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013), 32-72; 41; and Poole, 40. David Frankfurter examines a similar, sado-erotic impulse in Late Antique Christian martyrologies, suggesting that voyeuristic displays of violence against the eroticized bodies of martyrs made temporarily licit a form a sexual desire that was otherwise inappropriate in a Christian context that had established itself in opposition to Roman spectacles of violence such as gladiatorial combat. By recounting the gruesome tales of the martyrs, audiences were

As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues in his seminal “Seven Theses,” as much as our monsters are representations or embodiments of our darkest fears, they are also repositories and expressions of our deepest desires:

Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. . . . When contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization, the monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self. The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body.¹²⁴

able to, in Frankfurter’s words, “excite fantasy without owning it.” David Frankfurter, “Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009): 215-245, 218. Being that corroboration of the “true” reasons behind the witch trials’ seeming fixation on sex and sexuality would be dependent on time travel in order to professionally analyze the psychology of accusers, authors of witchcraft manuals, and judges, it seems unlikely we will ever prove whether repressed sexual desire was a factor in the emphasis on demonic copulation, and/or if, as Walter Stephens has argued persuasively that witchcraft “confessions . . . were necessary *because the concept of sex with demons needed constant reinforcement*.” This reinforcement, Stephens argues, was necessary because contrary to our contemporary popular understanding, belief in demons during both the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period was in doubt and required reinforcement through detailed confessions that corroborated demonic experiences. As a very material form of contact and communication, sexual intercourse with demons was a particularly and potentially more convincing argument in their favour. Belief in demons and Satan were not, of course, the primary concern of theologians or the authors of witchfinding manuals and their hunts. Rather, a waning in the belief in demons represented the potential for doubt in the existence of God and other spiritual forces. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 7. Feminist reclamations of the witch are ongoing. Many of these texts exist as part of a subset of works that centre the radical/resistant monster, though analyses of such reclamations often problematize a straightforward readings of such characters as feminist. Examples of scholarship that examines this tension within purportedly feminist works include Bernadette Marie Calafell, *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture* (Peter Lang: New York, 2015), 93-94.; Laura Zwissler, “‘I am That Very Witch’: On *The Witch*, Feminism, and Not Surviving Patriarchy,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, no. 3 (2018).

¹²⁴ Cohen, 17. This same function of the monster, particularly in relation to the ways in which it frequently embodies both desire and fear (as well as the fear of desire), is articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (Methuen: New York, 1986),

The desires that Cohen describes go beyond specifically sexual interest, and encompass a longing for forbidden pleasures and desires of all kinds, including those that may not obviously (or directly) relate to sex (e.g. the consumption of forbidden foods, access to behaviours and physical spaces that may be inaccessible in real life, or even violent revenge exacted against a perceived enemy or irritant). In this way, the monster is “appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” and can fulfill its function as a source of personal or societal catharsis.¹²⁵

In the context of sex and sexuality, however, the monster is not only an avatar into which the audience might slip, like a Hallowe’en costume or a second skin, but a literalized object of desire on the part of the spectator. It is not just that we want to occupy the role of the monster, or that the monster coaxes us into sexual scenarios we might desire but repudiate in public; we are attracted to the monstrous bodies themselves.¹²⁶

viii. This is not to minimize the related, yet distinct phenomenon, of treating desire for the human Other as monstrous. This impulse finds its expression in the depiction of human communities or individuals as monstrous in order to warn of the dangers of expressing desire for those communities or individuals. For example, and as expressed in the work of Debra Higgs Strickland, in the European Middle Ages, Jews were sometimes depicted in Christian illuminated manuscripts in the form of hyenas. Moralizing narratives in which the animal represented both idolatry (here, Judaism) and sexual rapaciousness, played upon both the belief that hyenas were “sex-changing and corpse-eating,” animals, as well as Christian fears of both miscegenation (particularly intermarriage between Christian women and Jewish men) and the conversion of Christians to Judaism. Higgs Strickland argues, concerning a thirteenth-century depiction of a hyena ravaging a female corpse by biting onto the corpse’s genitals, that the image, “was a symbolic reference to the contemporary prohibition on sexual intercourse between Jews and Christians (as well as between Muslims and Christians).” Higgs Strickland, 147; 153-154.

¹²⁵ Cohen, 17.

¹²⁶ Occasionally throughout this chapter, I use the psychological term “paraphilia(s),” rather than the more colloquial “fetish(es),” to describe sexual attraction to, or arousal by, things or persons other than adult humans. This is not in order to pathologize monsterfuckers, but to avoid using, “fetish,” a culturally loaded term. Paraphilias are not themselves considered to be psychiatric disorders, though if a paraphilia causes distress in one’s life, it may be

While sexual attraction to and interest in the monster are nothing new, the twenty-first century has seen an explosion of works that deliberately make sexual engagement with monster characters a focus. These works form part of a broad category of visual art, cinema, written fiction, video games, and other media, called “monsterfucker,” “monsterfuckery,” or, more precisely, “teratophilia.”

A broad categorical umbrella, monsterfucker art includes a spectrum of works that range from pornography¹²⁷ that is solely focused on monster sex and that contains a minimal plot, to mainstream, traditionally published science-fiction, fantasy, or horror literature that features fade-to-black sexual encounters with aliens, dragons, or other fantastic beings. As an informal category, monsterfuckery is able to be freely applied by the audience or author, with the only stipulation that the work feature either monsterfucking (sex or sexual play featuring one or more monsters and that is shown on page or screen), or a character who is implied to engage (or wishes to engage) in monsterfucking. Implication may be achieved through narration, the aforementioned fade-to-black sex scenes, or the presence of a romance between a humanoid being and a monster that suggests the existence of a physical sexual relationship between those characters. Hereafter, “monsterfucker,” used as a noun, will refer to persons who wish to have

diagnosed according to the DSM-V as a paraphilic disorder. For example, it would not be considered a paraphilic disorder for someone to experience sexual arousal only from store manikins. However, should the individual with this paraphilia experience distress or disruption to their life due to an overwhelming and unpleasant impulse to realize their sexual fantasies in the local Wal-Mart, they might be diagnosed with a paraphilic disorder. Peter Tupper, *A Lover's Pinch: A Cultural History of Sadomasochism* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, 2018), 231-234. An additional term, “kink,” is often used more casually to discuss paraphilic desires.

¹²⁷ Throughout this chapter, I refer to pornography and erotica interchangeably. Although distinctions between the two terms have been made by scholars and cultural critics such as Gloria Steinem, in general such distinctions are more about the gentrification of sexual desire rather than an inherent difference between competing forms of expression. Catherine M. Roach, “Erotica,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex, and Sexuality*, ed. Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood (New York: Routledge, 2018), 107-116; 107-108.

sex with monsters or who enjoy imagining people (including or excluding themselves) having sex with monsters.

The question of just what counts as a monster and what counts as “humanoid” is a complex one when discussing artworks that do not necessarily meaningfully engage with such questions (focus tends to be on the celebratory and the titillating rather than in crafting precise, academically satisfying definitions). Self-identification means that while for some audiences and artists a humanoid elf (human in appearance save for, perhaps, pointed ears and a tendency toward a slight build) might be counted as a humanoid, for some it may be considered a monster. That said, the majority of those who engage with the subgenre and subculture tend to use “monsterfucker” to refer to sex with creatures who are less human in appearance than classic, Tolkienian elves. Despite the potential for the term to become overextended, in general the fact that monsterfuckery has an inherently physical focus means that sexual interest and emphasis are almost always placed on less obviously human(oid) forms. Nonetheless, categorical distinctions may come into play in monsterfucker discourse in order to differentiate it from other paraphilias. In a social media post by the fantasy and science fiction author, Aliette de Bodard, for example, de Bodard cites an instance when one of her books was negatively reviewed on the book review website, Goodreads, on the basis that it promoted bestiality. According to de Bodard, “My best one on Goodreads was the one that accused me of encouraging bestiality in *In the Vanishers' Palace*, on the basis of the dragon character having sex while partly in dragon form (It's not bestiality, its monster fucking . . .).” The implication here, is, of course, that while even fantasies of bestiality might be considered reprehensible to a broad public, monsterfucking (the portrayal of sex with a fantastical and therefore unreal creature), ought to be free from such fraught implications.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Aliette de Bodard, Bluesky, June 25th, 2025, <https://bsky.app/profile/aliettedebodard.com/post/3lsdsqnhmok2k>.

Contemporary artists who include erotica that features monsters in their work often situate themselves within a tradition of artworks that depict or contain scenes of sex between monsters and humanoids (or monsters and other monsters), while further intensifying interest in the erotic encounter itself. Thus, monsterfuckery as a term may be retroactively applied to even ancient literature, redescribed in a monsterfucker context as forming part of a longstanding desire on the part of humans to have sex with monsters, or to imagine monsters having sex. Emphasis tends to be on the physicality of these scenarios. It is, in a nutshell, a heuristic category.

The possibilities for “egress” offered by monsterfucker stories are threefold in nature, with a strong potential for overlap. First, the audience might identify with the monster themselves, imagining themselves capable of incredible feats and acts of sexual prowess and violence, or simply unconstrained by the restrictions of polite society in a way that allows them to fantasize about freely expressing covert desires. Second, the monster may act as a tempter who either seduces or threatens the audience (or audience stand-in) into sexual acts they secretly desire but are unable to actualize in real life. Third, the monster’s object body is that which is desired, whether it comes clothed in feathers, tentacles, spines, fur, or in nothing at all. These monstrous bodies might be entirely fantastical, or they might represent an exaggerated version of real-world characteristics (e.g. bulging muscles, massive bulk, atypical genital presentations, and the presence or absence of limbs). Lest potential readers mistakenly assume that monsterfucker works are only interested in anthropomorphic monsters, however, there is an entire subcategory of monsterfucking that involves fantasies of sexual intercourse or stimulation from amorphous blobs of slime. While sometimes “slimes” will be anthropomorphized to facilitate sex with a humanoid protagonist, often these monsters remain amorphous for part or all of the sexual encounter, as in the example of the short story, “Slime,” by Archive of Our Own user

Can't_Smoke_Eggs. In this fanfiction,¹²⁹ the Batman character Jason Todd is gangbanged by a series of sapient, amorphous slimes.¹³⁰

Gothic fiction and its monsters have long been repositories and embodiments of repressed and oppressed sexual desires. As Jack Halberstam argues with respect to the Victorian consumption of Gothic stories:

A Victorian public could consume Gothic novels in vast quantities without regarding such a material as debased because Gothic gave readers the thrill of reading about so-called perverse activities while identifying aberrant sexuality as a condition of otherness and as an essential trait of foreign bodies. The monster, of course, marks the distance between the perverse and the supposedly disciplined sexuality of a reader. Also, the signifiers of 'normal' sexuality maintain a kind of hegemonic power by remaining invisible.¹³¹

Here the monster might represent, as Halberstam argues concerning the erotic magnetism of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, desire for the racialized body, and through that representation provide an outlet for subversive and sublimated erotic attraction.¹³² Similarly, as George E. Haggerty writes, concerning the Gothic novel, "terror is almost always sexual terror, and fear, and flight, and incarceration, and escape are almost always colored by the exoticism of transgressive sexual aggression [sic]."¹³³ The monsters of Gothic art, broadly defined, often play the role of semiotically over-determined repositories for all that which not only is sublimated, but that

¹²⁹ "Fanfiction" refers to a fan-authored work set in the universe of a pre-existing media property, work of fiction, or featuring the depiction of real people—typically celebrities such as musicians, actors, or internet personalities—in imagined scenarios

¹³⁰ Can't_Smoke_Eggs, "Slime," Archive of Our Own, (2022), <https://archiveofourown.org/works/40963815>.

¹³¹ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 13.

¹³² In the case of *Dracula*, the image of the monster makes generous use of common markers of "foreignness" to suggest the racialized bodies of Jews. Ibid., 86-106.

¹³³ George E. Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 2.

which must remain so. Most famously, Gothic fiction is often read as a kind of *mappa mundi* to chart the murky waters of suppressed or disguised queer love, longing, and attraction.¹³⁴ A nineteenth-century queer interest in Gothic fiction and its monsters transferred to a twentieth-century fascination with the same themes in film and television, and all with the fluidity of regular Lon Chaney, Jr. transforming into the hirsute Wolfman.¹³⁵

Twentieth-century and twenty-first-century monster cinema are rife with seductive imagery. This imagery has gone beyond an appeal to a presumptively cis, straight, White male gaze, and builds on longstanding connections between popular monster archetypes (vampires, werewolves, Creatures—of the Black Lagoon or of the laboratory—and zombies) and our cultural Others (religious and racialized minorities, queer people, disabled people, *et cetera*) in a way that has contributed to the establishment of alternative canons of monstrous sexuality and identification. Given longstanding traditions of using monsters as a means of breathing cinematic (un)life into those considered marginal within contemporary Western cultural traditions, it should perhaps not surprise that those same marginalized persons should not only identify with the monster, but should fantasize about making their ways into the monster's bed.

While anyone can be a monsterfucker, and even though monsterfuckery is not limited in scope to marginalized persons or communities, interest in monsterfucking represents a not insignificant subculture within online marginalized communities that deal with speculative media. Due to the overabundance of material available to be considered (even excluding work by non-marginalized artists), I have chosen to focus in particular on trans and gender nonconforming uses of monsterfuckery in the realm of written fiction, including webcomics. Trans-authored works

¹³⁴ For a succinct summary of the history of queerness in Gothic fiction, see Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*.

¹³⁵ *The Wolf Man*, directed by George Waggner (1941; Universal, 2014), DVD.

present a unique engagement with monsterfuckery that tends to emphasize themes related to bodily autonomy and transformation.

Of particular interest in the case of these trans reimaginations of monstrous sex and sexuality are how they couple with a reformulation of the trans body, whether through the literal transformation of trans people's genitalia and secondary sex characteristics, or through coupling (or tripling) with the body monstrous as an expression of trans euphoria. To this end, the works that I have chosen to examine concern the theme of "transition by monster," due to the unique appeal it holds for trans authors and audiences. While it is not my intention here to evaluate representations of transition across all trans literature, it is worth noting that it is rare for literature that features trans characters not to either implicitly or explicitly address transition. While the process of transition may not be of interest to a given text, for instance, the "status" of trans characters as having engaged in aspects of physical transition (or not), as well as which aspects, is often noted through brief references to the physical appearances of the characters (e.g. the presence, absence, and amount of body hair; references to breast augmentation or top surgery, *et cetera*),¹³⁶ if only in order to paint an accurate visual picture for the audience. Trans monsterfucker texts are therefore frequently in conversation with a broader category of trans fiction that deals with questions, hopes, and anxieties related to physical transition.

The history of trans literature renders this unsurprising. As Madison Rougier articulates in his MA theses on transmasculine fiction, interest in trans literature has largely taken the form of voyeuristic curiosity with personal and formulaic accounts of gender dysphoria, transition, and hardship. As Rougier argues, although trans memoirs

can be beneficial in providing more context, insight, and representation regarding transgender

¹³⁶ This is not to reify a binary or straight(forward) reading of trans gender expressions, or of body morphology. Women may, for example, have facial hair in varying amounts, may or may not possess breasts or a penis, while men and nonbinary people may or may not possess the same.

experiences, are similar to one another in the tropes and conventions that they use to tell their stories, meaning that any experience that does not align with these tropes consequently gets overlooked or seen as invalid. Moreover, these narratives are often confined to heterosexual and gender-normative standards dictated by publishers. In other words, the publishers are in control of the narrative, and authors must either conform to these standards or not get published at all, which in turn limits and ignores aspects of one's transgender experience that may not fall in line with these standards.¹³⁷

These same pressures, Rougier notes, extend even to trans-authored fiction, which often bears the burden of addressing the same formulaic concerns as the genre of the trans memoir, so that trans authors are frequently encouraged to perform a version of trans identity and authorship that is tailored to the prurient or paternalistic interests of a cisgender audience. Although trans authors and other artists may not be explicitly discouraged from creating art that does not engage with these themes, the encouragement to create such works, as well as a willingness primarily to fund them, means that, regardless, trans authors are tacitly limited in the professional artistic sphere.¹³⁸

Although rarely reflected upon by cis artists, critics, or industry professionals, the tendency for “trans stories,” regardless of content, to be primarily composed for a cis public, has been somewhat of an unspoken but widely-known fact within trans circles. This has often likewise been the case in academia, where theoretical formulations of “trans” as a heuristic category are deployed largely to elaborate on cisgender works and concerns.¹³⁹ Only in the twenty-first

¹³⁷ Madison Rougier, “‘A Narrative is a Living Body’: Trans-relations in Contemporary Transmasculine Fiction,” (master's thesis, University of Vermont, 2024), 3, *Graduate College Dissertations and Theses* (1863).

¹³⁸ This is not, of course, to argue that trans artists are uninterested in memoir, or in the themes that recur in the genre of the trans memoir, but rather, that cisgender dominance among gatekeepers and stakeholders within artistic industries means that works which appeal to those gatekeepers and stakeholders are far more likely to receive funding, professional support, distribution, and acclaim. The same fact is acknowledged by Caden Mark Gardner and Willow Catelyn Maclay in *Corpses, Fools, and Monsters: The History and Future of Trans Cinema* (London: Repeater, 2025), 1. Rougier, 3-4.

¹³⁹ Important exceptions include Jack Halberstam's work.

century, and particularly from the early 2010s onwards, have analyses of trans-authored works by trans academics truly begun to flourish. These works, including Rougier's contributions, but also Caden Mark Gardner and Willow Catelyn Maclay's recent monograph, *Corpses, Fools, and Monsters: The History and Future of Transness in Cinema*, draw attention to trends within trans literature, film, and other art forms, and identify the ways in which trans artistic potential has historically been limited by censors. Due to the historical dominance of trans stories that appeal to cis audiences, the construction of trans histories of artistic production are inherently messy and entangled.

Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that cis interest in trans work has formed an artistic interruption that has curtailed the ability of trans people not only to create authentic art reflecting their experiences, but that it has circumscribed the ability of trans people to contribute meaningfully to the broader artistic community. This is not to say that there is no authentic history of trans art, nor is it to diminish the significance of trans works (which are often created in spite of rigorous censorship efforts), but to draw attention to the external pressures felt by the community and that retain an impact on trans self-expression. Under these conditions, authentic forms of trans self-expression arguably cannot help but be radical/resistant. It is also the case that, whether as a consequence of limited opportunities due to systemic transphobia, or a desire on the part of trans authors to avoid the cissification of their art, a robust community of self-published and independent trans creators is a primary contributor of trans artworks. Due to the history of cis-centric representations of trans images and stories, contemporary trans artists are thus nonetheless influenced both by sympathetic but paternalizing narratives such as the award-winning biopic, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999),¹⁴⁰ and overtly transphobic portrayals of transness, as in

¹⁴⁰ *Boys Don't Cry* is a fictionalized account of the death of American trans teenager Brandon Teena. As noted by Gardner and Maclay, "*Boys Don't Cry* . . . has remained the placeholder of trans masculine representation in cinema since its release. However, this is not because of the resonance of its trans film image, but instead due to mainstream films remaining static in their depictions of trans masculinity." And, as Gardner and Maclay make clear, trans responses to the film were mixed. Gardner and Maclay, 236; 238-246.

the case of the horror movie *Sleepaway Camp* (1983),¹⁴¹ while simultaneously carving out new spaces in which to present alternative formulations of transness.

To focus on monsters, Australian trans filmmaker, Alice Maio Mackay's *So Vam* (2021) and *T-Blockers* (2024), both engage with the history of trans monstrosity in different ways. In *So Vam*, a band of queer vampires battle transphobes (human and vampiric), reclaiming space for themselves not only within their community, but within the film's metafictional self-awareness of itself as a vampire text. One of the film's characters takes time, for instance, to explain to the (briefly) human protagonist and his friends that vampires have always been queer. Over the course of the movie, the protagonist finds the confidence to express queer identity both through vampirism, and through drag performance. In *T-Blockers*, monstrosity is not something to be celebrated, but is instead the purview of radicalized alt-right men who spread bigotry through a zombifying parasite that causes them to attack the trans protagonists of the movie.

In the literary sphere, Chinese-Australian transmasculine author Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing* (2009) and American nonbinary author Andrea Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* (2017) engage with themes of transformation and monstrosity that problematize rigid conceptions of not only the gendered body, but the body writ large. Cho's *Look Who's Morphing* is a collection of interconnected short fictions that each detail the protagonist's metamorphoses into different people and things, while Lawlor's *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* is a work of historical fiction that follows the titular, shape-shifting Paul as he slips into a variety of gendered guises (changing wardrobe and role, but also genitalia) in order to explore his sexuality through queer hook-ups. Both works use absurdity to problematize cisgender notions of the body as sacrosanct and impermeable, drawing attention to the ways in

¹⁴¹ *Sleepaway Camp*'s climax—reproduced in my first chapter—pivots on the revelation that the killer, Angela, is a trans woman. As Gardner and Maclay describe, *Sleepaway Camp*, “complicates” the typical slasher formula, “with the final girl and killer combined into a Chimeric image that relies upon transness as an outlet of disgust.” Ibid., 131.

which we read and interpret the bodies of others creates overlapping layers of identity throughout our lives. *Look Who's Morphing*, for example, opens with a story—presented in the style of a fantastical, autobiographical anecdote—in which the narrator is passed around by their family like a baby when they reunite at the airport. The narrator, while they long for familial affection and the comfort of the child-parent relationship, brims with a desire for adult self-expression:

the fearful part of me tells me that I need to be held by my father, and the newer part of me—the part that learned dancing at the resort—tells me that dancing, like pop culture discussions, brings people together. In the end, the part of me that learned dancing at the resort wins out, and so I jump out of my father's arms and I say to my parents, 'No one puts Baby in a corner,' and I perform a big raunchy dance number after I say it and everyone else at the airport joins in and starts dancing in a raunchy way too. My parents have no comeback for all this. As a result, they have no choice but to come to terms with the fact that I am an adult.¹⁴²

The fantastical nature of Cho's stories communicates a deeper interest in transformation as ongoing process, and, like Paul in Andrea Lawlor's work, the narrator does not remain statically fixed either in form or desire. In "Suitmation," for instance, Cho describes how the popularization of suitmation via the movie *Godzilla*, leads to the production of human "suits," that allow the narrator to wear the body of Suzi Quatro.¹⁴³ While the story operates on a variety of levels—not the least of which is as a commentary on celebrity culture and our fixation on attaining idealized bodies—most significant for my purposes is its implicit engagement with the history of depictions of trans identity as false or duplicitous, and with the related image of the trans skinsuit. Alongside *Sleepaway Camp*'s Angela, one of the most famous trans horror images is that of the serial killer Buffalo Bill from *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), whose modus operandi involves murdering and then skinning young women. Bill then sews himself female skinsuits that he is able to wear. The movie goes to some pains to argue that Bill is not a "true transsexual," but the disclaimer rings hollow given the overall framing of the character, including the fact that in

¹⁴² Tom Cho, *Look Who's Morphing* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009), 12-13.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15-17.

his backstory he applied for gender reassignment. As Jack Halberstam expresses, reflecting on the movie in the early 1990s, “it seems to me that *The Silence of the Lambs* emphasizes that we are at a peculiar time in history, a time when it is becoming impossible to tell the difference between prejudice and its representations, between, then, homophobia and representations of homophobia.”¹⁴⁴ Though Halberstam tends to take a more charitable view of *Silence of the Lambs* overall, it is nonetheless challenging to read the character as anything but both transphobic and homophobic. In “Suitmation,” the image of the skinsuit, which, through the invocation of rockstar Suzi Quatro, is distinctly feminized, draws further attention to the legacy of Buffalo Bill and his fantasies of female embodiment. The narrator’s metamorphoses never quite terminate, and nor do the metamorphoses of those around them.

In this way, Cho and Lawlor resist, following trans filmmaker Christopher Lee, fixations on the “before and after” of trans bodies pre- and post-transition. Instead, they are more interested in the ways in which transformation as a process reveals the fact that all bodily forms are necessarily transitory.¹⁴⁵

Trans identification with monsters is observable beyond these offerings, encompassing Middle Grade novels like the previously discussed *Dear Mothman* by Robin Gow, Young Adult novels like Hal Schrieve’s *Out of Salem* (2019), Andrew Joseph White’s *Hell Followed With Us* (2022), and Trang Thanh Tran’s *They Bloom at Night* (2025). Short-story collections like *We Mostly Come Out At Night: 15 Queer Tales of Monsters, Angels & Other Creatures* (2024) and a myriad of adult novels, novellas, and short stories published through both traditional presses, independent presses, and self-publishing suggest a flourishing subgenre of trans monster literature.

¹⁴⁴ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 167.

¹⁴⁵ Gardner and Maclay, 257.

Of the many trans works that incorporate the radical/resistant monster in the context of monsterfuckery specifically, I have limited myself to two major works, selected due to their influence (*The Woods All Black* is a rare, traditionally-published trans monsterfucker novella that contains explicit erotic scenes; and InCase's webcomic, *The Invitation*, has a healthy amount of public, online fan response that I am able to draw upon to deepen my analysis). Although authors and audiences of monsterfucker works may include teenagers and younger (and, due to the anonymity and ambiguity of online identity, it is ultimately challenging to ascertain someone's "true" age, race, gender, *et cetera*), I have also limited my analysis to works considered part of the Adult readership category. By their very nature as pornography, or as stories containing or alluding to explicit sexual content, monsterfucker stories would almost all fall under this umbrella.¹⁴⁶

Before examining these trans-authored works, however, I will present a brief overview of the variety of expressions of monsterfuckery that one finds in contemporary fanworks (largely written fiction uploaded to fanfiction website, Archive of Our Own), and popular pornography of the kind found on mainstream websites and fora such as Pornhub and Reddit.

Monsterfucking in the Twenty-First Century

Modern teratophiles are a diverse bunch, and the objects of their desires even more so. Not limited to well-endowed women with tails and horns, buxom witches, or sparkly vampires, there are essentially no limits when it comes to what the monster-adled mind might conjure.¹⁴⁷ It is

¹⁴⁶ I qualify this statement due to the possibility for a number of Young Adult works, including TV shows like *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017), to be counted as monsterfucker stories.

¹⁴⁷ In Archive of Our Own author, ProblematicWriterMan's *Resident Evil 4* erotic fanfiction, "The Time Leon S. Kennedy Got Raped by a Centipede Priest," the protagonist is anally penetrated by a variety of centipedes. As

also worth noting that, as Laura Helen Marks observes in her preface to her analysis of pornographic adaptations of Victorian literature, “pornography is diverse, not inherently misogynistic, and not essentially transgressive.”¹⁴⁸ With this in mind, it is worth commenting, perhaps, on the fact that, while monsterfucker pornography may appear, in a universal sense, to transgress social norms simply by virtue of representing the monstrous as a source of desire, monsterfucker works may not always be experienced as particularly transgressive by those who produce or consume them, and may in fact reinforce rather than subvert existing social structures.

One of few scholars to engage with monsterfuckery as a twenty-first-century phenomenon is Rebecca Saunders, whose article on cis straight male engagement with monsterfucker art examines the ways in which the subgenre and its associated communities can be read as an expression of a societal crisis in men’s sexuality post the #MeToo movement. In Saunders’s reading, “the self-conscious ludicrousness of monster porn and its thoroughly unsurprising circulation on mainstream tube sites typifies the insignificance of twenty-first century monsters [sic].” This development in the depiction and circulation of monstrous images and narratives is, for Saunders, less an evolution and more of a backslide that erases both the historical rootedness of monster stories as texts concerned with the Other and Othering. It also damages the monster’s capacity to provoke. Monsterfuckery, for Saunders, lies firmly within a tradition of mainstreaming the monster (akin to the development of Catherine Spooner’s monstrous/cute). Just as in the past, however, scholarship surrounding online communities centered on the production or curation of art has been demonstrated to neglect online subcultures in which

Mendez, the titular “centipede priest,” gradually loses human form, his appendages—including his penis—transform into arthropods (the fanfiction is quick to note the distinction between these and insects). ProblematicWriterMan, “The Time Leon S. Kennedy Got Raped by a Centipede Priest,” *Archive of Our Own* (2023). <https://archiveofourown.org/works/46407304>.

¹⁴⁸ Laura Helen Marks, *Alice in Pornoland: Hardcore Encounters with the Victorian Gothic*, (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2018), xi.

marginalized people create and engage with art, so too does Saunders's study oversimplify the social and gendered dynamics at play in monsterfucker communities and texts.¹⁴⁹

Modern monsterfuckery is a broad category that encompasses a wide range of art, literature, community spaces (online and off), and even sex toys.¹⁵⁰ It is not limited to one group of people, and in fact, a cursory glance at works available online would suggest a predictable demographic make-up based on the relative majority and minority populations of the Western world. Whole fora dedicated to monsterfuckery depict largely straight or straight-passing sex between monstrous men (often orcs, goblins, minotaurs, and the most popular figures from world mythology and contemporary roleplaying and fantasy video games) and elfin blonde women with Andersonesque¹⁵¹ figures. Rather than being the sole purview of straight male audiences, however, such fora often cater to heterosexual women whose fantasies involve sexual intercourse (often forced or coerced) between themselves and the monstrous men depicted in the images and stories. These stories, frequently told in webcomic or cartoon format, often feature the female character(s) being kidnapped and forcibly bred or otherwise transformed into sex slaves by one or more monster captors.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Rebecca Saunders, "Here Be Monsters: Monster Porn and the Crisis of Masculinity," *Feminist Media Studies*, 23, n. 5 (2022), 2086. For a consideration of how trans and other queer participation in online fan communities has been ignored under the presumption of a largely cisgender female audience/author-base of fanfiction works, see Jennifer Duggan, "Worlds. . .[of] Contingent Possibilities": Genderqueer and Trans Adolescents Reading Fan Fiction," *Television and New Media*, 23, n. 7 (2022): 703-720.

¹⁵⁰ One of the most well-known companies that produces monsterfucker dildos and other sex toys is the online retailer Bad Dragon. The website caters not only to teratophiles, but also to "furries" (simply put, people who enjoy dressing up as anthropomorphic animals). "Bad Dragon Landing Page," February 17, 2023, <https://bad-dragon.com/>.

¹⁵¹ In this case, "Andersonesque" refers to Pamela and not the filmmaker Wes Anderson, although I do not doubt that such media exists somewhere on the internet.

¹⁵² For examples of popular online fora where monsterfuckers are able to mingle and share erotic works, see "r/MonsterFucker," *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/MonsterFucker/>; "r/Teratophiliacs," *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/Teratophiliacs/>; and "r/MonsterMen," *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/MonsterMen/>. The

This is not to say that straight male monster fantasies have no place in the spectrum of monsterfucker art. Indeed, straight male monstrous desire is by and large accepted more readily by the mainstream. One of the clearest recent examples of this is the online fascination with the vampiric video game antagonist Lady Alcina Dimitrescu from popular survival horror series, *Resident Evil*.¹⁵³ In the franchise's most recent mainline installment, *Resident Evil: Village* (the eighth numbered title in the franchise of games, movies, comics, action figures, and books created by Japanese video game company, Capcom),¹⁵⁴ Lady Dimitrescu was presented from early in the game's marketing as a central enemy against whom the player character (Ethan Winters) would be pitted (see Fig. 3). Although upon the game's release it was revealed that Dimitrescu was only the first of five antagonists against whom Ethan would find himself embattled, fixation on Dimitrescu rather than any of *Village*'s other antagonists (or protagonists)

largest of these, r/MonsterMen, boasts 217 000 members, while r/MonsterFucker and r/Teratophiliacs boast 41 000 and 39 000 members respectively as of July 2025. More specialized fora also exist on Reddit, including one dedicated exclusively to tentacle sex (a popular subgenre of monsterfuckery), and in particular consensual tentacle sex. "r/Consentacles," *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/r/consentacles/>.

¹⁵³ *Resident Evil: Village* for Playstation 4, Capcom, released 2021.

¹⁵⁴ The *Resident Evil* franchise, known as *Biohazard* in Japan, began in 1996 with the release of the Playstation videogame *Resident Evil*, but has since expanded to include seven live action films (with an eighth in production), four animated films, a series of seven novelizations and original novels by author S. D. Perry (along with numerous film novelizations), comics, action figures, and two television series. The main series of games includes eleven released titles, with a twelfth forthcoming, and there have been a multitude of spin-offs, remakes, and ported versions of the games. The central premise of *Resident Evil* is that a corrupt pharmaceutical company called Umbrella has been conducting secret, illegal experiments on human beings in order to create monsters they can sell to global powers as bioweapons. The first game (and many subsequent works in the franchise) deal with the aftermath of an accidental outbreak of a zombie-producing virus engineered by Umbrella. Although the primary monsters the playable characters and protagonists encounter are zombies, larger and less numerous enemies typically consist of mad scientists, aristocrats, and business people who have intentionally transformed themselves into monsters. For a brief history of the franchise up to 2017, see Dawn Stobbart, *Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), 28. My own analysis of the games' villains and their intentional transformation into monsters is to be found in Mason, "A Eugenics of Disability."

persists in fanworks related to the game. This includes fanfiction, fanart, cosplay, and associated memes.¹⁵⁵

Artwork related to Dimitrescu, including that promoted by Capcom themselves, presents her as a domineering, sinister maternal figure. The “mother” of three adopted vampiric daughters, Dimitrescu occupies the role of Dracula analogue, alongside a roster of villains each linked with a classic horror movie monster (the Creature from the Black Lagoon, a ghost, and Frankenstein’s monster).¹⁵⁶ In the game itself, Dimitrescu is supernaturally tall, needing to crouch to enter most rooms as she pursues Ethan through her haunted, Stokeresque castle and grounds. Although some sexualized elements of her design are predictable (her breasts, though covered both in the game and in official artwork, are very large), the overall image of Dimitrescu depends on less widely acceptable depictions of desirability. Her grey skin, exaggerated height, bulging veins, and severe, almost clown-like make-up firmly mark her as monstrous, while her matronly appearance contributes to fan characterizations of her as a “mommy” figure. Dimitrescu as monster mommy dominatrix (or “dom/domme”) represents a common fetishized interpretation of the character—an interpretation that Capcom has done nothing to dissuade despite *Resident Evil*’s mainstream status and international popularity. While even a cursory knowledge of video games should be enough to prove mainstream companies are more than willing to sell their

¹⁵⁵ On popular fanfiction website Archive of Own, a full 4900 of the 33652 *Resident Evil* fanfictions feature Lady Dimitrescu, with 1860 of those listed as “explicit.” “Archive of Our Own,” July 20, 2025.

¹⁵⁶ *RE: Village* also contains numerous werewolf enemies (the majority of the game’s monsters, which Ethan Winters must shoot his way through in order to progress). Unlike the four aforementioned monsters, however, there is no named werewolf with a personality or individual motivations. Lady Dimitrescu and her fellow three major monstrous antagonists each represent what in video games is known as a “boss” character. Bosses or boss monsters are major obstacles the player character must defeat in order to progress in the game. Defeating a boss typically involves engaging in a semi-scripted combat challenge in which the boss monster leverages unique attacks against the player character(s). This is in contrast to basic enemies, whose attacks are shared across a whole class of opponents. Boss monsters are typically more challenging to defeat, with greater attack strength, speed, and sometimes the ability to heal themselves when damaged by the player character.

games on the basis of the sex appeal of their female characters (Lara Croft, the heroine of the popular *Tomb Raider* franchise is a chief example), it is rare for a sexualized video game character to so brazenly draw on fringe or less widely acceptable sexual fetishes such as mommy, femmedomme, or size difference kinks. It should also be noted that, although many of the fans sexualizing Dimitrescu are straight cis men, a not insignificant subset of her fans includes cisgender and trans lesbians.

Straight cis male monsterfucker porn, however, is not limited to fantasies of humanoid monsters like Lady Dimitrescu,¹⁵⁷ nor even to fantasies of sex *with* monsters. Using *Resident Evil* as an example, it is not hard to find unofficial animations and comics featuring scenarios in which the franchise's playable *female* characters are ravaged by a variety of male (or male-coded) monsters. Jill Valentine, one of two playable characters in the first *Resident Evil*, as well as the lead protagonist of *Resident Evil 3*, is frequently the focus of this type of scene, and many artworks and videos depict her engaging in intercourse with grotesque monsters such as *Resident Evil 3*'s central (and monosyllabic) monster, Nemesis. Nemesis, while humanoid in the sense that he possesses a vaguely human shape (arms, legs, head, torso, and—crucially in these fanworks—penis), is undeniably monstrous, with tentacles, a lipless mouth filled with enormous and disturbingly flat teeth, and a scarred and mutated face. Nemesis's appearance further transforms over the course of *RE3*, and pornography featuring the character often focuses on his more degenerated and less humanoid forms, or the use of his tentacles for vaginal and/or anal penetration.

¹⁵⁷ In this Reddit post in r/Teratophiliacs by user Plot_Enjoyer, erotic artist ZeBlackBallD's eldritch horror, The Titan of Love, looms over a number of miniscule stick figures who appear to be worshipping her. Although her design features enormous breasts, the rest of her body lacks any resemblance to a human and is composed primarily of tentacles and jagged appendages. Plot_Enjoyer, "Titan of Love F/M," on "r/Teratophiliacs," *Reddit*, June 29, 2025. https://www.reddit.com/r/Teratophiliacs/comments/1lnz4c1/titan_of_love_fm/. ZeBlackBallD's artwork can be viewed on their website: "ZeBlackBallD Profile Page," *Newgrounds*, July 11th, 2025, <https://zeblackballd.newgrounds.com/>.

In claiming that the sole audience for these works is cis, straight, and male, however, one risks presuming a heterosexual, male demographic when in fact that audience's identity is anything but clear. Since much of the material discussed only exists and is accessible in an online context, one can often only base claims as to the gender, race, and age of audiences on self-identification, and rarely is there much of a lively conversation in the comments section of a Pornhub video.¹⁵⁸ As the images and content present on the Reddit forum r/MonsterMen would suggest, however, many artworks (including videos and .gifs) that on the surface would appear to cater to a straight male gaze, were either authored by, or solicit an audience primarily composed of, women. The women engaging in sexual acts with "Monster Men" featured in the forum are often stereotypically attractive according to the ideals set by the porn industry, with large breasts, small waists, fair complexions, and blond hair. Nonetheless, comments from users often explicitly identify with the women being used as sex objects, rather than with the penetrative male monsters. For example, in a post by Reddit user cherokeechickk titled, "Would any of you actually mate with a monsterman of free will?," of the sixty-two comments on the post, none of those responding answered in the negative,¹⁵⁹ with both self-identified men and women

¹⁵⁸ A now-deleted video, "Jill Valentine and Nemesis 60fps VR Train Reverse Cowgirl 5 ANGLES!" for example, included zero comments, but had been viewed a total of 704 times as of the original writing of this footnote. A similar video ("Jill vs Nemesis w/Sound Resident Evil" uploaded by Pornhub user BlenderFreak) featured nine comments as of this writing, including one from user Celinehrny stating that they, "would love to be fucked like that," explicitly identifying with Jill rather than Nemesis. Similarly, a number of ambiguous comments describe Jill as "lucky." BlenderFreak, "Jill vs. Nemesis w/Sound Resident Evil," *Pornhub*, https://www.pornhub.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ph5ed6723f99c1c.

¹⁵⁹ Some users did stipulate that it depended on whether or not they survived the encounter, or cited a preference for a larger or smaller monster. Cherokeechickk, "Would any of you actually mate with a monsterman of free will?," on "r/MonsterMen," *Reddit*, February 2023.

participating. One user, jay_dew, whose comment received sixty-eight “up votes,”¹⁶⁰ expressed her vehement interest in this specific fantasy with unreserved enthusiasm and even desperation:

God nobody in this world has any idea how much I wanna get bred my monster men. Not a day goes by without me touching my slutty pussy to the thought of these unreal men using me like a toy.
FUCKING HELL I’LL DIE IF I DON’T GET FUCKED LIKE THAT PLEASE IM READY TO DO ANYTHING [sic]

Whether or not the level of commitment expressed in jay_dew’s comment is exaggerated, the desire is nonetheless one that cannot be limited to a male-only power fantasy of dominating a smaller and weaker female.¹⁶¹ Indeed, the same Reddit thread includes a reply from a self-

¹⁶⁰ Up votes are a method used by Reddit to determine the popularity and ranking of a comment or post. Comments with more up votes will be featured nearer the top of a comment section, while those that receive no votes, or corresponding “down votes” appear near the bottom. Votes are generated by users themselves, and are sometimes used to down vote incorrect or harmful responses to questions, but can also signal the popularity or lack thereof of a given point of view within a specific Reddit community. In this case, jay_dew’s comment is ranked second-highest on this particular post, as of February 2023.

¹⁶¹ Nonetheless, some men in the same forum express this exact reason for enjoying the content on r/MonsterMen. In a self-reflective post soliciting opinions on the relative normalcy of his paraphilia, a since-deleted user posted the thread, “Is it strange to be a man and be into seeing women getting destroyed by humanoid monsters?” In the post, the now-anonymous user stated that, “Perhaps another reason could be is because when I see monsters like Werewolves , It allows me to unleash my primal instincts and the idea of unleashing my primal instincts on a woman is what is appealing , I also like the idea of throwing away my humanity and becoming a beast of rage as a power fantasy . I believe it could also be the taboo part of it as well and that romance between humanoid monsters and women (Or humanoid female monsters and men) is forbidden in most fictional settings and the fact that many would think of this fetish as strange and gross. [sic]” Other men in the comments section expressed similar desires, though additional commenters were quick to point out that the kink wasn’t unique to men, with user SeekerofAllandOne stating, “I don’t see this kink as being specifically male of female.” See “Is it strange to be a man and be into seeing women getting destroyed by humanoid monsters?” on “r/MonsterMen,” 2023, “https://www.reddit.com/r/MonsterMen/comments/17hzw9r/questionis_it_strange_to_be_a_man_and_be_into/.”

described femboy.¹⁶² User tomiqqeei states in response to the question: “Yes it's my dream, as a femboy I've always had a thing for monster men and so if I could choose a partner it would definitely be a monster man, they are wonderful and definitely better than human men [*sic*].”¹⁶³ Here, tomiqqeei specifically links his queer gender performance as a femboy with his desire for monster men in the context of user cherokeechickk's question about whether r/MonsterMen members would agree to be bred by a monster if given the opportunity. As a result, gender performance is destabilized along several lines, with tomiqqeei linking his desires with the concept of having sex for the purposes of procreation.

Whether tomiqqeei is a cisgender or trans femboy, the notion of his being “bred” by another man, and the specific linkage of that with his gender identity as *femboy*, suggests that a deliberate queering of traditional gender and sex roles is essential to his sexual fantasy. Further, the emphasis placed on “as a femboy” would seem to indicate that from tomiqqeei's perspective, the desire to be bred and dominated by a monster is something intrinsic to femboy gender performance. While it is unlikely that all femboy-identifying individuals would agree with this statement, it is notable that for this user sexual attraction, sexual fantasy, and gender identity are linked in meaningful ways. Part of performing femininity, in this case, involves a deliberate relinquishment of control on the part of the human partner and the assumption of a submissive sexual role characterized by the objectification of the human body. That this submission is *voluntary* and consensual is significant here and in other examples of monsterfucker media and community discussions. Notably, cherokeechickk's question is itself framed around the theme of consensual sex—she wants to know whether other r/MonsterMen members would engage in sex with a monster of “free will,” specifically. Ignoring the (perhaps unintended) implication that

¹⁶² “Femboy” is a slang term reappropriated by the queer community as a self-descriptor for men whose gender performance is hyperfeminine. Femboys often wear traditionally female clothing and will sometimes present as female while identifying as male. While the term had traditionally been used to describe only cisgender men, it is now also sometimes used by transmen.

¹⁶³ “Would any of you.”

one might genuinely engage in monsterfucking *against* one's will, what appears to be a simple question about desire communicates a more complex attitude regarding safe and consensual sex and willing participation in both kink and fantasy.

Although the centrality of consent may read as contradictory in a context in which community members and artists are frequently depicting scenarios in which an individual is being kidnapped and often raped, this focus is quite common among kink communities in general, and specifically those communities where BDSM (usually, bondage, domination, sadism, and masochism; but occasionally D & S may stand for discipline and submission) is a prominent component. The concept of "consensual non-consent" is likewise applicable here. As the term itself would suggest, consensual non-consent demarcates sexual encounters during which rape, sexual assault, or dubiously consensual sexual encounters are role-played by participants, consent having been given beforehand. Thus, while participants may behave during the sexual scenario as though they are resistant or unwilling, their willingness has been negotiated prior to the encounter. Many people who engage in this type of roleplay will also employ the use of a "safe word" that allows participants to revoke their consent at any time.¹⁶⁴

BDSM and related forms of erotic play also intersect in meaningful ways with specifically queer monsterfuckery, particularly insofar as both are concerned with embodiment. As well, queer and BDSM practices have both been read as "practices of resistance."¹⁶⁵ When combined, according to Andrea Beckmann, queer and consensual SM practices have the potential to challenge contemporary heteronormative sexualities that rigidly link sexual roles and performance with

¹⁶⁴ The concept of the safe word is crucial to the healthy maintenance of many kink communities, especially those that engage in BDSM-related activities, yet the efficacy of safe words within kink spaces and the reliance on them to shield kink communities from accusations of abuse have been critiqued. See Catherine Scott, *Thinking Kink: The Collision of BDSM, Feminism, and Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), 85-100.

¹⁶⁵ Andrea Beckmann, *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sadomasochism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 229.

specific genitalia, as well as to appropriate, following Foucault, “traditional modes of ‘power,’” in ways that re-place power and control within the hands of the very marginalized persons who have suffered oppression or suppression by traditional channels.¹⁶⁶ In a consensual kink environment, the power dynamics typically associated with cisgender male, butch, or otherwise masculine presentations, can be upended, inverted, and redescribed, while the same holds true for femme presentations.¹⁶⁷ Critically, the process of redescription has no limit and may continuously shift, ensuring that redescription is not so simple as a one-way reversal.

This constant renegotiating of the power dynamics at play within sexual relations may not only allow for a temporary uncoupling of assigned power roles from individuals, but can broaden the awareness participants have of different positionalities through the process of roleplay. As interviews conducted by Robin Bauer with queer BDSM participants highlight, such roleplay can also reveal the ways in which Western concepts of strength and vulnerability are mapped according to gender performance and can impact participants’ own sense of themselves as safe or at risk. While transfemme and gender non-conforming participants might feel uncomfortable expressing femininity in public spaces where their presentation might impact their proprioception—or sense of themselves—as unsafe, within the delimited and redescribed space of BDSM play, there are fewer limitations not only on one’s ability to express gender in different ways, but in terms of one’s ability to express and experiment with vulnerability and strength.¹⁶⁸

In many ways, queer monsterfuckery operates similarly by providing, through fiction, roleplay, or other forms of artistic expression, spaces (physical, digital, or imagined) in which the queer

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 229-230.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Robin Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 195-197.

body can be rendered in new and endlessly capacious ways, constantly reinventing itself in an evolving fantasy of gendered performance.

Beyond the body, queer temporality and life events are more adequately represented by the monster who, to paraphrase Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, is made temporal through its capacity to return, again and again, wearing the skins (read: fears, phobias, and illicit desires) of its age.¹⁶⁹ As Jack Halberstam explains in his benchmark work, *In a Queer Time and Place*, “queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.”¹⁷⁰ Indeed, queer rites of passage—the turning points by which queer people mark time, change, and in some cases progress—are vastly different than those experienced, planned, and longed for by straight people. Puberty for adult trans people who make the choice to take hormones, for example, occurs not once, but at minimum twice, while due to both legal limitations and to queer attitudes about heteronormative institutions, many queer couples may have legally married much later than their straight peers, or opted not to marry at all.¹⁷¹ As Jennifer Duggan states in her analysis of queer engagement with fanfiction and other fan works, queer people often experience adolescence as a “lingering,” suggesting that for queer people it is a state that continues into one’s twenties.¹⁷² More popularly, recent years have seen an increase in interest in a so-called “second adolescence” experienced by queer people, many of whom may not come out until their twenties, thirties, or later, and therefore will not experience identity formation at the same time as their straight peers.¹⁷³ Similarly,

¹⁶⁹ Cohen, 4-12.

¹⁷⁰ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York UP, 2005), 1.

¹⁷¹ Speaking from personal experience, many queer people engage in the kind of playful experimentation typical of adolescence in their twenties rather than their teens, for the simple fact that moving away for university, college, trade school, or work may provide distance from homophobic social environments (family or community).

¹⁷² Duggan, 707.

¹⁷³ Examples of this are analyzed in Srividya Mehendale, “Embracing a Queer Second Adolescence,” *In Plainspeak*, Tarshi, July 22, 2024. <https://www.tarshi.net/inplainspeak/embracing-a-queer-second-adolescence/> and “The Second

polyamorous partnerships, called “polycules,” further destabilize heteronormative paradigms of what it means to be in a sexual and/or romantic relationship, in turn collapsing (or expanding) the ways in which we map human lives, particularly in relation to heteronormative definitions of family.

Marginalized bodies are always already read as points drifting in a spectrum of monstrosity. Hence monsterfuckery, in the context of marginalized sexual fantasy, is not only the manifestation of an unusual but vague paraphilia, but an expression of self-same desire. The desire by trans people for trans bodies, and the same by and for disabled, fat, and racialized bodies.¹⁷⁴

While queer and marginalized people are not by any means unique in terms of fantasizing about sex with monsters and demons (as the examples listed earlier in this chapter indicate), the particular themes that emerge from marginalized, particularly queer, depictions of and conversations around monsterfuckery demonstrate a unique expression of ideas related to futurity and the marginalized body.

Lee Mandelo’s *The Woods All Black*, InCase’s *The Invitation*, and the Trans-Historical Monster

Queer Adolescence: Navigating Identity, Growth, and Authentic Relationships,” *Queer Relationship Institute*, December 13, 2024, <https://www.queerrelationshipinstitute.com/blog/the-second-queer-adolescence/> For an examination of the concept of “arrested development” as it has been problematically applied to queer lives, see Kathryn Bon Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), 22-23.

¹⁷⁴ Queer online spaces on websites and applications like Tumblr, Discord, Archive of Our Own, and others, not-infrequently open themselves up to alternative forms of sexual desire and kink.

Although monsterfucker narratives and art are celebrated by audiences and artists across the gender spectrum, the subgenre enjoys a popularity within trans communities that is particularly noteworthy, since it represents a large proportion of artistic engagement in specifically online queer spaces such as Discord¹⁷⁵ servers, fanfiction websites like Archive of Our Own, and retailing platforms with large queer audiences such as Itch.io.¹⁷⁶ By “engagement,” I refer not

¹⁷⁵ Discord is an online streaming and social media application that allows users to create their own private, semi-private, or public server, in which they can socialize with others. These servers may be organized around a common interest, such as a specific video game, musical genre, or sport. They might also be established as community spaces for creators and fans working in a specific genre or subgenre, may form a venue for special interest groups or charitable organizations to digitally convene, or even act as a space for members of an in-person friend or family group to quickly communicate with one another. Discord servers typically have unique sets of rules of conduct created by the server owner or moderators. Depending on the size and complexity of the server, a given Discord will likely be organized into sub-fora (called “channels”) dedicated to particular topics (e.g. in a server created for fans of science fiction and fantasy novels, there may be distinct channels for book reviews, book discussion, off-topic chats, or links to author interviews, with members encouraged to keep chatter on-topic in each forum).

¹⁷⁶ Itch.io began its life as a platform on which independent video and mobile game designers could playtest their creations with users, as well as market and sell their games or game assets. It has since broadened its scope and is currently a popular site for sequential artists, authors, and other creators to sell their work. Although the site has a broad user base, it has, until recently, enjoyed a reputation as a hub for queer creators, in part due to the lack of restrictions placed on the kinds of art, including erotic art, that could be bought and sold using the application. As of this writing, unlike other popular online retailers like Amazon, Itch.io provides creators the ability to upload their work DRM-free, which means that customers fully own the files they pay for (on Amazon and other retail websites, Amazon is able to delete files from user devices, and so the degree to which one “owns” a piece of digital media such as an eBook, movie, song, or image is debatable). Given the rising threat of censorship within the United States, particularly of Trans, Black, Immigrant, and other marginalized voices, many independent authors and artists who are at risk of censorship had previously begun the process of migrating their work to Itch.io. Itchio (as it is popularly known) also allows for the creation of “bundles” that allow creators to package their work with others’ and sell a large number of works by a variety of creators at a discount. Typically, these bundles are themed around a particular topic, shared genre, or author identity (e.g. bundles celebrating Pride month, romantic fantasy bundles, horror bundles, or works by Black creators). In a significant recent development with implications for monsterfucker artists, however, Itch.io delisted and/or removed all erotica from its database. The removal, which took place on the

only to the creation of monsterfucker art, nor even the discussion of the art itself, but the celebration and articulation of monsterfuckery as a positionality of its own that typically communicates oppositional attitudes toward mainstream government (particularly conservative governments, but also against mainstream liberalism), neoliberalism, anti-pornographic sentiments (e.g. so-called “puritan” discourse that emphasizes a “de-sexed” and often heteronormative vision of queer identity), and kinkshaming.¹⁷⁷ In this way, monsterfuckery is framed (or deployed as a framing device) as a form of personal or group resistance against either a vaguely-defined mainstream, or against political opponents, movements, and oppressive social and economic systems (e.g. cisnormativity, late-stage capitalism and so on).¹⁷⁸

evening of the 23rd of July, 2025 was a result of censorship promoted by the Australian anti-porn initiative, Collective Shout. Collective Shout have enjoyed success censoring pornographic content on websites and services like Itch.io and the videogame distributor Steam by targeting payment processors such as MasterCard, Visa, and Stripe. The removal of porn, as well as a variety of works that are not pornographic but that used the “adult” tag on Itch.io, has garnered sufficient attention that the CBC has now covered the controversy: Jonathan Ore, “How an Anti-Porn Lobby on Payment Processors Censored Thousands of Video Games,” CBC, July 31, 2025.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/steam-itch-takedowns-credit-cards-1.7597563>.

¹⁷⁷ “Kinkshaming” is the act of marking certain forms of erotic desire or expression as morally or physically repugnant, with an eye to instilling a sense of shame in anyone who participates in or fantasizes about those desires and expressions. It might include blanket statements that specific kinks are disgusting or problematic, but can also include direct personal attacks against individuals.

¹⁷⁸ The monsterfucker-dominated Discord server, Monster Manor, supports a variety of anti-capitalist and activist projects, as outlined. To highlight a few charitable efforts from the monsterfucker community, however, trans author Sirius’s horror and monsterfucker anthology, *There’s a Haint in That There Holler*, was compiled in support of hurricane Helene survivors. Dev Solovey’s *Bashing Skulls* anthology of queer horror is a charity effort in support of Trans Lifeline. The cover of *Bashing Skulls* features a Stonewall-inspired illustration of a Brown drag queen bashing a White man whose blue clothing (partly visible) suggests a cop, and the book itself, though a broad horror anthology, contains monsterfucker authors and stories. Author Robin Jo Margaret explicitly combines monsterfuckery with fat liberation in her promotion of her work as part of the #plus.size.readathon across social media platforms. Sirius, editor. *There’s a Haint in That There Holler* (Self-pub, 2024); Dev Solovey, editor. *Bashing Skulls* (Self-pub, 2025); Robin Jo Margaret, “Another year, another @ Plus.size.readathon,”

One popular online Discord server, Monster Manor, has established itself as a hub for queer, particularly trans, fantasy and horror fans and creators. A vast majority of the works discussed and authored by the server members fall into the category of monsterfuckery, and in general the server has been established by its creators and moderators as a digital space in which queer fans of the monstrous can socialize without fear that their interests will be disparaged or their desires derided. In its own words, the server was “created by a pair of monster lovers,” and “the Manor is a Discord server book club made for queer readers and indie authors who also love fantastical stories.”¹⁷⁹ The server boasts just shy of one thousand members as of summer 2025. The server includes channels devoted to visual art, film, videogames, fiction, and a variety of other media, and has specific channels for NSFW (not safe for work—that is, sexually explicit) material, with a heavy emphasis on monsterfucker works, and includes channels dedicated to mutual aid and Palestine aid. Upon joining Monster Manor, new users are prompted to choose a monster (ghost, werewolf, swamp monster, vampire, etc.), whose avatar is added to their user profile. Although not all users necessarily identify as monsterfuckers or read or write monsterfucker stories, monsterfucker visual art predominates in the visual art channel, and monsterfucker or monster romance stories are frequently selected as monthly bookclub picks.

Significantly, the human(oid) characters depicted in romantic and sexual entanglements¹⁸⁰ are often trans, and in particular are trans men or trans-masculine (typically communicated through the inclusion of top surgery scars beneath the chest(s) of the characters in the images). Monsters may also present as trans, whether in a broad sense that encompasses nonbinary people of all genders, binary trans woman and men, or intersex people.

Instagram, August 4, 2025,

https://www.instagram.com/p/DM76Pq1I7KP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==.

¹⁷⁹ Specifically, the server was created by monsterfucker and queer erotic romance author H. S. Wolfe and user junisreading. Monster Manor, “Monster Manor Server Rules,” server post.

¹⁸⁰ Sometimes the entanglements are literal, as in the case r/Consentacles.

Monstrosity, and particularly the transformation of the human body into a monstrous one, is also often constructed as either an allegory for medical transition or as a means of exploring the transformative potential and power inherent in trans identity through a process of abjection. In this capacity, I argue, and particularly insofar as transness, monstrosity, and abjection are often imbricated in popular thought, the abject body has become both a source of identification and of resistance for gender nonconforming people through the figure of the monster. Each of these characteristics recurs in the context of monsterfucker works, where perhaps more than in any other form of monster-oriented art, the grotesque and the abject are lingered upon with particular fascination. Rather than solely being the purview of audiences who delight in the abject forms described on page, screen, or paper, from the perspective of lurid interest, when created and consumed by gender nonconforming creators and audiences, monsterfucker works are also explicitly texts that use the power of the abject to promote gender nonconforming liberation, as well as to champion gender nonconforming perspectives. This includes the promotion of abject desire for trans bodies—that is, desire for the body in transition or post-transition—as an inherently revolutionary act of resistance against both heterosexual and cissexual norms. Given that the monster is particularly associated with horror genres, monsterfucker works often contain erotic elements that combine body horror, gore, cannibalism, and other motifs considered to be on the fringe or, at the very least, not for general consumption. Monsterfucker art written by, for, or featuring trans people therefore often combines scenes of violence, sex, and gender affirmation. In some cases, that affirmation goes beyond a recognition of trans men *as men* and trans women *as women*, and enters the realm of a wish fulfillment vis-a-vis sex reassignment. Through either (or both) intercourse with the monster and transformation into the monster, the trans character may likewise undergo bodily transition according to the character's personal desires.

The visibility of the monster represents much of what is at stake in trans and gender nonconforming renderings of the monstrous. For example, as Jack Halberstam argues, trans images on screen such as the murderer/monster Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) are viscerally and immediately both visible and embodied. As Halberstam explains in his analysis of the film, “after this movie (but perhaps all along), horror resides at the level of the skin itself.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 1; 163.

Meanwhile, genderqueer and queer femme scholars Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris view the monster not from the position of its visibility, but as a symbol of the *invisibility* and unintelligibility of some queer presentations. In such cases, the ability of the monster to become hypervisible, provides an opportunity for self-definition and the articulation of identity. In their 2016 creative non-fiction piece, “Monsters, Desire, and the Queer Creative Body,” the authors lament the ways in which genderqueer, and queer femmes experience a monstrous erasure, while trans, intersex, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer identities, have achieved a degree of legibility within mainstream culture. Through identification with the monster (specifically through Frankenstein’s creature), Holman Jones and Harris see the potential to transform monstrous silence and absence into an opportunity to speak and to articulate a version of themselves that renders their identities intelligible.¹⁸²

Visibility and legibility are particularly significant factors in trans self-actualization due to the potential (and frequency) of one’s gender to be either deliberately or accidentally misread, for hypervisibility or the “discovery” of one’s trans identity to occasion violence, as well as a history of silencing and siloing trans voices and bodies.¹⁸³ Thus, the monster is both a troubled candidate for identification and a fecund champion for exploration and resistance against cisnormativity. In trans monsterfucker works particularly, the trans monster and their fucker embrace the monster in all its danger and its possibility.

As a means of illustration, I will consider two noteworthy examples of monsterfucker narratives that centre trans and gender nonconforming characters: InCase’s webcomic, *The Invitation*, and Lee Mandelo’s traditionally-published novella, *The Woods All Black*.¹⁸⁴ Aside from the reasons

¹⁸² Holman Jones Harris, “Monsters, Desire, and the Queer Creative Body.”

¹⁸³ Consider, for example, the trend of casting cisgender actors in trans film roles, examined in Caden Mark Gardner and Willow Catelyn Maclay, *Corpses*, 231-254.

¹⁸⁴ InCase, *The Invitation*, InCase, 2020, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p1/>; Lee Mandelo, *The*

previously stated, I have selected these works due to their inclusion of transition-by-monster scenes,¹⁸⁵ as well for as their comparable historical contexts. Both works also demonstrate the breadth of interest in monsterfucker stories, with *The Invitation* being a self-published work and *The Woods All Black* a novella published by the mainstream traditional publishing house, TorDotCom. That *The Woods All Black* in particular is a traditionally published novella is also notable for what it might indicate about the shifting status of monsterfuckery from something considered fairly niche, to a subgenre with its tentacles now probing the mainstream. As my earlier example of *Resident Evil: Village* suggests, it is not that monsterfucking has always been totally absent from the mainstream, so much as that its representations have either largely been straight and cissexual, or have veiled their potential to use transness to disrupt normative conceptions of gender expression in metaphor and horror, as in Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg's psychosexual oeuvre. What is notable about *The Woods All Black*, is a combination of its authorship (Lee Mandelo is himself a trans male author), combined with its direct and explicit status as a book focused on trans characters that openly deals with transition-related issues with a trans audience in mind, and that is not shy about its monsterfucker content.

Woods All Black (TorDotCom: New York, 2024). Additional examples of the theme of transition-by-monster include: Dani Finn, *Grey Angel* (Self-pub, 2025); and Rien Grey, *The Scales of Seduction* (Self-pub, 2024). These are not the only works in which the theme appears, but like *The Invitation* and *The Woods All Black*, they each concern historical-fantastical settings. Grey's monsterfucker erotica piece, *Scales* focuses on a trans woman Basilisk who makes a deal with a goddess in order to undergo physical transition, but who finds gender euphoria through passionate sex with the monster, Medusa, she was commanded to slay. *Grey Angel*, meanwhile, is a secondary world fantasy novella with a historically-informed setting in which two transfemme soldiers hunt down a pack of monsters only to discover that the creatures they had planned to kill are the offspring of the goddess (the titular *Grey Angel*) one of them worships. Over the course of the book, one of the two protagonists—a closeted transwoman who identifies as nonbinary only because she lacks the confidence to come out as a trans woman—finds validation through sex with the monster goddess, who transforms her through their sexual encounter and also allows the two trans women the ability to conceive with one another.

¹⁸⁵ In the case of InCase's *The Invitation*, there are multiple instances of physical transition that take place over the course of the comic.

The power in such stories is not so much in that they provide an outlet through which fictional, historical trans people can gain access, after death, to gender-affirming care, as that they become a space in which contemporary trans creators and audiences can live out fantasies of care they may be barred from in real life whether due to economic, geographic, cultural, or situational reasons. In the fantasy of transition-by-monster, trans characters do not have to prove their eligibility before gaining access to healthcare, need not reckon with the awkwardness of physically (or socially) transitioning before the prurient gazes of cis peers, and experience physical changes at a speed of the artist's choosing (whether that means an immediate transition, or something more gradual). Often, it should also be noted, transition is not *asked* for explicitly by the character, but is instead something a character may subconsciously desire and which the monster senses before providing. This dynamic, one in which the sexual fantasy is not, at first, willingly entered into by the character, is not uncommon in erotica writ-large, and represents a safe way in which audiences and creators can indulge in a fantasy they may feel ashamed of, squeamish about, or derided for should they express their desires in real life.¹⁸⁷

For example, the popular monsterfucker romance, *Ice Planet Barbarians* by self-published author Ruby Dixon, centres on the kidnapping and forced breeding of several female spacefarers after their ship is first captured by aliens before crash-landing on a planet where they are taken captive by yet another species of alien. The fantasy here, of being objectified and reduced to broodmares within the context of pornography, is disguised (or even erotically intensified) by its

¹⁸⁶ For an interview with Lee Mandelo in which he explicitly identifies *TWAB* as both a trans and monsterfucker story, see Fabienne Schwizer, "An Interview with Lee Mandelo," *Grimdark Magazine*, February 10, 2024. An example of an examination of the ways in which Cronenberg's work has historically been appropriated by trans audiences, while also explicitly and intentionally engaging with trans themes, is Gardner and Maclay, 178-190.

¹⁸⁷ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 13.

framing as either non-consensual or dubiously consensual. In general, female sexuality, kink, and erotic desire is thought to find an outlet in these kinds of stories, due to societal pressures that women conform to traditional expectations of chasteness and innocence. Since the characters in *Ice Planet Barbarians* begin the story as victims of kidnapping, sexual trafficking, and sexual assault, they are both able to safely indulge their sexuality while remaining non-complaint and non-complicit.¹⁸⁸ This idea, expanded to include fantasies either of transition, or sexual encounters with trans people, suggests that erotica provides an avenue through which real people are able to safely explore the possibility of (or desire for) transition while maintaining a plausible deniability that such fantasies are something they would wish for in real life.

Because the trans character on page or screen experiences a *forced* transition, both they and, by extension, the audience and author, are one step removed from any definitive claim that they themselves might wish to transition. Instead, the fantasy can be explained away (with, admittedly, dubious success) as one centered on a less dangerous set of kinks such as submission or a general lack of control. It is not that the character *is trans*, rather, *they have been transed*. Thus, the audience (and author) are not necessarily making claims about their own gendered desires, but are instead¹⁸⁹ exploring a vague, detached *possibility* of transness—part horror story, part an

¹⁸⁸ Ruby Dixon, *Ice Planet Barbarians* (Self-pub, 2015).

¹⁸⁹ A perception of gender transition as an explicitly and specifically sexual paraphilia is not without its own controversial history. Sexologist Ray Blanchard's work on trans psychology included the coining of the term "autogynephilia" to describe what he viewed as the paraphilia shared by male-to-female transexuals of a so-called "secondary" type who were attracted to women and who transitioned later in life. Blanchard's legacy has been responsible for limiting healthcare options for transgender women. This perspective is critiqued in Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl*, and debate continues within and outside transfemme circles as to the relationship between sexual desire, kink, and gender transition. The concept of autogynephilia and its application to trans women by Blanchard positions trans women as sexual deviants who do not experience "true" womanhood, but only a paraphilic fixation on feminizing one's own body. See Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Seal Press: Emeryville, 2007), 131.

expression of heterosexual and cisnormative interest in women's bodies and a perhaps subliminal sexual interest in the subjugation and feminization of other cisgender men.¹⁹⁰

Beyond these elements of transition-by-monster stories is the fact that they provide a form of physical transition both free from medicalization and rendered smooth and uncomplicated through a kind of psychic *knowing* on the part of the monster (or force) responsible for the transition. While in real life, one of the major psychological barriers that trans people face when attempting to access gender-affirming healthcare is the fear of humiliation and embarrassment at having to express very intimate and personal needs to a stranger or institution, nothing of the kind is experienced through transition-by-monster. The monster does not require its lover-prey to fulfill criteria on a checklist designed by cisgender medical professionals and psychologists, nor does it attempt to frighten off those seeking care by emphasizing rare side-effects to medication (side-effects that are often far fewer than those for medication routinely prescribed to patients for other health concerns, and which rarely occasion the same degree of scaremongering).¹⁹¹ Rather, the monster senses the needs and wants of the trans person, divining specifics that the trans person may themselves be unable to name. Uncertainty, or an inability to be able to articulate a clear definition of one's gender identity, are not barriers when it comes to transition-by-monster.

The Invitation

¹⁹⁰ To return to the example of "The Titan of Love" from the r/Teratophiliacs subReddit, user RainbowDemon503 states, "damn she [the Titan of Love] gives free transitions for orgasms??? amazing!!!" suggesting either their trans identity, or a paraphilic interest in transition from a cisgender perspective. RainbowDemon503, "damn," on "r/Teratophiliacs," Reddit, June 29, 2025.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Teratophiliacs/comments/1lnz4c1/comment/n0s3a78/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button

¹⁹¹ Dr. Mari-Lynne Sinnott MD CCFP, [Gender Journeys], (lecture, St. John's Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL, March 5, 2025).

In InCase's *The Invitation*, whether the transition of its protagonist(s) is actively sought out by those protagonists is ambiguous. Set in 1878 in a non-specific Western country (though references to London suggest it is likely the United Kingdom), *The Invitation* centres an engaged couple, Dr. William Loving III and his fiancée Annie. As the comic opens, William is spending the summer at his family manor, while Annie remains with her own family. Seemingly alone at the manor house, William spends his time researching a purportedly magical artifact, with the ultimate goal of proving the existence of magic through use of the object. Obtained from a curio dealer in London, the object—a red and black phallic rock with a wide base—arrives complete with instructions for its use: “An invitation to be kept by the heart. It will come upon the willing.”¹⁹² The implication, as William understands it, is that for the artifact's magic to work, the user must be willing. While the exact, intended effects of the artifact remain obscure to both the reader and, seemingly, William himself, the results of indulging it become apparent within the first page of the comic. After following the artifact's instruction to sleep with it at night, William awakens to discover that he has ejaculated, and as he notes in the fourth panel, he is experiencing an increased libido.¹⁹³

Over the course of the first three pages, William undergoes a gradual transformation as his body loses all its hair, experiences fat redistribution that gives it a more traditionally female appearance—including the growth of breasts—and begins to sprout horns and a tail alongside changes in his skin colour so that it turns faintly blue-grey. Alongside these dramatic physical changes, William describes how the artifact is awakening new and disturbing desires in him, and he begins anally stimulating himself by using the artifact as a sex toy and performing fellatio on it as part of an elaborate altarpiece he constructs for the benefit of a mysterious female “Master” whose voice he has begun to hear. On Day Six, when William's fiancée, Annie, arrives at his door to check on him, he refuses her entry, feigning illness, while in narration on Day Eight, he describes his delight in his new form, saying, “My body and mind continue to change. I wait to

¹⁹² InCase, 1, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p1/>.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

feel a prickle of manly pride, but it does not come. I like how I look now. I hope The Master does too.”¹⁹⁴

On Day Ten, the Master reaches through the altarpiece as William is performing fellatio on the artifact and pulls William into an infernal realm filled with demonic creatures engaged in various forms of sexual intercourse. As William stands on the threshold to what appears to be Hell, he expresses his apologetic remorse to an absent Annie that he can no longer marry her, as he has now fully given himself to the Master. He also remarks that, unlike what he was expecting, through engaging the artifact he has not, in fact, invited the Master into *his* home, but “was being invited into Hers.”¹⁹⁵

In form, the Master is both hypersexual and demonic. Superhumanly tall, the Master towers over William. Her high-heeled shoes, which form part of Her body, resemble cloven hooves, and Her bright red and black skin allies Her with the satanic. Her skin blends with Her clothing—an elaborate BDSM-coded saloon-like dress that leaves Her penis uncovered. Whether or not She is intended to represent Satan, She is undeniably infernal in character, and the fact that She is stated to have been imprisoned implies satanic origins. William’s use of the capital “H” to refer to Her suggests her divine status, as well as Her dominant hold over him. In *The Invitation*, the devil is real and She is both succubus and supernatural dominatrix.

The majority of the demons William sees as he is led, bound by a tether to the Master, appear blind, their eyes covered by hardened growths or protruding, curled horns. Most of the demons possess both breasts and penises. Although the Master is apparently a captive within this realm,

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 3, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p3/>.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 10, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p10/>.

William learns that Her imprisonment is, at least according to the Master, unjust. The Master's only desire (and only crime) is that "She wants every living being to be happy."¹⁹⁶

As the Master guides William deeper inside Her cavernous realm, the pair enter its inner caves through two massive pillars that stand between the spread legs of a bound demoness (who may represent the Master herself), with the implication that they are travelling into and inside of her vaginal cavity.¹⁹⁷ Giant, writhing tongues and sharp teeth mark the way forward: a vagina dentata. Inside this space, the Master consummates Her control over William by penetrating him with Her penis—a consummation that results in further transformation, until William begins to resemble the other demons who belong to the Master. As the coupling continues, both the reader and William glimpse what appears to be the Master's true form: a cycloptic entity with a many-tongued and fanged mouth, whose limbs are formed from corded tentacles and fleshy spikes. Behind Her head, underscoring the representation of the Master as both infernal and divine, a dark red halo frames Her head, accentuating the glowing red of Her one great eye.¹⁹⁸

In the human world, Annie receives a letter from William that informs her of the end of their engagement and which leads Annie to believe he has left her for another woman. Unperturbed, Annie returns to the Loving house with the goal of retrieving her fiancé. She finds him inside with a mysterious woman whose face remains shrouded by a large-brimmed hat. William appears more or less human at first, but as Annie asserts that William is "mine," the Master slips Her ribbed tongue inside his mouth and the pair of them begin to transform.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 11, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p11/>.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 19, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p19/>.

Annie remains in what she believes is the Loving mansion, determined both to free William and to uncover what she perceives as the Loving house's Gothic secrets, but the lines between the human home and the Master's demonic realm are increasingly blurred. As Annie wanders the Loving house's otherworldly halls, the panels are lit by the same red glow as the Master's halo, and the rooms are filled with Her demons. Days go by and Annie finds herself compelled by supernatural sexual desire. The orgiastic rites of the Master's demons call to her, as does the Master's love. As Annie describes, in the Master's realm she "was exactly where [she] wanted to be."¹⁹⁹ "For the first time," Annie describes, she, "saw the Loving home for what it was." Annie's narration, coupled with a panel featuring a gathering of demons mid-coitus, is rendered a double-entendre: it is not simply that Annie has discovered the true form or meaning of the Loving house, but that she now understands that the house—that is, the house built by both William and the Master—is itself *loving*. That is, welcoming and warm.²⁰⁰

Despite having borne witness to the existence of demons for weeks, Annie only now confronts William with the reality of magic. William explains that although the Master takes possession of people from a variety of realms besides their own, and where magic, rather than science, appears to hold sway, it is Annie's unique skills as a physicist that are needed to help free the Master from Her prison so that Her love can spread across the world.²⁰¹

Annie at last gives in to the Master, freely consenting to sex. Annie, William, and the Master then have sex and, critically, during intercourse the Master fellates William's penis and leaves a vulva in its place. She then pleasures Annie orally, seemingly transplanting William's penis onto Annie's body.²⁰² Annie is more than happy to give herself over to the Master, citing the Master's

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 2.9, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-9/>.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.10, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-10/>.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Transformation for all the Master's demons also comes with free fetishwear and lingerie. InCase, 2.16,

love and Annie's newfound ability to live a life that was denied her in the human world.²⁰³ Just as Annie is on the cusp of committing to the Master forever, however, she makes a scientific discovery that could one day lead to the Master's release. Instead of rewarding Annie like she expects, the Master reveals to Annie an even more monstrous form than the cycloptic one revealed to William: a hunched, tentacled, bony creature with many teeth.²⁰⁴ Annie receives this knowledge of the Master's true form not with wonder, but with horror and flees from the Master's realm in terror.

Grimly, with one foot still in the Master's infernal world of sexual abandon, Annie attempts to rejoin human society and to warn others away from the Master's control. Three whole years have passed while Annie was in Hell with William, however, and despite the terror she feels toward the Master, Annie can't help but long to return there. The sexual urges the Master either awakened in Annie or made room for, plague her in the heteronormative and cisnormative world to which she is now exiled. As she lodges with a couple who lost their son to the Master, Annie fantasizes about penetrating the wife of the family, though the penis the Master allowed her to grow has disappeared.²⁰⁵ Annie vacillates over whether or not to return, debating the nature of the Master and whether She is indeed evil. "But what is evil?" Annie asks, "The idea was taught to me by men who rejected my very being." Eventually, the desire to return to William and the Master is too great and Annie agrees to return.²⁰⁶

As Annie returns to the Master, she leaves behind some of her research with the note to whoever finds it to the effect that perhaps that person will have the strength of will to stop Her. "Look for

<https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-16/>.

²⁰³ Ibid., 2.18, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-18/>.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 2.25, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-25/>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 2.30, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-30/>.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 2.33, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-33/>.

Her among the desperate people,” Annie advises the would-be demon-slayer, “They will be the first ones to go.”²⁰⁷ The Master’s prey—or, understood differently, her found family—are those seemingly abandoned by mainstream culture and society. Given both Annie and William’s social rank (they both appear quite wealthy), it is likely here that Annie is referring not only to the financially destitute, but to queer (though perhaps also other marginalized) people.

Once Annie is consumed by the Master—a fate implied by a panel in which we see the Master’s monstrous, tentacled mouth stretch wide to swallow Annie up—Annie’s marriage to both the Master and to William is at last committed to through a series of religiously-coded declarations that mimic Christian wedding vows. The Master is shown in the position of a wedding officiant as William and Annie stand with hands clasped, staring lovingly at the Master.²⁰⁸ The final panel, which fills the whole page, features William and Annie embracing as root-like protuberances anchor and attach them to the floor and walls of the Master’s realm, as though they have become part of a great body, or perhaps even a hivemind.²⁰⁹

Throughout *The Invitation*, horror merges with the erotic and with themes related to Otherness and acceptance. Although transness is never mentioned explicitly, the spectre of trans desires, of the trans body, and of the body in transition oozes from the text. William’s declaration that he likes his new body²¹⁰, especially as early as it appears in the comic, immediately creates an expectation that the remaining pages will express and chart a process of physical gender transition meant not only to titillate, but to affirm. While space is never granted for either William or Annie to express a desire for changed pronouns (and neither of them asserts that they *are* a woman, or *are* a man in the face of a denial of their identities), the joy, abandon, and enthusiasm for their new forms speak for themselves. Regardless of whether William identifies as belonging to any particular gender, his presentation, alongside Annie’s statements about

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 2.34, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-34/>.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 2.38, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-38/>.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 2.39, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-39/>.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 1, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p1/>.

belonging versus not belonging, establish a degree of gender trouble within the text. As both William's body and mind first begin to transform, he states that, "Wherever this journey takes me I will gladly go!"²¹¹ Despite that the Master's control over William feels intentionally disturbing, it simultaneously takes the form of a personal and intimate realization of trans gender. When William expresses that, "After all these years, I have finally found magic," the statement is not only literal, but one that draws attention to William's gender identity and newfound physical freedom. "How could I turn back now?" he asks in the same panel, before adding, "I will see this through to the end..Whatever that may be! [sic]"²¹² William's commitment here is thus simultaneously an expression of a kind of numinous spiritual experience linked to his discovery of the reality of a supernatural realm, and a desire to experience the totality of his transformation. When William finally enters the Master's home, his letter to Annie in which he apologizes that he must end their engagement despite that he still loves her, reads as a rejection of cisnormative institutions like heterosexual and cisgender marriage. Notably, it is not that William does not desire women sexually—certainly, the Master is both (and neither) man or woman—but that William does not believe his own body is compatible with either Annie's desires or society's prescribed role for him. That Annie not only *does* still desire William, but that she turns out to long for a similar transformation, functions as a means of articulating a deeper trans fantasy of inclusion, in which physical (or even social) transition does not mean the termination of previous romantic and sexual relationships, but in fact the strengthening of those same bonds.

Although William's desires are the means through which we are introduced to the Master and the changes She offers, it is Annie who most explicitly expresses trans desires. Repeatedly, Annie contrasts the transformation and sexual freedom offered by the Master against a human world in which she has been unable to express herself. Unlike William, whose desire for change is both something he appears to discover through the act of transformation, and which he never quite verbalizes directly, Annie's narration is more direct. As she begins to come round to the Master's

²¹¹ Ibid., 2, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p2/>.

²¹² Ibid., 4, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p4/>.

charms, Annie narrates that, “They knew exactly what I wanted... Even what I never admitted to myself. They knew me too well. [sic]”²¹³ She opines to her hypothetical reader that God was “never there for me,” leaving her unable to resist the Master’s charms, though she admits that even had He been, Annie might still have made the same choices.²¹⁴ Indeed, she refers to her desires and to her existence outside the Master’s realm as being restricted and restrictive: “Would you blame me for wanting more? After being denied all my life? If you deprive a man of water long enough would you blame him for drinking from a poisoned well?” The question alone is enough to suggest that Annie’s desires in the human world were suppressed (or, at least, that she felt that they were), but the inclusion of “a man” and “him” instead of “a woman” and “her,” suggests a still clearer picture of Annie’s identity.²¹⁵ She describes the human world as one that was “cruel” to her, “denied [her] unjustly,” “denied [her] passions,” and “denied [her] mind.”²¹⁶ Undoubtedly, part of what InCase draws attention to here is the fact that, as a female scientist in the nineteenth century, Annie faced restrictions on her research and her intellectual pursuits, however, coupled with several panels featuring Annie penetrating William, it suggests that Annie might also be referring to her gender identity. While the term “trans” is never used in the comic—likely due to its historical setting—Annie and William’s genders are instead insinuated through their transitions. Nonetheless, a quick glance at the comments section of individual pages suggests the audience are anything but unanimous in their reading of the characters’ genders or sexualities.

Annie’s feelings of rejection by mainstream society might reflect her reactions to growing up in a misogynistic society (or even closeted lesbian desires). Even so, the fact that the Master and William offer her not only the ability to exist as a woman-loving-woman in Hell, but the potential to do so while occupying a male-coded body that renders her intersex, suggests that her

²¹³ Ibid., 2.12, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-12-2/>.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 2.17, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-17/>.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 2.18, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-18/>.

²¹⁶ Ibid. <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-18/>.

desires are both *for* transition (whether into a man, or into a form that better represents a desire to exist outside a gender binary), as well as her sexual attraction to bodies that likewise stretch the concept of binary gender. Notably, while with Annie, the Master transforms Her own body so that she possesses a vagina that Annie is able to penetrate, but She does not always do so.²¹⁷ William's declaration to Annie that, "All she ever did was bring joy to the creatures forgotten!"²¹⁸ defends the Master from critique, but also draws attention to the fact that Annie and William themselves were once "creatures forgotten." Since it would have been perfectly possible for the pair to marry and pass as a cisnormative, heterosexual couple, it raises the question of just what was unusual about them. Certainly, even if they were limited in their desires to a BDSM relationship, they might have enjoyed their preferences privately, suggesting that whatever they were being prevented from exploring was something they could not have easily, or safely, engaged in in a public context.

Alongside their gender transformations, both William and Anne are also transformed into monsters that mimic the Master's appearance. Within the narrative of the comic, part of the reason for this is logistical and practical. As William notes just as he's entered the Master's realm, "I understood the purpose of my transformation. I don't think a human being could survive Her passion."²¹⁹ Monstrosity is here a necessary part of entering into sexual congress with the Master, and William's transformation (horns, tail, glowing yellow eyes, and blue skin) have all been in service to readying him to be anally penetrated by Her (one can also assume a degree of internal retuning, though it does not appear on page. Presumably this is due to a lack of the author's erotic investment in whether or not William's spleen will get in the way of a tentacle dick—something that cannot be said for all monsterfucker comics).

²¹⁷ Ibid., 2.24, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-24/>.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 2.7, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-7/>.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 14, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-p14/>.

In this comic, Monsterfuckery is the means by which transformation is initiated, the source of gender fulfillment through transformation, but also an end goal in itself. A horror comic as much as it is a work of erotica, the mind control element of the narrative persistently underscores that William's and Annie's wishes for gender affirmation require a potentially damning (in a literal, infernal sense) bargain be struck. While the audience never witnesses much of an internal struggle on William's part, Annie clearly wrestles with her choice to accept the Master, and indeed only relents due to both a lack of alternative options for gender affirmation in the human world, and the psychological indoctrination she has already experienced at the Master's hands. In the end, it is specifically the abject form of the Master that must be accepted—even desired and loved—before either human can be fully accepted into the Master's world. The cycloptic yet holy vision of the Master that William witnesses, and the betentacled mass that Annie eventually allows herself to be consumed by—all with a beatific expression on her face—speak to the power inherent in the tension of beauty/horror that dwells within the monstrous. It grants power, perhaps even a certain kind of freedom, when it is embraced.

For all that *The Invitation* is a pornographic comic that engages with many of its motifs and story beats precisely because they carry an erotic charge either for the author or a presumed audience, the comic has a lot to convey in terms of how monstrosity and queerness are co-constructed and about how embracing a monstrosity that has previously been used to demonize carries with it both a radical potential to resist cisnormative culture and a danger of becoming subsumed beneath something much larger and more insidious than one might realize. Whatever mind control that is exerted by the Master grants William and Annie the ability to witness both themselves and each other. As Annie says upon finally realizing the Loving house is not what it initially seemed, “Looking back it's so obvious to me. William's queer appearance. The Master's beautiful form”²²⁰ This recognition marks Annie's newfound ability to parse William's sexual and gender identity (marked as “queer” in the text, as a wink to the modern audience), but also

²²⁰ Ibid., 2.5, <https://incase.buttsmithy.com/comic/the-invitation-ch-2-p-5/>.

what can be read simultaneously as Annie's control by the Master (now seen as beautiful) and her awareness of the inherent grace of perceived monstrosity/difference as represented through the Master.

Significantly, *The Invitation* has been received by trans monsterfucker readers as a narrative that depicts a monstrous expression of gender affirmation. In the subreddit r/MonsterGirlSapphic²²¹, user Spellbreaker3's post containing a link to the comic along with a screenshot of William and Annie's infernal wedding, features several comments by self-identified trans users (a large number of the 12 000 forum members are trans) complimenting the comic for its portrayal of trans characters. The top comment, from user Lucythepinkkitten, reads:

This whole story gives me so much gender euphoria. The thought of being taken in by a hot mommydom demon who transforms you into one of her own and invites you to spend eternity in bliss together is a peak mix of porn and gender validation²²²

The link Lucythepinkkitten's comment makes here between gender affirmation ("euphoria," "validation"), and BDSM monsterfuckery is significant. It is not only one aspect of the text that appeals, but the entire narrative with all its promises of erotic transition-by-monster. This use of pornography as a tool for validation is not unique within queer spaces to trans audiences, but represents an older tradition, one commented upon by Laura Helen Marks in *Alice in Pornoland*. In her analysis of several porn adaptations of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Marks makes the observation that gay male adaptations of the story, "offer fantasy visions of a society in which sex between men is taken for granted and transformation is

²²¹ Sapphic, here, refers to women-loving-women and is inclusive of bisexual and pansexual women as well as lesbians.

²²² Lucythepinkkitten, Comment on Spellbreaker3, "The Invitation By InCase," 2023, "https://www.reddit.com/r/MonsterGirlSapphic/comments/18i8k26/the_invitation_by_incse/."

the key to becoming beautiful, desired, whole.”²²³ While the queernormativity of the *Jekyll* adaptations is absent from *The Invitation*, InCase’s webcomic shares a concern with the ability to fully realize oneself and one’s desires. In the case (!) of the *Jekyll* pornos, this realization involves transformation from an aesthetically nerdy, humdrum gay man into a buff, idealized jock who is the envy of all the boys at the gay bar. Meanwhile, in *The Invitation*, beauty is sourced from the monstrous and to the monstrous it gradually transforms, combining gender transition with monstrous embodiment.

In so doing, the text engages with a tradition of viewing trans bodies—particularly trans bodies that are either ambiguous or are engaged in a process of gender transition—as already allied with the monstrous by virtue of the ways in which they are read by a cisgender public. That the work is also one in which trans monsters are a threat to cisnormativity in the human world, likewise positions transness as a state with the capacity to draw power from that which has been disavowed and cast out. It is a power brimming with the potential to tear down the very systems of oppression that appear to have necessitated its construction, with the Master’s plan one that involves breaking free of the liminal space in which She and Her army of trans demons dwell in ecstasy, to seduce the rest of the human race and transform all humans into trans humans.

The Woods All Black

In a similar vein as *The Invitation*, Lee Mandelo’s *The Woods All Black*, published in 2024 but set in 1920s Appalachia, uses monsterfucking as the means by which physical transition is achieved in a historical setting. As in *The Invitation*, transition and monsterfuckery are both imagined as intertwined with resistance against cisnormative and heteronormative society, and as in *The Invitation*, physical transition is combined with aspects of body horror and questions of autonomy.

²²³ Marks, 119.

The protagonist of *TWAB*, Leslie Bruin, is a travelling nurse whose job involves vaccinating the isolated populations of rural communities, as well as offering general healthcare to those same populations. When he is tasked with serving the tiny Appalachian village of Spar Creek, he discovers a resistant population alongside a more sinister, supernatural force that appears to reside in the forest surrounding the town.

Although Leslie uses male pronouns when referring to himself, and although he typically prefers male dress, according to Lee Mandelo, “Les considers himself an ‘invert,’ which might best be translated over into today as a he/him dyke and-or-also butch.”²²⁴ Decidedly not a woman, nor is Leslie entirely legible as a man. Much as Holman Jones and Harris describe their own gender expressions as unintelligible to a broader mainstream, Mandelo describes his depiction of Leslie (and his trans male lover, Stevie), as his attempt to articulate, “the spaces between, wherein one’s legibility (and safety) within a cisheteronormative societal structure constantly wobbles and twists.”²²⁵ It is what Mandelo describes as Leslie and Stevie’s “failure” to embody *woman* that marks them as Other and provokes violent reactions from the small Appalachian community in which they find themselves.

A veteran war nurse, Leslie is accustomed to (and haunted by) brutal conditions. He also anticipates a degree of resistance on the part of the locals. Spar Creek is a predictably conservative environment, with Jackson Hansall, a councilman, the only member of the community to truly welcome Leslie’s presence. The rest of Spar Creek, including its pastor, Ames Holladay, remain skeptical of Leslie’s vaccines, and slightly put-off by what they see as a very mannish and peculiar woman. Leslie does, however, find his interest peaked by a local

²²⁴ Schwizer, “An Interview.”

²²⁵ Ibid.

ne'er-do-well, Stevie Mattingly. Mattingly is a rambunctious trans man in his late teens, who Leslie is immediately taken by (and attracted to).

Stevie does not explain his trans identity to Leslie upon their meeting, rather, Leslie intuitively based on seeing Stevie in male dress and male company, then witnessing him a second time, in church, dressed in traditionally female attire.²²⁶ This same church visit makes it immediately apparent to both Leslie and the audience that Spar Creek will prove hostile to anyone attempting to buck against norms of gender, sexuality, and race. Holladay's sermon feels written to specifically draw audience attention to trans issues, through Mandelo's pointed use of phrasing associated with modern gender discourse:

“‘. . . in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.’ *Male and female created he them*. I have seen, you know I have seen, those sinners who reject their roles; they are as children, unguided, feasting until they are sick—feasting upon fleshly desires. Their souls cry out for repentance but they do not heed the call!”²²⁷

What I refer to here is Holladay's use of “roles” to describe to specifically gendered performance. Clearly not a new word, it nonetheless does the work of conveying to the audience that the pastor's particular bugbear concerns what we routinely refer to in queer and feminist discourse as gender roles. Lacking a vocabulary of transness, neither Leslie nor Stevie ever articulate their identities using such ahistorical terminology. Rather, the fact of Leslie and Stevie's gender nonconformity is conveyed through a combination of Spar Creek's transphobic rhetoric and Leslie's internal narration. In this narration, Leslie refers both to himself, and other queer and trans people, using the more period-appropriate term, “invert.”

²²⁶ Mandelo, 20-21.

²²⁷ Ibid., 22.

Later in the novella, once Leslie and Stevie have come to trust one another, they articulate their identities to one another using Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as a starting point. As Leslie explains to Stevie, *Orlando* is about, "an immortal person who begins as a man, and then becomes a woman, and romances other men and women." Stevie responds cheekily with, "Who'd have thought, being a man and a woman at the same time?" which allows Leslie an opening to describe himself as just such a person and to ask whether Stevie is the same. Stevie neither confirms nor denies Leslie's suspicion, simply remarking that it's "a bold question," before giving Leslie a flirtatious look-over.²²⁸ Stevie reiterates an earlier warning of his about Spar Creek's transphobia, reframing transness as something hidden and secret, that in the face of the bigotry fomented by Holladay, must be carefully kept to oneself.²²⁹

Holladay's sermon is not only transphobic in a broad sense, but it is specifically targeted at Stevie, who Leslie has just recently seen wearing traditionally male clothing, as well as Leslie himself (who Holladay has chided, moments earlier, for dressing in inappropriate, male clothes during church). Recites Holladay, "'The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.'"²³⁰

That the pastor's transphobia is nothing new to Leslie does not stop it from having an emotional impact on him. As Leslie states in narration:

²²⁸ Ibid., 82.

²²⁹ That Spar Creek was negatively impacted by Holladay and his conservative views is communicated to Leslie by another outsider, Marge. Marge explains to Leslie that "twenty years ago Spar Creek was as decent a place as any for a child to be strange, but . . . Preachers preach and people get to whispering." Ibid., 75.

²³⁰ Mandelo, 22.

The faint buzz in Leslie's blood grew to an anxious roar. Though no heads angled their way, he felt the pressure of eyes upon him and his rigid young compatriot. The meat of his body remembered being penned as a place turned nasty, be it bar, foxhole, or ambulance. Fleeing the room would serve no purpose—he was attending the sermon to demonstrate how *normal* he could be—but he'd grown to expect a fist to back of the head shortly after being called *abomination* [sic].²³¹

Later that day, Leslie is wandering in the woods at the back of the Hansall's property, when he encounters Spar Creek's monster for the first time. The encounter is subtle, as Leslie does not *see* the monster directly, but he does sense that an unknown force has not only become aware of him, but that it is paying attention to him. As Leslie explores the woods, the animals suddenly go quiet, causing Leslie to tense as he prepares himself for a PTSD flashback to his experiences in the war. Rather than being drawn into the past, however, the "tightness between his ribs"²³² suggests that a more proximate danger might be present. Leslie spies footprints (it is implied they are human) nearby, and though, "nothing about the footprints themselves was remarkable" they provoke, "an immaterial pressure . . . along the nape of his neck, the sort of preternatural awareness he had tried to abandon at the front. Someone, or *something*, had laid its attention on him. That much his body knew."²³³ As Leslie examines the tracks, he cuts himself on a rock and becomes aware of "a presence" across the creek that rustles through the trees before vanishing.²³⁴

The genre-necessitated secrets that simmer beneath the surface of Spar Creek's Appalachian Gothic setting keep Leslie at arms-length from the town, so that even once he becomes marginally accepted by the community and is given permission to vaccinate much of the population, there is a sense that he remains a continual outsider and that his presence will only be tolerated for a short while.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 26.

²³³ Ibid., 27.

²³⁴ Ibid.

Throughout *TWAB*, Mandelo creates a thick sense of dread that depends on a combination of the threat of the mysterious monster Leslie encountered by the creek bed and the danger presented to Leslie and Stevie by Spar Creek's bigoted residents. As Leslie notes, "something about Spar Creek twisted at the back of his mind, as it had from the first: a subtle *wrongness* deeper flowing than the bad intentions of one pastor and his congregation."²³⁵ That wrongness appears to find its source in Stevie Mattingly, not through any fault of Mattingly's, but in the town's (mis)treatment of him. Shortly after making the observation of Spar Creek's danger, Leslie comes across an injured Stevie in the woods. Stevie's torn shirt, bloody nose, and plethora of bruises, suggest both to Leslie and the audience that Stevie has been sexually assaulted, possibly raped. Stevie flees as Leslie attempts to treat his wounds.

In the wake of finding Stevie, Leslie reveals in narration that he was also sexually assaulted, possibly raped, and his own experiences galvanize his commitment to remaining in Spar Creek to help with the myriad social and medical problems that plague its residents. When it turns out that Stevie is pregnant himself—a result of his rape by a young man named Floyd Marshall—Stevie comes to Leslie for help, but Leslie lacks the resources to be able to safely terminate the pregnancy and an indignant Stevie runs off.²³⁶

The more that Leslie attempts to help the residents of the Creek, the greater the vexation of Holladay and his followers, and pressure increases for Leslie to leave. As this pressure is exerted, the monstrous presence in the woods continues to make itself known to Leslie through increasingly brutal means: leaving the dismembered corpses of animals outside the Hansall's

²³⁵ Mandelo, 33.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

home,²³⁷ haunting his dreams, and drawing him toward a cave in the forest where Leslie finds a severed human pinkie and ring finger within what appears to be some kind of pagan altar.²³⁸

Meanwhile, tensions between Stevie and the rest of the community worsen when Stevie publicly condemns the community for shielding his rapist. Stevie's outburst meets with predictable disdain and dismissal from Holladay, who turns Stevie's accusations around and blames Stevie for his own rape on the basis that "loose women cannot be trespassed on, especially not when they place themselves directly in the hands of men."²³⁹ The conflict only serves to strengthen the bond between Leslie and Stevie, and Leslie follows Stevie to the forest, where Stevie expresses that he feels much more at home.²⁴⁰ Not long after, Stevie's friend, Hiram Collins, is fatally shot by Floyd Marshall after Hiram attempted to defend Stevie.

Over the course of the novella, Leslie has been wrestling with his own sexuality, having previously only been interested in women himself. He now suddenly finds himself enamoured with Stevie, who does not quite fit the paradigm of the invert that Leslie applies to himself. The older, more experienced of the two, Leslie explains to Stevie the possibilities of queer sexualities (though not in so many words). The two have sex, emphasizing a sub/dom dynamic between them, with Stevie taking on the role of a submissive "brat" and Leslie the older man ready to teach him.²⁴¹ The scene is lengthy given the relatively short page count of the book, and emphasizes elements of sexual exploration not atypical for queer, and particularly trans, erotica such as enthusiastic, continuous consent, and gender play. The first erotic scene in *TWAB*, it is not the first time that Leslie discusses sex, and as previously mentioned, one of the central

²³⁷ Ibid., 69.

²³⁸ Ibid., 77.

²³⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 90-91.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 100-105.

internal conflicts Leslie wrestles with throughout involves his evolving and shifting sexuality and his realization that he could be attracted to a man.

Though the villagers are unaware, in a definitive sense, that Leslie and Stevie's relationship is sexual (and possibly romantic), Leslie is well aware that associating with Stevie has rendered him persona non grata. Just following Stevie and Leslie's sexual encounter, Jackson Hansall gives Leslie a dire and prophetic warning:

When I rode in, everyone was carrying on about some big, ugly beast coming from the woods to menace the Marshalls. Slashed up their livestock, plus some others' besides. Saying it was a hill devil. I don't think you should be in Spar Creek when they decide it ain't a panther, but a witch. You understand?²⁴²

Attention, Jackson Hansall notes, has shifted from Stevie to encompass Leslie as well, with Leslie's presence becoming associated with the unknown monster in the forest. What is perceived as his alliance (or friendship, or love affair) with Stevie by the villagers is especially suspect, since the animal attacks have been targeted toward Stevie's enemies. The danger Hansall anticipates does indeed reach a boiling point within a short span of time.

That it is following Leslie and Stevie's tryst that matters at last turn violent, does not surprise. Queer desire, here, once consummated, is the final symbolic blow. Ames Holladay and a number of torch-wielding villagers storm Leslie's room, forcing their way inside.

As he rifles through Leslie's things, discovering *Orlando*, along with other queer works, Holladay proclaims that even Leslie's books are, "as degenerate as . . . expected . . . Do you

²⁴² Ibid., 111.

believe the people of Spar Creek too stupid to read? To know what sort of perversion and filth you'd brought with you, right under our noses?" That Holladay understands the books are queer, specifically, is communicated through Leslie in narration. Leslie notes that Holladay's "expression of disgust told Leslie he either recognized them for what they were, or simply assumed as much."²⁴³

As Holladay continues to preach at and threaten Leslie, it becomes clear that he blames Leslie for the animal attacks suffered by the Marshalls. Holladay has convened the wronged parties—the Marshalls—and plans to forcibly baptize Leslie in the creek behind the Hansall's property—a euphemism that Leslie understands to mean that they will drown him.²⁴⁴

As Leslie is being dunked beneath the water, however, he suddenly feels Holladay's grip loosen. When he pulls himself from the water he sees the mob of villagers fleeing through the trees, and at last casts his gaze upon the monster of Spar Creek:

On the stream bank crouched the beast that stalked the nights, its eyes only for Leslie even as a wealth of other prey scattered. None of those congregants had paused, either to rescue their fellows or to stand and fight; they fled at the sight alone. Besides the pinkness of its mouth and throat glimpsed between razor teeth made of fluorspar, the creature was dark as pitch: coal and ash given life. A membranous covering lay over its lambent, striking yellow eyes. It resembled both a panther and a man on all fours, though its shape seemed to ooze against the woods beyond. Leslie had trouble saying if its glittering fangs rose from a mouth, or a muzzle.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Ibid., 119.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 120.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.

Following its appearance at the riverbank, the werewolf-coded monster transforms from the creature described above back into something resembling Stevie Mattingly. Though Leslie is able to recognize Stevie, Stevie remains half-monster: “his fingers [were] tipped in scything claws. Blackness clung in patches around his wrists, ankles, and groin. His human teeth glared eerie white, and his eyes still held a glow.”²⁴⁶

Stevie approaches Leslie, declaring, “I had to get the hang of what it made me, first, but now I’m more than any of them could have imagined.” Stevie then draws Leslie into a hungry kiss, which causes Leslie to remark in narration that “no wonder the creature had been circling Leslie’s cabin,” and then to respond to Stevie with, “Fuck, you’re stunning.”²⁴⁷ Leslie’s reaction, along with signalling *TWAB*’s allegiance with the monster, also comes as a kind of tonal and stylistic shift that roots the work firmly within modern, trans, monsterfucker expectations. Leslie’s affirmation that Stevie is “stunning,” not in spite of his monstrosity but in fact *because* of it, is communicated through the presentation of this fact as something revelatory (Stevie is stunning *now*, specifically). In the following chapter, Leslie further narrates why Stevie’s monstrous form—and his and Stevie’s violent and subversive desires—appeal to him. “After the war ended,” Leslie opines, “he’d tried to shape himself into a softer person. He’d tried to model his novels, his mentors, to make room for a good love, but the relationships he’d attempted and *how* he’d attempted them were never going to fit his truth.”²⁴⁸ As before, the language of living one’s truth carries a modern charge, speaking to a contemporary framework of queer authenticity that has existed in the past but which has come to much more deeply permeate queer ways of discussing identity in the twenty-first century.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 123.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 125.

²⁴⁹ Language of “living” or “speaking” one’s truth carries a distinctly modern charge, with emphasis placed on the individual and on individual self-expressions of identity. Typically, this language is used motivationally to inspire honest reflection in the individual, while spurring them to confidently assert and express their preferences, aesthetic

Now rescued, Leslie and Stevie proceed to hunt down the mob who attacked them, and as they're hunting, Leslie asks what price Stevie had to pay in order to become the monster. Stevie responds that, "it doesn't seem fair to call it a cost . . . I was born right on this ground. These woods, their land, knew me already; it was ready to make a fair trade. Eat some of it, let it eat some of me, you know? The real *blood of my blood*." Leslie asks about the fingers he found in the cave, having come to the correct conclusion that they were Stevie's, and Stevie explains that a local woman told him about the altar and that cutting off his fingers wasn't that terrible (especially since they immediately regrew). Upon finding the altar, Stevie describes intuitively knowing what he was supposed to do, suggesting a supernatural connection between both he and the land.²⁵⁰

That Stevie feels this connection prompts Leslie to reflect that he, too, has experienced the wilderness calling to him through his dreams. Going further, he now interprets these dreams as

tastes, perspectives, and desires. In a specifically queer context, it carries the implication of living an openly and exuberantly queer life outside the closet. In all contexts, it is interrelated with the concept of authenticity and the authentic self. As Charles Taylor writes in *The Malaise of Modernity*, "the ethic of authenticity is something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture. Born at the end of the eighteenth century, it builds on earlier forms of individualism." A modern, in Taylor's understanding, definition of authenticity goes beyond rugged or selfish individualism, however. Rather, authenticity as a moral value emphasizes being true to oneself through a continuous process of articulating one's identity by means of creative exploration, expression, and dialogue with others. Taylor, 25; 28. At it's best, living or speaking one's truth is thus an ongoing and self-critical process that involves the constant (re)construction of one's own personal authenticity, and involves not simply dressing oneself according to one's own tastes, but living one's life according one's guiding principles and values. To *not* live one's truth, by implication, is to live inauthentically, cynically reproducing or mimicking the behaviours, desires, preferences, and values of others. In *TWAB*, living or otherwise expressing one's truth is a distinctly queer experience, not only in terms of how he experiences or expresses his gender, but in terms of his sexuality and its own paraphilic orientation toward sub/dom dynamics.

²⁵⁰ Mandelo., 126-127.

an offer the wilderness was making to him, but that he “hadn’t known what was being offered.”²⁵¹ The implication, due both to Leslie’s phrasing and his effervescently positive reaction to Stevie’s monstrosity, is that had Leslie known what was being offered, he would have accepted in a heartbeat. When Stevie does track down Floyd Marshall, Stevie’s violent revenge is enjoyed by Leslie as a form of delicious (and bloody) justice. Marshall, misunderstanding the balance of power, attempts to sexually force himself on Stevie a second time. This time, however, when he shoves his tongue inside Stevie’s mouth, Stevie bites it off—an act Leslie reacts to by grinning.²⁵² When Floyd collapses, screaming, Stevie taunts him: “You thought you were going to fuck me again? . . . I’m going to eat you raw.”²⁵³ Marshall flees, but it is futile: Stevie transforms and pursues him, and then, once Marshall is captured, Stevie rips him apart and feeds on the corpse.

After Stevie has sated himself, rather comically considering the scene, he approaches Leslie and, using his claws, cuts through Leslie’s shirt buttons as though to initiate sex. The pair have sex in the creek while Stevie is still in his monstrous form, their shared kiss forcing/allowing Leslie to consume Marshall’s flesh. During the encounter, critically, Stevie grows a phallic protuberance with which he is able to penetrate Leslie:

Something firm, rounded, and thick pressed against the cleft of [Leslie’s] ass . . . What he saw between its legs gave the impression of a cock: a blunt, ready instrument similar to the strap he’d left behind in Chicago. Leslie was less surprised that the shapeshifting entity had produced a dick and more by the size it had chosen. While he gawped, the thing changed again, growing a sinuous curve.

The description of Stevie’s penis continues for several pages as Leslie is vaginally penetrated.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 127.

²⁵² Ibid., 130.

²⁵³ Ibid., 130.

In the novel, monstrosity is framed as a choice, something that does not feel accidental on the part of Mandelo. Even were transformation into the monster not combined with gender affirmation through the growth of non-surgically-altered genitalia, the positioning of monstrosity as something that might be desirable, that involves perceived dangers (e.g. finger-cutting) that are actually an exaggerated risk, and that is yearned for by trans people while being condemned by cisnormative society, makes the metaphor clear. Transformation, here, is prohibited and discouraged, and in part this is due to the power and confidence it instills in those who would buck societal expectations of gender, sex, and sexuality. Newly transformed, Stevie has the capacity not only to defend himself against further assault, but is able to enact revenge against those who have attacked him both physically and metaphorically. Transformation likewise changes sex for Stevie and Leslie from something they are uncertain about (i.e. Leslie comments throughout on how uncertain he is about his sexual identity and where his attraction lies) into something fully pleasurable and empowering for the pair of them.

It is highly significant that transformation is described in religious terms. The dreams through which the wilderness communicates to Leslie suggest a numinous encounter with the otherworldly, while Leslie's own descriptions of Stevie's monstrosity are expressed in overtly religious terms. Says Leslie, when Stevie tells Leslie he can watch Stevie kill Floyd Marshall:

The boundaries between fear, compulsion, and desire were thin and clingy as sap. He thought about his bloodied feet; his split lip, busted nose, and lacerated hands; the reverberations of a murderous hymn buried in his cochlea . . . and nodded. Stevie grinned vicious in return. Leslie had seen and delivered death before, but he imagined the experience would be entirely different at the hands of this exquisite boy-creature with claws already peeking from his fingertips. Something bloody, hallowed by the forest's grace; an honest and natural communion.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 128.

Words such as “hymn,” “hallowed,” and “communion,” draw direct attention to the religiosity of Leslie’s feelings and to the pair’s experiences of the monstrous, which involve not only interpreting the monster as a holy figure, but reframing the monster trans as the outcome of a mystical connection Stevie and Leslie have formed with the wilderness. For Leslie, Stevie in his monstrous form, is “sublime”²⁵⁵ and a “forest deity.”²⁵⁶ After Leslie is penetrated by Stevie, Leslie describes their sexual encounter both as a marriage and a baptism. During the sexual encounter itself, Leslie notes that, “*One blood and one flesh . . . isn’t that what marriage is?*” and later, post-coitus, “His first baptism had been a violation, but the second was a renewal.”²⁵⁷

Mandelo’s use of religious language to describe Stevie and Leslie’s experience is more than a simple reversal, parody, or critique of the Bad Religion represented through Holladay’s transphobia. Rather, it expresses a queer, trans desire for religious experience, and specifically forms the blueprint for that experience through the figure of the monster. Exiled and excluded from mainstream society in Spar Creek (and, by extension, Western culture as a whole), the monster makes its home on the outskirts: deep in the trees, stalking the boundary-line of human houses, and birthed at ancient altars inside caves. The consummate outsider, the monster in this case is united with both Nature (pushed further and further from Spar Creek’s residents), and with those humans who have been metaphorically sidelined within that human community. This is in line with Timothy K. Beal’s description of the primordial chaos monster’s dual status as both destroyer and creator, and its role as both monster and divinity (or, perhaps more accurately, monstrous divinity). Writes Beal, “chaos is both deadly and fecund,” representing a radical potential for creation through the process of destruction. Thus, “beneath faithful assertions in these stories that the cosmos is hospitable, secure and meaningfully ordered—in a word, *heimlich*—one senses the presence of a lurking *unheimlich* chaos within the divine that at any

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 131.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 137.

moment might come flooding back over everything.”²⁵⁸ The combination of fear and compulsion that urges Leslie toward the monster throughout *TWAB* demonstrates the ways in which Mandelo’s configuration of the holy engages with the monstrous as a facet of divinity and vice versa. Set up against the supposedly ordered world of Spar Creek, Stevie’s deviance and his monstrous transformation are just such revelatory explosions of the chaotic—explosions that reveal the fragility of cisgender order through their ability to validate trans experiences of the self via bodily transition and thus emphasize the ways all bodies contain the potential for metamorphosis. With the monster’s push-pull throughout the novella, it likewise embodies the religious horror described by Beal in his application of Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* to a reading of Job.²⁵⁹

In *TWAB*, Trans religious liberation is achievable through the construction of a new form of religious belief, expression, and mysticism, complete with its own rites of passage (e.g. initiation through bodily sacrifice, transformation from the old state into the new, and marriage through sex), and which roots trans identity as not only monstrous, but as something grounded in the Natural. This last is especially significant when read in the context of transphobic rhetoric that has traditionally (and continually) attacked the validity of trans identities on the basis that they are unnatural.²⁶⁰

Debates over authenticity, artifice, the real, and “realness” within a trans context are heated and ongoing even within trans circles. In Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* as well as *Bodies that Matter*, questions of realness, authenticity, and artifice are central to Butler’s analysis of gender performance. In *Bodies That Matter*, an analysis of “realness” as a concept articulated within

²⁵⁸ Beal, 15.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 53-54.

²⁶⁰ For a succinct discussion of the ideological underpinnings and risks involved in analyses of trans identities that employ language of Nature and the Natural, see Myra J. Hird, “Animal Trans,” in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (New York: London, 2016), 227-247.

queer, especially Black and Latina/o trans and drag community spaces, emphasizes the ways in which realness acts as a yardstick by which gendered performance is measured and assessed (literally, in the case of the competition setting of ballroom and drag contests). Critically, realness is, “the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect.” According to Butler, realness, through its ability to be performed and approximated, reveals the degree to which the real, in reference to gender, is an unstable concept. Butler’s analysis of realness, here, is particularly concerned with drag performer, Venus Xtravaganza and her own recorded thoughts on her community and its internal definitions.²⁶¹ As Halberstam notes, revisiting Xtravaganza and the ballroom documentary *Paris Is Burning*, “a distinction needs to be made between realness and the real—a distinction that would have been meaningful to Venus, who lived in the world of balls, voguing, and realness. Realness in *Paris Is Burning* is . . . not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects.”²⁶²

Yet as Stevie and Leslie make their way to Spar Creek’s church to confront their oppressors, Stevie makes the observation that:

“It’s funny, how those men all tried to keep us locked up in town, saying the hills were Satanic . . . seems to me that what’s here is only right and natural. God knows it feels good to be so strong, and powerful, and *alive*. Must be just that, what they’re so damn scared of: people getting free of them.”²⁶³

In *TWAB*, transness is not only Natural, it is *super*Natural, not only in the traditional sense being associated with the paranormal, but in terms of being “more natural” than cisgender identities by virtue of sharing a deep link with Nature as spiritual force. As a “forest deity,” Stevie (and Leslie alongside him) has become something more powerful, more ancient, and more long-lived than

²⁶¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 129-130.

²⁶² Halberstam, *Queer Time*, 51.

²⁶³ Mandelo, 138.

those who have oppressed him.²⁶⁴ The confidence the pair of them now demonstrate, and that Stevie expounds upon in the above passage prior to entering the church, directly addresses their identities as religious Others.

As the pair eavesdrop outside the church, they overhear Holladay preaching to the crowd once more, arguing that although Floyd Marshall transgressed when he raped Stevie, he has shown remorse and intends “to make his trespass legitimate by law.”²⁶⁵ Holladay himself will marry the couple after he has performed an exorcism on Stevie, and the status quo of Spar Creek will be preserved. Since the villagers intend to carry their plan out at dawn, Leslie and Stevie plan instead to steal a horse and flee Spar Creek. When Holladay interrupts them, he gives permission to Leslie to leave town, but insists that Stevie will remain. Stevie is unable to transform without spooking the horse they are hoping to escape on, and so Leslie stabs Holladay through his Adam’s apple.²⁶⁶ Stevie sets the barn alight, and they ride off on the stolen horse, with Leslie remarking that the sight “was the closest thing to hellfire Leslie had ever believed in.”²⁶⁷

The concluding epilogue shows Leslie and Stevie now relocated to New York City and on their way to Chicago. As they eat ice cream while waiting for their train, we learn that while Leslie is binding his chest (the better to pass), Stevie’s own chest apparently shrinks further and further with each transformation, the sinister magic of the woods around Spar Creek far more effective than either surgery or hormone replacement therapy. The scene is one of contentment, with Leslie remarking that, “there was something richly pleasurable about passing through places as a man, entirely unremarked upon, though the experience rested differently on his shoulders than

²⁶⁴ Mandelo, 131.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 139.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 142.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 143.

Stevie's."²⁶⁸ The remark seems to point toward their different experiences of gender nonconformity, and their different choices in terms of how gender is expressed in their bodies, the presumption being that while Stevie chose to transform, for whatever reason, Leslie has not. It is a concluding set of images that speaks to Mandelo's intention to give breath to the variety of ways one might embody gender while resisting cisnormative categories.

The novella's closing line, "Stevie bumped shoulders with him, and together, they waited for the streetlight to change," adds a melancholic yet hopeful note to the text. Hopeful because of the promise of a new life together and for a better future for trans people more broadly, and melancholic because it rings true as a hope for the contemporary trans readership Mandelo is addressing. Here, the light changing, reads as a metaphor for attitudes towards transness changing.

Lee Mandelo himself makes his designs with regard to *TWAB* clear in an interview with *Grimdark Magazine*:

If we're talking genres, *The Woods All Black* draws partly from bash-back and rape revenge stories; in other words, "if they're going to call you a monster, then show them your teeth." Considering the rising hatred and violence against trans/queer peoples we're experiencing in the present, backed by both religious and state institutions, alongside denials of reproductive justice and the ongoing threat of white supremacy... the conflicts within *The Woods All Black* still feel, unfortunately, pretty evergreen.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 145.

²⁶⁹ Schwizer, "An Interview."

Also evergreen are the conflicts that arise by virtue of Leslie's complex and shifting gender presentation, as well as Leslie's pressure to "pass." In this case, unlike Stevie, that pressure is to pass as authentically female, without the troubling baggage of his inversion.

Throughout the novella, Leslie must affect and present a stereotypical set of female behaviours, including the donning of skirts and a more demure manner of speaking that will allow him access to women's circles where he can do what he needs to calm the residents and convince them to let him help them with their medical problems.²⁷⁰ In another genre, these performances might take the form of humourous antics that gradually endear Leslie to the villagers and convince them to triumphantly oust Ames Holladay from his position of influence in the community, but as *TWAB* is a horror novella, its concerns are less with assimilation into (and acceptance by) the mainstream, and moreso with a total refusal of its trans protagonists to conform to anyone else's standards of personhood or social acceptability. In this way, the howl of the monster in the woods becomes a rallying cry for trans people in general, one that rejects transnormativity and speaks to a perspective on trans rights that emphasizes that trans liberation cannot be dependent on mainstream acceptability. Notably, *TWAB*'s tagline, featured on the front cover of the 2024 novella, instructs the reader that, "when they call you a monster, show your teeth."²⁷¹ Thus, while the closing image is one of hope for a better future in both the short and long term, *TWAB*'s thesis is robed in trans rage and armed with claws: it is not just that gender nonconforming people should not attempt to conform or assimilate to cisnormative standards of gender and sexuality, we are incapable of doing so. The only alternative, when faced by institutionalized and state-sanctioned violence, is to resist just as viciously.

In both these works, monsterfuckery is about more than sexual gratification (though it does consider this important), but concerns trans ways of being and becoming that both promise a

²⁷⁰ Mandelo, 38, 40.

²⁷¹ Mandelo.

means of escape for their trans characters through the figure of the monster, and ensure through the process of transformation and the realization—in blood and bone—of the authentic self, that they will no longer be welcome within the boundaries of human (read: cis) society.

Conclusion

In a reaction to a cisgender woman's responses to Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*, that suggests longing for the monster is really a desire to domesticate, disabled trans erotica author Johannes T. Evans's writes:

I can't think of anything less appealing, less desirable, than taming or domesticating a person, monstrous or otherwise — but living with them, exchanging things with them, exploring one another? Especially if they're big and sexy with big wings and sharp teeth and stronk? Sign me up!²⁷²

For Evans, the audience member's explanation for the appeal of monsterfuckery is insufficient in large part because it attempts to universalize desire for the monster according to cisnormative and able-bodied conceptions of both embodiment and attraction. The monster, in Evans's estimation, is not simply a yearned-for object that must be absorbed into existing networks of desire and being, but a reflection of marginalized (in his case, trans, disabled) experiences of embodiment. Historically monsterized, marginalized people who now champion a consensual affiliation with the monstrous, consider that:

the monster is familiar, a friend, could just as easily be one of us — the monster is not constrained by the 'human' rules of mainstream society, and the monster from one narrative to the next is likely to be

²⁷² Johannes T. Evans, "I Want To Fuck The Monster: Monsterfuckery From a Trans and Disabled Perspective," *Medium*, May 1, 2021, <https://johannestevans.medium.com/i-want-to-fuck-the-monster-53a04dec0a11>.

in some way otherised or isolated, in some way pushed away, even reviled. We identify with the monster, because the monster is different, and so are we.²⁷³

The monstrous body is a cipher through which Evans, as a trans man, is able both to express his experiences of dysphoria and disability, and explore what it means to be himself in a world that is opposed to certain forms of authenticity.²⁷⁴ As Evans writes, the cisgender commentor's "fantasy was our worst nightmare: taking the monster and forcing it into being like her."²⁷⁵ It is a position that denies the many ways in which monsters, and monsterfuckers, refuse confinement, bursting bodily through whatever barriers we construct in our attempts to (de)limit them.

The marriage of horror with the erotic that is so frequently a feature of monsterfucker works is particularly attuned to the body, emphasizing those aspects of embodied experience that emerge from Kristeva's concept of the abject. Evans describes the pleasure and fear of writing about bodily fluids, texture, smell, transformation, and growth as a means of engaging with bodily difference. Body horror, here, is experienced transly, through a disabled lens, as abjection in combination with identification.

When I initially began work on this project, marginalized reclamations of monster figures that rejected narratives of assimilation were only beginning to gain an obvious momentum—enough of one that I was able to state that *something* interesting was developing in terms of the ways in which monsters were being used, talked with, and talked about, by marginalized people. The outlines of, if not an organized movement, then a disorganized coven. While monsterfucker

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Evans explains, concerning his own monsterfucker stories, that it is through these works that he has been able to navigate his dysphoria while exploring his sexuality and its relationship to the body. Horrified by pregnancy as a child, for example, Evans describes a process through which his monsterfucker stories featuring impregnation by monsters allowed him to explore the variety of ways one can exist in a body. According to Evans, "the benefit of playing with monsters is that 'natural' becomes a question of perspective."

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

stories have existed for a long time (whether or not we have used the term to describe them), the last five years post-pandemic have seen a significant upswing in monsterfuckery as part of what has emerged as a powerful trend of marginalized identification with the monster.

Chapter 3

Out of the Closet and Into the Woods:

Ecofabulism and Queer Constructions of the Monstrous

*“Your teeth are sharp stones, dulled by civilization,” - Indrapramit Das, *The Devourers*.²⁷⁶*

*“Trees are super f*ckin queer,” - Sarah Taber.²⁷⁷*

Introduction: Ecofabulism

A monster’s place has long been at the threshold of not only our metaphorical boundaries (boundaries of licit behaviour, self-expression, religious belief, and so on), but at the concrete borderlands of our villages, cities, and countries. In a very literal sense the monster, to quote Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Seven Theses,” “polices the borders of the possible” through its relegation to (and constant patrolling of), the liminal spaces that exist between urban and suburban environments, and the wilderness beyond (forests, jungles, lakes, oceans, caves, *et*

²⁷⁶ Indrapramit Das *The Devourers* (New York: Del Rey, 2016), 124.

²⁷⁷ Sarah Taber (@SarahTaber_bww), “Most tree species have both male and female flowers. And/or, every single flower on the tree has both pollen & ovaries...,” Twitter, 2021, https://twitter.com/SarahTaber_bww/status/1423016012824424449.

cetera).²⁷⁸ To some degree, terrifying stories of werewolves, giants, bigfoots, and other ghouls who stalk the periphery of human settlements, serve as cautionary tales. Oral wisdom warns the errant German child against entering the Black Forest alone, lest they be picked off by predators – human or otherwise. Tales of sea monsters lurking the depths may be enough to caution would-be daredevils from swimming in rough, deep, or otherwise treacherous waters. These stories are often passed down generation to generation.

Over time, monsters lay claim to desolate and uninviting landscapes: forests, caverns, swamps, and murky oceans. At a metaphorical level, the behaviours of the monster (cannibalism, anthropophagy, deviant sexual practices, inverted religious custom) are symbolically relegated to the periphery and exorcized from the normate community whose borders it patrols. For good reason, the observation that demons and monsters are expelled from urban and human-settled spaces to protect communities from not just claws and fangs, but *ideologies* and *perspectives* has been a primary focus of Monster Studies scholarship interested in the concept of the border.²⁷⁹ In these circumstances, the monster is a source of pollution, and the nature of the pollution that it embodies has much to tell us about the societies from which they spring: what is valued, what is feared, and what remains an ever-present temptation that must be warned against in order to maintain the structure of that society.

For this reason, cities and urban spaces have long been the refuge of the Other, as in the novel *Juniper and Thorn* by the queer Jewish author Ava Reid. However, not all queer people (monstrous or otherwise) find or seek shelter in urbanity. Among recent monster narratives by queer authors or that focus on queer potentialities, are a number of works notable for their insistence that queerness is to be found not beneath towering skyscrapers, crouched in darkened

²⁷⁸ Cohen, “(Monster Theory) Seven Theses,” 12.

²⁷⁹ Poole, 125-132; Michael, 39-61.

alleys, or cruising the club, but in the fields, forests, swamps, and wild spaces that limn the borders of the civilized and the free.

I consider four such works here, as part of an emerging trend in queer fiction that marries the monstrous and the queer with a sense of oneself as part of wild Nature. These works, which suggest a kinship between social Others and the natural environment, often position the monster queer in conflict with urbanity (whether represented by large cities, small towns, or global industrialization writ large). By allying queerness with wild(er)ness, these works and their authors counter accusations against real queer people that their identities are in some way artificial, or at the very least, are incommensurate with the Natural world.

Even in the context of smalltown vs. metropolitan interpretations of queerness, it is not uncommon for smaller, more rural communities to describe queerness (or other forms of difference) as positionalities that emerge only due to the influence of city life. In Rhea Rollmann's *A Queer History of Newfoundland*, for example, Rollmann relates how, in the context of Newfoundland, Canada, homosexuality and transness were thought of primarily as things foreign to the isolated island province, and which existed in Newfoundland only due to immigration from mainland Canada and elsewhere. Rollmann's work is replete with examples of these, and similar, attitudes, including an anecdote recounting a childhood experience of her own. According to Rollmann, "Underscoring the queer presence throughout the province's early history reminds us it is nothing new. When I was an elementary school child, I remember a teacher warning us that homosexuality was something that came from Toronto. Nothing could be farther from the truth; in fact, insofar as St. John's is an older city than Toronto, there was probably a queer presence here long before Toronto or any other Canadian metropolis existed." The anecdote provides part of Rollmann's rationale for conducting her study in the first place; by publishing even a fragment of the queer histories she uncovered as part of her research, she reworks queer people back into the story of her province while providing concrete evidence that her elementary teacher was wrong. History, here, is implicated in the population's reality. In denying queer history, queerness itself can be denied.

Each of the works under consideration stands as an example of a newly emergent sub-genre that I identify as a subset of radical/resistant monster texts. It constructs a counterdiscourse of queer identity that emphasizes embracing one's monstrosity and the potential of transformation or metamorphosis into the wild monster to liberate queer and marginalized Others from oppressive government or social systems.²⁸⁰

These works fall into the realm of larger ecofeminist trends in many ways. As Alexandra Hauke articulates in her consideration of ecofeminism and the American frontier in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, such texts concern the notion that "a return to the vegetable soul, and thus to a unification of human and non-human nature, if through violent regeneration, can thus contribute to ending systemic exploitation of both women and the environment."²⁸¹ While all three texts examined here are concerned with both women and the environment, they simultaneously narrow and broaden their consideration to focus on systemic exploitation within specifically queer contexts. For example, in *Grey Dog* and *Wilder Girls*, such explorations remain primarily focused on queer women, treating identification with (and transformation into) the monster as a way of abandoning and attacking human, patriarchal, heteronormative, and neurotypical society.

In *Grey Dog*, Gish's protagonist is gradually courted by a monstrous being dwelling in the forest, which eventually claims her as its own. The protagonist's final rejection of the stifling, patriarchal environment of the small town in which she resides, involves embracing violence and

²⁸⁰ Rhea Rollmann, *A Queer History of Newfoundland* (St. John's: Engen Books, 2023), 38. For a more detailed unpacking of the construction of capital "N" Nature, see Chapter 4.

²⁸¹ Alexandra Hauke, "An Ecology of Abject Women: Frontier Gothicism and Ecofeminism in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*," in *Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and the Nonhuman*, ed. Sladja Blazan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) 110.

choosing life in the wilderness over the comforts of civilization. In Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*, nonbinary and femme identities are explored through a Black feminist lens that sees identification with the monster as a means of reinforcing a connection between Black power and the land. Solomon depicts her Black intersex main character as undergoing monstrous transformation throughout her life, and it is through the protagonist's connection with Natural monstrosity that she is able to free her people from the oppression and violence of the American State. Rory Power's queer, neurodivergent protagonists locate monstrosity as part of themselves, and over the course of the novel come to terms with the ways in which those parts render them hostile to the human society that has segregated and experimented on them. In the final pages of *Wilder Girls*, the characters choose the promise of monstrous, queer futurity over the human world, deciding to spread a plague that will mutate and/or kill the rest of the human race. In Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty*, queer nonbinary masculinities and femininities are encompassed within the novella's understanding of queer monstrous potential. Following the spread of a disease that kills all cisgender human women, a colony of male survivors is visited by mushroom women that mate with and transform the remaining men. In *The Beauty*, survival in the post-apocalypse is contingent upon the rejection of heterosexist, cisnormative, and misogynistic ideologies and social orders.²⁸²

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler observes that, "Significantly, being 'outside' the hegemonic order does not signify being 'in' a state of filthy and untidy nature. Paradoxically, homosexuality

²⁸² Queer ecofiction that employs the monster as a figure through which to articulate the role of Otherness in destabilizing heteronormative notions of futurity is not unique to written fiction, but represents a larger trend in fiction spread across film and videogames. In my article, "Queer Futurity and Identity in Zombie Video Games," I examine TellTale Games' narrative videogame series, *The Walking Dead* (based on the comic book series of the same name) alongside NaughtyDog's *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Part II* in the context of the ways in which the zombie outbreak in both works occasions the opportunity for the establishment of new, ecoconscious communities founded on queer familial relations. Elliot Mason, "Queer Futurity and Identity in Zombie Video Games," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Zombie*, ed. Simon Bacon (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2025).

is almost always conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as *both* uncivilized and unnatural.”²⁸³ Through the framing of queerness as both unNatural and uncivilized, queerness remains ontologically threatening along dual axes. Unable to be assimilated due to its association with chaos, it is nonetheless also presented within heterosexist and cissexist paradigms as artificial and therefore false.

In mapping developments in the trends associated with the radical/resistant monster, I observe a response to Butler’s paradox emerging in a subgenre of texts concerned with (re)uniting queerness with both wildness and Nature. These works reject an understanding of queer identity as an innately urban, modern phenomenon and seek instead to imbue it with a sense of historical and traditional richness that is evidenced by its rootedness in the untamed landscape. In this way, the subgenre I have observed and which I give name to here, participates in the formation of a subaltern counterpublic. As Nancy Fraser explains, subaltern counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”²⁸⁴ Much as in the case of monsterfuckery, here too, a counterdiscourse emerges that marries queer identity and experiences with the monstrous in order to redescribe queerness according to queer, rather than straight, terms.

I call this species of counterdiscourse (and subgenre) the Ecofabulous—*eco* from *ecological* and *fabulous* for its dual association with the fantastic, and its playful use as a compliment and aesthetic mode of identification in queer circles.²⁸⁵ Ecofabulous works are characterized by:

²⁸³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 168.

²⁸⁴ Fraser, 67.

²⁸⁵ In madison moore’s, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, he describes fabulousness as, “a queer aesthetic, an essence that allows marginalized people and social outcasts to regain their humanity and creativity.” madison moore. *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (Yale UP: New Haven, 2018), vii. Importantly, the works I outline in this chapter are not simply “fabulous,” which, as per moore, suggests an aesthetic rooted in glitter,

- 1) the focus on a queer character, often a loner or outsider in some way who experiences a sense of literal or figurative isolation (whether due to their queerness or additional factors);
- 2) the identification with, or longing for, a monstrous Nature which may be literalized in the form of a monster;
- 3) the revelation of a transcendent connection between the self and Nature;
- 4) the deployment of a speculative construction of Nature as connected with queerness to make claims about the relative worth of mainstream society—broadly constructed—to queer authenticity and self-fulfillment; and
- 5) the fact that it does not require a universally “happy” ending, but instead remains open-ended and ambiguous in a way that queerly avoids a progressivist impulse.

It thus may be the case that Ecofabulist works also fall under the umbrella of ecophobia—put simply, works that involve a fear of nature.²⁸⁶ This fear or anxiety finds expression in the subgenre of Gothic fiction known as the ecoGothic. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils define ecoGothic, following contributions from Simon Estok, Del Principe, William Hughes, and Andrew Smith, as:

sequins, and Hollywood glamour, but also *eco*. It is an alternative form of queer fabulousness that robes itself in crow feathers rather than feather boas. This is, of course, not to suggest a hierarchy of queer modes of aesthetic expression, but to acknowledge an increasing trend toward queer affiliation with a broad concept of Nature.

²⁸⁶ To elaborate on what is actually a complex set of phenomena, according to Simon Estok, ecophobia, “exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) towards the natural environment. While its genetic origins have functioned, in part, to preserve our species, the ecophobic condition has also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests. Often a product of behaviors serviceable in the past but destructive in the present, it is also sometimes a product of the perceived requirements of our seemingly exponential growth.” Simon Estok, “Corporeality, Hyperconsciousness, and the Anthropocene EcoGothic: Slime and Ecophobia” *Neohelicon* 47, February 2020, 27-39; 35.

(1) a repository of deep unease, fear, and even contempt as humans confront the natural world; (2) a literary mode that uses an implacable external “wilderness” to call attention to the crisis in practices of representation; and (3) a terrain in which the contours of the body are mapped, contours that increasingly stray beyond the bounds of what might be considered properly “human.”²⁸⁷

The Ecofabulous focuses on monstrosity as a threat to existing (or past) societal structures; as a result, works in this subgenre tend to be rooted in ecoGothic and ecohorror contexts.²⁸⁸

Ecofabulist narratives generally feature as part of their thematic resonance an emphasis on boundaries, borders, and invitation or trespass in and out of these spaces. Indeed, tension between these concepts—along with where queer people belong vis-a-vis urban, village, or wild spaces—typically forms a major element of a work’s plot. As in *The Shape of Water*, Ecofabulist stories might end with the assertion that the only means of queer flourishing in a hetero and cisnormative world is to abandon human culture (and/or one’s own humanity) in exchange for embracing a wild monstrosity represented by flight into the wilderness and away from

²⁸⁷ Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, “Introduction: Approaches to the EcoGothic” in *EcoGothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, eds. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

²⁸⁸ Elizabeth Parker, writing on ecoGothic, makes a distinction between ecoGothic and ecohorror on the basis that ecoGothic, alongside its dependence on terror as an affective driver, invites desire on the part of its audience. Ecohorror, by comparison, she argues, focuses only on horror. I would challenge this distinction on the basis that horror does not preclude desire and that, in fact, most horror texts, particularly body horror texts that centre the abject, also use the tension between these responses to impact their audience. In addition, as Catherine Spooner has articulated, Gothic works need not, especially in a post-millennial context, evoke anxiety or horror at all, with Gothic being more of a shifting network of aesthetic elements and values. These aesthetics are common to the horror genre, but their presence need not require that one experience horror affectively. Elizabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 138. Spooner, 14-15.

homophobic and transphobic urban spaces. In addition, however, to repeating themes of egress and constraint found in the monster stories analyzed earlier (and which emphasize that in order to survive, the monster must abandon human society), Ecofabulist stories frequently present the monster/queer as inherently hostile toward humans and civilization. Along these lines, Ecofabulism may encompass works in which the monster/queer—rejected, enslaved, and/or demonized by human society—threatens return or *does* return, in order to destroy their human oppressors.²⁸⁹ In so doing, the monster/queer not only acknowledges the reality of queer experiences of invalidation and marginality, but avenges them. Where spaces and places both have proven hostile to queer, monstrous, and wild flourishing, those same spaces and places are newly made inhospitable to the straight body. In Ecofabulist works, it is not *just* that this is achieved through queer identification with the monster; it is not *only* that it is made possible because queerness is presented as being intrinsically linked with Nature. Rather, in the Ecofabulous, both monstrosity and queerness are represented as things intimately entangled with Nature, each one imbricated with (and implicated in) the other(s). Ecofabulism is thus a specifically queer, monstrous expression of the ecoGothic, that combines a sense of dread and anxiety common to the Gothic with both ecocritical interests and a radical/resistant approach to monstrosity that redescribes the monster as a source of empowerment.

I have organized my examination of four Ecofabulist works according to the escalation of hostility and/or destruction that is leveled in the work against civilized society. The first, *Grey Dog* by Elliott Gish, is a 2024 historical horror novel about a lesbian schoolteacher in rural Nova Scotia who is courted by a devilish forest god until the horrors and hallucinations it leads her to experience cause her to abandon not only so-called civilized behaviour, but human civilization entirely.²⁹⁰ The second, *Sorrowland* by Rivers Solomon, follows a Black queer nonbinary

²⁸⁹ Lee Mandelo's *The Woods All Black*, discussed as part of my analysis of monsterfuckery in Chapter One, fits within the bounds of Ecofabulism. Likewise, both *Grey Dog* and *The Beauty* might be considered monsterfucker texts.

²⁹⁰ Elliott Gish, *Grey Dog* (Toronto: ECW, 2024).

woman who is raised inside a gated community run by a New Religious Movement. The protagonist, Vern, flees the compound into the wilderness after she is forced to bear her rapist's twins while she is, herself, still a teenager. In the wilderness, Vern raises her children out of reach of human influence, all as she discovers a supernatural connection to the woods and to a powerful fungal forest deity that causes her to transform into a monster. As Vern matures she grows to accept the monstrous physicality of her metamorphosing body and uses its powers to destroy her former community's controlling leader and expose his connections to the United States government.²⁹¹

The final two works under consideration—Rory Power's *Wilder Girls* and Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty*—employ a popular conception of Apocalyptic that combines the promise of queer (and Natural) futurity with the destruction of modern Western society (and possibly all human society).

The following sections consider how each of these works exhibits the characteristics I have outlined as belonging to the Ecofabulous, while foregrounding the ways in which they articulate visions of queer flourishing and self-expression that rely on forming (or identifying) a kinship between queer people and monstrous Nature. Further, by embracing monstrous Nature, these works reject heterosexist assumptions about the Naturalness of straight and cisgender identities and modes of being, and, as in all radical/resistant monster texts, express the need for marginalized people to defy and repudiate pressures for them to conform.

Courted by the Wild: Elliott Gish's *Grey Dog*

²⁹¹ Rivers Solomon, *Sorrowland* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2021).

Ada Byrd is a woman with secrets. The protagonist of Gish's *Grey Dog*, Ada is a disgraced schoolteacher sent to the rural Nova Scotia community of Lowry Bridge in 1901. An epistolary, *Grey Dog* recounts the entirety of Ada's experiences through a black journal gifted to Ada by her late sister. The conclusion of *Grey Dog* coincides with the terminal pages in the journal, so that Ada's ambiguous fate is intertwined with the end of the last remaining physical tie Ada possesses to her sister, and to the human world.²⁹²

Over the course of the book, Ada is courted by a (largely) unseen force that resides in the wilderness, and whose wooing of Ada is enacted through disturbing gestures that often involve leaving dead forest creatures (or the parts of creatures) for her to find. In my reading, the presence is queerness itself, which will not allow those it touches to rest, tormenting and tantalizing them in dreams until it is acknowledged. Like queerness, it is framed as a danger to children, and like queerness it often requires severing ties with the heterosexual, cisgender (read: normate human) world. In Ada's case, the presence also represents freedom from her trauma-laden past, since it ultimately separates her from the sources of her misery (the physical journal, which tethers her to the human world, along with the limitations placed upon her as a queer woman).

Published in 2024, *Grey Dog* was written in the shadow of both the #MeToo movement and a related, popular shift within horror spaces toward explicitly feminist horror works within or adjacent to the radical/resistant monster subgenre. Many such post-millennial feminist horror narratives are part of what has become popularly known as the "good for her" subgenre, in which a female character embraces or discovers her agency, frequently through violence, in order to rescue, avenge, or otherwise free herself from predominantly male antagonists. These antagonists are often family members or romantic partners, but may also take the form of patriarchs,

²⁹² Gish., 380.

officials, would-be rapists, kidnappers, or male and male-coded monsters. Although “good for her” emerged as a more formalized category in 2020, many works considered part of its informal canon predate the establishment of a generic category, and lists of “good for her” texts may include pre-twenty-first-century works such as the *Alien* franchise or *Carrie*.²⁹³ In “good for her” horror movies like Ana Lily Amirpour’s *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (2014), David Eggers’s *The Witch* (2015), Coralie Fargeat’s *Revenge* (2017), and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019) horror is used as a vehicle to express female rage, explicitly addressing the ways in which women have been (and are) routinely dismissed, blamed, and belittled in familial and romantic relationships, as well as in professional contexts, and all under the threat of physical (including sexual) violence.

Feminist horror, including stories focused on female rage and revenge, are not new in the horror genre, and the rape-revenge narrative, as explored by Carol J. Clover in her seminal study, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, includes many films beneath the “good for her” umbrella. Rape-revenge movies, argues Clover, are often treated in criticism as particularly misogynistic and exploitative. In reality, she contests, movies in this genre, such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1977), contain content that, regardless of the films’ artistic merit, is no more common in rape-revenge movies than it is in more mainstream and widely accepted works. Instead, it is rather that depictions of sexual assault in rape-revenge movies are less sanitized, and are consequently more likely to engender discomfort in the viewer, whose complicity is laid bare by the films themselves. Rape-revenge films implicate the audience—especially the male audience—in ways

²⁹³ “Good for her,” narratives are not limited to the horror genre, but most works popularly discussed in this context are horror works. Critically, it is also unnecessary for these works to end happily for their female protagonists, and often, as in the case of *The Witch* (discussed above), their endings are ambiguous. Charlotte Gaffney, writing for *The Culture Sift*, and Jordan Nishkian, writing for *Cordcutting*, discuss the subgenre, its history, and its themes. Charlotte Gaffney, “What Is the ‘Good For Her’ Genre?,” *The Culture Sift*, July 22, 2021, <https://theculturesift.com/what-is-the-good-for-her-genre/>; Jordan Nishkian, “Let’s Talk About the ‘Good For Her’ Cinematic Universe,” *Cordcutting*, January 11, 2024, <https://cordcutting.com/what-to-watch/good-for-her-cinema/>.

that make them uncomfortable, as do the often brutal acts of revenge enacted upon male perpetrators by female protagonists.²⁹⁴ *I Spit on Your Grave* is only one of several rape-revenge films that, rather than centering a story of male or familial revenge against a male rapist, instead focuses on the woman who was raped, following along as she slices and dices (or otherwise dispatches) the men who brutalized her.²⁹⁵ While these works are not unproblematically feminist (Clover formulates several of her own critiques),²⁹⁶ many modern “good for her” narratives either fall within the rape-revenge genre, or make reference to it, and many movies of the type from the 2010s onwards have female directors and/or writers.²⁹⁷

“Good for her” works may reclaim the monster, redescribing it from a feminist position. In *The Witch*, for example, the film’s teenage protagonist, Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), is falsely accused of witchcraft by her conservative Puritan family. Unbeknownst to Thomasin, however, a real witch dwells in the outlying woods that surround the family’s remote cabin, and it is she who is preying on the family’s children and (seemingly) possessing its livestock. After Thomasin kills the last remaining member of her family in self-defense, Satan appears to her in the form of the family’s billy-goat, Black Phillip (Charlie the Goat). Satan offers a blood-splattered

²⁹⁴ Clover, 120.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 138-139.

²⁹⁶ Amongst them, Clover notes that the writers, producers, and directors of the rape-revenge movies she analyzes are largely male. Most crucially, for Clover, is that in order to strike a feminist pose, movies such as *I Spit On Your Grave* reinforce classist assumptions about rural populations. Clover, 151.

²⁹⁷ For example, *American Mary* (2012; directed by the Soska sisters), *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour), and *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat), to name only a few. Many of these are referenced or analyzed in Bonnie Evans’s article looking at contemporary reworkings of the rape-revenge film. Bonnie Evans, “Rape and Revenge (2017): The Male Gaze and Fourth Wave Feminist Rage in Rape-Revenge Film,” *Continuum* 39, no. 4: 603-614. The genre is nonetheless not uncomplicated. As Debra Ferreday demonstrates in her analysis of the media reception to two of pop superstar Rihanna’s rape-revenge music videos, Black on white violence is read more critically by white feminist audiences, particularly when the material presented on screen is itself directed, written, and starred in by people of colour. Debra Ferreday, “‘Only the Bad Gyal Could Do This’: Rihanna, Rape-Revenge Narratives and the Cultural Politics of White Feminism,” *Feminist Theory* 18, no. 3 (2017): 263-280.

Thomasin the opportunity to “live deliciously,” if only she will sign her name in his book. Once Thomasin has done so she joins a coven of witches for their Sabbath. During the ritual, she and the other women are shown levitating in a circle while laughing deliriously, as the leader of the coven rises into the sky above them.²⁹⁸ It is the closing shot of the film.

My choice to describe *The Witch*, rather than another “good for her” movie, is due to its thematic resonance with Elliott Gish’s *Grey Dog*, along with Gish’s statement in an interview that the latter (along with Aster’s *Midsommar*) was an influence.²⁹⁹ Like Thomasin, Ada is “courted” by a mysterious and malevolent entity that resides in the forest and is associated with animals, and like Thomasin, Ada finds an uneasy and ambiguous freedom only through accepting the wild and monstrous parts of herself and rejecting civil society.³⁰⁰ While *The Witch* is primarily focused on female rage in a historical context, however, *Grey Dog* combines that interest with an intersectional understanding of lesbian female rage and repression. Both works also engage very

²⁹⁸ *The Witch*, directed by David Eggers (2015; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2016), Blu-Ray.

²⁹⁹ Paul Semel, “Exclusive Interview: ‘Grey Dog’ Author Elliott Gish,” *Paul Semel*, April 9, 2024, <https://paulsemel.com/exclusive-interview-grey-dog-author-elliott-gish/>.

³⁰⁰ As previously mentioned, “good for her” movies wear a feminist badge somewhat uneasily, since their endings are often anything but unambiguously happy. Indeed, scholar Laura Zwissler proposes something of a counter-reading of *The Witch* that situates the film less within the canon of popular feminist reimaginings of the figure of the witch, and instead understands Eggers’s project as being deeply engaged in an earnest rendering of the historical, misogynistic fears embodied by, and embedded in, the stereotype of the witch as monster. According to Zwissler, “What makes *The Witch* different from your average monster-predator film is that the young female protagonist is also the potential monster.” Zwissler reads Thomasin’s alliance with Satan not as a choice, but as a trap that sees her trade one form of patriarchal control (Puritanism, her father) for another (Satan’s). Or, as Zwissler puts it, “she chooses the pimp over the father.” Zwissler, 4; 10.

directly with the historical stereotype of the witch and its attendant symbolisms.³⁰¹

In true Gothic fashion, the details of Ada's tragic past are relayed to the audience gradually over the course of the novel. Ada and her sister Florrie were physically and emotionally abused by their domineering and misogynistic father as children. This childhood abuse and its psychological impact on Ada is compounded by the fact that Florrie was murdered by an abusive husband while she was pregnant with his child. As a lodger at her previous posting, Ada fell in love with the wife of the man whose room she was renting, only for the woman's husband to sexually assault her. Following the rape, Ada was repeatedly coerced into sex by the husband, distracting herself during intercourse by imaging she was sleeping with the wife. Ada lost her former post after the wife discovered Ada in bed with the husband; and finally, Ada suffered a miscarriage following her dismissal from her last posting—something for which she was seemingly grateful.

While a modern audience is likely to feel sympathy for the abuse that Ada has endured, the historical setting of *Grey Dog* is such that the revelation of Ada's past—particularly her rape and miscarriage—would mark her as a social pariah in the small and gossipy community of Lowry Bridge.

Despite the danger of discovery, Ada's arrival in town is not entirely unpleasant. Though Ada is a reluctant schoolteacher, the rural setting pleases her, since as a child both Ada and Florrie found escape from their abusive father through a love of Nature. The school where Ada teaches

³⁰¹ For an analysis on the formation of the stereotype of the witch in Antiquity and Late Antiquity see: Kimberly B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (Columbia UP: New York, 2007). Although Stratton's examination of how the stereotype of the witch formed is focused on the ancient world, the stereotype she describes is one that deeply influenced the Early Modern figure of the witch, as well as later responses to that image.

is in the middle of the woods. This is ideal for Ada's educational priorities, which involve instructing the local children about local flora and fauna.³⁰² The fact that Lowry Bridge is surrounded by forest also places Ada in close proximity to the supernatural, monstrous force that, over the course of *Grey Dog*, fixes its attentions on her. For the sake of ease, I will refer to this presence as the grey dog, which is the name and form it takes when appearing to one of the novel's central characters.³⁰³

Throughout the novel, the Natural world becomes a spectre that haunts the limits of the page. Ada's connection with it is intrinsic to her sense of self and representative of the depth of her relationship with her late sister. Indeed, among the slew of dark memories that Ada shares with the reader is a violent encounter which she and Florrie suffered at the hands of their father and which involved the sisters' shared love of Nature. Having discovered the stash of specimens Ada and Florrie kept hidden in their wardrobe, Ada's father gathered them and displayed them before the girls, demanding they explain why they had collected such things. Among the objects were, "the bones of the squirrel we'd dug up from our mother's garden. A ragged snakeskin found abandoned between the boards of a picket fence. A number of Florrie's drawings, including one . . . of a hare's corpse."³⁰⁴ Their father brands them "dirty little beasts," before beating them,

³⁰² Not all the townsfolk welcome Ada's choice of topic. One parent in particular, Mrs. Castle, becomes something of Ada's nemesis. During one incident, after Mrs. Castle's son reports back to her the contents of Ada's lessons, Mrs. Castle confronts Ada with accusations of unChristian teaching. "'These children,'" argues Mrs. Castle, "'don't need to know about frogs . . . it is spelling and sums and the Bible they need, not all this nasty stuff. A Hallowe'en party! Why you've all but got them burning the wicker man!'" Ada's response, that the paraphernalia—animal skulls and other knickknacks picked up on her travels—are "that which God Himself created," underscores Ada's perspective that Nature is itself something sacred. The interpersonal conflict between Castle and Ada also presents a microcosmic version of the macrocosmic tension in which the novel is ultimately invested: the tension between Nature/freedom and Urbanity/stricture. Gish, 123; 125.

³⁰³ Ibid., 366.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 118.

breaking their treasures, and locking them in a cupboard. In the morning, upon waking, Ada and Florrie discover that their possessions—glass specimen jars and drawings—have disappeared.³⁰⁵ Their love of Nature, as encapsulated in this moment, is set up in contrast against the malevolent, controlling, and abusive male figures that pepper the novel, including those associated with normative Christian ways of being. Nowhere is this as apparent as in Ada and Florrie’s understanding of Godhood.

Key to both Ada and Florrie’s parsing of the world, as well as Ada’s supernatural encounters in Lowry Bridge, is their concept of “the God of outside.” Contrasted against “the God of inside,” the God of outside is associated with the wilderness and all that Ada and Florrie value(d).

Ada recounts Florrie’s explanation of the two gods:

‘There are two Gods, she’d told me once, sotto voce in case our father heard her uttering such an impious thought. ‘There is the God of inside—the God of churches and prayer meetings and all that—and then there is the God of outside, the God that lives in the trees and in the dirt. And the insects, and the birds, and the things that eat them too.’

And even though I had protested that surely there was one God only, sovereign over church and nature both, Florrie would not be swayed. If the same God was in charge, she argued, why did *inside* and *outside* seem so at odds? Why would we leave a sermon with our limbs heavy and our eyes drooping, but come in from a day in the woods humming with life?³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 119-121.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 23. Similarly, when Ada befriends the local reverend’s wife, Agatha, Agatha remarks that Ada’s framing of God is very different from her taciturn husband’s. At Agatha’s description of that God as callous in the face of the townspeople’s tragedies, Ada remarks in narration that the God Agatha describes is, “the God of stifling churches and ugly carpets” (ibid., 141).

The God of inside is repeatedly associated with the Christian God, who in turn is framed as a figure whose ideals Ada will never embody. When Ada and Florrie are locked in their cupboard as children, Ada remarks that, “the darkness inside of the cupboard was miles away from the wholesome dark of the night sky; it belonged entirely to the God of inside, not the God of outside.” That God, their father’s God, is the one Ada is sure their father hoped “would reach down from heaven to touch Florrie and me, turning us into the kind of little girls who would never collect animal bones or stare, transfixed, at a rotting carcass.”³⁰⁷ Throughout, fatherhood and Fatherhood are interconnected forces that mutually sustain one another through the oppression of all that is outside: the feminine, the queer, and the wilderness.

As Ada is increasingly entranced by the supernatural creature that haunts her, it grows clearer that, at least from Ada’s perspective, the entity and the God of outside are one and the same. During the grey dog’s first encounter with Ada as she walks through the woods, Ada finds (or is gifted) a small owl skull before sensing that there is someone/thing behind her, ready to touch her. The spell of the moment is broken only when one of her pupils—a girl named Muriel who dwells in the forest outside the rest of Lowry Bridge’s community alongside her impoverished and intensely misogynistic father—disturbs her reverie.³⁰⁸

Ada’s second encounter with the presence in the forest happens one evening as she walks home from a visit with Agatha. Notably, Ada experiences an immediate attraction toward and affinity for Agatha, who shares Ada’s intellectual curiosity but is limited in her pursuits by her traditionalist husband.³⁰⁹ That the presence meaningfully engages with her following this

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 120.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 25.

³⁰⁹ Agatha’s husband, though not obviously physically abusive, is controlling. He forbids Agatha novels, which she hides inside her hope chest to read while he is out, and expects her to reinforce the lessons from his fire-and-brimstone sermons upon their children. Ibid., 107-108.

encounter, therefore, further connects it with Ada's sexuality. As the pair part and Ada watches Agatha vanish into the night, however, Ada is struck by the sensation of being watched. As Ada waits for some sign of who—or what—is watching her, a massive swarm of locusts pelts her, until she is forced onto the ground, head hung to avoid the assault. As Ada huddles in place, the insects vanish, leaving her uncertain whether she hallucinated the encounter.³¹⁰

A month later, Ada is given the gift of a beautiful bouquet of wildflowers by Muriel. Ada is delighted, at first, by the gift. Muriel is a wary child who Ada immediately realizes is very intelligent and much less naive than her classmates, and Ada is keen to convince Muriel that academics are worth pursuing. After Muriel has left Ada to walk home from the woodland schoolhouse, Ada smells a foul stink emanating from the flowers. Upon examining the bouquet more closely, she finds, to her horror, a bloody, severed squirrel's tail. Convinced Muriel is playing a terrible prank, Ada discards the bouquet, though after she has done so she realizes that the tail, like the locusts, has vanished.³¹¹

Ada's supernatural encounters in and around the forest surrounding Lowry Bridge intensify as the novel continues: Ada discovers a dead chickadee, seemingly planted in the snow for her to find, and is greeted by a disembodied voice speaking her name;³¹² she is lured into the night by a series of mysterious knocks on the door while staying with Agatha, only to find a hare outside that, in front of Ada, chews off its own tongue;³¹³ and following yet more incidents, she is

³¹⁰ Gish, 110-112.

³¹¹ Gish, 136-137.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 165.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 227-230

trapped inside the schoolhouse while an unseen monster prowls outside, pounding at the school walls.³¹⁴

Though Ada is haunted by her encounters, the experiences themselves leave open the question of Ada's sanity. The disappearance of various of the horrors she witnesses, along with the fact that the schoolhouse incident occurs during a wild storm invites the possibility that Ada is at the very least unreliable, contributing to the novel's sense of Gothic claustrophobia, which, through the medium of the diary, traps the reader inside Ada's fragmented thoughts alongside her.

Yet, even though Agatha cannot hear the phantom knocks that lure Ada into the snow, Ada is not the only resident of Lowry Bridge to experience the supernatural. Living outside the town is a wealthy widow named Norah Kinsley. Kinsley³¹⁵ is something of a local boogeyman and suspected witch. When Ada's hosts—an otherwise friendly couple called the Griers—speak of her, it is hesitantly and in hushed tones, and when Ada visits her, Kinsley herself draws the comparison:

'I suppose you have heard . . . that I am a witch. . . . No need to play innocent. I know what the children say about me, and I am not offended. Every town needs its witch, doesn't it? Someone to whisper about in the dark? Some woman in your town who was just a little too strange, a little too old or wild or mad, for you to think of her as just a woman.'³¹⁶

Most significantly, Kinsley knows about the presence in the forest, something that her characterization as a witch both anticipates and explains. Writing of the figure of the witch,

³¹⁴ Ibid., 254-259.

³¹⁵ I use "Kinsley" to refer to the character throughout, since Ada uses the more formal "Mrs. Kinsley" to describe her. It is not until Kinsley's true relationship to the grey dog is revealed that Ada begins to refer to her as Norah.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 96.

Barbara Creed notes that, “the witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her ‘feminine’ nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes, and storms.”³¹⁷ This popular understanding of the figure primes the audience to anticipate Kinsley’s deeper connection to the grey dog, as well as to the woods that Ada fears, yet to which she is drawn. The intertextual nature of horror, fantasy, and science-fiction, contributes a layering effect within the text, which allows Ada’s situation, Kinsley’s character, and the threat of the grey dog, to function on multiple levels. As in related *witch* stories, such as Eggers’s *The Witch*, but also the folklore upon which the film was based, a web of relationships—family resemblances—is formed between Ada, Kinsley, and the grey dog (Nature).

As Ada grows more troubled by the grey dog’s visitations, as well as by the dreams that torment her sleep, she seeks out Kinsley with the understanding that the woman might have secrets to share. Although Kinsley does not immediately divulge the totality of her knowledge, she admits to Ada that she has had dreams of being pursued through the forest by a ravenous beast. Kinsley describes to Ada that, “there was something behind me in hot pursuit, so close I could feel drops of spittle falling from its open jaws. I did not know what sort of creature it was . . . but I knew that it was fearsome, and that it wanted me between its teeth.”³¹⁸ Critically, in Kinsley’s dream, the creature was unable to follow her once she had crossed the Slade river that divides one side of Lowry Bridge from the other. As Kinsley observes, “Vampires cannot cross rivers, you see, nor fairies.”³¹⁹ There is no place for the grey dog beyond the bridge, which, while marking the beginning of the wild parts of Lowry Bridge, also divides the townspeople between those insiders who are capable of (if not content with) their civilized lives, and those on the outside who, whether due to class, sexuality, or a nebulous strangeness the other townsfolk sense as

³¹⁷ Creed, 76.

³¹⁸ Gish., 187.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

being peculiar—even *queer*.³²⁰ Those are the same peculiar individuals who share a connection with the grey dog.

As Kinsley first describes the power of her forest dreams to Ada, there is one in particular that stands out to her and thus within the novel. In the dream, Kinsley ventures into the woods outside her isolated mansion to answer the incessant call of the wilderness that has been plaguing her. Outside, Kinsley spies a large creature that resembles a grey dog and that watches her from the other side of a bank. According to Kinsley:

I knew then . . . that the animal would not leave its station on the riverbank, until I returned to the other side. It would stay there forever, like a thing of stone or steel, unless I stepped back into the water and swam across to meet it. And I knew, in the same way, that that was exactly what I was going to do.³²¹

The presence takes this form for Kinsley, she suspects, in a manner which makes a singular and personal connection that draws on Kinsley's childhood memories. Kinsley describes to Ada how the figure of the grey dog was familiar to an illustration that she "always anticipated with mixed dread and delight, not wanting to turn the page to see it, and yet unable to think of anything else."³²² This image—a slaving hunting dog in pursuit of a fox—was one that "terrified" Kinsley, "and yet [she] longed to see it,"³²³ the imagery, at once horrifying, speaking to a perhaps nascent experience of queerness. The experience, for Kinsley, is also particular: the grey

³²⁰ Throughout the novel, Gish playfully has Ada describe situations, people, and especially her own emotions as "queer," or "gay." See Gish, 271.

³²¹ Ibid., 188.

³²² Ibid., 189.

³²³ Ibid.

dog does not manifest itself to (and within) her as any random creature, but as one with which she alone shares kinship. When Ada asks Kinsley whether she still has the dreams, Kinsley replies in the affirmative, but adds that, “I did not mind them as I once had. A monster seen is a monster that can be dealt with. A monster hidden beneath a bed or inside a wardrobe cannot.”³²⁴ The metaphor of the wardrobe and its similarity to the closet draws implicit comparison between the experience of queer identity formation and the monster. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of twentieth-century discourse surrounding homosexuality, “The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.” As Sedgwick elaborates, although as a metaphor it has found itself transposed to contexts outside obviously queer situations (Sedgwick uses the personal example of ‘coming out’ as a fat woman), rather than revealing the ways in which the term has become evacuated of queer meaning, such use instead demonstrates the ways in which queerness in the twentieth century has become a primary sorting category that attaches to a variety of supposed binaries.³²⁵ In view of Sedgwick’s reading of queer metaphor and the Gothic to the Ecofabulism of *Grey Dog*, the “supposed binaries” being troubled are not only the queer/straight, but the monstrous/human and wild/civilized.

Ada’s connection to the human world of Lowry Bridge wanes as her relationship with both Kinsley and the grey dog waxes. She grows suspicious of formerly friendly characters such as Agatha and Mrs. Grier,³²⁶ experiences troubled sleep,³²⁷ ceases bathing,³²⁸ and strikes one of her pupils.³²⁹ Alongside these developments, Ada’s experiences of the grey dog grow more

³²⁴ Ibid., 189.

³²⁵ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 70-72.

³²⁶ Gish, 273-274.

³²⁷ Ibid., 296.

³²⁸ Ibid., 302-303.

³²⁹ Ibid., 298.

sexualized, and her attraction to Agatha is more viscerally expressed. Recalling being trapped in the schoolhouse during the storm, Ada frames it as a distinctly sexual experience:

Ada. Such longing, such need infused into those two cajoling syllables! No one had ever said my name in such a way. No one had ever wanted me so much. Come to me. I am waiting. My fingers quivered as my hand slowly rose, their tips kissing the ice-cold iron of the latch. But as I did so, I felt the door tremble again, as though something leaning against it had drawn in a deep, shuddering breath in anticipation of some long-desired delicacy, and my senses came back to me. With a half-wild cry, I turned and ran back to the safety of my desk . . . From my sanctuary, I could hear the door shaking terribly, as though the thing were throwing itself at it in a fury, and I closed my eyes to pray.³³⁰

The door and the schoolhouse—another closet metaphor—prevent the grey dog from reaching her and so she turns to prayer to banish her forbidden desires (along with the grey dog’s desire for her). Burying that desire is, however, ultimately impossible, and it explodes during Ada’s interactions with Agatha. When Agatha visits Ada at the Grier’s, for example, Ada lashes out at her both verbally and physically.

Convinced Agatha’s seeming interest in her is a pretense and that Agatha merely wanted a temporary diversion, Ada leaps on top of her:

I was standing over her for this, panting and hot, my face so close to hers we were nearly cheek to cheek. . . . *What would it taste like?* That thought occurred to me in a voice not quite my own. I leaned in and let my tongue protrude from my mouth. It slid up her cheeks like a hand up a skirt, greedily caressing. . . . I salivated at the thought of breaking through that paper-thin skin to the flesh beneath, soft as fruit, sweet as peach. It would have felt utterly natural in that moment, to bite.³³¹

³³⁰ Ibid., 261.

³³¹ Ibid., 276.

The assault—for it is clear throughout that Agatha is terrified—is explicitly animalistic in its descriptions and combines queer sexuality, violence, and a monstrous anthropophagy in one scene. Significantly, Ada describes lashing out at Agatha using the phrase, “a hurt animal will bite,”³³² and later fantasizes about Agatha’s “flesh yielding beneath my hand. Her skin between my teeth. . . . I can hear my stomach growling at the thought.”³³³ The fantasies, along with Ada’s actions, are not uncomplicated. Throughout *Grey Dog*, sexual assault is a recurring horror more brutal even than the grey dog’s attentions. That Agatha is therefore the victim of Ada’s rapacious desires frames their relationship as one caught in the cycles of abuse Ada is desperate to escape from.

Ada’s final encounter with the grey dog is preceded by the revelation that its interest in her has been a kind of courtship. Kinsley has been aware of this all along, having witnessed the grey dog make similar advances on Ada’s predecessor, who, it is revealed, walked into the woods never to be seen again. “You are such an innocent,” Kinsley—now Norah—remarks of Ada after Ada expresses shock that Kinsley would refer to the grey dog’s offerings to her as “gifts,” “. . . Can you not recognize when you are being wooed?”³³⁴ According to Norah, the grey dog is selective about those it chooses—a “particular sort” to use Norah’s phrasing—that it courts according to the individual’s specific tastes. For Ada, this personalized courtship has tailored itself according to her love of all things wild, through a sequence of gory gifts given over the course of her journal’s pages. Norah, having experienced the attentions of the grey dog, claims she was able to recognize that Ada was the grey dog’s type: “so meek, so well-behaved, but with such fire

³³² Ibid., 274. This same description, of an animal gnawing off its own limb to escape a trap, is used elsewhere in reference to the God of outside. Ada notes that the God of outside understands this instinct. Gish, 216.

³³³ Ibid., 277.

³³⁴ Ibid., 336.

burning beneath your eyes!”³³⁵ While Norah was similarly courted, she ultimately decided to remain half-in, half-out of the grey dog’s realm, and in this way, as Ada herself notes, Norah is something of a “procuress,”³³⁶ or queer monstrous wingman, for the grey dog. Later in the novel, Ada shifts her perspective and calls Norah instead a “liberator.”³³⁷ That the grey dog’s type is, in reality, queer people, is suggested when Ada and Norah have sex on the night prior to Ada’s journey into the woods.³³⁸

Norah’s explanations to Ada—that she recognized Ada and that previously, she had recognized Amelia Webster (the former schoolmistress), speak to queer recognition that allows queer elders to usher in newcomers to the community. Others, too, are marked by the text (and remarked upon by Ada): Muriel, who has her own relationship to the wilderness and therefore to the grey dog, and another student named Lillian.³³⁹

Ada’s decision to give herself to the grey dog comes in stages, and while arguably that process begins the moment Ada sets foot in Lowry Bridge (and particularly, the woods outside it), her first substantive rebellion against the God of inside occurs when she is confronted by the school board and by her father for striking a child. Following the meeting, her father takes her aside to chastise her, but unlike in the past, Ada does not demure to him. When he calls her “a garden” that must be cultivated and tamed, Ada denies him:

³³⁵ Ibid., 337.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 359.

³³⁸ Ibid., 365.

³³⁹ Ibid., 81; 369.

‘I am no garden, Father,” I said, emerging from behind the desk. There was a grace to my movements that had not been there before, a warm fluidity like that of a panther padding out from the shadows. He took one step back from me, then another. “I am not a place where nature can be weeded and tamed and kept in order. I am tree roots—and dark hollows—and ancient moss—and the cry of owls. I am not a thing that you can shape, not anymore. I am no garden, but the woods, and if you ever come near me again, every bit of wildness in me will rise up to bite you. I will tear your throat out with my teeth.’³⁴⁰

Animal and Nature-based imagery recurs throughout *Grey Dog*, including in Ada’s own self-descriptions. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Ada confronts her father, it is to an image of Nature’s power that she alludes when describing her ferocity. Likewise, at the moment when Ada is at last preparing herself—as though for her nuptials—to meet with the grey dog, she is granted a vision of Florrie. In the dream, Florrie mouths, “The God of outside waits for you.” While for Norah, the presence in the forest is the grey dog, for Ada, it is the God of outside, a manifestation of all that is anathema to patriarchal, human, Christian society.³⁴¹

The last scene of the novel features Ada in the schoolhouse. Agatha knocks at the schoolhouse door, frightened for Ada. No one has asked Agatha to find her, rather, Agatha has chosen of her own accord to search for Ada in the schoolhouse in the wilderness. When Agatha pleads that she is concerned for Ada’s wellbeing and says that she has been praying for her, Ada rebuffs her, claiming she no longer has need of prayers. Desperate, Agatha yells that, “this is not Ada Byrd at all—this is an *animal*!” The outburst is the last straw for Ada, who leaps onto Agatha and pins her to the floor. She kisses Agatha’s cheek, lets her “tongue trace the soft ridges of her throat. She shuddered, in pleasure or in horror—I did not know—I did not care. I let my mouth wander

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 352.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 380.

where it would.”³⁴² At last, Ada bites into Agatha’s throat in orgasmic delight, seemingly killing Agatha in the process. Knowing the reverend will eventually come for her, Ada describes her plan to burn the schoolhouse and then wander into the woods. She recognizes this as the termination of her civilized, human life:

That life is done. A new one awaits me beneath the trees, in the damp muck of the underbrush, in the places where worms writhe through the dirt and predator chases prey, and I shall turn to meet it. I shall walk into the woods, bare and open to the rush of the wind, washed with moonlight and shadow, and there I shall await the grey dog.³⁴³

Two contrary readings of Agatha’s death are possible. On the one hand, the text collapses both Ada and the grey dog. She is at once courted by it, but also, through its invitations and her eventual flight into the woods, she becomes symbolically part of it. Such a reading makes note of the ways in which monstrosity is treated by Gish (and Ada) throughout the novel. Witch, werewolf, vampire, and fairy imagery are combined and alluded to in equal measure.³⁴⁴

While Norah is considered a witch by people of Lowry Bridge, she is not the only witch figure in the novel—Ada references on two occasions a woman from her own childhood, called Jenny

³⁴² Ibid., 384.

³⁴³ Ibid., 386.

³⁴⁴ Historically, these same figures have not always been rigidly defined, with witches able to take on the forms of wolves and werewolves, while also demonstrating characteristics a modern audience would associate with vampires, such as blood-drinking and undeadness. See, for example, W. Y. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999). This monograph, which analyzes Russian and other Slavic representations of magic and witchcraft, contains many accounts of representations of the figure of the witch that involve shapeshifting, blood-drinking, and other staples of werewolf and vampire lore.

Carpenter, who was thought of as a witch and on whom Ada's fellow children would play tricks. Ada describes her as a source of fright, not only due to Jenny's associations with witchcraft, but also because of her age. Upon rapping on Jenny's door as part of a prank, Jenny greets Ada, naked. She is described as foul-smelling, with sallow skin and pendulous, wrinkled flesh. When she reaches out for Ada, she calls her, "pretty girl."³⁴⁵ This "pretty girl" spoken to Ada as though marking her as suitable to take up the mantle, is echoed in Ada's final words, "'You pretty thing,'" to Agatha. Likewise, as Ada begins to shuck the expectations of what, to Lowry Bridge, is a "good woman,"³⁴⁶ she takes pleasure in nudity that would be considered inappropriate in polite society, and in so doing, explicitly identifies with Jenny: "This was what Jenny Carpenter had felt, all those years ago. She bared her flesh to the world and laughed."³⁴⁷ Earlier, as Ada self-consciously assesses her body in the mirror, she remarks ungenerously, again with reference to Jenny:

When I look at myself I see Jenny Carpenter, her body laid over mine, the details of her ageing flesh impressing themselves into my own, as though I am in the process of becoming her. If I am not careful, soon enough I will find myself wandering the road with my hair streaming in the wind, giggling to myself. A veritable witch.³⁴⁸

That Ada becomes just such a figure, laughing as the wind whips around her, should not surprise.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 98.

³⁴⁶ Ada expresses at one point that, "one might say 'a good man' and mean anything—there are as many ways of being a good man, it seems, as there are of being a man at all. But there is only one way to be a good woman. It is such a narrow, stunted, blighted way to be that I wonder any woman throughout history has been up to the task. Perhaps none of us ever has." Gish, 362.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 361.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 193.

In general, witch imagery pervades the novel. Alongside Jenny (crone), and Norah (Mother), a witchy air spirals around both Muriel and Ada (Maiden), an image in triplicate that is standard fare in depictions of the figure.³⁴⁹ This is joined by pervasive werewolf and vampire imagery: Ada's walk is lit by a full moon on the night she walks naked to Norah's mansion—a scene in which she says she “padded along”³⁵⁰ as though a canine or feline animal. Like a vampire or a wolf, Ada longs for blood and describes herself “hardly able to stifle a moan when the first drop hit my tongue.”³⁵¹ Her speech in defiance of her father, along with her first attack on Agatha, both speak to the ways in which Ada has come to identify ever more deeply with not only the animal, but the monstrous. The lupine, grey dog that graces the cover of the novel, joined at the waist to a deer and snarling back at its prey, suggests a divided nature that lies not external to the self, but within. Ada is, at once, a being transformed (meek deer to ferocious dog), and a being in conflict with itself.

On the other hand, if Ada, then, is not simply the lover of the grey dog, but is herself either already part of it, or is soon to be, then her sexualized attack on Agatha at the end of the novel would suggest that Agatha, and not just Ada, is being wooed, linking Ada even more firmly with the monstrous. Read this way, Agatha's death might be interpreted literally, in which case she is consumed completely, as perhaps a symbol of Ada's perpetuation of the cycles of abuse that pervade the novel and her own past, or as a representation of the severing of Ada's final ties with civility and the world of humans.

Whatever Ada and Agatha's respective roles in the text (suitor and/or the one being courted), there is room to consider that Agatha is *not* killed and that consumption is rather *consummation*.

³⁴⁹ Calafell, 90.

³⁵⁰ Gish, 357.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 314.

The passionate, sexual language that, not only here, but throughout the book, is used when Gish describes Ada's desire for Agatha, is bloody, violent, and anthropophagic. If we are to understand the grey dog as a symbol for queerness, and its gifts as invitations into queer community and the realization of a queer authentic self, then Agatha's narrative is opened up to new forms of analysis that may position her as a closeted queer woman herself, one who is either killed before she has the opportunity to flourish or who is violently forced into outing herself.

Through its ambiguous ending, *Grey Dog* exemplifies the refusal of the Gothic to present concrete answers to the questions it poses, instead disguising and enfolding its various interpretations inside each other. Like *The Witch* before it, this obfuscation extends to its treatment of its protagonists' fate. Is Ada ultimately rescued by the grey dog, or is she consumed? Liberated from civilized society, yet robbed of a coherent sense of self, she is, arguably, both: rendered something new and monstrous that can be fully embraced by her beloved Nature, and which grants her the ability to sever her remaining ties to the world of civilized, Christian, heterosexual society.

The Salvation of Monstrous Nature in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*

Black nonbinary science-fiction, fantasy, and horror author Rivers Solomon links queerness, monstrosity, and Nature in faer³⁵² novel, *Sorrowland*, with particular attention paid to the ways in which wildness and wilderness characterize queer modes of being. These same modes of being are directly contrasted against the so-called civilized Christian world and form the basis of the protagonist—Vern's—emancipation from oppressive patriarchal structures. Likewise, monstrous Nature and Vern's own transformation into the monster, facilitate both the salvation

³⁵² As of 2025, Solomon uses the queer neopronouns fae/faer.

of Vern's segregated Black community when they are threatened by the United States government, and the recovery of lost Black histories from within that community when it emerges that Vern's monstrous gifts grant her the ability to inhabit the memories of long-dead community members. As in *Grey Dog*, *Sorrowland* exemplifies the characteristics of the emerging Ecofabulist subgenre within queer ecoGothic texts.

Raised within the isolated, Black-only compound of the Blessed Acres of Cain,³⁵³ Vern is a queer, intersex woman well aware of the ways in which she does not conform to the ideals of the culture into which she was born. As Vern describes, as early as her birth, she “transgressed bodily notions of male and female”³⁵⁴ with her enlarged clitoris. As a young adult reflecting on her experiences in Blessed Acres, Vern recalls the abuse she received, the source of which she sees as her own failure to conform:

Back at Cainland, she'd been able to drown properly. Not by herself, but with Reverend Sherman's help. All she need do was get herself in enough trouble, then he'd hold her under the lake until she went still. Seconds later, he'd revive her with his lips to hers. It was a punishment for girls like Vern, the ones who could never get along. Washing away the past, the bad urges, the bad thoughts, the bad inclinations. Whenever she came to on the shore in Reverend Sherman's arms, alive after all, it was hard not to see him as her savior, not to want to do everything to please him.³⁵⁵

Her relationship with the community, and particularly its religious leader—Reverend Sherman—is complex, for while she realizes as a young adult that much of what she experienced in Blessed

³⁵³ Vern eventually learns that the Blessed Acres (also called Cainland) was founded by a Black nationalist organization called CLAWS (Coloureds Against White Supremacy). In Blessed Acres, it is not the “White” Christian God who is followed, but the God of Cain, who CLAWS considered a separate deity. Solomon, *Sorrowland*, 81. Still later, Vern learns that the reason for Cainland's continued ability to survive was that it was actually being funded by the American government. Solomon, *Sorrowland*, 190-191.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 76.

Acres was horrific, her recollections are characterized by a longing and nostalgia for the simplicity of the compound's worldview.³⁵⁶

Nonetheless, as a girl Vern is chosen by the community's religious leader—Reverend Sherman—as his wife and is forced to bear his children. Stifled by the restrictive religious environment of Blessed Acres, and by her child marriage in particular, Vern flees into the woods to birth her children, “where animals ruled with teeth and claws,” and “such things [as bodily gender] mattered not a lick,” leaving behind her mother and brother in the process.³⁵⁷ Over her years in the wilderness, she teaches her twins that their father was not Reverend Sherman, but Vern's long-lost best friend, Lucy, creating a queer origin story for her family.

Eager to avoid the rote set of names considered appropriate within Blessed Acres, when Vern gives birth she opts instead to name her children Howling and Feral. She likewise avoids gendering either child. Both choices, for Vern, are explicit expressions of resistance and rebellion:

It made her happy to give them such improper names, because there was nothing good that was proper. Vern wished to make every moment of her life a rebellion, not just against the Blessed Acres of Cain but against the world in all its entirety. Nothing would be spared her resistance.³⁵⁸

Vern is intent on creating distance between her new family, human society, and Blessed Acres. This is clear not only through her particular choice of the names themselves, but through the

³⁵⁶ Vern also identifies her affinity for the drownings as a “masochistic” impulse within herself. Solomon, *Sorrowland*, 76.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 15.

rejection of civilized society that she expresses above. Early journeys to the road and the outskirts of human society are likewise made tentatively, so that when she does return to the woods she does so with a sense of homecoming: “One step, then another, then another, until her good sense came back to her. She turned toward the woods. That was where she belonged.”³⁵⁹ Indeed, over the course of the years Vern spends in the forest with her children, the family is so isolated from human society that her children come to believe the whole world is woods.³⁶⁰

While Vern’s experience of life in the wilderness with her children is in many ways idyllic, especially in contrast with the harsh realities of Vern’s life inside Blessed Acres, it is not uncomplicated. Vern is tormented by strange visions she refers to as “hauntings,” and a queer longing for companionship sees her seek out a lover in an older woman named Ollie, who aggressively pressures her into sex³⁶¹ before turning out to have been hired by the compound to return Vern to Reverend Sherman.³⁶² Hunger likewise requires that Vern kill other animals to survive and care for her children, something she abhors.³⁶³ More concerning still, as Vern matures the growth she experiences causes headaches and other pain. As Vern herself describes, “whatever had made her strong had also made her hurt. . . . There was a foreign body inside, making her over, and it was no accident.”³⁶⁴

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 109.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 74.

³⁶² Ibid., 83-89.

³⁶³ Ibid., 97-98.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 75. There is a degree to which Vern’s transformation may concurrently be read as a metaphor for puberty, and specifically in this case, a queer experience of puberty in a hostile context. Transformation in monster narratives is often used to suggest adolescent development and its horrors. The werewolf in particular is frequently employed in this way, which should not surprise given the monster’s associations with unwanted (or simply unexpected) hair growth, emotional volatility, and rapaciousness. In Vern’s case, monstrous transformation coincides with both adolescence and her rape by Reverend Sherman. Puberty, in the context of Vern’s forced marriage thus signals a very material burden and the enforcement of patriarchal, cisgender, and heterosexual norms. That monstrosity here

The transformation Vern describes is literal, for the parasite she alludes to gradually begins to alter Vern's physical form as growths warp her skeletal structure. Howling describes the changes to his mother's body as though, "Mam got flipped inside out," with her skin turning leathery, revealing her bones.³⁶⁵

The changes Vern undergoes connect her with the forest through a figure she refers to as the "godanimal":

The creature, bright white, contemplated Vern with curious hunger, its round eyes vast hollows. It was part animal, part god, and antlers twice its size protruded from its back like bone wings or calcified webs. Vern rushed to stand but tripped over her pants and drawers. . . . It smiled at her, hungry. 'I am pleased to meet you, Vern. I have been waiting,' it said, then galloped forward. A sound like a storm siren blared from its lungs, and the antlered beast engulfed her. . . . She threw one last punch, but it landed in the air. She was alone again, only the ringing in her ears from the creature's scream testifying to its earlier presence. Though nothing remained of its physical form, Vern knew something—something real—had been there with her. That creature was more alive than any of Vern's other hauntings. She'd felt an intelligence, a consciousness. It was somebody, and it knew her.³⁶⁶

As in *Grey Dog*, Nature is understood as both monstrous and divine. Here, the godanimal is both terrifying—something Vern must defend herself and her children against—as well as a sacred figure with whom Vern shares a deeper connection. When Vern's blood is examined through a

is also the means by which Vern survives and eventually thrives, does not preclude a reading of the experience of transformation as horrifying. For an analysis of female werewolves as metaphors for female puberty in particular, see: Hannah Priest, "I Was a Teenage She-Wolf: Boobs, Blood, and Sacrifice," in *She-Wolf: A Cultural History of Female Werewolves*, ed. Hannah Priest (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2015), 129-147.

³⁶⁵ Solomon, *Sorrowland*, 137.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 160.

microscope, it seems to confirm that, through her metamorphosis, Vern's own status—human, monster, or god—is becoming increasingly ambiguous.

Vern's transformation prompts Vern to decide to leave the forest with Howling and Feral, since she is worried that she is sick and that her children will die without her to protect them. After hitchhiking to a Mexican restaurant, Vern befriends two indigenous Oglala women—Bridget and Gogo—and becomes Gogo's lover. It is when Gogo—a trans paramedic—examines Vern that she determines the cause of Vern's transformation is a fungal infection. Gogo relates this information to Vern with reference to the sacred, joking that Vern is a “miracle,” to which Vern quips back that there is a “divine light glowing through the lens” of the microscope. Vern's infection is miraculous not only because the fungal species is unknown, but because the fungus has, according to Gogo, “ravaged” Vern's body, and yet Vern is still functional.³⁶⁷ The growth on Vern's back, which has developed humanoid characteristics so that it evokes the image of a parasitic twin, is a fungus in the process of fruiting.³⁶⁸ As Vern returns to the cabin in which she has been staying, she reflects on the realization that the monstrous godanimal she fought off was, in fact, a vision of her own future. Although the thought terrifies her, it reawakens in Vern a sense of her own potential: “Alone, Vern reveled in her aliveness. All this time she'd thought death was coming for her, but perhaps it was she who was death coming for everyone else.”³⁶⁹ A symbol of Vern's ability to resist, as per Vern's own manifesto, the monster god of the wilderness grants strength alongside the horrors it produces in the body. As Vern soon learns, however, the existence of the fungus inside her is a result of experimentation the White American government was conducting on the population of Blessed Acres.³⁷⁰ As much as this revelation is horrifying, however, the fungus connects Vern to the memories of Blessed Acres's forefathers and foremothers—including, seemingly, Vern's lost friend, Lucy. This connection is

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 175.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 176.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 178.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 190-191.

possible due to a mycelial network that links Vern with others (including the forest), to which the fungus's mycelium is connected.³⁷¹

The more time passes, the deeper Vern's connection with Nature grows:

Vern lay on the ground with only her base longings for company. She, with the vigor of a young god, fingered herself into oblivion. She did this every morning. Had done for the last month or two. . . . Before dawn, she tiptoed outside, undressed, and gave her body over to winter. For three weeks she'd been restricted to the cabin by debilitating pain. Finally free, she was always seeking out moments to taste the outdoors unbridled. When snow covered the ground, she gobbled packed clumps of it. When rain made puddles, she sucked up the brown water with lips and tongue. She ate roots and weeds and poisonous berries. Past selves sloughed off, forming a wake of human-shaped pelts behind her. Two-months in the mountains, and she was remaking herself anew. Vern grabbed a fistful of weeds with her left hand as she finished herself off with her right. Her head rocked side to side, and she called out, *God, God, God, God, God*. She was not invoking any known deity. She was calling unto herself, this new being emerging inside her. As if by her command, the sky opened up and it began to snow.³⁷²

Here, Vern is a monster god resplendent, her sexuality and affinity for the natural world part of the same network of identity as the monstrous form she is beginning to occupy.

As Vern comes into her own, the hauntings intensify and she describes being able to hear and communicate with the Earth, to be able to feed through the mycelia in her skin and crisscrossing the ground, and to sense the shape of things through that same mycelium.³⁷³ Reverend Sherman appears to Vern during one of these more intense hauntings, and reveals that he died of cancer and that the fungus only has the power to convey the memories of the dead, and that those same

³⁷¹ Ibid., 192.

³⁷² Ibid., 192-193.

³⁷³ Ibid., 193.

dead reside in the earth. Vern is devastated, since this must mean that Lucy is dead as well. “All along,” Vern reasons, “the fungus ate the brains of the dead who had hosted it, bringing them back to life in its mycelium.”³⁷⁴ It also continues to transform Vern. “With each passing day,” she describes, “she took a step further away from human. Not long ago, Howling had witnessed Vern’s passenger as a novelty. Today, he saw the fungus’s other side. There was no denying the monster in Vern. There never had been.”³⁷⁵ That growing monstrosity brings Vern closer to the godanimal in form, until finally Ollie (Vern’s earlier betrayer) returns with the godanimal—called Queen by Ollie—in tow. Ollie reveals that Queen is at least fifty years old and that she is one of the earliest inhabitants of Blessed Acres. Ollie and the government have been using the compound to breed a stable population that is susceptible to the fungus. Now, however, the compound and everyone inside it are in danger of being culled. Ollie sends Queen after Vern, but as the two race through the wilderness they are attacked by a human hunter. Queen saves Vern from the hunter, devouring him, and Vern flees. Later, Ollie and Queen return and take Vern captive using an animal tranquilizer.³⁷⁶

The American government may have made Vern a monster, but it has come back to haunt them as she uses her newfound ferocity to undo them. Now matured, Vern is able to allow her exoskeleton to burst free of her body at will, and she uses it to attack Ollie, eventually eating Ollie as the fungus allows her to come into “her true self.”³⁷⁷ Queen, indoctrinated by Ollie and traumatized at Ollie’s death, shoots herself in the head.³⁷⁸ When it is revealed on the TV that everyone in Blessed Acres is dead following a shootout with the government, Vern and Gogo are devastated,³⁷⁹ but Vern has also realized that her powers have the potential to heal, and she uses

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 229.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 251-252.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 311.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 319-320.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 322.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 334.

her abilities to revive everyone in the compound. With TV cameras trained on Blessed Acres, Vern works her magic.³⁸⁰

The novel concludes with Vern and Gogo in the woods:

‘I like the woods,’ [Vern] said. ‘In them, the possibilities seem endless. . . . I like to think the wild always wins. In the woods, it doesn’t matter that there is no patch of earth that has not known bone, known blood, known rot. It feeds from that. It grows the trees. The mushrooms. It turns sorrows into flowers.’ They both sat down, sweaty arm to sweaty arm. They remained until the woods were black but for patches of moonlight. They remained until they could hear the night calls of one thousand living things, screaming their existence, assuring the world of their survival. Vern screamed back.”³⁸¹

Throughout *Sorrowland*, the concept of the “wild” elides with that of the monster and of Black queer identity. Solomon makes this very clear when Vern explicitly wonders “if the fungus was Black. Born in Africa. A watchful spirit looking after her people.”³⁸² Acceptance of Vern’s monstrous fungal form is also a prerequisite to enjoying queer sex without the attendant shame or guilt she experienced previously. After expressing nervousness about sex with Gogo since the intensification of her transformation, Vern finally agrees to intimacy after Gogo suggests via touch that she actually admires Vern’s new form. Critically, Vern describes their sex as animalistic, the pair of them “no different than dirt or rotting logs, in no danger of becoming ether, of being raptured and stolen away from this moment.”³⁸³ Queer monstrous sexuality is here entwined with the novel’s conception of godhood and the sacred as being specifically anti-Christian, viscerally embodied, and Nature-oriented. Vern and the fungus make no space for the ephemeral, for even the hauntings—largely visitations of ghosts, and often visitations by

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 353.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 354-355.

³⁸² Ibid., 246.

³⁸³ Ibid., 262.

specifically queer and Black ghosts³⁸⁴—are made possible through the physicality of the mycelial network that connects the spirits to Vern.

An expression of the ways in which monstrosity can be salvific, both on a personal and a community level, is undergirded in *Sorrowland* by a sense of marginalized (specifically, Black and Black queer) suffering as residing within the Earth and of lost stories retained through a connection with the environment and the land.

In this way, Solomon's work runs queerly adjacent to what scholar Kinitra D. Brooks describes as "fluid fiction." According to Brooks, fluid fiction is, "a racially gendered framework that revises genre fiction in that it purposefully obfuscates the boundaries of science fiction/fantasy/horror writing just as black women confound the boundaries of race, gender, and class." The idea, in this case, is that pre-existing attempts at defining genre-defying works, such as the term "speculative fiction," risk obscuring the particularity and specific positionality of Black woman writers. Fluid fiction, a term coined by Brooks, is intended to draw attention to Black feminist authorship, as well as, following bell hooks, the creation of a literary "homeplace" within genre fiction. That is, "a place far away from the Western world's objectification of blackness," that, "creates a safe space in which black men, women, and children become subjective beings of agency." Works that fall into the category of fluid fiction, thus reject a White canon, constructing in its place a body of specifically Black literature in conversation with Black literature. Critical to fluid fiction, for Brooks, is the ability for Black women's fiction to sustain, "an antagonistic relationship toward the hegemonies of the white patriarchal constructions of literature that mark Canon formation."³⁸⁵

³⁸⁴ Two of the spirits Vern encounters include a pair of gay male lovers—Peter and Samuel—who died of AIDS and contracted the fungus. Vern is able to reunite them by linking hands with them and rendering them semi-corporeal. Before her eyes, their AIDS-ravaged bodies heal and the two lovers are once more able to embrace. Solomon, *Sorrowland*, 295-296.

³⁸⁵ Kinitra D. Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2018), 71-73.

In *Sorrowland*, I contend, a similar project is at work insofar as through its articulation of Black queer identity and the relationship of Nature, embodiment, and the sacred to that identity through the figure of the monster, Solomon participates in a similarly playful and creative project that uses genre-blending to reimagine and reinvigorate science fiction/fantasy/horror from a queer Black feminist perspective.

Toxity, Global Warming, and the Monster in *Wilder Girls*

In Rory Power's Young Adult novel, *Wilder Girls*, rather than focusing chiefly on a personal connection between queerness and wild spaces, as is the case in *Grey Dog* and *Sorrowland*, the author's queer interest in Nature is combined with a backdrop of global warming and environmental concerns. Power presents the monster as a means of securing the continuation of life in a post-apocalyptic future while allying the monster with queer and neurodivergent young women.

Wilder Girls takes place on an island boarding school called Raxter. The all-girl school is bounded by a wild and dangerous forest, where a sickness is spreading amongst—and physically mutating—the forest's flora and fauna, turning animals and plants hostile and aggressive. The sickness, called "the Tox," has spread to humans as well, killing most of the adults, and mutating the surviving students. The teenage girls experience the Tox through further "flare-ups" that sporadically transform their bodies in unpredictable and often horrifying ways. Over the course of Power's novel, her queer protagonist, Hetty, contracts the Tox.

Unknown to the protagonists, the island has long been the site of experimentation on the Tox, first to exploit the life-extending properties of the parasite that causes the sickness (and which is unique to Raxter) and later to cure the disease. It is implied that the girls were sent to Raxter with an understanding that they would become subjects in an extended study, and that the challenges

of raising neurodivergent and queer children influenced the parents' decision to send them. The lab that studies the Tox lies hidden in the middle of the wooded island. There, the remaining scientists struggle to cure an illness that kills cisgender men and adult women.

Since the school is located on the isolated Raxter Island, it is conceivable that the Tox could be contained. Yet at the end of the novel, Hetty, her love interest Reese, and their friend Byatt, escape the island on a boat, foreshadowing the spread of the Tox. Rather than heralding the end of everything, however, the girls' flight promises that should they spread the disease, the world they inherit will be one they can shape according to their own desires and needs. The Tox is framed alternately as horrifying and empowering. Although it transforms those it infects into monsters, the transformations allow the girls to survive, and it offers the promise of societal transformation once it is carried off Raxter Island.

Power links the Tox and its transformations in younger bodies, particularly cisgender women's bodies, with puberty. Perhaps obvious is the connection between the "flare-ups" and adolescence, which is further reinforced by descriptions of the flare-ups as seasonal, or cyclical, recalling descriptions of menarche and menstrual bleeding. The first description of a flare-up, experienced by Hetty's friend Byatt, notably emphasizes the presence of blood during the transformation: "I remember every second of it. How she bled through our old mattress until it dripped onto the floorboards underneath our bunk. How she looked more confused than anything as the skin over her spine split open."³⁸⁶ While exposed spines remain outside typical symptoms of puberty, the blood-soaked mattress is evocative of menstruation.

The connection is made even clearer when Hetty describes the age-breakdown of the school's population, and notes that the "youngest girls are thirteen now. Eleven when this whole mess

³⁸⁶ Rory Power, *Wilder Girls* (New York: Delacourte, 2019), 13.

began, and now it's [the Tox's] started to take them apart."³⁸⁷ After Byatt is confined to the lab at the centre of the island, a doctor notably asks her about her menstrual cycle, and whether it is regular. Byatt answers that the girls "lost them [their periods] after the Tox."³⁸⁸ Further interactions between Byatt and her doctor make it clear that the scientists working on a cure believe that adolescents infected by the parasite largely survive, while menopausal women and those assigned male at birth do not.³⁸⁹ The novel appears to confirm this theory, as the only two male characters in the novel both succumb to the Tox, killed outright before being transformed into zombie-like creatures. Reese's father (a teacher at the school) wanders into the forest and fuses with the native flora, only to attack his daughter when Hetty and Reese break out of the school to rescue Byatt.

Unlike the girls, whose transformations are horrifying but do not rob them of consciousness, Reese's father (called Mr. Harker) lacks such self-awareness. The nature of Mr. Harker's transformation further links him with death: "as he opens his mouth, he takes a long, rattling breath. Black, splitting teeth, and a nest of green at the back of his neck."³⁹⁰ The rattling breath and black teeth each recall death, and while the green is revealed to be a nest of vines that shoots from Harker's mouth to attack Hetty and Reese, the image of rot and decay recurs. Mr. Harker's hands are described as, "spongy with rot," "his skin peels off like strips of paper . . . soft and pulpy." As Hetty states very bluntly, "he's rotting from the inside out. Tissue mottled with mold."³⁹¹ Like the Raxter girls, Mr. Harker is also transformed into a monster, but while

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 17.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 171.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 172-173.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 212.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 213-215.

monstrosity grants the novel's female characters the possibility for self-definition and agency, Mr. Harker and the other adult and male characters are stripped of the authority they held in life.

While the focus on adolescents in a Young Adult novel should not surprise, Power makes it apparent that she is drawing a meaningful connection between the experience of puberty, and the transformations prompted by the Tox. Puberty, the Tox, queer awakening, and neurodivergence, are often addressed in the same passage throughout Power's work. Just prior to the first (and public) flare-up of a girl named Emmy, for instance, Hetty has the following exchange with Byatt (the object of her affections), and Reese (Hetty's eventual love interest): "She's [Byatt's] never liked us much, not since she complained that there were no boys on the island, and Reese gave her the blankest look I've ever seen and said, 'Plenty of girls, though.' It made something jump in my chest, something I can still feel at night when Reese's braid casts a rippling glow on the ceiling. A reaching. A wish."³⁹² The categorization of the feeling in Hetty's chest as a vague "something" rather than anything specific, frames it as a burgeoning emotional and sexual change in the same way that the physical changes of puberty (and the Tox) are experienced in the novel. Since her queerness is awakened alongside the Tox, the two become paired, inviting analysis of the Tox and its transformations as a form of social critique. The Tox, presented as undesirable, as a vector of internal and external changes rejected by (and positioned as hostile to) mainstream society, becomes a symbol of the queer female Other. That queerness is seen as potentially dangerous is underscored when Hetty relates how, when Reese came out to her, "it was like a weapon."³⁹³ While Hetty's description of Reese draws attention to Reese's ongoing hostility and tendency toward aggression, queerness itself here is framed as both deadly and disruptive. Notably, for instance, Hetty comments that Reese said "'Queer' . . . as though daring me to disagree."³⁹⁴ Queerness occurs as a disruption to the family in Reese's backstory, in which

³⁹² Ibid., 25.

³⁹³ Ibid., 87.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

it is suggested that Reese's mother left her, possibly as a result of Reese's sexuality.³⁹⁵ The combination of queerness, Reese's travel to the boarding school (albeit accompanied initially by her father) positions Raxter as akin to a gay conversion camp—secluded in order to promote normate behaviour while avoiding potential contagion (the spread of queer desires).

Similarly, Byatt's neurodivergence is linked both with puberty and the Tox. One of Byatt's first point of view chapters opens with a description of her experiences with compulsive lying, which began when she was ten.³⁹⁶ The language Byatt uses to describe her lying is similar to that by which one might use to describe a parasite. "Usually," says Byatt, "it was an accident. A lie I never set out to tell. A trick I never meant to play. I'd open my mouth, and something strange would come out, new and not mine. Like there was someone else inside . . . Anger, depthless and black, and I couldn't cut it out of me. Growing and growing until it was all I had room for."³⁹⁷ Notably, the Tox spreads visibly as a blackness on the surface of the organisms it infects: "every Raxter girl, fingers black up to her knuckles as the Tox takes her."³⁹⁸ Throughout *Wilder Girls*, Byatt wars with both the Tox, and her mental illness, with the two frequently conflated so that it is challenging to determine to which Byatt is referring. During one episode, the doctors are monitoring Byatt when she senses a flare-up:

Just before a flare-up, there's a moment. Hard to describe . . . but for me it almost makes it worth it. The pain and the loss, all of it a fair price for this. This strength, this power, this eagerness to bare my teeth . . . Calm down, I think. Hold it in. Only part of me doesn't want to. I can hear it snarling and

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 114.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 157.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 158.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 41.

low, telling me to go. Telling me this has always been inside me and that these doctors are trying to take it away.³⁹⁹

Byatt's description of the thing inside her—seemingly the Tox, at first glance—frames it as something that has always existed within her, uniting the Tox with her mental illness at a conceptual level. The passage is followed by a transformation in which Byatt gains the ability to scream, banshee-like, and injures the doctors. Rather than being horrified with herself, Byatt describes the flare-up as a “strength thrumming through my body . . . the gift the Tox gave me.”⁴⁰⁰

Over the course of Byatt's captivity, Byatt's perspective on the Tox shifts, with the suggestion that her feelings about her mental illness have also changed. While trapped in the lab, Byatt reflects on a conversation she previously shared with Mona. Mona suggested that Byatt would keep the mutation if she could. Byatt lies and says that she would not keep it, but in her internal monologue she reveals the truth: “Of course I would keep it. Because I think I'd been looking for it all my life—a storm in my body to match the one in my head.”⁴⁰¹ When Byatt finally realizes the existence of the parasite and its responsibility for the Tox, her feelings are conflicted. She calls it, “a violation, but a gift too. It let me find a reason for everything I felt . . . It let me match my body to my mind. Can thank it for that, at least.”⁴⁰² Byatt discovers the parasite when she has already been marked for euthanasia as the hospital staff evacuate the island. She experiences a flare-up that causes her skin to swell, and cuts herself open to find the parasite inside. The immediate sensation she feels after she removes the organism is notably not relief, but that

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 129-130.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 245.

“something is missing.”⁴⁰³ Byatt survives the doctors’ attempt to gas her, since the gas would have targeted the parasite (and killed both human and parasite in the process), yet when Hetty and Reese find Byatt she is left stripped of her awareness in a similar manner to Mr. Harker. When Hetty realizes that Byatt survived the gas because she removed the Tox, she comments that, “it’s like she came out with it. Her personality, her everything.”⁴⁰⁴ Unlike Reese and Hetty, who by the end of the novel have reconciled themselves both with their queerness and their new monster status, Byatt’s removal of the Tox (a stand-in for her neurodivergence) ultimately destroys her.

The Tox develops inside the bodies of the girls in unpredictable ways, manifesting in Hetty for most of the novel as a growth, and then a suppurating wound over one of her eyes. Reese, meanwhile, boasts “sharp, scaled fingers,”⁴⁰⁵ while the character Mona grows gills.⁴⁰⁶ Though the descriptions of the girls’ physical transformations are framed in horrifying terms *physically*, at various points Hetty and Byatt frame the transformations as essential to both their survival and their conceptions of self. During a lesson from one of their male teachers, Hetty and Byatt are brought on a fieldtrip to observe “Raxter blues”—a type of mutated blue crab unique to Raxter island that appeared in the years prior to Hetty’s arrival. The crabs, which are compared with girls’ infected with the Tox, are dissected to show their gills and lungs, demonstrating how the body adapts, “to give you the best chance it can,”—a sentiment that draws attention to the transformations experienced by Hetty and her friends, and foreshadows the changes they are experiencing as beneficial adaptations rather than entirely harmful mutations.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 347.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 39.

Metamorphosis in the environment is similarly framed positively by the characters. When Hetty and her friends are tasked with patrolling the forests outside the school, Hetty remarks that, “in the woods the Tox is still wild. No girls for it to pick at, so it got into everything else. Out there, it blossoms and spreads with a kind of joy. Unbridled and vicious and free.”⁴⁰⁸ As previously noted, the Tox is also positioned as somehow commensurate with the interior self, so that acceptance of difference, including sexuality and neurodivergence, becomes linked with acceptance of toxicity.

Throughout *Wilder Girls*, the adults on the island are constructed as an oppressive force. This manifests not only through the use of the girls’ bodies in their experiments, but also the managing of the girls’ inToxicated and disabled teenage bodies in the context of the school. Near the novel’s conclusion, Hetty and Reese force the Headmistress to confirm their suspicions about the nature of Raxter island and the girls’ purpose there. “‘We knew something was happening years ago,’” the headmistress explains,

‘they asked—the people from Camp Nash, the Navy, and the CDC—but it was only access they wanted. Just to test a few things here and there. But we weren’t expecting something like the Tox.’ It’s a lie and we can both tell. She knew. She new something was wrong and she kept us here anyway. ‘You mean you never thought it would put *you* in danger,’ Reese says. ‘But the rest of us, we were a risk worth taking, right?’

Here the girls’ are described as disposable, and indeed, the revelation that Byatt experiences in the hospital—that many Raxter girls have been brought to the lab to be dissected and killed in order to find a cure—seems to confirm this disposability. Hetty in particular experiences bias as a kind of restraint upon the body, noting early on that, “I . . . don’t like thinking of the sickest

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 51.

girls tucked away, don't like that there isn't room for everyone. And I don't like how every door up there locks from the outside. How, if you wanted to, you could keep someone in."⁴⁰⁹

At a surface level, the passage introduces the possibility of mystery—why the locked doors? What lies beyond them? How horrifying must the sickest girls' transformations be?—but more significantly, I read this observation as a microcosm of the novel's larger motif of confinement (the sick ward enclosed within the school, which is surrounded by a forest, which is isolated on an island). From the novel's opening, the girls, infected with the Tox, are constructed as dangerous Others who must be contained and not allowed to spread. The theme of escape—whether from the school, the lab, or the island—is therefore also positioned in relation to the girls' broader sense of autonomy. When Hetty and Reese discover Byatt, semi-catatonic in the yard outside the lab, for example, Hetty evaluates Byatt's escape from the physical confines of the lab as, "Byatt, with the end almost on her. Taking her body back. Coming out here, away from where they put her." It is Byatt's confinement, rather than the Tox, which is perceived here as stifling. To become monster, to become one with the Tox, is to survive, adapt, escape. To conform, to abide by the rules, is to perish.

In *Animacies*, Mel Chen uses affect theory to examine the treatment of matter in conversations around death, race, queerness, and disability. In her chapter, "Following Mercurial Affect," she looks in particular at rhetoric surrounding the concept of toxicity. She describes how "toxic" no longer refers only to the chemical, but also the personal, and brings to light language used in workers' manuals and guides that defines toxic persons as those who are "counterproductive." Similarly, she notes, "recent concerns about the toxicity of lead were especially charged in terms of race, sexuality, ability, and nation."⁴¹⁰ This increase in rhetoric of toxicity, specifically in an

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁴¹⁰ Chen, 190.

American context, is wielded “as an instrument of difference.”⁴¹¹ In the latter half of the chapter, Chen engages with the ways in which they themselves have been read as (and have self-identified as) toxic. In a literal sense, Chen’s decreased liver function due to possible mercury poisoning renders the urban environment toxic—perfumes, smoke, sunscreen, each seeps into Chen’s body, causing difficulty breathing and pain across the body. In a metaphorical sense, Chen’s behaviour is framed as becoming toxic, becoming mercurial: “I can radically lose compassionate intuition, saying things that I feel are innocuous but are incredibly hurtful. The word *mercurial* means what it means—unstable and wildly unpredictable—because the mercury toxin has altered a self, has directly transformed an affective matrix: affect goes faster, affect goes hostile, goes toxic.”⁴¹²

The framing of Chen’s behaviour and self as mercurial and toxic is not only rendered in negative terms, but also in positive ones that allow Chen the ability to reinterpret their relationship with matter. They describe, for instance, the intimacy they are able to share with their couch as one that highlights both the couch and their own body as “interporous,” and “interabsorbant.”⁴¹³ The usual boundaries between inside/outside, animate/inanimate, living/nonliving, and subject/object break down at the level of toxicity, and problematize what Chen’s study identifies as the hierarchy of animacy (that which is construed variously as “lively,” “mobile,” “active,” and “agentive”).

In *Wilder Girls*, the Tox breaks down binaries such as inside/outside, living/nonliving, and so on in much the same way as does Chen’s interpretation of toxicity. This breaking down of binary distinctions operates within the novel as a means of commenting on futurity, and the role of the

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 192.

⁴¹² Ibid., 201.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 203.

monstrous in collapsing outdated categories (“human,” “animal,” “plant,” “object”) that privilege an anthropocentric worldview. Many of the mutations in the novel construct the monster as a hybrid entity combining animal and plant (Mr. Harker and his vines, Mona’s gills, Reese’s reptilian scales). Comparisons are repeatedly drawn between the human characters and the animals of the island—the Raxter blues (crabs and a unique species of iris), that are used as an example of animal adaptation, draw a clear relationship between the Raxter girls and the nonhuman world. Descriptions of girls who turned violent after their transformations as “feral” further dissolve the illusion of a nature/urban and civilized/wild dichotomy. As Hetty narrates, following the revelation that a parasite is responsible for the Tox, the parasite is, “making us wild.”⁴¹⁴ That which is supposed to be, in an anthropocentric reading of the world, *outside* the realm of the human, has encroached on that most intimate human stronghold: the body. At various points, Hetty expresses a desire to have the Tox, and its parasite, removed. Yet, by the novel’s conclusion, she has learned that this is an impossibility—everything that made Byatt herself—that is, her *self*—was lost once the parasite was ripped out.

What Hetty *does* expel, in the novel’s concluding pages, is her human heart, vomited from her mouth. In the pages leading up to this expulsion, Hetty comments that her absentee military father “doesn’t live in my heart” in comparison to the close relationship Reese experienced with her dead father. The purging of her human heart, and the new heartbeat that replaces it, seem to suggest Hetty’s final abandonment of the human. Though the trio sails away from the island, it is not, as originally intended, in search of Hetty’s father. Instead, Hetty states that, “I don’t know where we’re going. I don’t know what’s next. But Reese’s heartbeat is steady in my ear, and I remember . . . how it was. The three of us together, and I’ll make it that way again.”⁴¹⁵ The emphasis on Hetty’s found family—Reese and Byatt—over her biological one, privileges both the queer and the monstrous, and proposes a queer futurity premised on the spread of the Tox.

⁴¹⁴ Power, 340.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 353.

Within the text, the Tox and its spread are explicitly identified as a consequence of global warming:

The year of the Tox is highlighted on one copy . . . ‘The average temperature of Raxter over time’ . . . And there it is—the climate changing, the temperature rising. I read once about creatures trapped in the arctic ice. Prehistoric, ancient things, coming awake as the ice melts. In Maine, on Raxter, a parasite slowly reaching into the weakest things—the irises, the crabs—until it was strong enough to reach into the wilderness. Into us.⁴¹⁶

Much of this is a supposition on the part of Hetty, yet it is the interpretation that lingers, and no alternative is given. Tox, as part of the hyperobject called global warming,⁴¹⁷ is shown to make apparent the lack of distinction between environment and individual, in much the same way that Chen’s reevaluation of toxicity destroys the easy boundary between outside and inside.

In *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton’s discussion of the viscosity of the hyperobject makes a similar point. Using the example of *The Matrix*, Morton argues that it is not Neo’s reality that dissolves when he eats the red pill, “but the subject that dissolves, the very capacity to ‘mirror’ things, to be separate from the world like someone looking at a reflection in the mirror—removed from it by a sheath of ontological glass.”⁴¹⁸ This same dissolution takes place over the course of *Wilder Girls*, revealing not only that the distinction between subject and world is

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 341-342.

⁴¹⁷ For a more thorough analysis of Morton’s concept of the hyperobject, see Chapter 4. Briefly, a hyperobject is an object “massively distributed across time and space” and that is so capacious it confounds human attempts to perceive it in its totality. Alongside global warming, the explicit focus of Morton’s study, they consider matter as diverse as styrofoam and nuclear fallout to be hyperobjects. See: *Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

⁴¹⁸ Morton, 37.

actively decaying, but that it was illusory to begin with, and that it is only by acknowledging the illusory quality of that distinction that we can abandon the anthropocene and enter the age of the monster. While Ada and Vern—the protagonists of *Grey Dog* and *Sorrowland*—personally reject the human when they embrace the monster, the protagonists of *Wilder Girls* reject on behalf of all people.

Gender, Contagion, and Fungal Futurity in *The Beauty*

Aliya Whiteley's novella, *The Beauty*, concerns a post-apocalyptic society in which all cisgender women have died following a devastating pandemic that causes fungal growths to populate inside the body. Prior to the spread of the disease, it is suggested, overpopulation and exploitation of resources led a small community called the Group to separate themselves from mainstream society and take root in a craggy coastal region of Devon, England, called the Valley of the Rocks. After the community is established, the Group (along with the rest of the world), is ravaged by a rapidly spreading disease that kills cisgender women, but leaves the men alive. With their women dead, the survivors of the Group cling to the memory of what was lost: woman, civilization, and a future for the human race.

The Beauty's protagonist, Nathan, is a storyteller for the Group, and it is through him that the Group weaves its own mythology and maintains a sense of community memory concerning the women they lost, and the establishment of the Group itself. At first the Group is hierarchical. Though they claim to have no leader, Nathan is quick to explain that a man named William, "is the person who gives advice that everyone listens to."⁴¹⁹ When the Group still contained some women, Nathan approached a character called Miriam and asked "what word we could give to him [William] that would explain that—maybe a new one, made from our mind? She threatened

⁴¹⁹ Aliya Whiteley, *The Beauty* (London: Titan, 2018), 4.

to chop my brain into bits and feed it to the chickens for being so cheeky. I still don't understand why."⁴²⁰ What Nathan misses is that any term to replace "leader" merely obscures the power held by that individual, reinforcing their authority by allowing them to claim they have none. The leadership role within the Group shifts over the course of the story, with Nathan often in conflict with whoever holds power. As storyteller, he is able to exercise a certain degree of autonomy outside the strictures of the Group rules, since no one is able to predict what he will say during his evening stories (even if they instruct him to avoid or emphasize certain topics), and because he is skilled at veiling his true meaning through metaphor and allegory. Nathan remains a threatening figure to each of the successive Group leaders throughout the story.

The first true group conflict is also the inciting incident for the rest of the narrative. When peculiar mushrooms begin sprouting from the graves of the dead women, Nathan takes it as a sign, "of change, of regeneration,"⁴²¹ explaining to William that he would like to name the mushrooms and tell stories about them to the Group. William resists, but as the story progresses, the mushrooms on the gravesites grow into womanlike shapes. Curiously, some of these women grow from burial sites in the woods, where no woman is known to have been interred. Later, we learn that Nathan's uncle Ted killed and buried several travelers to avoid them joining the Group and causing grief with their inevitable deaths.

The mushroom women, who Nathan names the Beauty, awake a compulsive and irresistible arousal in the men, and each of the men pairs off with a Beauty. Half-mushroom, half-human, the Beauty do not possess heads or mouths with which to talk, though the rest of their bodies are exaggeratedly female:

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 3.

The ground shudders and from the hole climbs a thing. A woman. A thing. It is yellow and spongy and limbed, with a smooth round ball for a head. It is without eyes, without ears. I press myself against the rough wall as it emerges and stands like a human, like a woman. It has breasts, globes of yellow, and rounded hips that speak to me of woman, of want, and that disgusts me beyond words.⁴²²

Nathan's immediate disgust is replaced by an intense desire, and excitement. He shares this excitement with the Beauty, who does not communicate with him using conventional language, but through a kind of shared sensory and psychic connection that exists only between one Beauty and its specific human. The relationships between the Group and the Beauty are at first largely pleasant, according to Nathan. Nathan in particular frames his relationship with his Beauty, whom he calls Bee, as both maternal and sexual.

In Nathan's stories, he begins to weave a new Group mythology around the Beauty, framing them as an inevitability, as the *raison d'être* of the Group. In his new Group cosmogony, Nathan emphasizes the loneliness of the Group prior to the coming of the Beauty: "Deep in the bones and brain there was loneliness, in a world of seed and egg, of bee and flower, of pairs. To be a man was to find a hole inside and know it could never be filled. Until the coming of the Beauty."⁴²³ This is met with hostility from William and several other Group members. These men reject the Beauty, resisting the intense compulsion to copulate with their bonded pairs, who shadow the men in a state of dismay.

In Part Two of the novella, we learn that the Beauty "have taken over the heavy tasks, the unpleasant ones. They farm and chop without complaint."⁴²⁴ In contrast to the exaggeratedly

⁴²² Ibid., 20.

⁴²³ Ibid., 51.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 34.

female qualities with which Nathan identifies the Beauty in the beginning, the Beauty are now taking on the traditionally male roles of a patriarchal society. Even the construction of the Beauty's role during sexual intercourse begins to take on a more rigid and stereotypically masculine character: "the Beauty simply touch, mould, demand the comfort of our bodies at any time, blocking out all other thoughts."⁴²⁵ Despite the tone of Nathan's statement here, he bears seemingly no hostility toward the Beauty, embracing them as a symbol of hope.

Anger toward the Beauty grows, with some complaining that Nathan's evening stories about the Group are lies. The Group's doctor, Ben, accuses Nathan, stating that, "it hasn't all been a journey towards meeting the Beauty. It hasn't all been a straight road leading to dawn. We didn't come to the Valley of the Rocks in order to meet and meld with these—walking mushrooms!"⁴²⁶ Violence later breaks out when two men kill one of the Beauty. In retaliation, the Beauty abandon the Group and wander into the forest, until the men responsible are publicly beaten according to a new set of rules. Further change occurs, as men increasingly begin adopting traditionally female dress. At first, they express hesitation and shyness concerning this behaviour, but eventually the practice becomes widespread.⁴²⁷ This practice foreshadows a physical transformation in the men of the Group. A man named Thomas is impregnated by his Beauty,⁴²⁸ and as Nathan examines Thomas's naked, gravid body, he observes that his "balls are shrivelled like walnuts, tiny, in a wrinkled pouch that nestles under a tiny worm of a cock."⁴²⁹

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 69.

After Thomas has given birth to his yellow, humanoid, daughter, he suckles her from the pouch at his side from which she was born, admitting later that he was impregnated by his Beauty, called Betty, through the orifice that has opened up in his side: “Betty has a long thin yellow tube that comes out of it. Between its legs. And it puts that in there. It feels like nothing I’ve ever felt before. So good. I couldn’t stop it. I don’t want to. It’s like when I come with my cock, but ten times stronger. And longer. It lasts for minutes.”⁴³⁰ The lines between man and woman, man and Beauty, continue to be blurred, first through the figure of Thomas, but later the other members of the Group. As Nathan witnesses of Thomas, his original genitals have further degraded, to the point that he sees, “only a hairless flap of skin, like the medical books said a woman should have, but then I see the stub of his cock, no more than a nub. There are no balls in the remains of the pouch beneath.”⁴³¹

The Beauty display a capacity for violence following the birth of Thomas’s daughter, Holly. Believing her in danger from the doctor, they crush the doctor’s head. Further threats against Holly (real or simply perceived) lead to the deaths of several more of the men. The Beauty of the dead Group members ostracize themselves from the community, forming a perpetual ring around the village and humming in seeming communication with each other. The Group begins calling them the Unloved, and Nathan, now pregnant himself, formulates a plan to leave the Valley of the Rocks with Bee to find human mates for them. When Nathan attempts to leave, however, his uncle Ted tries to stop him. Nathan calls to Bee psychically, and she and the other Beauty kill Ted’s Beauty. The Unloved carry Ted—injured and vulnerable—into the forest. Months later, Nathan makes good on his plans to leave the Group, though now he has decided not to return, but to find a place to make a better life for his family (Nathan, Bee, and their unborn child).

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

The fungus is, from the start of the novel, attached to sex and gender through its association with the womb: “Miriam died early, one of the first, with the yellow fungus thick on her nose and tongue. It crawled out from her womb and down her legs.” The descriptions of womanhood and of femininity are fairly essentialized in this way throughout the novella’s first pages, and issues of queer identity and gender/sex distinctions go unaddressed. Nathan’s response to the initial appearance of the Beauty—intense sexual desire coupled with a longing for maternal affection—further suggests his conception of “woman” is severely limited, lacking a sense of women as individuals rather than archetypes, as objects that fulfill male desire. When Nathan thinks of women, he thus often describes them according to component parts: “there might be men in laboratories with tubes and eggs making fresh women, golem women as Doctor Ben says sometimes. It makes me picture white rooms with pink limbs, breasts and heads, pinned to long tables.”⁴³² Though this description prompts nightmares in Nathan, it is not so different from his descriptions of the Beauty, quoted earlier, which emphasize these same features, and provoke *both* disgust *and* desire. In fact, the Beauty are not so unlike the golem women of Nathan’s nightmares—“breasts, globes of yellow . . . and rounded hips that speak . . . of woman.”⁴³³ Their function is reduced to that of sex objects, of surrogate mothers.

At first, Bee is described as having “feminine hands,” as walking “with a sway of its soft yellow hips.”⁴³⁴ Though Nathan’s conception of “woman” deifies her, it is through this deification that she is rendered Other and disempowered. Even his most generous descriptions, which push back against the emphasis on cisgender women’s bodies, essentialize women as child-bearers:

⁴³² Ibid., 9.

⁴³³ Ibid., 20.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 20-21.

This loneliness I feel is of the womb, borne by women. I was sixteen when they all died and I thought I understood this loss, but it comes to me that I didn't know what women gave to the world. It wasn't about their lips, their eyes, or the gentle quality of their voices. It was about the way that all men are a part of them. And now we are part of nothing.⁴³⁵

That Nathan conflates longing for his mother with sexual desire, is clear from one of the stories he tells the group, in which he describes his first meeting with Bee. In Nathan's story, "he recognized the form and smell of woman. His memories were returned to him in that aroma, in the pendulous feel of the breasts, and it was as if his mother had returned to him, as if all womankind had returned."⁴³⁶

One level of storytelling in *The Beauty* emphasizes these essentialized understandings of gender and sex in order to critique violence against women, as well as patriarchal institutions that position women as naturally subservient. At this level, the development of the Beauty's role in the Group may be read as a reversal of patriarchal norms, in which women (the Beauty) gradually take on the authoritarian roles once occupied by their fathers and husbands. Read in this way, *The Beauty* becomes a revenge tale—Uncle Ted's maiming and kidnapping at the end of the narrative, in this case, can be read as an act of retributive justice for the women he murdered and buried in the woods.

Many of the transformations the men of the Group undergo, position them in the traditional "place" of cisgender women—Thomas experiences something like pregnancy-related depression, expressing that "I hate it and I want it out of me. It drains me . . . It makes me so ugly" when

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 29.

Nathan speaks to him about the coming baby,⁴³⁷ and later experiences post-partum depression, despite his love for Holly.⁴³⁸

The shrivelling of the men's genitalia is perhaps one of the most glaring examples of male transformation in *The Beauty*, and one that might be read as a direct "gender reversal," as it positions the Beauty as examples of the *femme castratrice*. In Barbara Creed's seminal study of psychoanalysis, the monstrous-feminine, and the horror film, Creed builds on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to describe the ways in which the cisgender female body is constructed as commensurate with the abject body. As Creed explains, most horror films position the cisgender woman's body as abject body *par excellence*. "The fully symbolic body," Creed explains of Kristeva, "must bear no indication of its debt to nature . . . the image of woman's body, because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and consequently is more likely to signify the abject."⁴³⁹

The Beauty demonstrate many of the features Creed identifies as specific to the monstrous-feminine. Like the archaic mother archetype in Creed's analysis, the Beauty demonstrate, "total dedication to the generative procreative principle."⁴⁴⁰ The Beauty are, at least in Nathan's initial estimation of them, "a monstrous womb" insofar as the fungal infection that killed the original, human women, resided in the womb. Most especially, the Beauty castrate, as is the subject of the second half of Creed's analysis. The becoming-woman that the men of the Group experience as part of their transformations manifests as a gradual castration, the final result of which is the utter shrivelling of the genitals. As Creed notes, "when male bodies become grotesque, they tend

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁴³⁹ Creed, 11.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

to take on characteristics associated with female bodies.”⁴⁴¹ Reading the Beauty as *femmes castratrices* further aligns with Creed’s analysis of castration in the context of the rape-revenge tale. In a reading of *The Beauty* as a revenge story that reverses gender roles in order to critique the status of women in patriarchal culture, the castration of Thomas, and eventually Nathan and the others, appears to make sense.

Yet *The Beauty* is less simple than is immediately apparent in its configuring of gender and sex. While Nathan does initially construct “woman” as an essentialized figure, the transformations the Group experiences, while horrifying, are continually framed as hopeful, and Nathan’s own transformation is described in his own words as a movement away from the rigid form of masculinity represented by Ted. In embracing his transformation, physical and emotional, Nathan opens himself to a reconsideration of sex and gender that represents the promise of the continuation of humanoid (though not human) life on earth. Indeed, it is not only cisgender male identity that is problematized and expanded by the fungus, but cisgender female embodiment, since in order for the Beauty to live, traditional womanhood must die. This reconsideration of sex and gender positions the monster as the vehicle of queer futurity.

Language of hope pervades *The Beauty*. One of Nathan’s richest descriptions of that hope occurs when he and Bee touch hands for the first time: “They brush my mind and I feel hope, that most ethereal of entities. The thing has hope. Or maybe it is my hope, amplified and appreciated; hopes for a world where we have a place, a meaning, a future. Where we all fit. Tessellate.”⁴⁴² Despite the restrictive language of “woman” that Nathan elsewhere uses to describe the Beauty, he notably sheds “she” in his discussion of hope, in favour of the gender-neutral “they.” The language of tessellation, which recalls later instances when the Beauty appear to act as a

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴² Whiteley, 22.

collective, or during which Nathan communicates psychically with Bee, seems to originate from Bee itself—a mental nudging that Nathan experiences within its own mind, but which capitalizes on feelings of hope and despair Nathan was already wrestling with. It is an image that recurs in Nathan’s description of the Group’s altered way of life following the acceptance of the Beauty. “We have all settled into a pattern,” explains Nathan, “we tessellate. It’s all I ever wanted, and yet it’s not everything. The pattern stretches only so far. . . . the future is a horizon—a faintly visible line that may promise much, and always remains too far away to touch.”⁴⁴³

This is not the only way in which Bee alters Nathan’s perspective. The very name, “Beauty,” is inspired in Nathan as a reclamation of a word and idea that he knows his mother found constricting and oppressive. In his internal monologue, Nathan describes the new “Beauty,” Bee, as “not inaccessible or frightening. Everything it thinks, feels, wants and needs is open to my discernment. Beauty is a word that has a different meaning for me now and I am glad to have reclaimed it.”⁴⁴⁴ Bee is part of Nathan’s hope for the future, just as Holly and Nathan’s own unborn child become symbols of hope for Nathan and the Group.

Hope is thus bound up in the acceptance of the monster, the Beauty, and the collapse of traditional gender norms, and gender essentialism. The breakdown of the gender binary occurs not only through the bodily transformations of the men, but through the men’s choice to adopt modes of behaviour considered feminine, and through Whiteley’s increasing use of language of being filled and penetrated to refer to the experiences of the men of the group (especially Nathan and Thomas).⁴⁴⁵ Notably, William, one of the men to reject the Beauty, mocks Thomas’s choice

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 46-47.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁴⁵ Nathan’s story about the Beauty filling a hole inside man that could not otherwise be filled is one of many such statements that opens itself to alternative readings. Nathan likewise uses language of penetration in reference to Thomas, framing his attempts to comfort Thomas as “penetrating his misery,” and again when he refers to knowledge

to wear a dress, calling it “disgusting.”⁴⁴⁶ The attitudes of William and Ted (another failed leader figure) are framed in the novel as backwards, as hostile not only to the will of the Beauty, but to the potential for a future. Similarly, when Nate and Ted argue about Nate’s storytelling, Ted accuses of Nathan of being “less than” a man, claiming that the Group would not survive any longer if the Beauty left, because they have become “weak.” Nathan responds in narration that, “it comes to me that maybe I don’t want to be a man.”⁴⁴⁷

The conversation is prompted in part by an argument over Nathan’s mother, and her relationship with Ted, who was controlling. Nathan accuses Ted of wanting to protect the Group from the very thing that will save it—the Beauty. “You want to . . . protect us from what could be terrible and beautiful and all the things in between,” Nathan argues, “the things that live on and live on. But maybe we want to live on with the Beauty. Maybe we don’t want your protection.”⁴⁴⁸ In the final pages, when Ted is expelled from the Group and carried into the forest by the Unloved, Nathan stands up to him one last time, telling him, “I am no longer a boy.”⁴⁴⁹ Though the statement applies in part to Nathan’s establishment of himself as an adult, instead of the child Ted seems to think him, it can also be read in two further ways: Nathan is no longer a boy in that his gender is no longer so simple, and he is no longer a boy in the sense that he is not human.

That Nathan himself is no longer human is addressed more overtly in two places in the novella, and is again linked with hope and futurity.

that can’t “penetrate the skin.” See: Whiteley, 51; 67-68.

⁴⁴⁶ Whiteley, 47-48.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 99.

Toward the end of the novel, for instance, after Nathan has become pregnant, he vomits up a “stringy” yellow vomit that “tastes of mushrooms.”⁴⁵⁰ During the second instance, Nathan contemplates the reaction of the Group to Thomas’s pregnancy:

The older men: they all think there will be no baby and they hate the idea that there could be hope. Because hope takes the form of a joining rather than a continuation. We will meld to grow. Part human, part Beauty. Could anything be more wonderful, more terrifying? The offer of salvation in the form of a baby who is not a baby.⁴⁵¹

Nathan’s disappointment that the older men do not understand expresses dismay at a more generalized fear of change, and more significantly, a fear of the necessity and inevitability of change. The initial movement to the Valley of the Rocks was just such a change, framed as a personal and community choice on the part of the group to seek a less polluted and overpopulated environment in which to raise their children.⁴⁵² This second change, from binary, patriarchal society, to a nonbinary and monstrous society, further solidifies underlying themes concerned with our own futures, and the immediacy of the need to change in order to survive global warming and create a more sustainable and inclusive future. It is an inherently queer future, one that resists the essentialist categories of man, woman, and human.

In *The Beauty*, the nonhuman, in the form of the monster, intentionally triggers the metamorphosis that marks the end of the human category.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 13.

Conclusion

While all four Ecofabulist works under discussion here flirt with concepts of annihilation (whether of self, community, or world), ultimately what is expressed within them is more complex than a use of the monstrous to describe a queer temporality focused on mortality. Instead, in line with Jack Halberstam's observation that, "Queer time . . . is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing,"⁴⁵³ these works problematize a view of identity and worth that privileges heteronormative and cisnormative family structures and ways of being. By allying queerness and monstrosity with wilderness, Ecofabulist stories stretch the capacity of queer people to tell and participate in modes of storytelling that resituate (or replant) queer/monster identity as intimately and innately compatible with the Natural world.

In *Grey Dog*, Elliott Gish's lesbian protagonist, Ada, maintains a deep affinity with Nature from childhood through to adulthood. It is this affinity that forms the basis of her relationship with the monstrous grey dog and through which she expresses her sense of difference within the context of the insular community of Lowry Bridge. Marked as Other because of her queer attractions, as well as her academic interests, monstrosity becomes not just a facet of Ada's identity, but the only available means through which she can authentically express herself and her desires. The novel's conclusion, which sees Ada abandoning Lowry Bridge and human civilization for the wilderness, speaks to the ways in which the monster is increasingly used in radical/resistant monster texts as a means through which queer characters (and their authors and audiences) are encouraged to reject heteronormative and cisnormative institutions and calls to propriety and civility in favour of wild modes of being and identification with the wilderness and the untameable.

⁴⁵³ Halberstam, *A Queer Time*, 2.

Similarly, in Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*, faer protagonist Vern's only means of escape from her abusive context is flight into the woods. Once there, Vern transforms into a monster with the power to ensure the survival of both she and her children. Vern's choice to raise her twins without a concept of binary gender, as well as to name them according to Natural themes, speak to the ways in which both Vern and *Sorrowland* as a text marry queerness (specifically, in this case, Black queerness) with an interest in the salvific potential of monstrous Nature. It is notably only once Vern has come to terms with her new (and ever-changing) monstrous body that she becomes powerful enough to confront those responsible for abusing both her and her fellow victims in Blessed Acres, and it is through her affinity with Nature that she finds solace at the novel's conclusion.

Rory Power's *Wilder Girls*, a Young Adult horror novel, ends rather than begins with apocalyptic pandemic. In her work, Power emphasizes the transformative potential of the monster, and the attending threat to normate culture presented by her queer, neurodivergent female characters. The state of infection is coupled with monstrous potentiality in the bodies of its female characters, with slippage occurring between the categories of illness, infection, disability, and the monstrous. Although the novel presents the transformation of its characters as horrific, it maintains a tension between the girls' desire to be cured and a radical acceptance of their new monstrous (and contagious) bodies. As the few adults on the island abandon their experimentation on the Tox and the affected children, the novel's central characters rebel against their caretakers, fleeing the island, and presumably spreading the virus.

The ultimate revelation of the novel, that the Tox implants a parasitic (though perhaps symbiotic) organism into the bodies of its hosts, underscores the ways in which monstrosity and Nature combine with the girls' marginalized positionalities in a way that allows them both to survive and to adapt. The fact that, when one of the novel's protagonists successfully removes the parasite from her body, her individuality is lost alongside it, suggests that monstrosity, neurodivergence, and queerness are inseparable. To refuse one's monstrosity—one's radical difference—is to become silent. In the novel, perceived monstrosity (due to non-normative

sexuality, neurodivergence, *et cetera*) provides the excuse to justify segregating and experimenting on the novel's teenage protagonists, but it is the girls' embodied monstrosity that allows them to finally escape the strictures imposed upon them. Rejecting the monster in this case is expressed as a rejection of the self, with freedom residing in the acceptance of one's own hybrid nature and decision to violently transform the rest of human society (notably, neither of the two cisgender male characters in the novel is able to survive the Tox, with the implication that, should the parasite spread, the society that emerges may well be composed only of people assigned female at birth).

Wilder Girls thus combines a speculative exploration of Earth's future, with a critique of the systemic oppression of women and minorities. Not only does the monstrous empower Power's characters with a newfound capacity to affect and transform their environment and society, but it also gestures toward the potential of apocalypse itself to act as a catalyst of widespread environmental and societal change. Nonetheless, *Wilder Girls*, emphasizes the radical violence heralded by the emergence of its monster heroines—the tearing down of established institutions and their attendant consequences for women and minorities—is rendered in Power as a bloody process.

Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty*, meanwhile, situates itself in the post-apocalypse, in the wake of a plague that has gradually killed all cisgender women and left fragmented bands of cisgender men (and, one might assume, trans women) behind to attempt to survive in the wake of the collapse of Western society. The Group followed by Whiteley witnesses the deaths of their wives, mothers, sisters, and other female relatives. Hope is attained in the novella only with the advent of the monstrous. When the Beauty emerge from the graves of the deceased women and gradually prove to be capable of interbreeding with human beings, the offspring that result from the human-fungal relationships present an opportunity for the Group's (former) humans to start anew in the post-apocalyptic landscape. Significantly, transformation through sexual intercourse with the Beauty transforms the Group's members so that their physical bodies not only becomes

queered, but so that they, too, become monstrous. It is only through embracing these new, monstrous, queer embodiments that the Group's members are able to thrive.⁴⁵⁴

All three of these works employ elements from a variety of horror and speculative genres, including, but not limited to, body horror.⁴⁵⁵ As Xavier Aldana Reyes argues, “Queer body horror has a penchant for change and growth, emphasising the importance of difference, and above all, its acceptance, enabling us to rewrite our lives, to understand ourselves as fluid subjects in transition.”⁴⁵⁶ The acceptance of difference—one's own and/or another's—in the Ecofabulist works under discussion, does not here negate the sense of threat posed by the monster to mainstream society, but instead forms part of a radical mode of acceptance that involves a complete rejection of the societal structures that attempt to impose fixed, hetero and cisnormative modes of being on the texts' protagonists.

Chapter 4

⁴⁵⁴ Aliya Whiteley, *The Beauty* (Titan Books: London, 2014). *The Beauty* and *Sorrowland* are examples I identify elsewhere as being part of a related emergent trend—an increase in representations of what I call the fungal imaginary. Such works focus on monstrous fungi, viewing them through a quasi-salvific lens that associates them with an ecocentric mysticism with the potential to both rescue and destroy human life. Another work that intersects with both Ecofabulism and the fungal imaginary is Jenny Hval's *Paradise Rot*. Elliot, Mason. “Nature: Monsters, Modernity, and Mushrooms,” in *A Cultural History of Monsters in the Modern Age*, ed. Jeffrey Weinstock. (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

⁴⁵⁵ Xavier Aldana Reyes defines body horror as, “a subgenre of horror concerned with the maiming, destruction, transformation or grotesque exaggeration of the human body.” Aldana Reyes, 1.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

Human is a Stronghold that Hides a Weakness”:⁴⁵⁷

Hyperobjects and Monster Futurities

*“‘Do you ever wonder,’ she asked the shapeshifter, ‘what it would be like not to live in the world of humans?’” – Jeff VanderMeer, *Dead Astronauts*.⁴⁵⁸*

*“Something about being is inherently spooky, disturbingly uncertain.” – Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*.⁴⁵⁹*

Introduction

The end of the world is a monstrous business. As the slow apocalypse of global warming, given name by Andrew McMurry in 1996, seems to barrel toward its inevitable future (not itself a precise, teleological end point so much as an imagined new status quo, unsteady in its particulars), monsters and the rest of us must reckon with their potential place in the emergent environmental landscape.⁴⁶⁰ McMurry’s articulation of this contemporary reality calls us to

⁴⁵⁷ Jeff VanderMeer, *Dead Astronauts* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019), 259.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴⁵⁹ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 175.

⁴⁶⁰ Andrew McMurry, “The Slow Apocalypse: A Gradualistic Theory of the World’s Demise,” *Postmodern Culture* 6, no. 3 (1996), ProQuest.

contend with the promise of the slow apocalypse: that the world we know is already ended, and that whatever version of earth emerges through the *process* of apocalypse will be so strikingly different from our own as to render the survivors (humans, nonhuman animals, plants, and landscapes) potentially unintelligible, certainly unthinkable, to contemporary humans.

Recalling T. S. Eliot, McMurtry takes to task thousands of years of human eschatological and apocalyptic visions:

We have wrongly expected the end of the world would provide the high drama we believe commensurate with our raging passions, our bold aspirations, and our central importance to the universe—we are worthy of a bang, not merely a whimper. And let me be blunt: by holding out for that noisy demise, we can pretend we haven't been expiring by inches for decades.⁴⁶¹

It is a sentiment echoed in the work of Lorenzo DiTommaso on apocalypticism.⁴⁶² In his, “The Apocalyptic Other,” DiTommaso outlines the ways in which a Christian apocalyptic worldview is incommensurate with (indeed, hostile to) environmental conscientiousness. In his perspective, this worldview regards nature as the ultimate Other, as something that is to be discarded along with the dissolution of the old creation, as foretold by the Revelation of John in the New Testament. Gesturing to the work of John Muir, Rachel Carson, and others, DiTommaso describes contemporary environmental movements as part of an environmental revolution—the fourth revolution in a list of similar such scientific turns that have radically questioned the centrality of human beings in the grand narrative of Earth's history.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁶² Lorenzo DiTommaso, “The Apocalyptic Other,” in *The “Other” in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, eds. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 221-246. See also DiTommaso, “Apocalyptic and the Environment: A Reply to Warren S. Goldstein,” forthcoming in *Critical Research on Religion*.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 243.

Likewise, according to Timothy Morton, “it is helpful to think of global warming as something like an ultra-slow motion nuclear bomb.”⁴⁶⁴ And, like a nuclear bomb, our perception of global warming is experienced piecemeal—never in its totality, though we are always operating within that totality—but as though we were seeing the explosion first, only later hearing the sound, and still further into the future recognizing the effects of the blast's radiation upon landscape and body. Seemingly discrete moments—the Australian wildfires of 2019-2020; more frequent and devastating floods in Bangladesh;⁴⁶⁵ and recent deadly flashflooding in Texas⁴⁶⁶—are mere tips on the proverbial iceberg of global warming's occluded whole. Global warming is omnipresent—something we are inside of, even as it seems to loom on our horizons.

The slow, painful, and gradual extinction that is articulated by these and other authors can be construed as a radical transformation that is reflected in the transformative potential of the monsters that populate speculative climate fiction such as that of science fiction and horror author, Jeff VanderMeer. VanderMeer's *Borne* trilogy contends with the spectre of global warming and the future of human and nonhuman animal life on Earth, while using the figure of the monster to imagine post-climate change futures for their marginalized characters, many of whom are nonhuman animals. Critically, they position the monster as the vehicle of a transformation that will simultaneously alter and save society, while arguing for use of the radical/resistant monster as a means of reconceptualizing our relationship with the environment. As in other radical/resistant monster narratives, the marginalized monsters in these works do not eschew the horrifying, sometimes violent aspects of the social monster in order to reform society.

⁴⁶⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 125.

⁴⁶⁵ See K. Maudood Elahi, “Climate Change and Health Impacts in Bangladesh,” in *Climate Change and Human Health Scenario in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Rais Akhtar (New York: Springer, 2016), 205-219.

⁴⁶⁶ “Did climate change worsen Texas floods? Yes, study suggests,” *CBC*, July 8, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/weather-climate-floods-texas-1.7578905>.

Instead, they depend on the intrinsically abject qualities of the monster-Other to interrogate long-held beliefs about normative bodies and personhood in order to critique systemic, contemporary abuse of nonhuman animals and the human-authored destruction of our planet. VanderMeer uses a monstrous lens to redescribe human, nonhuman animal, and artificial bodies as chimeric forms that combine elements of the organic and the mechanical and which are intimately entangled with their environments. The revelatory act of *being* in such stories is inherently monstrous at its core.

VanderMeer's work, which takes place in a world almost unrecognizable as our own (and, indeed, may in many ways not be our own), is an example of the radical/resistant monster at both its most transformative and its most destructive. The nonhuman animal characters represented through his chimeric monsters occupy a quasi-salvific, numinous role within their texts, demonstrating both an intimate and personal relationship to a monstrous divinity, and the power to occupy the roles of cosmic creator-destroyers themselves. In this way, VanderMeer's nonhuman animal characters engage on a deep level with the numinous possibility of the monstrous articulated by Beal.⁴⁶⁷ By approaching the notion of the monster in this way, VanderMeer thus participates in the broader trend of marginalized identification with the radical/resistant monster and its violent/transformative potential.

The *Borne* trilogy allies this rendering of the monstrous with an interest in social justice causes related to environment and futurity. From this perspective, survival is contingent upon monstrosity. Like the slow apocalypse of global warming, *monster* is a process. It is the constant threat of metamorphosis that nips at the heels of our ontological categories and definitional strategies, and that threatens the separateness of the environments and subjects those categories purport to delineate. What better tool, then, than the monster, through which to communicate and wrestle with the inescapable and unknown realities of living on a damaged planet?

⁴⁶⁷ Beal, 53-54.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen gestures toward this potential. In his seventh and final monstrous thesis, “The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming,” monsters are described “as our children.” By invoking the “becoming” of Deleuze and Guattari, however, Cohen’s parenthood *becomes* a kind of reproduction not by filiation but via epidemic, infection, and contagion. According to Deleuze and Guattari, epidemic is the *modus procreandi* of the vampire and the werewolf. “The vampire,” Deleuze and Guattari explain, “does not filiate, it infects.”⁴⁶⁸ Humans experience a “becomings-animal” through infection and the formation of packs, not family or State structures. Categories once safely delineated begin to break down, and a process of dangerous transformation takes their place. The space in which this occurs is the territory of the monster, and the metamorphic quality and capacity of the becomings-animal is also a *monstrous* quality and capacity.

Writing (and re-writing) post-pandemic, when COVID-19 has so recently threatened our health and livelihood from outside the apparent safety of our homes, it is not hard to imagine how infection and epidemic could be understood as both eschatological event and monster. Certainly, as the destabilization of our most sacred and previously immovable institutions is called into question, I am forced to wonder if this is not the end of *a* world, or *some* worlds. And, if it is an end, is it also a kind of monstrous potentiality—a new beginning that requires radical and systemic transformation, the hybridization of categories and systems, the disemboweling of academy, government, healthcare, economy? Is it a monstrous end that we, perhaps, desire, fear, and even need?

⁴⁶⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 241-242.

This is the conception of the end of the world that is articulated in the novels and novella analyzed in this chapter. VanderMeer understands eschaton as simultaneously generative and destructive. This in itself is hardly revolutionary— it is, after all, the point of the Revelation of John’s “new creation.” The means by which VanderMeer construes the agency of the event via destruction and generation—that is, through the violence and fecundity of the monster—gestures toward the kinds of rehabilitating monster narratives that I examine throughout this dissertation.

Used as tools to differentiate the privileged category of the human against perceived threat, monsters tell us about the fears of a society or an individual, and what a culture may consider immoral, polluting, or abject. They likewise speak to our desires, however hidden, and gesture toward a hungry curiosity for the novel and the unfamiliar – or, perhaps, the familiar reassembled in new and unfamiliar ways. In their grotesque mode, monsters serve as a means of social critique, revealing the hypocrisies embedded in (and in bed with) our assumptions about our worlds and the worlds of others. They also, according to Cohen, ask us questions about “how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward expression. They ask us why we have created them.”⁴⁶⁹

Here, the monster is a hermeneutic tool of self-evaluation that holds its creator to account. If the object of this study is the act of misrepresentation, its interpretation and reinterpretation, and redescription through the shifting discourse of the monstrous, this chapter considers how the figure of the monster has been re-purposed, both as a tool through which to reevaluate our assumptions about human experiences, and as one that brings into focus nonhuman animal exploitation, and the potentialities of the future of all species on our planet. While the reclamation of monstrous figures and identification with the monster in the works analyzed

⁴⁶⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 3-25.

throughout this study so far is made on the part of marginalized *homo sapiens*, this chapter argues that the radical/resistant monsters is likewise being mobilized by human authors to address nonhuman animal oppression. VanderMeer's *Borne* trilogy, under investigation in this chapter, is differentiated by its concern, not with a coming apocalypse that will see the monster triumphant (e.g. the promised zombie apocalypses of Liang's *Delicate Bodies*), but with apocalyptic events that have already occurred, and an implication that any form of survival requires the oppressor to reckon with its marginalized and monsterized Others.

Monsters are, through their participation in the process of "becoming," harbingers of possible transformations, and the promise or threat of things still to come or to be undone through ontological change. It is in this capacity that, at least in part, monsters function as spectres of what may be called "earthling futurity" in the works under discussion in this chapter. As a result, monsters speak the unspeakable, representing that which cannot be fully comprehended. Monsters are used to imagine the future of the planet and its inhabitants and to gesture toward fruitful ways of reimagining human and nonhuman animal relationships.

The end of the world *is* a monster's business.

Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects, and Monster Futurity

Following the thread of unspeakability, or more precisely of excess (that which exceeds the capacity of the thinker to perceive it fully), I read the monstrous in Timothy Morton's concept of the *hyperobject*. Morton envisages global warming⁴⁷⁰ as what he calls *hyperobjects*.

⁴⁷⁰ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 8, presents a compelling case for his privileging of "global warming" over "climate

Environmental destruction—global warming, climate change, and mass extinction—are all, Morton explains, “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.”⁴⁷¹ The hyperobject is that which is simply so vast that humans are unable to perceive or contemplate it in its totality. One way to represent such a phenomenon is through the body of the monster, with its messy (re)assemblage of forms that exceeds categorical definition.

It is no accident, then, that Timothy Morton, in their exploration of the hyperobject, identifies their examples as inherently monstrous and demonic, while simultaneously signaling the ways in which the exploration of both monster and hyperobject is a fruitful means of de-centering the human. As Morton notes, “the contemporary philosophical obsession with the monstrous provides a refreshing exit from human-scale thoughts.”⁴⁷² For Morton, the monstrous holds the potential to help us conceptualize the nonhuman. Indeed, to reckon with the idea that something totally nonhuman, something so outside our capacity to imagine it or *think it*, might exist. Characterized as viscous and nonlocal, hyperobjects are platonically demonic in Morton’s conception: “they appear to straddle worlds and times, like fiber optic cables or electromagnetic fields.” Like the villainous, inhuman monster, Bob, from David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks*, hyperobjects are agents both pro/intruding into reality and operating within reality.⁴⁷³

change” by drawing attention to the many ways in which the latter terminology allows both left and right-wing speakers to suggest that the climate has always been changing, thus feeding denial of the urgency of the dangers we face.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁷² Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 64.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 29.

Hyperobjects are also expressed through recourse to nonhuman animal metaphors, described by Morton as, “disturbingly squishy and mollusk-like.”⁴⁷⁴ In many ways, they collapse the concept of the human or animal in their entirety, refusing to participate in the maintenance of categorical distinctions increasingly rendered redundant by the revelation of just how much slippage there is between humans and other organisms. As Morton describes, “when I pick a blackberry from a bush, I fall into an abyss of phenotypes, my very act of reaching being an expression of the genome that is not exclusively mine, or exclusively human, or even exclusively alive.”⁴⁷⁵

What Morton draws attention to, and what forms an underlying assumption in the fictional worlds of Jeff VanderMeer, is the recognition that human and nonhuman bodies are ever in a state of flux themselves. Even at a molecular level, we exchange particles with other objects (living and non-living) all the time. It is a sentiment found also in the work of Mel Chen, whose examination of human and nonhuman animals includes a consideration of how our bodies dwell in a constant relationship of exchange between living and non-living matter.⁴⁷⁶ Considering the human as a category in constant flux, whose soft and permeable boundaries are revealed through its interrelationships with other matter, combines well with concepts of transgression and metamorphosis common to monsters and monster theory.

The works of Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt, and others, use monstrous figures as ways of addressing, representing, or coping with, global warming.⁴⁷⁷ In their introduction to the “Monsters” section of their edited volume, *Arts of Living*

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Chen, *Animacies*.

⁴⁷⁷ See: Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gun, and Nils Bubandt, eds, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and Donna J.

on a *Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, Tsing et al. relate how monsters can serve as metaphors to describe both the experiences of transformation felt by human and nonhuman animals during the Anthropocene, and the imminent danger of global warming:

the monsters in this book, then, have a double meaning: on one hand, they help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements; on the other, they point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man. Monsters ask us to consider the wonders and terrors of symbiotic entanglement in the Anthropocene.⁴⁷⁸

Similarly, Donna Haraway, in rejecting the term “Anthropocene” itself as inadequate to fully describe the messy, multi-species relationships between humans and nonhumans in our present, invokes monsters she calls the “Chthonic ones.” The Chthonic ones, “replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair . . . romp in multicritter humus but have no truck with sky-gazing Homo.”⁴⁷⁹ These figures, which she explicitly distances from

Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016).

⁴⁷⁸ Tsing, et al., M2.

⁴⁷⁹ Haraway, *Staying*, 2. Certainly one might take issue with Haraway’s reasoning, for it potentially obscures human responsibility for global warming, even as it attempts to rhetorically reframe our current relationships with nonhuman animals. Haraway is not unique, however, in rejecting or critiquing the term Anthropocene, though the majority of those who take issue with it do so, in contrast, out of a rejection of its centering of a colonialist, White worldview. In Aandaxjoon Sabena Allen’s comparison of White settler depictions of the Anthropocene with Lingít narratives that reframe the ways in which human and nonhuman animals relate to one another and the Earth, Allen critiques the concept of the Anthropocene on the basis of its universalizing force, as well as its positioning of “apocalypse” as a unique experience. According to Allen, the genre of the Anthropocene is one that presupposes that a White apocalypse will be experienced identically for all peoples (and beings) across the globe. She further contests that when Anthropocene works engage with Indigeneity it is typically for the purposes of mining Indigenous knowledge for the benefit of White settlers. This knowledge extracted, Indigenous people(s) and the characters who represent them in film and literature are almost always considered only insofar as they embody a racist

understanding of Indigenous peoples as being *of* Nature rather than inside it. It is not uncommon for fictional stories about the Anthropocene to mourn Indigenous people(s) as always already lost, such as in the satirical disaster movie, *Don't Look Up!* (2021). According to Allen, the film features a romanticized portrayal of Indigenous characters living in the wilderness in full regalia or partially clothed, just before they are tragically killed in a comet strike. Similarly, concerning John Green's essay collection, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (2021), Allen argues that, "Rather than offering alternative spaces or ideas, the Anthropocene itself becomes fetishized as a beautiful yet tragic experience. This still buys into the uniqueness of this 'crisis' while ostensibly providing a message of (White) hope." Allen critiques Green on the basis that the book ignores Indigenous experiences of apocalypse in favour of focusing on the ways in which global warming presents a threat to the American Dream. Through its pessimism, Allen argues, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* both catastrophizes our contemporary period and promotes a lack of individual responsibility for global warming that absolves White people from a sense of culpability. Aandaxjoon Sabena Allen, "Raven Evades the Anthropocene: Whiteness, Indigeneity, and Environmental Disaster," *Wicazo Sa Review* 36, no. 2 (2021): 81-97; 86. Similarly, Ruba Salih and Olaf Corry critique the universalizing impulse they locate within the discourse of the Anthropocene as one that is ultimately only concerned with settler lives, since in the context of Palestinian refugees and other displaced people(s), genocide and apocalypse have already happened or are ongoing. Ruba Salih and Olaf Corry, "Displacing the Anthropocene: Colonisation, Extinction and the Unruliness of Nature in Palestine," *Nature and Space* 5, no. 1 (2022): 381-400. See also: Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). The fact that, for many Indigenous people(s) globally, the apocalypse has already happened (thus rendering the threat of human-made global warming an apocalyptic event focused specifically on White people), is a subject taken up in Anishinaabe author, Waubgeshig Rice's postapocalyptic novel, *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. In the context of the novel, while White, urban populations struggle to survive in a landscape they lack the knowledge to traverse, Rice's Anishinaabe characters enjoy a resurgence of traditional ways of life. *Moon* also features the anthropophagous wendigo, a monster that its characters do not ally with, but that instead is symbolically linked to Whiteness and colonialism in the text. This, too, is in a sense a reclamation of the monster, but instead of recuperating the monster as a source of identification, Rice reestablishes Anishinaabe authority over the figure, which has a history of being appropriated by Western, particularly White, artists. I would contend that, alongside food culture, monster culture is one of our most intimate expressions of ourselves and our way(s) of interfacing with the world. Since monsters express, in negative, what is valuable to a given person, group, or culture, alongside what they might desire, repudiate, and fear, monsters are cultural artifacts with especial weight. To claim and cannibalize someone else's monster for parts, when done crudely and in the context of colonial enterprise, is therefore arguably a demeaning action. Reclaiming the monster in this case, can mean reasserting cultural connectedness and a re-rooting of the monster according to its traditional characteristics. Waubgeshig Rice, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (Toronto: ECW, 2018). Timothy Morton themselves presents a rebuttal to objections of the use of the term "Anthropocene" in Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a*

the similarly monstrous Cthulhu of H. P. Lovecraft,⁴⁸⁰ inform her choice of “Chthulucene” to describe the multi-species entanglements that characterize our contemporary moment. These entanglements and the hybrid organisms that find themselves entangled might otherwise be called “chimerical visions,” according to an earlier frame of Haraway’s that makes explicit the role of hybridity (or the chimerical) the ways that seemingly singular individuals (humans, dogs, bio-engineered mice) are actually composed of multiple forms of life and are caught in a messy web of interspecies and interobject relations.⁴⁸¹ The Chthulucene is, for Haraway, “the dynamic ongoing symchthonic forces of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake.”⁴⁸² That is, Haraway insists upon reading temporality (past, present, future) as a series of multi-species events, or assemblages. The continued relationships between species are what is threatened by environmental degradation: habitat loss, pollution, global warming, and so on.

Haraway herself reimagines the future potential of these multi-species entanglements in her concluding chapter to *Staying with the Trouble*. In this chapter, Haraway, filmmaker Fabrizio Terranova, and scholar Vinciane Despret each posit a future society whose members genetically fuse themselves with primarily endangered nonhuman animal and plant species in order to better understand nonhuman animal experience, and to memorialize extinct and soon-to-be-extinct

Logic of Future Coexistence (New York: Columbia UP, 2016), 14-16. For my own part, while acknowledging the challenges of the term, I do not understand global warming as something caused by uniquely Western peoples, which I am concerned engages in a (perhaps accidental) orientalizing of non-Western Others that homogenizes all people of colour into a kind of pristine, idealized noble savage. Nonetheless, the critiques raised are important ones, at might point to the ways in which “Anthropocene” should be used; that is, we might apply it to the kinds of contexts and stories Allen dissects, as well as discussions of international actors and forces who have contributed to global warming.

⁴⁸⁰ Haraway., *Staying*, 101.

⁴⁸¹ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, *Staying*.

organisms.⁴⁸³ These societies practice a kind of becomings-animal that multiplies itself not through biological reproduction (which is limited in order to avoid resource depletion), but through a process not unlike the contagious reproduction of the vampires and werewolves conjured by Deleuze and Guattari. The humans who willingly modify their bodies with nonhuman animal DNA are visited in a set of several generational stories. For the purposes of the art project, Haraway and her collaborators name each of these successive characters Camille. In the story of Camille 2, the authors describe how, “as a coming of age gift the second Camille decided to ask for chin implants of butterfly antennae, a kind of tentacular beard, so that more vivid tasting of the insects' worlds could become the heritage of the human partner too, helping in the work and adding to the corporeal pleasures of becoming-with.”⁴⁸⁴ This process of “becoming-with,” or sympoiesis, is infectious (in Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the word), but gradual.

The monstrous nature of the hybrid Camilles is rendered in Haraway’s art as simultaneously beautiful and freakish, and the reactions of non-hybrid humans to the first generation of Camilles is correspondingly mixed: “because symbionts were still rare . . . in vulnerable moments nonsymbiotic children and adults could and did feel the symbionts were freaks, both more-than-and other-than-human, and seriously threatening.”⁴⁸⁵ As in the monster narratives examined so far, Haraway’s invocation of the monster to express a hope for a more environmentally conscious future positions the monster as both a rallying figure and a source of trepidation and threat. The threat is made against the status quo of human social structures and the impact of human societies on the environment. At a biological level, the Camilles fundamentally destabilize the integrity of the human as something set apart from nonhuman animals and the environment. What is key to the Camille stories is the promise of Haraway’s imaginative future

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 134-168.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 149.

and the ways in which the hybridity of the Camilles gestures toward new ways of reading present and past. Human and nonhuman animals, and their environment have ever been deeply entangled.

Jeff VanderMeer's science-fiction trilogy, examined in a later section, makes use of the monster in a similar way. In the *Borne* trilogy, VanderMeer uses the monster as a means of discussing nonhuman animal lives and drawing attention to the possibility of the discourse of monstrosity to destabilize the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman animal. Monstrosity here, as elsewhere in the works analyzed in this dissertation, becomes a vehicle for imagining not simply marginalized experience, cognition, repression, and resistance, but also the role of the monster in a future irrevocably transformed by the nonhuman animal. As with most speculative fiction that is set in the future, these works talk about that future in order to talk about the present.

The Problems of Anthropocentrism in Imagining the Nonhuman Animal

In the introduction to his essay and short fiction collection, *Monstrous Creatures*, Jeff VanderMeer observes that

the monstrous is the intersection of the beautiful with the strange, the dangerous with the sublime. Things that seem to be continuously unknowable no matter how much you discover about them. That surround themselves with darkness. Sometimes, too, they are utterly terrifying, no matter how you try to keep that thought out of your head.”⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ Jeff VanderMeer, *Monstrous Creatures: Explorations of Fantasy through Essays, Articles and Reviews* (Bowie, MD: Guide Dog Books, 2011), 9.

Notably, VanderMeer invokes the monstrous here, not to describe King Kong, Dracula, or the monstrous state of the economy, but to describe nonhuman animals: “mega-fauna, breadfruit, wolverines, sea cucumbers, sloths, rhinoceros beetles—the list of things I find amazing trends toward the monstrous.”⁴⁸⁷ It is no surprise, then, that VanderMeer’s explorations of nonhuman animal cognition and experience in *Borne*, *The Strange Bird*, and *Dead Astronauts* looks to the monstrous to express modes of being outside VanderMeer’s experiential purview. Through his nonhuman characters, VanderMeer uses the monstrous to voice criticism of human exceptionalism and draw attention to real-world cruelties perpetrated both directly and indirectly against nonhuman life.

What is critical to VanderMeer’s representation of nonhuman characters is that he avoids attempts at the anthropomorphism that is common to fictional portrayals of animal experience, instead placing emphasis on his work as *interpretation* front and centre in the trilogy itself. He likewise does not reduce the use of nonhuman animal characters to metaphors for purely human experience. The use of the monstrous in particular, maintains in the texts’ presentation of its nonhuman animal characters a sense of the alien, the unknowable, the radically Other. This sense of the alien emphasizes rather than diminishes the degree to which VanderMeer’s work seeks to translate something of nonhuman cognition to the reader and places the emphasis of his work on the interrogation and fragmentation of the category of the human itself. Perhaps surprisingly, VanderMeer achieves this effect in part through a metafictional self-awareness that any attempt to translate nonhuman perspectives through a human medium (author, novel, novella) will necessarily fall short. In VanderMeer’s work, the monster thus threatens the status quo within the fictional world it inhabits, while simultaneously threatening the sanctity and security of real-world categories and norms.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 9.

The significance of avoiding both anthropomorphism and the reduction of the animal to a metaphor for the human is perhaps best expressed through the work of Carol J. Adams, J. Jack Halberstam, and Sunaura Taylor.

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol J. Adams's seminal work in the field of animal studies and animal theory, Adams coins the phrase “absent referrent” to express something of the way in which nonhuman animal metaphors obscure the lived realities of the animals they invoke. According to Adams, “the absent referrent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning.”⁴⁸⁸ Adams explains that animals become absent referrents in three ways: 1) through the *literal* killing of animals, particularly livestock animals, since they are absent in death, 2) by creating an absent referrent (the dead animal) *definitionally* through our reclassification of animals as “meat,” which obscures the fact that an animal has been killed in order to create meat, rendering absent the animal that has been killed, and 3) through the use of nonhuman animals to metaphorically refer to human experience. For example, in the case of livestock animals, animals become absent referrents in metaphors that, for instance, describe a woman's experience of sexual objectification as “feeling like a piece of meat.” As Adams explains, one cannot truly feel like a piece of meat—an inert object that lacks sensation.⁴⁸⁹

This phenomenon is not, of course, unique to animal metaphors, but for my purposes here, acknowledgment of the history of the use of fictional nonhuman animals to describe human experience highlights the ways in which VanderMeer's work stands apart from the usages

⁴⁸⁸ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 21-22.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

discussed by Adams. I argue that metaphors which rely on the absent referent participate in a process of gentle coercion that subtly distracts from the suffering and oppression of the object-rendered-absent. This process is compounded by a tendency on the part of humans to care only about animal death or suffering when that suffering impedes human systems (usually systems of economic production), or when the animals in question display supposedly human traits.⁴⁹⁰

Sunauro Taylor makes this point clear in her analysis of animal activism and disability when she describes the efforts of sympathetic humans to free two ASL-speaking chimpanzees, Ally and Nim, from the research laboratories where they were confined, on the basis of their “human like” ability to communicate through language. As Taylor points out, chimpanzees whose ASL use was not widely known or who did not demonstrate ability with ASL, did not receive the same level of public sympathy, and were not freed.⁴⁹¹ The emphasis on the human world, and the tendency of humans to express concern for animals only when those animals display supposedly human traits, or when humans are directly impacted as a result of animal exploitation, betrays a discomfort when confronting the reality of animal oppression and suffering. When animals cannot communicate with humans, or when humans refuse to acknowledge the reality of nonhuman modes of communication, nonhuman animals can be safely rendered silent—inaccessible (and often unseen) Others upon whose bodies violence can be enacted guiltlessly and with impunity. The inability of nonhuman animals to be more human is seen as an inherent failure, while rare examples of animals displaying so-called human behaviour or emotion are

⁴⁹⁰ Concerns over human, rather than animal welfare, drive many calls for surface-level amelioration of slaughter methods. For instance, as Sunauro Taylor demonstrates in her analysis of disability and animal rights, Obama’s 2009 ban on the killing of “downed cattle,” was informed not out of concern for the cattles’ well-being, but by research linking the slaughter of downed cattle to an increased risk that the cattle carried mad cow disease. Rather than having a positive, if unintended, effect on the well-being of cattle raised as livestock, however, the ban merely encouraged slaughterhouses to further abuse nonhuman animals in order to force them to stand. Sunauro Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 36-37.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 48-49.

rewarded or applauded for an assumed exceptionalism, as in the case of Ally and Nim. Taylor further links the hierarchization of nonhuman animal ability, with social attitudes that display ableism toward disabled human beings:

As we have seen, people justify eating animals—and using and killing animals more broadly—with ableist standards that create hierarchies of value based on mental and physical abilities. People also justify it through ableist conceptions of the natural and of dependency, which suggest that there is a depoliticized thing called “nature” that determines what kinds of bodies and minds are exploitable and killable, and that excuses using those who are weaker and dependent for our own benefit.⁴⁹²

Taylor’s attack on the “natural” and upon classifications of certain behaviours and abilities as human or nonhuman contributes further to the collapsing of these categories and toward a critique of the category of the human. Monsters, by virtue of their uncategorizability, are set up as inherently unnatural, and the linkage between the monstrous and humans who have failed to live up to the standard of what can be called “humanness” (whether according to ability, behaviour, class, race, gender, or sexuality), has been made clear elsewhere in my analysis.

That nonhuman animal characteristics have likewise been deployed to communicate the degree of monstrosity should not surprise—the monster body is, after all, so often rendered monstrous by virtue of its combination of human and nonhuman animal traits. The creature in *The Shape of Water* and its inspiration *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, as well as perennial favourites like the vampire and werewolf, all look to the nonhuman animal to construct the monster body. That the classification of specific human populations as animalistic has been used as a justification for their subjugation is well-documented, yet as Taylor asserts, though we must question the use of the nonhuman animal as a metaphor for the Other, we must also question why

⁴⁹² Ibid., 200-201.

the comparison of humans to nonhuman animals ever became the Othering insult *par excellence*.⁴⁹³

According to Taylor, ableist attitudes and an enshrining of the “natural” are embedded in the anthropocentric underpinnings of these types of comparisons. While describing her experiences as a disabled vegan guest-speaker at philosophical and art event, Taylor notes how the event was rendered doubly inaccessible to her. Taylor and her husband were unable to attend the art portion of the event due to its staging on an inaccessible floor, and the two main courses for the event were meat and dairy-based. A special meal was prepared for them. “I was,” Taylor explains, “about to expound to a room full of omnivores the reasons for choosing veganism, and I felt keenly aware of how this food would be read—as isolating and different, as creating more work for the chefs, and as less filling than the other dishes.”⁴⁹⁴ These negative attitudes toward accommodation, Taylor argues “led [her] to focus on the ways in which animal oppression and disability oppression are made invisible by being rendered as simply natural: steers are served for dinner and disabled people wait downstairs.”⁴⁹⁵ Taylor’s work seeks to problematize the use of nonhuman animal metaphors as a means of Othering humans, both in order to destabilize racist and ableist ideologies, but also to draw attention to animal suffering, and the ways in which Othering discourses that target a variety of populations are entangled with one another. This entanglement often reinforces the exploitation and abuse of multiple groups through its positioning of oppressed populations as hostile to each other.

VanderMeer’s use of monsters to express nonhuman animal suffering turns traditional patterns on their head, since it merges human, nonhuman animal, plant, and mechanical subjectivities to

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 103-110.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 155.

interrogate the validity of the categories themselves and directs attention specifically toward nonhuman animal suffering through these chimeric hybrids. The Otherness of animal cognition is laid bare for the works' human readers through the use of that ultimate Other—the monster—in framing animal subjectivity. While any attempt to definitively and accurately depict animal subjectivity is doomed to failure, what is at stake is less the question of whether humans can access that subjectivity, so much as the question of whether humans should care about animal suffering and exploitation *regardless* of difference, even radical difference. Empathy, in a technical sense, may not always be possible when the nonhuman does not share human signifiers of pain or other emotions, and so perhaps, the method of generating human action against animal exploitation must shift to one based in a caring-for and caring-about, that does not require direct empathy rooted in shared and observable human-specific emotion.⁴⁹⁶

Such a shift would incorporate a movement away from the anthropocentrism critiqued by scholars like Timothy Morton, Mel Y. Chen, Donna Haraway, Sunaura Taylor, and others. Difference, expressed as radical and total in VanderMeer's fiction, through the figure of the monster, channels human discomfort with the non-normative to create a new site of care for the nonhuman Other, while simultaneously refusing to jettison the threatening and dangerous qualities of both monsters and nonhuman animals.

The mapping of human stories onto animal bodies is widespread, and in a Western cultural milieu such mappings typically use the figure of the animal to support a normative ideology. In Jack Halberstam's examination of the 2005 documentary film, *The March of the Penguins*, for example, Halberstam analyzes the documentary for the ways in which *March* frames its seemingly nonhuman subjects in distinctly human, and normalizing, ways. Specifically,

⁴⁹⁶ Sunaura Taylor describes a similar approach in her discussion of a feminist ethic of care. *Ibid.*, 206-207.

Halberstam interrogates the film's emphasis on romantic love, individualism, and the heteronormative family unit. As Halberstam explains:

Heterosexual reproduction, the most insistent framing device in the film, is never questioned either by the filmmakers or the critics. Indeed, Christian fundamentalists have recently promoted the film as a moving text about monogamy, sacrifice and childrearing . . . despite the fact that the penguins are only monogamous with their mates for one year, and that they promptly abandon all responsibility for their offspring once the small penguins have survived the first few months of arctic life.⁴⁹⁷

Halberstam goes on to further dismantle the normate animal mythology constructed by *March*, through an examination of the ways in which the film obscures aspects of penguin behaviour that contradict the heteronormative and ruggedly individualist messages of its themes and framing. As Halberstam further states, “most biologists observe 'nature' through a narrow and biased lens of socio-normativity and they therefore misinterpret all kinds of biodiversity.”⁴⁹⁸

Although Halberstam is correct to interrogate the ways in which media like *March* obscure specifically queer and communal behaviours among nonhuman animals, an approach that explicitly links nonhuman animal behaviour with *human* counter-normative (queer, non-monogamous, communally-oriented) behaviour and social structures must take care not to reinscribe human values and social systems upon nonhuman animal worlds, even when that reinscription works toward the furtherance of non-normative activist projects in human society. Queer appeals to Nature that use observable nonhuman instances of same-sex coupling and

⁴⁹⁷ Jack Halberstam, “Animating Revolt/Revolting Animation: Penguin Love, Doll Sex and the Spectacle of the Queer Nonhuman” in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, 265-281 (New York: Routledge, 2008), 269.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

relationships to naturalize queer *human* behaviour also run the risk of ignoring a potential for reading nonhuman animal behaviours and assemblages on their own terms, rather than according to human desires. As a queer person myself, and as Sunaura Taylor makes clear in her analysis of disability and animal rights, I would further add that searching for confirmation of the Naturalness of queer identities and relationships places dangerous emphasis on an imagined and idealized concept of Nature that suggests queer identities and relationships ought *not* to be accepted or respected were they not Natural. The relative naturalness of a given behaviour, identity, preference, or relationship (human and nonhuman alike) becomes yet another hierarchizing tool to reinforce the normate and to separate desirable from undesirable modes of being.⁴⁹⁹

Rendering animal experience in fiction (including as documentary, which likewise fictionalizes its subjects), must engage with the disorienting “weirdness,” the inaccessibility, of nonhuman animal lives. It is in this respect that the monster is particularly useful as a mode of entry, for “monster” is constructed as a category of opposition, flux, and ever-receding distance. As we have seen, monsters have traditionally been relegated to the margins—both geographically (now, cosmically, as is clear from the abundance of alien invasions and alien encounters in our fiction) and societally.⁵⁰⁰ While monsters can be frighteningly proximate, in that they communicate and

⁴⁹⁹ This, of course, reveals a further tension that exists in terms of the perspective of Ecofabulist works. However, I tend to read the efforts of the subgenre as oriented toward re-situating queerness, rather than superimposing it upon Natural landscapes, ecologies, or nonhuman animals. It achieves this through an awareness that queer people are already a part of the same multi-species entanglements discussed in this chapter, rather than beings set apart. In *Grey Dog*, for example, it is not that Ada Byrd ventures into the forest, sees two does copulating, and experiences validation of her sexuality. Rather, Ada has always recognized herself as being part of Nature, and the courtship she experiences further entangles her in the ecosystems that surround her.

⁵⁰⁰ Historically, it has been common practice to imagine that monsters reside in the most peripheral realms imaginable—distant continents, polar landscapes, and untamed oceans. European travellers’ chronicles and compendia from Antiquity onward have pushed the limits of these peripheral worlds further and further from familiar shores, as explorers mapped and catalogued the flora and fauna of so-called new worlds. In a contemporary

represent intimate details of the human (what we fear, what we desire, what we dream), they similarly act as repositories for what we do not understand. In this way, they become hermeneutic tools of inquiry into nonhuman perspectives. This is not to say that animal activism must ignore or jettison the observable comparisons between human and nonhuman animal emotional experience,⁵⁰¹ but rather, that empathy-based activism must look beyond the similarities between human and nonhuman animal perspectives if it is to destabilize the institutions that contribute to animal suffering on a global scale, and which are experienced through environmental devastation, habitat loss, the agricultural industry, *et cetera*. What I call the “weirdness” of nonhuman animal behaviours and experience is precisely what VanderMeer’s works engage with through their use of the monster to explore animal oppression and imagine new modes of being.

Strange Birds and Blue Foxes: The Monsters of Jeff VanderMeer

Jeff VanderMeer critiques nonhuman animal exploitation and human excess through his use of the monster to explore animal interiority and the future of a planet transformed by global warming. In his work, the end of the world is reimagined with an eye toward the monstrous as VanderMeer articulates an eschatological event that unfolds gradually through a process of continuous transformation that is in turn made visible in the bodies of the characters and their

context, as our knowledge of our planet’s geography and of the biosphere have increased, we have instead turned to the vast unknowns of outer space in search of monsters. See Chet Van Duzer, “*Hic Sunt Dracones*: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (New York: Routledge, 2012), 387-435.

⁵⁰¹ The emotional lives of animals, and the commonalities between human and nonhuman animal experience are explored particularly in the work of Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. See: Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* (New York: Delta, 1995).

worlds. In his *Borne* trilogy, he uses this continuous, monstrous, and transformative potential to interrogate the unequal distribution of power in contemporary society, and the ways in which that unequal distribution perpetuates violence against specific populations. Violence in these works, however, is maintained as a tool of the monster characters. There is a threat inherent in the bodies of the protagonists that at once empowers them with the ability to transform their environments and societies, while simultaneously menacing the reader with the threat of societal collapse.

VanderMeer's *Borne* trilogy is not alone, but emerges in the same historical moment as a number of works of Western speculative ecofiction—known popularly as “cli-fi” or “climate fiction”—that build on the tradition of the post-apocalypse as a period of both destruction and renewal by making use of the figure of the monster. These include, to name a few, British science-fiction and horror author M. R. Carey's fungal zombie novel, *The Girl With All the Gifts* (2014), its sequel, *The Boy On the Bridge* (2017), and its cinematic adaptation of the same name (2016); Canadian Cree-Métis director Danis Goulet's short film, *Wakening* (2013), in which an Indigenous woman finds an unlikely ally in the figure of the wendigo; along with fungal zombie videogames such as Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us: Parts I & II* (2013; 2020); the *Horizon* videogame franchise (2017; 2022); and the queer, story-based table-top roleplaying game, *Dream Askew* (2018). Each combines monstrosity, climate anxiety-fueled ecophobia, and the perspective that the apocalypse may represent the possibility for future flourishing rather than an end of the world.

In these and other such works, capitalism, colonialism, racism, and homophobia are implicitly or explicitly blamed for the desolation and decay of the old world, as well as for global warming, whether or not a few zombie fungi helped that end along. Related works, such as Canadian science-fiction author Premee Mohamed's award-winning cli-fi novella, *The Annual Migration of Clouds* (2021), and Canadian fantasy author J. Patricia Anderson's *Daughters of Tith* (2023), may similarly focus on or engage with a hopeful, post-capitalist post-apocalyptic future without including a monstrous element. While I characterize these works as hopeful, none of them—including the *Borne* trilogy—imply a purely idyllic, uncomplicated future, and each is, to a

greater or lesser degree, critical of our contemporary destruction of the Earth's ecosystems and climate. As Timothy Morton notes in *Dark Ecology*, "art is thought from the future. Thought we cannot explicitly think at present. Thought we may not think or speak at all. If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer toward art."⁵⁰²

While VanderMeer is not alone in combining the motifs of post-apocalypse, a hope for futurity, and monstrosity (or animal consciousness and rights with anti-capitalism),⁵⁰³ and while neither cli-fi, nor ecofiction, are new, VanderMeer's work stands apart. Known as "the Weird Thoreau" following Joshua Rothman's article in the *New Yorker*,⁵⁰⁴ his particular approach to the above themes, combined with his influence on the field of speculative ecofiction and his climate activism, render him a notable figure in the field.⁵⁰⁵ Another of his cli-fi series, *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, was adapted into the cult sci-fi horror film, *Annihilation* (2018), and the *Borne* trilogy itself has been optioned by AMC to be adapted to television.⁵⁰⁶ As a giant of contemporary speculative fiction, Jeff VanderMeer is arguably, outside of Guillermo del Toro, radical/resistant monster-maker with the most cultural reach of anyone discussed in my analysis.

⁵⁰² Morton, *Dark Ecologies*, 1.

⁵⁰³ One notable recent example includes British science-fiction author Adam Roberts's *Bête* (2014), in which nonhuman animals are injected with artificial intelligences by animal rights activists to ensure the animals' safety. In the work, the animals' sapience is not definitively asserted by the text and forms the central quandary of the novel's characters. Adam Roberts, *Bête* (London: Gollancz, 2014). Roberts is not alone, of course, in using fiction to explore animal consciousness, preceded, among others, by Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972).

⁵⁰⁴ Joshua Rothman, "The Weird Thoreau," *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/weird-thoreau-jeff-vandermeer-southern-reach>.

⁵⁰⁵ In an interview with Drew Broussard for *Lithub*, VanderMeer and Broussard outline his approach to global warming and climate activism. Drew Broussard, "Born to Rewild: Jeff VanderMeer on What it Means to Restore Your Own Little Part of the World," *Lithub*, April 5, 2021, <https://lithub.com/born-to-rewild-jeff-vandermeer-on-what-it-means-to-restore-your-own-little-part-of-the-world/>.

⁵⁰⁶ Denise Petski, "'Borne' Universe Novels In The Works For Television By AMC Studios," *Deadline*, December 3, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/12/borne-universe-novels-television-amc-studios-jeff-vandermeer-1202799188/>.

In the case of VanderMeer's oeuvre more broadly, but especially in his novels *Borne* and *Dead Astronauts*, and his novella *The Strange Bird*, VanderMeer uses the transformative potential of the monster to explore questions of personhood as they relate to nonhuman animals and to explore nonhuman agency and suffering. Each of these works, which take place in the same fictional universe, imagines a future irrevocably transformed by global warming, neoliberal capitalist excess, and pollution. Notably, VanderMeer explicitly draws on the work of Timothy Morton as it relates to global warming and the concept of the hyperobject, to create his speculative futures.⁵⁰⁷

VanderMeer's nonhuman characters, far from being straightforward representations of an imagined nonhuman animal psychology, are themselves chimeric entities, caught in processes of seemingly endless metamorphosis. This status, in which they display both hybridity (a combination of multiple things) and metamorphosis (a shift from one thing to another),⁵⁰⁸ reveals them to the audiences as, in the words of Caroline Walker Bynum, “destabilizings of expectation. Both can suggest that the world, either in process or in the instant, is disordered and fluid, with the horror and wonder of uncontrolled potency or violated boundaries.”⁵⁰⁹ Confounding even the categories of hybridity and metamorphosis, the monster in *Borne* “reveals a world of difference, a world that *is* and *is* multiple,” in the style of the hybrid, while it likewise, “reveals a world of stories, of things underway.”⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁷ See, for example: Jeff VanderMeer, “Jeff VanderMeer Talks *Borne*, Hyperobjects, and Florida Wildlife,” interview by Leah Schnelbach, *Tor*, May 26th, 2017. Print. <https://www.tor.com/2017/05/26/author-jeff-vandermeer-discusses-borne-and-environment/>.

⁵⁰⁸ Medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum establishes this distinction in order to examine the differing rhetorical uses of hybridity and metamorphosis in Bynum, 28-33.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The monster in VanderMeer is also what Lindsay Kelley and Eva Hayward call a “tranimal”—a portmanteau of “trans” and “animal.” According to Kelley, the term “articulates the labor and biocapital of cross-species organisms,” constituting genetically-manipulated, digitally rendered, and/or spectral nonhuman animals.⁵¹¹ As Kelley explains, transimals, such as the GFP (green fluorescent protein) monkey, fish, or kitten are genetically modified through the fusion of non-native DNA (in this case, that of a bioluminescent jellyfish, *Aequorea victoria*) with their own. These bio-engineered chimeras are then used in service to humans, whether for pleasure (the glowing, sterile fish are sold in Taiwan as pets), or for research into both human and nonhuman medical concerns. Donna Haraway’s chimeric “OncoMouse,” a mouse created to be predisposed to breast cancer in order to be researched for the benefit of human cancer treatment, functions in much the same way.⁵¹² As Kelley hauntingly frames GFP transimals, “even as *Aequorea victoria* populations diminish at sea, their synthesized flesh multiplies and flourishes.” We become, through our incorporation of bio-engineered beings into our bodies, transimals ourselves.⁵¹³

In the first book of VanderMeer’s trilogy, *Borne*, the titular character is a bio-engineered shapeshifter whose default state is amorphous and distinctly inhuman. As the novel progresses, and as Borne absorbs other organisms, Borne gains the ability to mimic other lifeforms and objects, including human and nonhuman animals. Borne is adopted by a human who attempts to curtail his nonhuman behaviours, but the result is that Borne eventually self-identifies as a monster—a dangerous and liminal being that will never be fully human, and which exists in a continuous process of corporeal flux as he absorbs more and varied objects and organisms.

⁵¹¹ Lindsay Kelley, “Tranimal,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2: 226-229; 226.

⁵¹² Donna Haraway, *ModestWitness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁵¹³ Kelley, “Tranimal,” 227.

In *The Strange Bird*, VanderMeer tells the story of a bio-mechanically modified bird, who is implanted with human DNA and memories. The story follows the Strange Bird's literal flight from captivity in a lab, her recapture by humans and nonhumans, and the abuse she endures as her avian characteristics are forcibly stripped from her to render her more useful for the humans she encounters. Her hybrid body—part machine, part bird, part human—becomes the vehicle for her eventual and final escape from captivity and enslavement, while her tripartite nature allows VanderMeer to explore nonhuman animal consciousness without the Strange Bird's voice reading as a concrete claim as to the interior reality of bird psychology.

While many works of fiction have been written from the perspective of animals, largely these impose a human understanding of animal consciousness that obscures its status as translation and interpretation, or which jettisons any notion of the nonhuman by simply employing animal societies as metaphors for human ones. VanderMeer's interpretation of animal consciousness is, similarly, an interpretation. Since VanderMeer fuses the human, cyborg, and nonhuman animal in the Strange Bird, however, the nature of his portrayal as interpretation is laid bare for the audience. Although these facets of the novella are plain, VanderMeer creates a sense of alterity and unsteadiness in the reader that gestures to the inaccessibility of another being's consciousness, by rendering certain of his protagonist's reactions and observations peculiar and alien. This has the effect of drawing attention simultaneously for the need to consider animal consciousness, agency, and well-being through empathy-based action, while also suggesting that nonhuman animal interiority is fundamentally different from that of humans, and that regardless, nonhuman animals ought to be respected.

A similar tactic is used in VanderMeer's *Dead Astronauts*. A far more experimental piece, *Dead Astronauts* combines poetry and prose to construct a disjointed narrative that explicitly evokes the theme of the limits of the human as a category of distinction through its emphasis on the disintegration of its protagonists as discrete entities. One of the astronauts, for instance, frequently dissolves into the surrounding environment as a kind of living math. A second fluctuates between forms, sometimes human-looking (though never fully human) and often

frequently monstrous in shape (for example, two monsters named Leviathan and Behemoth), combining animal and mechanical characteristics. Most relevant to my focus on animals and their representation as monsters, the three astronauts are at turns guided and thwarted in their efforts by a character called simply the blue fox. Like the Strange Bird, the blue fox is the result of human experimentation on animals, and its consciousness is a combination of human, mechanical, and vulpine characteristics. Through the perspective of the blue fox, who ushers the astronauts toward their eventual end, and seemingly the salvation of the timeline the astronauts seek to protect, VanderMeer constructs the blue fox as a monster figure whose monsterhood prefigures the end of humanness (and, perhaps, foxness), through a transformation of environment and species hierarchy. Through its recollections of its pre-experimental past, the blue fox draws attention to the exploitation of animals in a contemporary context.

That the blue fox appears as a character in all three works, operating as a grand agent behind the scenes of the human actors, positions the nonhuman animal-monster as the primary author of the events that transpire within each text. This positioning allows the *Borne* books to engage with “apocalyptic” both via its popular definition as “end of the world,” and in its capacity to articulate the revelation of divine secrets that underpin reality, and which incorporate a worldview, as DiTommaso underscores. Read this way, the blue fox emerges as a prophetic figure whose knowledge of the true forces at work beneath the surface of its worlds grants it a quasi-divine status that is dependent on its hybrid nature: nonhuman animal, machine, human, monster.

VanderMeer's human characters are similarly caught in this endless process of monsterization, thus representing how the entire category of the human is at best outdated. If Timothy Morton can say, writing in 2013, in their discussion of the uncanny valley and race, that “there is only another side if you are holding on to some fictional idea of humanness,”⁵¹⁴ then in VanderMeer's

⁵¹⁴ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 131.

fantastical futures, the fictional idea of humanness is precisely what is attacked through his nonhuman protagonists, and their promise that “human is a stronghold that hides a weakness.”⁵¹⁵ The suggestion that the category of the human is a constructed one is expanded here to further point to the fact that constructed things—fortresses, castles, condos—can be besieged, invaded, dismantled from within. This is the process of monstrous transformation in VanderMeer's work—one that dismantles the idea of discreteness, not only in terms of the human and the nonhuman animal, but in terms of our relationship with a purportedly external object we call environment. His works thus simultaneously interrogate inter-species relationships in the present, while positing a future in which the categories we are already increasingly aware are unstable, become even further degraded.

In an earlier chapter, I examined Guillermo del Toro's modern monster movie, *The Shape of Water*. I noted that, in the world of the film, the monster's flourishing is incommensurate with human society. Both the monster and Elisa (the mute protagonist of the film) must flee from human society in order to find fulfillment.⁵¹⁶ The works under discussion in this chapter present an alternative scenario. The monster may still be incommensurate with contemporary human society, but rather than flee, the monster becomes both the result and source of apocalypse. In this way, the monster embodies and represents the struggles of marginalized individuals while simultaneously uniting the monstrous Other with the Mortonian hyperobject. Global warming is written in the body in the *Borne* universe, but if so, this writing constitutes an inscription that grants power. Eschaton, for the marginalized characters in these works, is not so much an ending, as it is an opportunity for flourishing. The end of the world is a monster's world after all.

⁵¹⁵ VanderMeer, *Dead Astronauts*, 259.

⁵¹⁶ That the ending is ambiguous—we are left wondering if Elisa and her monster lover have died, or whether Elisa has transformed into a monster herself to live happily ever after—is explored in Chapter One.

The world of VanderMeer's *Borne* universe combines two typically distinct science fiction premises. First, the post-apocalyptic landscape is one ravaged by global warming, environmental degradation, and experimentation, and whatever lifeforms (humans included) that have survived, eek out their existence on a day-by-day basis, scavenging the derelict former city they live in for bio-engineered food and medicine. Second, the setting is revealed to be a secondary, artificial one created by the "real" universe, in order that humans in the primary world be able to escape from the ravages of their own soon-to-be post-apocalyptic landscape.

The organization that has overseen the experiments that created the secondary post-apocalyptic world, the world of *Borne*, is called simply "the Company." While the absolute goals of the Company remain veiled throughout the *Borne* books, the characters in these stories primarily engage with the Company through its bio-engineered creations: food, medicine, and the organisms it produced through genetic and cybernetic experimentation. The most omnipresent of these creations is a giant flying bear called Mord. Mord, the result of the transformation of one of the Company's own human scientists into a bear, is simultaneously a source of dread and of subsistence for the novel's characters. On the one hand, Mord is an apex predator, whose vast airborne body literally overshadows the city below. On the other, whenever Mord lands within the city, his body sheds pieces of biotech that can be salvaged by smaller organisms on the surface—human and nonhuman alike. He is, in a word, a hyperobject.⁵¹⁷ In the novel *Borne* itself, the human Rachel retrieves a piece of unidentifiable biotech left behind by Mord, and which will gradually reveal itself to be a living organism, whom Rachel names Borne.

When Rachel is attacked and tortured by a group of marauding bandit children, Borne protectively lashes out and absorbs one of the human attackers. It is after this point that Borne begins to demonstrate human-like abilities, and Rachel begins her attempts to raise Borne as a

⁵¹⁷ VanderMeer himself identifies Mord using Morton's terminology. See: VanderMeer, "Interview."

human being. Borne becomes “he” rather than “it,” to Rachel, and as he grows (physically and intellectually), Rachel’s insistence on Borne’s humanity becomes a painful constraint on his wild instincts. Borne both feeds and learns by absorbing other organisms, and the larger and more complex he becomes, the more pressing his desire to feed on humans, and the more emphatic in her denial of his inhumanity Rachel becomes. Problematically, Borne exists vis-a-vis Rachel in what she perceives as an uncomfortable liminal state, halfway between child and pet.

When Rachel learns that Borne has been shapeshifting into her form, as well as that of her romantic partner Wick, in order to learn more about humans and to attempt to mend the humans’ fragmenting relationship, Rachel finally banishes Borne from their home in the “Balcony Cliffs.” One of the central questions of the novel, that is, the nature of both humanity and personhood, rises to the fore as both Rachel and her lover Wick confront Borne. Here, Rachel narrates the conversation that leads to Borne’s exile:

“Should I have let Wick take you for parts, Borne? *What are you?*” “Rachel, it’s Borne. Your child. You love me like a child. You said you love me like a child.” And I’d disappointed him, saying that, so why should it save him now? “You’re not human,” Wick said, in a gasp like he was taking a breath for the first time. And I knew he’d stabilized, begun to recover from whatever Borne had done to him. “But I am a person,” Borne said. “Rachel told me—I’m a person!”⁵¹⁸

“I am not an animal,” cries the fictionalized version of Joseph Merrick from David Lynch’s 1980 film, *The Elephant Man*, “I am a human being.”⁵¹⁹ Borne’s plea that, while he may not be human, he is worthy of personhood, echoes this sentiment, yet Borne, unlike Lynch’s fictionalized version of the real-life Merrick, has already recognized that “human” is a category

⁵¹⁸ Jeff VanderMeer, *Borne* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 183.

⁵¹⁹ *The Elephant Man*, directed by David Lynch (1980; Paramount, 2006), DVD.

that owes Borne nothing, and which in turn is owed nothing by Borne. It is the category of “person” to which Borne now aspires, and perhaps which he is only ever able to aspire, since he has failed to live up to the human standards modeled by Rachel, and seemingly, Wick. That “human” definitionally means something different to the characters of *Borne* than it will to the novel’s readers, only adds to the ways in which the novel undermines the human/nonhuman binary. This difference in definition is made clear through the characters’ capacity to modify their bodies with Mordian biotech to a degree that calls any appeal to the purity of their humanity into question.

During Borne’s absence, Rachel at last enters Borne’s more private spaces within the Balcony Cliffs and learns through his journal of his suffered attempts to conform to Rachel’s human morality and behaviours. At every stage of his development, Borne is revealed to have questioned his status and nature in relation to the humans and nonhumans around him. “My name is Borne,” the journal begins, “—My name is not Borne. That is just something Rachel calls me. It means to carry something you don’t want to carry.”⁵²⁰

The probing and melancholy curiosity expressed in Borne’s journal entries reads somewhat akin to a human child or teenager’s developing capacity for self-reflection and critique, while simultaneously pushing beyond such comparisons to suggest Borne’s affinity with marginalized people, particularly queer people who often begin to question their identities during late childhood and early adulthood. Yet Borne comes gradually to reject any alliance with the human, as the mounting existential distress in the journal reveals:

My name is not-Borne . . . I am human. —I am not human. I am not human. I am not human. —
Rachel says I am a “he.” Am I he, she, or both or neither? —I am a person. Not nice. Not nice.

⁵²⁰ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 189.

Beautiful. I was made by the Company. I was made by someone. I am not actually alive. I am a robot. I am a person. I am a weapon. I am not/intelligent. I have nine senses and Rachel only has five. I can make eyes anytime I want and Rachel can't. If she lost her eyes, she'd be blind. If I lost my eyes, I could still see. I do not know when I am being what they want me to be and when I am myself. It is better when I am "cute." It is safer Borne traveled from a distant star. Borne traveled from a distant Company. Borne could not stop eating. Borne could not stop killing. Borne doesn't think of it that way, but it must be. It must be killing. BORNE MUST STOP KILLING. BORNE MUST STOP TASTING. BORNE MUST STOP BEING BORNE. BORNE MUST EAT WHAT IS ALREADY DEAD, LIKE NORMAL PERSONS.⁵²¹

At stake in these passages is Borne's humanity, but also his personhood, which he links specifically to his feeding habits—the consumption of living rather than dead flesh, and Borne's instinctual "tasting," or "sampling," of other organisms (the process of absorption described earlier, and which allows Borne to grow and develop). Borne's conclusions about his own nature reveal that he identifies not as human, perhaps not even as a person, but as something less concrete, less static: a monster. The awareness of his own nonhumanness, alongside Borne's forced exile from the Balcony Cliffs, leads Borne to seek companionship with other nonhumans, specifically, nonhuman animals. While surveying the landscape of the city from the Balcony Cliffs, Rachel spies Borne racing alongside the river, having taken on Rachel's form once more. Importantly, Borne is not alone, but runs in the company of a group of nonhuman animals:

I [Rachel] saw that strange animals followed in his wake again. The little foxes and rabbits and the things that looked like foxes and rabbits but were not. He [Borne] was just another part of the city now, I tried to tell myself, but the loss was too raw to think of him as just another obstacle, threat, or opportunity . . . I thought the animals might be chasing after him, but no, it became clear soon enough: Borne was leading them. Borne was somehow leading them. All the forgotten and outcast creatures, beneath the notice of the city.⁵²²

⁵²¹ Ibid., 189-190.

⁵²² Ibid., 192-193.

While the passage links Borne and the animals to a broader category of “outcast creatures,” it is significant that Borne has formed a relationship with the nonhuman animals specifically, and that he now occupies a position as their leader. That some of these creatures merely “looked like . . . but were not” rabbits and foxes, allies Borne and the nonhuman animals in his company with the monstrous as it is constructed in the novel—a category characterized by ambiguity and heterogeneity. Borne’s frustrations with Rachel’s inability to understand or accept him as he is, is therefore positioned, at least in part, as the failure of the human to simultaneously recognize and respect differences between the human and the nonhuman animal. That each of the three central categories under discussion here (human, nonhuman animal, and monster) collapses each into the other over the course of *Borne*, only further complicates real-world relationships and categorical distinctions typically (if fallaciously) believed inviolable.

One notable illustration of this collapsing plays out through the character Wick, who, it turns out, is not human either. Wick, we (and Rachel) eventually learn, is but another bio-engineered creation of the Company and requires medicine from the Company building in order to survive. Both characters are constructed by the text as monstrous Others, whose acceptance *as* Other by the human Rachel is a thematic through-line. During the exile scene, Rachel intuits that something is off about Wick’s physical reactions to the conflict between the three of them. She senses a similarity between Borne and Wick: “Across [Wick’s] features,” Rachel narrates, “some reaction I couldn’t recognize or fathom, a look so alien and wild and yet mechanical that it frightened me, made me feel caught between two monsters.”⁵²³ Here, subconsciously, Rachel questions the humanness of Wick, while identifying both Borne and Wick very explicitly as monsters.

⁵²³ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 184.

The novel reaches a climax when Rachel and her partner Wick attempt to raid the abandoned Company labs and are attacked by Mord, who remembers Wick from his previous, human life. As Rachel and Wick traverse the Company building, they learn Borne was one of many similar organisms sent through a portal by the Company, to explore and colonize this particular reality. Rachel, too, is in effect a refugee from the primary world.

As Mord uses mini-Mord bears called “Mord Proxies” to hunt Rachel and Wick, Borne uses all the matter he has absorbed to grow to Mord’s size and the two giants battle for the future of the city in a kaiju-esque fight for supremacy. The novel concludes with Mord dead and Borne reduced to the size he was when Rachel first found him. Rather than returning to his life with Rachel and Wick, in his role as half-child, half-pet, Borne has been rendered inert by the injuries he sustained by Mord, and it is no longer clear if he still has the ability to think, and whether he will ever demonstrate a capacity for human-oriented communication even if he can think. Rachel and Wick survive, alongside a cast of biotechnically altered nonhuman animals and hybrids that prepare to create a new society in the wreckage of Mord’s city.

As a piece of human-engineered biotech, capable of complex thought and raised by his adoptive human mother, Borne combines the human and the nonhuman to create himself as something totally Other. Raised by Rachel to conform to human standards of morality and behaviour, he refuses total appropriation by either category: human or nonhuman animal. While Borne is neither one nor the other, however, the narrative succeeds on the basis of its use of familiar nonhuman animal (and specifically pet) movie tropes to gesture to the ways in which Borne’s story comments on animal-human relationships. Rachel and Borne’s relationship, as well as Borne’s ultimate fate—sacrificing himself to save Rachel and her lover Wick—draws on familiar narrative elements found in books like *Old Yeller*, in which an animal companion dies or is disabled defending their human. At once a deconstruction of the animal/human binary, and critique of how humans demand that animals become distinct from wild Nature, *Borne* positions the monster and the monstrous as sources of empowerment and expression that can be made to push back against binary discourses like that of wild/tame, animal/human, or Nature/society. The

urban setting of the novel further deconstructs the Nature/society binary, by demonstrating that nonhuman animals typically considered part of the wilderness, similarly reside in, and are affected by, the urban environment.⁵²⁴

This critique at the level of setting conveys through fiction another of the points made by Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects*: “there is no ‘pristine,’ no Nature,” Morton argues, “only history.”⁵²⁵ Morton rejects the reality of something called Nature on the basis that Nature creates a false sense of itself as static and distant. “The classic image of Nature,” Morton recognizes, “is the Romantic or picturesque painting of a landscape. There it is, over yonder—on the wall in the gallery. And it has over-yonder-ness encoded throughout it: look at those distant hills, that branch suggesting that we follow the perspective lines toward the vanishing point, and so on.”⁵²⁶

The danger of Nature to ecology, and specifically the danger of the myth of “pristine” and “distant” Nature to ecology, is that Nature becomes something circumscribable, salvageable only ever in its entirety as something that exists in opposition to the urban environment, and whose salvation is dependent on the total annihilation of the urban. It is an apocalyptically oriented rendering of human and nonhuman animal relationships with environment that reduces the nonhuman to a symbol of Nature, whose degradation/depletion/extinction is understood on the merit of its relationship to a very anthropocentric loss of Nature over-yonder.

⁵²⁴ For an accessible meditation on the ways in which the urban environment is itself populated by a number of nonhuman species, as well as animal and plant relationships, see: Kelly Brenner, *Nature Obscura: A City’s Natural World* (Seattle: Mountaineer Books, 2020).

⁵²⁵ Morton, 58.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 72.

This same critique is what is at stake in Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, in which she examines the multifaceted relationships between nonhuman animal and human, as well as the ways in which close observation of urban landscapes betrays the inaccuracy of the Nature/city divide.⁵²⁷ "How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse," Haraway asks, "when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned?"⁵²⁸ *Borne* and its companion books examine these same themes. While the post-apocalyptic landscape of *Borne* thus signals that some traumatic event has ended the capitalist society that preceded it, the continuation of environment through its chimeric metamorphoses, its *monsterization*, signals the potential to imagine new futures. Exemplifying Kelley and Hayward's tranimal, characters like Borne and Wick problematize both interspecies relations and the very concept of species as distinct.

The monstrous bodies of the characters in *Borne*, as well as the destabilization of the category of the human and the cross-species relationships that grow up in the novel, each embody a shift in being that understands the rejection of human/animal (or human/monster) and urban/wild as ultimately harmful categories. Borne himself joins with the not-quite-animal band of rabbits and foxes after being forced out of the sacrosanct realm of the human, represented in the text by the Balcony Cliffs. What is key, however, to understanding the ways in which *Borne* interrogates the Nature/city divide, is the fact that the pure humanness of Rachel's world is itself illusory. The Balcony Cliffs are just as penetrable by the rest of the city and its wild denizens, as are real-world streets, alleys, and rooftops.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁷ For example, consider Haraway's examination of the human-animal relationships she describes in her account of pigeon-fanciers in California, and complex ways humans and animals collaborate in urban environments. Haraway, *Staying*, 16-27.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵²⁹ Kelly Brenner's *Nature Obscura*, 24-34, uses as its first case study the presence of moss in urban spaces,

Central to *Borne*'s interrogation of these categories is the emphasis in the novel on *personhood* rather than humanness. What Borne does not recognize until much later is that the category of "person," too, is a loaded one, which has been successfully collapsed, in many cases, into the category of the human. The stance that humanness must be abandoned, and personhood triumphed as an alternative, is equally and problematically bound up in an anthropocentric view of the world that positions the human as the arbiter of both categories. It is, after all, the human against whose morality, abilities, and normative classifications, personhood is judged and measured.

Personhood, it turns out, is bound up in the same messy qualities and prescriptivist ideologies as idea of the human. When Borne expresses his own hesitation regarding his personhood to Rachel, in a post-exilic conversation between the two of them, Rachel clings erroneously to the category of person in a way that she too recognizes as somehow dishonest. Borne confronts Rachel, saying, "'I'm telling you, Rachel, I can't anymore. I'm not *built* like you. I'm not human. I'm not a *person*.'" Rachel's response, "'You are a person,'" is followed swiftly by a denial: "I [Rachel] said [it] because I had to say it. Even with the evidence before me, or perhaps because of it."⁵³⁰ The personhood Borne aspires to at this point, and which Rachel (perhaps subconsciously) champions, is humanity dressed up in a fake nose and mustache. It is only once Rachel, Borne, and Wick, have reckoned with the relativity of their own personhood and humanity, that "person" comes to mean something more challenging. This new concept of "person," at least attempts to root itself outside an anthropocentric worldview.

particularly rooftops.

⁵³⁰ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 260-261.

Throughout *Borne*, Rachel, Wick, and Borne himself question Borne's status as monster.⁵³¹ A concurrent and related question raised by all three characters is whether Borne is also a weapon. Is he, much like Mord (with whom Borne is compared throughout the novel) dangerous, and specifically, is he dangerous toward humans like Rachel? The question of weaponhood is entangled with conceptions of just and unjust killing and sits at the heart of the question of Borne's personhood and humanity. As discussed above, Borne's personhood is often presented as contingent upon his not-killing, yet we know from Borne's own writings that not killing humans runs counter to his internal drives, perhaps even his needs.

Flourishing, for Borne, is inseparable from his need to kill. In a flashback to an earlier memory of Rachel's, Rachel describes how she and Wick argued about Borne's potential danger to them very early on in Borne's development, and how the question of whether Borne might be a weapon prompted a second conversation between Borne and Rachel on the same topic. "I don't feel like a weapon," Borne says to himself, overheard by Rachel, "I do not look like other weapons. Maybe I was meant to be a weapon, but I came out wrong. I don't even know where the word *weapon* came from. I did not have it before." Rachel responds that Borne can't possibly be a weapon because he's too silly, though she comments in her narration, that all weapons are silly "or silly-looking."⁵³² Borne expresses concern that Rachel will have to stop Borne, if he is in fact a weapon. Rachel verbally rejects this notion, yet her true thoughts are far more complex:

We were all weapons of some kind. We were all weaponized in our own way. 'Am I a person or a weapon?' Always, he wanted to know that he was a person. He just kept giving me different choices

⁵³¹ Another example of this is communicated through Wick's reactions to Borne. As Borne relates his nervousness around Wick to Rachel, Borne remarks that, "Wick, he doesn't say it, but he thinks I'm a freak. A monster." VanderMeer, *Borne*, 173.

⁵³² Ibid., 277-278.

so one time I might slip up and say, ‘You’re not a person.’ ‘You are a person. But like a person, you can be a weapon, too.’ . . . I remembered that conversation, and part of hoping there was light was also hoping for what I never would have wished . . . that Borne was a weapon . . . I wanted him not just to be a good weapon, but a *great* weapon. The kind of weapon that could defeat Mord.⁵³³

The assertion that people themselves are weapons, or at least that they have that capacity, is in keeping with the criticisms Rachel and Wick make of the societies that preceded the apocalyptic events that led to the creation of the City. Early in their relationship, Rachel makes clear to Borne that people are responsible for the desolation of the contemporary landscape, and in so doing, gestures toward this same idea—that people, including humans, are also potential weapons. “‘How did the world get this way?’” asks Borne of Rachel. Rachel responds:

“I don’t know. Because of people, Borne. We did this to ourselves.” We were still doing it to ourselves. “Was it always this way?” “Not always. There were more people and it was better. But not because there were more people . . . and there were cities all over the world where people lived in peace.” There had never been a time when all the people everywhere lived in peace. No one had ever had a lasting peace without ignoring atrocity or history, which meant it wasn’t lasting at all. Which meant we were an irrational species.⁵³⁴

The interrogation of both humanness and personhood positions the characters of *Borne* as characters in search of new vocabularies to describe a reality that it is obvious can no longer be contained by previous categorical distinctions. Thus, while Rachel often falls back on “personhood” to describe Borne, as well as other organisms with whom she interacts, “person” remains a placeholder term for something more expansive that is yet to come (but which may never be realized). That perhaps there is no more expansive term, that in fact, it is impossible for

⁵³³ Ibid., 279.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 132.

Rachel (and us) to get out of and speak from outside that human category, is a subtle thread throughout the novel. When Rachel is confronted by her lover Wick's status as nonhuman, for instance, Rachel is able to distinguish between an external definition of "person," and her own, subjective, personal one: "Wick had never been a person. But he had always been a person to me."⁵³⁵

The fluidity between person/human/monster is made even more apparent by Wick himself, in Wick's letter to Rachel. Here, Wick reveals a number of details about his relationship with the Company, and his manipulation of Rachel, for the first time. Most significantly for my purposes, Wick collapses the human and person categories into one:

You kept asking me if Borne was a person. But I didn't believe I was a person, Rachel, so I couldn't tell you. Because what you will learn, Rachel, is that I am not what you think I am. I am more like Borne, and every time you told me he was human, I felt less human, less real, and I don't blame you for that, but that's how it is for me, and will always be.⁵³⁶

Wick characterizes reckoning with his own inhumanity through his recognition of Borne as nonhuman. Because Rachel insisted that Borne was human, and since it was obvious to Wick that Borne was not and that Rachel was mistaken or delusional, Wick's own inhumanity has become glaringly obvious.

The category of the human is challenged throughout the book, even prior to the revelations about Wick. Earlier on, when the reader has no reason to suspect Wick is not human, Wick's use of

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 306.

biotech to alter his cognition, as well as Rachel's acceptance of this as perfectly reasonable human behaviour, signal that "human" in the post-apocalyptic landscape of the novel has come to mean something other than it does to the contemporary reader. For example, Wick uses his expertise from his time at the Company to construct beetles and drugs that have the ability to alter, delete, or construct memories and implant them in the mind of the affected person. "Within the explosion of mint or lime from putting the beetle in your ear," Rachel explains, "would form marvelous visions of places I hoped did not exist." Similarly, "people who couldn't face the present shoved them into their ears so they could experience someone else's happier memories from long ago."⁵³⁷ After Rachel first brought Borne home, Wick examines him, but the tools and method of examination are strikingly alien: "Wick passed his hand over Borne. The crimson worms living in his wrist leapt out briefly to analyze it, before retreating into his skin."⁵³⁸

It is clear that the tools which Wick (and the Company more broadly) construct to facilitate survival in the post-apocalypse are marked by the ways in which they integrate machine, nonhuman animal, and human. This is less an argument that humans are now becoming less distinct from animal and machine in the world of the novel, and more a comment on the use of defamiliarization to reflect the artificiality of this binary distinction in our own world.⁵³⁹ In his

⁵³⁷ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 8.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵³⁹ Defamiliarization is a literary technique in which the reader's presumptions about the world (or a particular aspect of the world) are challenged by removing the presumption that is under critique/discussion from its traditional context and rendering it as something new in the fictionalized world of the author. Essentially, it renders the common uncommon in a fictional context, drawing attention to how the particular element is naturalized in the world outside the text. Defamiliarization has long been used as a technique in genre fiction to comment on systemic and societal inequality. In the context of science fiction and fantasy literature, author Sami Schalk lays bare how defamiliarization has been used by Black women authors to critique the systemic oppression of Black and disabled people. Notably, Schalk draws on Jasbir Puar and Julie Livingston's work on interspecies criticism to comment on how centering nonhuman characters (she mentions "werewolves, demons, and half-mortals") can be used in

analysis of historical monstrosity, Stephen T. Asma emphasizes the importance of liminality, of *in between-ness*, to the figure of the monster. As Asma notes, pivoting from his analysis of intersexuality's historical identification as monstrous, "mosaic beings, grafted together or hybridized by nature or artifice, reappear throughout the history of Western monsters as the Golem, Frankenstein's creature, and transgenic animals."⁵⁴⁰ There is a degree to which, Asma argues, we are each, as individuals, resistant to straightforward categorization, and thus are each of us liminal.⁵⁴¹ To a degree, liminality as a universalizing force is precisely what is at stake in the *Borne* trilogy. In a context in which bodies are universally slippery, subject to dramatic metamorphosis, and are composed of multiple things—not simply organisms or organic matter, but also inorganic materials—*in between-ness* is revealed to be the default state of being.⁵⁴² While in the *Borne* trilogy, metamorphosis and hybridity are conveyed through the drama of giant flying bears and strange birds that can be forged into capes, in our own context, what is gestured to are the ways in which our own bodies are subject to constant flux, whether through ageing, wear-and-tear, or the incorporation of "alien" DNA into our bodies. Through the

cooperation with an interspecies framework to critique and destabilize the category of the human. "Interspecies," in this case, refers to a critical reexamination of the categories of human/plant/animal that considers how these categories exist in flux. See Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018), 114-115.

⁵⁴⁰ Asma, 40.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² In Jack David Eller's *Beyond Liminality: Ontologies of Abundant Betweenness*, Eller traces and interrogates the history of "liminality" as a critical term, examining and critiquing the ways in which it has come to be, perhaps overzealously applied. In his introduction, he uses the Nahuatl concept "nepantla"—indicating a belief in the universe as something undergoing continuous metamorphosis and which occupies a permanent "middle-state" between states—to problematize the universalization of concepts like liminality. As Eller states, "it is not clear there is a place for liminality in such a reality: either everything is liminal (because all is a mixture or betwixtness of elements and forces) or nothing is liminal (because there is no remainder or empty space of non-betweenness, no 'middle' or threshold." Eller does not mean to suggest that we must jettison the concept of liminality, but argues that we must be conscientious of the ways in which we have been trending toward a privileging of, or preference for, liminality (here understood as somewhat of a representative of chaos in opposition to structure and order). Jack David Eller, *Beyond Liminality: Ontologies of Abundant Betweenness* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 3; 4.

weirdness of Wick and Rachel's "humanity," our own species classifications are problematized. The category of the human is here revealed to be something hopelessly outdated, while the category of "person" is rendered slippery and suspicious. At the novel's conclusion, for instance, Rachel opines that "person" is a category we strive to be and understand:

Wick never believed that he was a person, was continually being undone by that. Borne was always trying to be a person because I wanted him to be one, because he thought that was right. We all just want to be people, and none of us know what that really means. Early on, I had thought that Wick was reaching for me—for the person called Rachel, who did indeed, in the end, love back the person called Wick.⁵⁴³

Rachel's admission, or perhaps realization, that personhood is itself a fluid and shifting category, paradoxically allows her to embrace it more fully. For instance, after attacking any solid definition of personhood, Rachel describes both herself and Wick as persons. Still, Rachel constructs herself in opposition to an ultimate and aggressive Other that she frames as monstrous. While the novel notably concludes with Rachel and Wick's opening the Balcony Cliffs to the rest of the city (including the city's nonhumans, importantly), she nonetheless frames hostile and violent forces as monsters: "There is only us now," Rachel explains, "and the monsters, who are both part of history and always with us."⁵⁴⁴ It is unclear to whom Rachel is specifically referring here, since she goes on to mention Mord, Borne, and the Company as "great powers" from whom Rachel and the rest of the denizens of the city are now free. Still, "great powers" could easily be replaced by "hyperobjects," yet since one can never be free from the shadow of the hyperobject, Rachel's assertion that she wants to be freed from such a controlling force seems doomed to failure. What we might understand, instead, is that in the case of the monstrous hyperobject, the changes necessary to Rachel, Wick, and the world around

⁵⁴³ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 320.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 318.

them that are necessary for hope to find purchase, have been initiated (or furthered) through the cosmic, eschatologically-encoded battle between them. This is an expansion of what Linda C. Ceriello has articulated as a contemporary shift toward a religiously-oriented patterning of the monster that treats destabilization of the self and of “inherent nature” in the context of binary forces like good and evil. Ceriello contrasts this with prior examples of the combat myth in which the purpose is the instatement (or, in some cases, reinstatement) of an ordered, stable universe.⁵⁴⁵

Further complicating the person/monster distinction in the novel is the complexity of Rachel’s own perception of Borne (whom she alternately refers to as monster, person, and non-person), as well as the *Borne* books’ more general framing of nonhuman and human animals as diffusive (and diffusing) categories.

Regarding the first point, the material examined so far indicates that Rachel arrives at no definite conclusion regarding Borne’s personhood, although she does achieve a critical understanding that, at the very least, calling Borne “human” puts undue pressure on him to conform. As Rachel notes at one point, “that’s the problem with people who are not human. You can’t tell how badly they’re hurt, or how much they need your help, and until you ask, they don’t always know how to tell you.”⁵⁴⁶ Humans and people may have become two overlapping but different categories for Rachel, as demonstrated in the above passage, but by *Borne*’s conclusion the text itself seems less than certain that these distinctions fully encompass the range of being in the world

⁵⁴⁵ While Ceriello examines this phenomenon in the context of personal expressions of authenticity in the context of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, her observations are broadly applicable. Linda C. Ceriello, “The Big Bad and the Big ‘Aha!’ Metamodern Monsters as Transformational Figures of Instability,” in *Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques: Monstrosity and Religion in Europe and the United States*, ed. Michael E. Heyes (London: Lexington, 2018): 207-233; 208.

⁵⁴⁶ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 148.

represented by the organisms that inhabit that world.⁵⁴⁷ Rachel's assertion that, "We all just want to be people, and none of us know what that really means," becomes a kind of concluding thesis for the novel, at once poking at the sanctity of the human, while equally gesturing to the fragility of "person" as a replacement category.⁵⁴⁸ Also important is the fact that it is arguably Borne's status as monster that affords both Borne and Rachel safety and longevity throughout the novel. The narrative as it unfolds would be impossible if Borne were not a messy fusion of monster, person, human, and nonhuman animal. Moreover, one's continued existence in the post-apocalyptic landscape of the City is conditional upon embracing the inter-species and inter-generic status that each individual character embodies. It seems no accident, then, that Rachel survives the cataclysmic events of *Borne* with a developed sense of the constructedness, the unreality, of what were previously deeply held beliefs: the rigidity of categories like "human," "person," "animal," "machine," and "monster."

The same linkages are made in the remaining two *Borne* books: *The Strange Bird*, and *Dead Astronauts*. The criticisms of human and nonhuman animal relationships in our own world that VanderMeer makes in *Borne* are perhaps more aggressively present in both, although *Borne* provides a foundation for understanding the texts' thematic focus on environment, apocalypse, and hyperobject. In particular, *The Strange Bird* and *Dead Astronauts* explore the breakdown of human and nonhuman animal relationships through the commodification of animal bodies, as well as more indirect human interventions into animal lives, such as through environmental destruction and habitat loss. As in *Borne*, the examination of animal consciousness and suffering draws on the monstrous to express the Otherness of nonhuman animal consciousness. It also

⁵⁴⁷ Key here is Rachel's acknowledgment that nonhuman pain can be challenging to determine. As anyone who has spent a reasonable amount of time with nonhuman animals will no doubt also recognize, this statement draws on real-world difficulties experienced when attempting to determine the pain levels of animal companions who do not communicate pain the same way (or with the same frequency) as humans do.

⁵⁴⁸ VanderMeer, *Borne*, 320.

presents the monster as a figure of salvation, destruction, and transformative potential for the nonhuman characters.

The Strange Bird places its emphasis squarely on the treatment of laboratory animals, though several interjections throughout the novella appear to shift focus onto other forms of animal exploitation, such as the use of animals for food or clothing. Unlike *Borne* itself, which centers on Rachel, a human narrator, *The Strange Bird* follows its eponymous main character. Over the course of the Strange Bird's journey, she is repeatedly altered, so that her categorical status is always in flux. The result is a monstrous hybrid, and while the transformations she endures that recreate her as a Frankenstein's monster-bird are themselves horrifying, those same transformations are also the source of her eventual escape.

The Strange Bird's ability to navigate the post-apocalyptic landscape is assisted by the presence of invasive human technology and human biological components, referred to at turns as her "compass" throughout the novella. This compass, it is eventually revealed, propels her to travel to a specific location in order that the remnants of a specific human scientist (Sanji) that have been fused with the original bird be reunited with the human scientist's lover (herself now also a hybrid, monster bird). Despite the human elements that have been implanted into the birds, however, both characters are represented as nonhuman, and the nonhuman animal element of the Strange Bird is emphasized throughout.

The alterations to her psychology and physiology are rendered as a great violence and exploitation. Nonetheless, the Strange Bird's status as monster, as in the case of *Borne*, contributes meaningfully to her survival. In fact, that survival, and the promise of the Strange Bird's futurity, are contingent upon her monstrosity. The text is therefore able to simultaneously comment on both violence against animals, as well as the ability of the monster body to afford nonhuman animals within the text a point of egress. The construction of the Strange Bird as a monster re-constructed from biological and mechanical parts also provides the in-text

justification for the reader's ability to parse a nonhuman animal perspective, while maintaining the weird, disorienting quality VanderMeer attributes to nonhuman animal cognition.

The Strange Bird's first on-page encounter with humans takes place in the laboratory where she, and a number of other animals, have been contained and experimented on. We know from *Borne* that this lab is the Company lab, where Wick once worked, and where both Mord and Wick were created.⁵⁴⁹ At this moment, the laboratory is under attack, as factions both within and without the Company tear it apart in a battle for control over its resources, and over the City itself. The Strange Bird's description of this event—the killing of her fellow animals for food—overshadows the rest of the novella, and each violence perpetrated against the Strange Bird after this event becomes another strike of the thematic hammer. The nonhuman is pitted explicitly against the human, and the human is constructed as something hostile and pitiless. That the passage also constructs the Strange Bird herself as something other than *animal*, that is, that it keys us in to the fact that she herself is a hybrid body and mind fashioned of human and nonhuman parts, positions her as something like a cyborg—a monster with its tentacles (or pistons, if we wish to emphasize the mechanical) in more than one pie:

On the seventh day, after the intruders had dug their way up into the laboratory . . . on that day, the scientists, cut off from supplies, and under siege in the room that held the artificial island meant only for their creations, had begun to slaughter the animals they had created, for food. The Strange Bird had perched for safety on a hook near the ceiling and watched, knowing she might be next. The

⁵⁴⁹ Since the story of *The Strange Bird* begins with the destruction of the original Company lab and the deaths of its scientists, we are clued in to the fact that the novella starts at an earlier point in the *Borne* universe's narrative than did *Borne* itself. The timeline of *The Strange Bird* stretches the length of *Borne*, as its protagonist dips into contact with characters from the novel like Rachel, Wick, and their nemesis The Magician (a character I have not mentioned so far, but who is perpetually in conflict with Wick over control of the City and its tech). By *The Strange Bird*'s conclusion, the protagonist has flown beyond the confines of *Borne*'s narrative, and so we travel past the point when Mord is defeated and the City is given up to Rachel, Wick, and the Blue Fox.

badger that stared up, wishing for wings. The goat. The monkey. She stared back at them and did not look away, because to look away was to be a coward and she was not cowardly. Because she must offer them some comfort, no matter how useless. Everything added to her and everything taken away had led to that moment and from her perch she had radiated love for every animal she could not help, with nothing left over for any human being. Not even in the parts of her that were human.⁵⁵⁰

Of particular interest in this passage is the way that VanderMeer constructs the Strange Bird as both nonhuman and human, as well as the emphasis he places on the Strange Bird's inability to feel sympathy for humans following the tragedy. As in the other works examined throughout my analysis, monstrosity becomes a form of embodiment whose continuous and generative potential lies in its ability to resist the human—in this case, as in many others, even and especially when the monster itself contains a microcosm of the human. The Strange Bird, here, despite the human parts of herself to which she draws attention, identifies more strongly with her fellow nonhuman animals, and it is therefore for them, rather than human beings, that the Strange Bird comes to stand in the rest of the novella.

Nonetheless, the Strange Bird is identified throughout as something different from either nonhuman animal or human. A trio of biomechanical vultures identify her as, “avian, overlaid with *Homo sapiens*, other terrestrial life-forms. Unstable mélange.”⁵⁵¹ A human captor questions her avian identity, asking, “‘you’re not just a bird, are you?’”⁵⁵² Later, when the Strange Bird is caught and subjected to experimentation a second time, the woman disassembling and reassembling her notes that the Bird “‘actually contains traces of squid and even human influence.’”⁵⁵³ When Wick and Rachel later find the remnants of the Strange Bird, Wick

⁵⁵⁰ Jeff VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017), 6-7.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 86.

identifies her nervous system as human, her feathers as partly cephalopod, and her multiple brains as being distributed across her entire body. Even so, although Wick is correct in identifying the Strange Bird's human components, his emphasis on these elements is somewhat in tension with how the narrative itself constructs the Strange Bird, who is consistently portrayed as something more complex and whose allegiance is certainly with nonhumans.⁵⁵⁴

Part of the great discomfort of the novella is in how it frames the Strange Bird, the “unstable mélange,” and her identity. Time and again, the human characters and some nonhuman ones (as in the case of the mechanical vultures) attempt to fix her identity. Yet by the story's conclusion, the Strange Bird has become, if not comfortable with, then at least accepting of, her hybridity. She emphasizes especially those parts of her that are more avian, describing her future in terms of nest-building, of flight, and of pecking “windfall apples from a tree.”⁵⁵⁵ She is far less comfortable with the human-made compass that drove her onwards, suggesting that “she was, in the end, much diminished for having followed it.”⁵⁵⁶

One of the more significant encounters the Strange Bird has with another character is her capture by a figure called only “the Old Man.” The Old Man, thinking the Strange Bird beautiful, imprisons her as a pet in a cage, renaming her Isadora (possibly after a wife whom it is hinted he murdered). During her captivity, the Strange Bird understands the Old Man's words, and through them, some of the threat he poses, specifically because of the hybridity of her experimented-upon body. For the duration of her imprisonment, the Strange Bird is acutely aware of her precarity as a treasured object. As with nonhuman animal pets outside the novel, her status is contingent upon good behaviour. According to the Old Man, “there are rules to being good,” and “yet he

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

never shared the rules. The Strange Bird had seen the three crosses that stood in the sand outside, which she thought were perches for other birds now long dead.”⁵⁵⁷

The passage, and its emphasis on good versus bad behaviour, evokes the ways in which kindness toward animals, particularly pets, is dependent upon “being good.” Many of us have experienced (either ourselves or through a friend), for instance, the euthanasia of an animal companion on the basis of age-related incontinence and other non-life-threatening disabilities. The animal, in this instance, must remain convenient. As soon as it becomes inconvenient for its human owners, it must be done away with (ostensibly “for its own good”), or be punished in order to “correct” the bad behaviour.

Outside the context of humans and nonhuman animal pets, Sunaura Taylor identifies similarly ableist and speciesist ideology at work in the euthanasia of disabled wildlife. In her second chapter, Taylor opens with an anecdote describing the euthanasia of a fox who shares her own disability:

A few years ago, I found a story about a fox with arthrogryposis, which is the disability I was born with. According to the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre, a wildlife conservation and management organization, the fox was shot by a resident of the area because “it had an abnormal gait and appeared sick.” The animal, whose disabilities were quite significant, had normal muscle mass, and his stomach contained a large amount of digested food, which suggested to researchers that, “that the limb deformity did not preclude successful hunting and foraging.”⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁷ VanderMeer, *The Strange Bird*, 20.

⁵⁵⁸ Taylor, 23.

Taylor's analysis of the killing of the disabled wild fox directly links the ableist attitude of "better off dead" that is directed toward disabled humans with the euthanasia of disabled animals, and compares the story of the fox with similar occasions when pets and farm animals are euthanized "for their own good," and often despite evidence that they still experience a high quality of life.⁵⁵⁹ In this case, disabled living and behaviour do not constitute "being good" from the paternalistic perspective of the human owner, representing alternately an inconvenience in the case of pets and farm animals, or profound discomfort in the case of wildlife. The Old Man's assertion that the Strange Bird "be good," that there are rules of behaviour of which she has no knowledge but which will determine whether she lives or whether she joins the crosses in his garden, functions as a recognizable threat due to the similarity it shares with real-world expectations placed on animal companions.

The precarity of the Strange Bird's position is specifically related to her nonhuman animal components, and to the recognition of her as animal by the Old Man. Following the threat of the garden graveyard and the command that she behave, the Strange Bird faces the additional threat that she might be killed for meat. As in the laboratory scene, the Strange Bird is helpless as she witnesses the Old Man butcher other nonhuman animals. After the Old Man captures several "weasel-like creatures" the Strange Bird "listened to the distant squeals as he found them and murdered them, and she saw in her mind the bubbles and burrows that were their lives become smaller and smaller until they were not there at all."⁵⁶⁰ In framing the weasels' deaths as murder, the text (and not simply the Strange Bird) takes a political position regarding animal welfare. The passage also simultaneously draws attention to the non-humanness of the weasels through its choice of metaphor—the weasels' lives are described without using referents familiarly associated with human lives (for instance, weaving, thread), but by using the metaphor of the burrow. The human reader is confronted by the claustrophobic feeling of collapsing tunnels that

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁶⁰ VanderMeer, *Strange Bird*, 23.

shrink the scope of the weasels' lives, while simultaneously reckoning with the detail that the weasels are "weasel-like," and are therefore part of this new category of being represented by the monster hybrid, i.e., the same category as the not-quite foxes and rabbits of *Borne*.

This event (the hunting and killing of the weasels) is a habitual process: "on the mornings when the Strange Bird woke to find the thin, limp bodies of the black weasels lying half-in, half-out of the massive pot on a table halfway across the room, she felt a sense of loss the Old Man could not share."⁵⁶¹ By privileging the Strange Bird's perspective, framed by VanderMeer as nonhuman, the text likewise invites the reader to consider the ways in which an anthropocentric worldview conditions us away from considering the suffering of nonhuman animals. There is a sense of kinship that is specifically related to the Strange Bird's nonhuman animalness, but which is also capacious enough to recognize cross-species solidarity between different kinds of nonhuman animals. If the Strange Bird can experience this sense of empathy and solidarity across species lines, then so to, the text seems to suggest, can humans. This solidarity, this empathetic drive, stems in part from the recognition of the precarity of the nonhuman animal in their relationship with the human. It contrasts feelings of inter-species kinship against the exploitative and instrumental relationship many humans exhibit toward nonhumans. The Strange Bird, recounting again the murder of her fellow nonhumans, is entirely too aware,

that the Old Man might find her beautiful, but should he ever be starving, he would murder her and pluck her dazzling feathers and cook her and eat her, like he would any animal. She would lie, half-in, half-out of the pot, limp and thoughtless, and she would no longer be Isadora but just a strange dead bird.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

As a nonhuman animal, the Strange Bird is at the mercy of the humans who wish to exploit her, but it is her status as monster and the embodiedness of her monstrosity that allows her to defend herself and to escape. Because the Strange Bird can understand human speech, she is able to comprehend the Old Man's instability, as well as predict the fact that the Old Man will eventually turn on her. When the Old Man is attacked outside by another human-animal hybrid, the Strange Bird flies away to the sound of his pleading cries. Recalling the corpses of the weasels, the Old Man's body as it slips beneath the lid of the predator's trapdoor is described as "half-in, half-out."⁵⁶³ The Old Man is not an entirely unsympathetic figure—indeed, throughout the novella, the human characters' actions are portrayed with a sensitivity toward the sense of necessity they feel at committing the violence they enact upon nonhumans and humans alike—yet the talionic framing of the Old Man's death appears to satisfy the Strange Bird's desire for justice. The Strange Bird's thoughts as she abandons the Old Man to his fate as someone else's dinner are notable: "the Old Man was just a dot below, inconsequential. Human beings had such strange ideas about gratitude. When it should be given. When it should be withheld. Should she be grateful for being imprisoned? What should she feel now? She sang out the question that was its own answer."⁵⁶⁴ These themes of human imperialism over the nonhuman body, of imprisonment, autonomy, and culpability, haunt the text unto its conclusion.

During one of his philosophical moments, the Old Man opines to the Strange Bird that though life is challenging, "death is worse." The Strange Bird responds that she:

believed someone had said it to him and now he was under the spell of those words. Death is worse. Except she did not know anything of death except what she had seen in the laboratory. So she did not know if death was worse. She wished only that she might be that remote from the Earth and the humans who lived upon it. To glide above, to go where she wished without fear because she was too

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 48.

high up. To reduce humans again to the size she preferred: distant ghosts trudging and winking out to reappear again, looped and unimportant.⁵⁶⁵

The Strange Bird's choice to draw on her experiences in the laboratory suggests that some things might be worse than death, and that these things might include the violence and imprisonment she witnessed and experienced. In the laboratory she was not allowed to experience birdness, and now, a captive again, she notably dreams of flight. Compare our first introduction to the Strange Bird, which describes her escape from the lab and her first experience of the world outside it: "but then the joy of flying overtook her and she went higher and higher and higher, and she did not care who saw or what awaited her in the bliss of the free fall and the glide and the limitless expanse. Oh, for if this was life, then she had not yet been alive!"⁵⁶⁶ While a captive of the Old Man, she dreams of the sky, of flight, of freedom of movement. During one such reverie, she sees Mord (the giant flying bear of *Borne*) from afar. This is followed immediately by a recollection of the lab and the control of the lab scientists over the nonhuman animal body:

There had been a bear in the laboratory. Patchy, small, inward-staring, even as it turned to the right to pace along the glass wall of its cage, and kept turning right and right again, for there was nowhere to go. . . . But the Strange Bird knew that this was a different species, a different kind of bear. For this bear could *fly*, just like her, and although the Strange Bird saw him only from a distance, and wrong-side up, she could not breathe in the moment for the miracle of him. The way the bear infernal was also the bear eternal, a kind of angel or something that was unexpected and wondrous yet terrible, too Had the beast landed beside her, it would have stood four or five stories tall. Yet it dove and swooped like a swift or swallow catching insects She did not care that the bear might be death; instead, her spirits soared because the bear flew, and suddenly she could imagine being powerful in her flight, so powerful others might fear her.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 45.

The Strange Bird's experience of Mord is framed as a religious experience, even as she constructs him simultaneously as "beast" and "angel." Her first reaction to Mord—the recollection of the laboratory bear "turning right and right again" evokes real-world animal captivity, whether in the context of zoos, factory farms, or laboratory and shelter cages. This reaction is followed up by her identification of Mord as aspirational—a nonhuman who has transcended beariness to become something fearsome and dangerous and powerful, a monster that cannot be contained. The power and danger of Mord is contrasted throughout the novella with the Strange Bird's captivity, and the ways in which she is repeatedly robbed of both bodily autonomy and intrinsic birdness.

When the Strange Bird is captured the final time, this time by Wick's nemesis, the Magician, her body and the bodies of other animal-machine hybrids are disassembled by the Magician for parts. Her enslavement by the Magician is framed by the Strange Bird as the worst of all her captivities, described as "a place worse than the laboratory . . . what Sanji had called 'a kind of hell.'" ⁵⁶⁸ The Strange Bird's earlier fear of a fate worse than death returns. As she is pinned to a table and dissected by the Magician, the Strange Bird observes a blue fox the Magician has previously altered. ⁵⁶⁹ The Strange Bird observes that

while the blue fox head on the wall stared down impassive, glowed like a lamp because the Magician had turned it into a lamp, but not given it the mercy of forgetting what it had become, and as the Strange Bird looked up at the still-living fox, she realized the Magician would not kill her. It would be worse than that. ⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁶⁹ I will return to the blue fox later, as part of my discussion of *Dead Astronauts*.

⁵⁷⁰ VanderMeer, *Strange Bird*, 61.

This fear is coupled with the knowledge that once the Magician is through with her, she will no longer be herself. The theme of the loss of self, and of the reconfiguring of the disassembled self as a hybrid being, recurs throughout not just the novella but the *Borne* books *tout court*.

VanderMeer describes the process of the Strange Bird's dissection and transformation in detailed and horrifying terms—her pain is “sharp and piercing, as if . . . each individual feather [were] on fire, with each quill turned into a blade driven into her flesh.” Body part by part (wings, spine, bones), the Strange Bird is dismembered while conscious and without anesthesia. She watches “as the Magician casually threw away so many parts that were irreplaceable. As she gasped through a slit of a mouth, her beak removed as well.”⁵⁷¹ This process is experienced by the Strange Bird as a “reduction” that is performed with a “smooth and clinical assurance,” that ensures “the Strange Bird did not have the option of dying of shock, flayed as she was, remade as she was.”⁵⁷² The losses felt by the Strange Bird are specifically rendered as losses relating to her avian parts: “There was no true way for the Strange Bird to regain herself in the aftermath of the atrocity. She had no wings. She had no wings, and the panic of that, the shock, was only tempered and made distant by how many of her senses the Magician had stripped from her. Her mouth could not sing but only breathe in shallow, uncomfortable gulps.”⁵⁷³

This fact is driven home when at last Wick and Rachel discover the Strange Bird, and Wick claims that, “it is not . . . itself. It can never be itself again.”⁵⁷⁴ Each of these passages links the

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 64.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 93.

violence experienced by the Strange Bird to violence against nonhuman animals perpetrated by humans outside the text. It is a negating violence that brutally strips nonhuman animals of body parts deemed desirable, useful, or convenient to human beings. The association between this type of violence, the commodification of the environment and of nonhuman animal bodies, and the post-apocalyptic setting of the *Borne* books, is brought forward by the Strange Bird herself. “In the lab,” she explains,

so many of the scientists said ‘forgive me’ or ‘I am sorry’ before doing something irrevocable to the animals in their cages. Because they felt they had the right. Because the situation was extreme and the world was dying. So they had gone on doing the same things that had destroyed the world, to save it.”⁵⁷⁵

As in the rest of the *Borne* books, VanderMeer’s emphasis remains on futurity, and it is a futurity specifically concerned with embodiedness. At the novel’s conclusion, the Strange Bird, despite her misgivings, cannot “opt out” of the human components of herself, though they are framed throughout the narrative as invasive, as redefining. Futurity, in the end, is wrapped up in a hybridity that embraces seemingly contradictory modes of being, and which suggests the entanglement of environment, nonhuman animal, human, and monster. The Strange Bird does escape each of the prisons in which she is trapped, does survive, though altered. At the novel’s conclusion, when her human components are reunited with the human components of Sanji’s lover, it is a bittersweet moment in which she recognizes the flux of her own form:

For what are bodies? Where do they end and where do they begin? And why must they be constant? Why must they be strong? So much was leaving her, but of the winnowing, the Strange Bird sang for joy. She sang for joy. Not because she had not suffered or been reduced. But because she was finally free and the world could not be saved, but nor would it be destroyed. And the beautiful bird broke into

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 58.

song, and although it was not a song any bird would recognize, the Strange Bird could understand it and whatever remained of Sanji inside of her recognized it and responded, and the two birds sang one to the other, the dead communicating to the dead in that intimate language.⁵⁷⁶

Crucially, the world is not saved, but neither does it end in fire and brimstone. Rather, what the work gestures toward, and what the *Borne* books suggest more broadly, is a fundamental and necessary change in how world is understood and defined. It is an imagining of a post-anthropocentric future. Following Kelley, “we might imagine an expansive, subversive taxonomy of tranimals, polluted, disrupted hierarchies, and infinite cages to be thrown open.”⁵⁷⁷

The monstrous is represented by the Strange Bird’s vision of Mord as a kind of avenging angel figure—an embodiment of the monster-animal that is powerful and deadly enough to escape capture. In this capacity, Mord is something of a chimeric, tranimal monster god. The monstrous is thus the means by which the future in the *Borne* books is navigated. This is perhaps no more so than in the case of the blue fox, who appears variously in each of the *Borne* books. Most significantly, the blue fox acts as both antagonist and protagonist in the novel *Dead Astronauts*.

Unlike the preceding two works, *Dead Astronauts* does not follow a conventional narrative. Instead, it transpires across several alternative timelines and universes that exist interconnectedly with the central timeline of *Borne* and *The Strange Bird*. During its opening chapters, the novel focuses on three scientists who travel between different timelines, attempting to ensure that the timeline in which the world survives is the one that wins out over the others. In this, they are guided by the blue fox, though the fox’s own goals remain mysterious, and its allyship with the

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 108-109.

⁵⁷⁷ Lindsay Kelley, “Menagerie à Tranimals,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22. No. 2, 2017: 97-109; 99.

humans is dependent on which timeline they occupy, including which “version” of themselves is being followed by the narrative. Gradually, each of the human characters falls away, and it becomes clear that the blue fox is the character with whom the novel is most concerned. Over the course of many lifetimes in many universes, the blue fox has died and returned, been transformed and transformed others, in order to eventually find an escape from a cycle of violence not unlike that experienced by the Strange Bird (or, perhaps, the Buddhist *saṃsāra*). Like the Strange Bird, it was once captured and experimented upon by humans, and like the Strange Bird, it seeks escape through the monstrous, chimeric qualities that result from its various transformations.

The fox’s story unfolds over all three *Borne* books, and its story in *Dead Astronauts* appears to terminate with the blue fox’s head mounted to the wall as we see it in *The Strange Bird*. Over the course of the three works, the blue fox operates in the shadows, communicating to the other characters through a skulk of foxes that monitors, guides, and sometimes rescues, Rachel, Borne, and the Strange Bird. The blue fox is able to see and communicate through these under-foxes, who operate with something like a hivemind. The blue fox is alternately received with trepidation, as in the case of Rachel, and as a quasi-religious figure in the case of the Strange Bird and the three scientists in *Dead Astronauts*. Thus, the blue fox, upon the Strange Bird’s captivity by the Magician, becomes a symbol of hope: “she [the Strange Bird] ignored all but that ceiling and the fox head, which was luminous even against the iridescent paint used to create the cosmos beyond.”⁵⁷⁸ Eventually, the Strange Bird begins meditating on the blue fox’s head whenever she is being operated on, as a means to alleviate her pain. “In the end,” says the Strange Bird, “there was only the head of the fox on the wall, staring benevolent down on her, shining with that blue, unfading, eternal light, that beatific agony.”⁵⁷⁹ The blue fox appears to exude an aura that allows the Strange Bird to maintain the internal compass that will eventually

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

lead her to safety, yet the explanation behind the “beatific agony” the Strange Bird describes does not become fully apparent until addressed in *Dead Astronauts*.

The religious language used to describe the blue fox here, recurs in *Dead Astronauts*, in which the fox takes on a similar role for the under-foxes, and for the three scientists. This religious, and often both apocalyptic and eschatological, dimension, is clear through the biblically-coded language employed by the blue fox when it communicates with its fellow foxes as well as the postscripts to each chapter:

And the blue fox said: *There shall come scavengers to the City from far away. They will call themselves the Company. They shall have no face. They shall have no body at which to strike, but many limbs. There shall issue forth from the Company beasts and monsters and creatures that shift their form in ways that you cannot imagine. There shall come threats you cannot imagine.*⁵⁸⁰

Biblical, apocalyptic, and messianic imagery recurs throughout *Dead Astronauts*, and it is often centered on occasions when the monstrous, the human, and the nonhuman animal collide. Moss, one of the scientists, is guided by the blue fox along a path that will cause her to merge with two biblically coded monsters—Leviathan and Behemoth—who are framed as creations of the Company.⁵⁸¹ One of the results of this language, and its interweaving with the theme of monstrosity, is that the idealized post-apocalyptic landscape sought by both the three astronauts, and the blue fox, takes on a quasi-biblical status itself, as a “new world” that has the opportunity to organize itself much differently than the old one. In this way, both the blue fox, and the monstrous, are encoded as saviours and safekeepers of futurity, and it is a futurity for which the prerequisite is to merge with (and acknowledge) the monster.

⁵⁸⁰ VanderMeer, *Dead Astronauts*, 5.

⁵⁸¹ See, for examples, *ibid.*, 66-68; 75.

The blue fox's own motivation appears in part to be the salvation of other nonhuman animals, most especially foxes, and often involves violence against humans in a kind of nonhuman animal-human war that brings to mind the salvific figure of the *bodhisattva*. Early in *Dead Astronauts*, the blue fox explains that it has embraced its monstrosity in order to achieve its goals, and over the course of the novel, the reader is clued in to the fact that the blue fox is able to shapeshift, even become human, and that its identity has to some extent collapsed into the identities it has been forced to inhabit. The ultimate result of its plans is left ambiguous by the end of *Dead Astronauts*, yet we are left to believe that the timeline of *Borne*, in which a new society that embraces to some degree the nonhuman, is the result of its efforts. In one passage from *Dead Astronauts*, the character Borne reappears as "the shapeshifter" and is asked by a character called the duck, "do you ever wonder what it would be like not to live in the world of humans?"⁵⁸² Part of the implication of each of the *Borne* books is that the world of humans has already ended (or is in the process of ending). It is also, arguably, a recommendation that we, too, disassemble the Anthropocene, whether that means disassembling the various apparatuses of capitalist, expansionist anthropocentric ideology and systems, or the discrete concept of the human.

As a messianic figure, the blue fox describes to the other foxes that, "there will be a terrible price to be paid. But I will pay it. If you follow me."⁵⁸³ Much of what is "terrible" surely references the deaths and transformations of the three scientists, as well as numerous other characters engaged with throughout the novel, but the most obvious referent is the violence enacted against humans by the blue fox, and which takes on a retributive character.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 249.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 5.

Experimented upon by humans in much the same way as the Strange Bird, the blue fox describes for the reader the process of its capture with reference to a mate and young long dead, and for whom it still yearns, hundreds of years later. Notably, however, VanderMeer troubles an easy reading of this section, using the blue fox's story to critique anthropocentrism and the projection of the human onto the nonhuman animal. In its recounting of events, the blue fox describes a group of humans capturing him, "who don't care what they're doing. Until forced to. Who all unawares destroy their own warrens, who poison their own food, convinced of righteousness."

The fox is trapped:

there came the piercing thread of agony in the shoulder. There came the dizziness, the stagger, the fall into leaves and moss, amid the snails and earthworms. Down close where the earth smells like heaven. My mate watched from the bushes. She knew she couldn't save me, and I didn't want her to try. Still I saw her. As I faded. As I faded into becoming something else, not old or new. As they took me away. Still looking into her eyes. The Sentimental tale. The tale you always need to care. Which shows you don't care. Why we don't care if you care.

The sentiment is not unlike Taylor's observation that humans favour animals who demonstrate so-called human-like qualities, or with whom it is easier to identify due to perceived kinship (mammals are more favoured, for instance, than reptiles or birds). The passage intentionally and explicitly references "sentimental" elements of the fox's story to evoke compassion, then problematizes them to generate discomfort in the human reader. Yet care for one's young, one's mate, is not a strictly human quality, and the text does seem to recognize this. Later in the novel, the blue fox references again its mate and young:

I couldn't protect my children. Couldn't protect my mate. She couldn't protect me. History didn't allow for that. History had other plans. Don't know if the need is part of me or part of them. The pool of water. The stream. The salamanders there. There tasty earthworms. The burrow. All of us together, in the burrow. They have been dead three hundred years now. I should be dead with them. A fox lives four years. I must not be a fox anymore.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 308.

References to burrow, stream, and prey animals populate the blue fox's perspective, and recur here (and once again in the novel's closing scene) as a kind of dream of being the fox. It is not dissimilar to the way VanderMeer uses imagery of flight, sky, and wings in the *Strange Bird*'s narration. Much like the *Strange Bird*, however, the blue fox is no longer only a fox. Having come into contact with some unseen intelligence (possibly a god, or possibly the author—*Dead Astronauts* gives few concrete answers), the blue fox is well on its way to sealing its messianic destiny. This destiny, at least in part, is to lay siege to the category of the human, and in so doing, bring about a world in which there are no humans. As the blue fox itself explains, "human is a stronghold that hides a weakness."⁵⁸⁵ It is the work of the monster to lay siege.

During the process of the fox's re-creation, it becomes a bioengineered chimera, and that process cements a hatred both of the human, as well as a recognition of its own human elements: "they tried to make me more human. Intelligent in the way humans call themselves intelligent. So I held on deep to fox. They couldn't risk a human, but they wanted a human response."⁵⁸⁶ The newly reformed fox is made to die again and again in a series of experiments seemingly designed to create access to a new, unblemished reality. An entire chapter is dedicated to the repetition of the ways in which the fox, and the real-world nonhuman animals it in part represents, is repeatedly tortured. For six pages, the following passage repeats with only occasional alteration:

They killed us with traps. They killed us with poisons. They killed us with snares. They killed us with guns. They killed us with knives. They strangled us. They trampled us. They tore us apart with hounds. They baited steel-jawed traps. They starved us out. They burned us alive. They withheld water. They killed all our prey. They slit our throats. They filled our burrows. They drowned us. They

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 259.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 260.

trampled us under horses' hooves. They bred us for fur and bludgeoned us to death. They kept us in cages so small with so many we burst apart. They suffocated us with poison gas. They put us in sacks and beat us with clubs. They cut out our tongues so we bled to death. They skinned us alive. They detonated rock and stopped our hearts. They swung us by our tails and smashed our skulls against stones. They murdered us in each and every year. They murdered us on each and every day. They killed us with traps ⁵⁸⁷

After the sixth page, the litany is interrupted by a single line on an otherwise empty page: "you couldn't kill us all."⁵⁸⁸ As the fox is made to suffer, die, then revive over and over, it plots vengeance. "My body," says the fox, "wanted to murder them all until the walls were covered in blood."⁵⁸⁹ This is followed by a description of the ways in which the blue fox then hunted and killed and trapped humans in the ways it (and others) were trapped and killed. It later regrets this violence, yet as it mingles in human shape with partygoers at a human's house it makes the following observation:

The owner loved the ironic taxidermy of roadkill. 'If it's roadkill, it's pure. I just make them beautiful again.' The taxidermist was there. I wondered if I ran over the taxidermist and preserved her in resin if she would feel beautiful. If she would feel pure. Exploded first into jagged eruption and pulling apart of flesh and tissue and bone and sinew. Left with a hole where the chest had been. A face half sawed off. Or perhaps a broken back, still alive and gasping, but crushed to asphalt in the middle, hoping now for another car to finish the carnage.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 271.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 277.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 264.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 288.

The graphic brutality of the passage, as well as that of the repetitious murder and abuse of animals, makes more explicit the social critiques VanderMeer introduces in *The Strange Bird*. Not only do they interrogate the abuse of nonhuman animals, but they also repeatedly draw attention to the exploitation of the environment, climate change, and the effects of both on humans and nonhumans alike. The taxidermy passage, for instance, is prefaced by the fox's commentary on the consumption of plastic, of the poisoning of humans by other humans and human-owned corporations, and it is notable that in the repeating chapter many of the methods of death (e.g. killing of the foxes' prey animals, destruction of habitat) evoke human-caused climate change and the destruction of wild spaces for commercial or other human enterprises.

Yet the ultimate promise of the blue fox, and of *Dead Astronauts*, is one of future salvation. The "terrible things" the fox says it must do, do appear at least to effect survival for the under-foxes and the other organisms in the *Borne* books. The *Strange Bird*, after all, escaped the Magician, and so continues her existence as monster-animal, and the monstrous transformations of the scientists seem tailored to set the course of events in motion that result in the development of the new world witnessed at the end of *Borne*. *Dead Astronauts* refuses clear answers, yet the emphasis remains on the theme of monstrous transformation as a means of reimagining the future. Its focus on nonhuman animals in particular, and especially the ways in which the nonhuman ought to be valued not according to human standards, or according to human merits, is key to understanding its activist messages.

Animals, argues Taylor, "are understood as incapable, as lacking in the various abilities and capacities that have long been held to make human lives uniquely valuable and meaningful."⁵⁹¹ Echoing the sentiments of ethologist Marc Bekoff, Taylor argues that human-nonhuman difference, rather than forming the basis for further oppression, should be recognized and

⁵⁹¹ Taylor, 43.

celebrated.⁵⁹² It is in this capacity that VanderMeer employs the monster in the *Borne* novels, as a means to interrogate anthropocentrism, and to gesture to the ways in which the liminality and intersectionality of the monster can be used to imagine nonhuman animal cognition.

Conclusion

As each of VanderMeer's animal characters navigates the ravaged but fecund landscapes left behind in the wake of the Company's disintegration, they experience a continued collapsing and coalescing of the categories of the human and the nonhuman. It is a promise VanderMeer's work shares with *Wilder Girls* and *The Beauty*, in which generic heterogeneity is a prerequisite for futurity. The figure of the monster in each of these works becomes not only a source of terror and horror (though it is also that), but a suggestion of what it may be necessary to become in order to reckon with our own culpability with regard to global warming, and both the precarity of our survival as well as the survival of a distinct category called "human." Viewed from a certain angle, what the monstrous transformations in these texts seem to reveal is perhaps less the *mutability* of the category of the human, than the fact that "human" never really existed at all.

As Timothy Morton articulates in *Hyperobjects*, the end of the world itself is perhaps necessary if we are to genuinely address systemic oppression of humans and nonhumans alike, and to survive on a damaged planet:

⁵⁹² Ibid., 60.

What is left if we aren't the world? Intimacy. We have lost the world but gained a soul—the entities that coexist with us obtrude on our awareness with greater urgency. Three cheers for the so-called *end of the world*, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and nonhumans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of *world*.⁵⁹³

In the end, the end of the world is a monster's business.

⁵⁹³ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 108.

Conclusion

Monstrous Horizons and the Possibility of Monsters

“I was lost when they found me, the monsters. Lost like Mowgli in the jungle, like Romulus and Remus in the Tiber—and these beings gazed upon me with kindness. They, too, were outcasts of an absurd world that demanded impossible perfection and gave nothing back,” Guillermo del Toro, *At Home with Monsters*.⁵⁹⁴

“Just because you don’t see them, doesn’t mean they’re not there,” Indrapramit Das, *The Devourers*.⁵⁹⁵

What does it mean to believe in monsters? One question implies another: Are monsters real? A simple matter perhaps, yet in the answering, scholars and laypersons typically find themselves brushing up against the rough, unpolished edges of an inquiry they have not previously explored, and if they did their maps of the terrain were at best incomplete. Beyond the question—beyond their maps—lies dangerous landscapes that cause one to second guess one’s most tightly-clutched assumptions, closely guarded fears, and deeply buried desires.

⁵⁹⁴ Britt Salvesen and Jim Shedden, *At Home with Monsters: Inside His Films, Notebooks, and Collections* (San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2016), 6.

⁵⁹⁵ Das, 5.

Again: What does it mean to believe in monsters? In the works I have analyzed here, I contend that belief in monsters is congruent with belief in both limitation and possibility. Texts and subcultures that depict or endorse the radical/resistant monster grasp hold of figures that have been used (and which are so often still used) to justify the oppression, suppression, and disavowal of real persons. When someone is rendered inhuman, we are given license to treat them inhumanely.

In radical/resistant monster texts, however, the monster speaks back. To believe in monsters in this context, then, might also mean to believe in their potential to challenge, to avenge, and to protect.

In terms of trans people and our stories, monsterfuckery, as in *The Woods All Black* and *The Invitation*, thrives at a historical moment in which our newly won rights in the Western world are under direct and constant attack. The plant that has sprouted in the new terrain of the twenty-first century faces the climate change of illiberalism around the world. In the United States, influential independent trans journalist Erin Reed (known also as Erin in the Morning), has maintained a map of the United States that tracks State legislature which targets trans adults and youths, in part to warn trans travellers of the relative safety of various locations. As of March 2025, the adult risk map marks two states (Texas and Florida) as “Do Not Travel,” fifteen additional states as having passed the “worst laws,” seven states as “high risk,” and four more states as “moderate risk.” For foreign trans travellers, the entire United States is marked as “Do Not Travel.”⁵⁹⁶ Not pictured on the map are, of course, the many trans people whose lives continue to be impacted by anti-trans sentiment and law in their home States. On a daily basis,

⁵⁹⁶ Erin Reed, “Anti-Trans National Risk Assessment Map: March Edition,” *Erin in the Morning*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/anti-trans-national-risk-assessment>.

my personal social media feeds are filled with mutual aid requests by trans people looking for financial support to help them flee unsafe states and/or the country.

But the problem did not begin with the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024. Long before that data I was receiving daily updates on State legislature and its impact on this map. In the years leading up to the election, mainstream news outlets in the United States, influenced in part by anti-trans discourse in the United Kingdom, promoted biased (mis)information about trans people and trans identities, with GLAAD reporting in 2024 that only one out of nineteen *New York Times* articles on trans issues quoted an actual trans person.⁵⁹⁷ Meanwhile, on 16 April, 2025, the United Kingdom's Supreme Court ruled in favour of restricting trans people's access to appropriately gendered spaces.⁵⁹⁸

In light of these and many other developments, Lee Mandelo's call for us to show our teeth speaks to not only the desire, but the necessity, for resistance. In monsterfucker spaces such as the aforementioned Discord server, Monster Manor, this includes dedicated channels for mutual aid and other forms of politically-engaged activism focused on supporting trans and other at-risk groups.

In the face of calls to abandon trans identity altogether,⁵⁹⁹ to go quietly, stealthily, back into the closet (or the tomb), monsterfucker art that speaks not only to the resilience of trans people, but

⁵⁹⁷ "A Year in Review: The New York Times Failed to Quote Any Out Trans Person in Two-Thirds of Stories About Anti-Trans Legislation," *GLAAD.com*, March 26, 2024, <https://glaad.org/releases/a-year-in-review-the-new-york-times-failed-to-quote-any-out-trans-person-in-two-thirds-of-stories-about-anti-trans-legislation/>.

⁵⁹⁸ "UK: Court Ruling Threatens Trans People," *Human Rights Watch*, May 9, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/09/uk-court-ruling-threatens-trans-people>.

⁵⁹⁹ Erin Reed, "11th Circuit Rules Trans Teacher Must Misgender Herself In Classroom In Accordance With FL Law," *Erin in the Morning*, July 2, 2025, <https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/11th-circuit-rules-trans-teacher>.

to the celebration of that which will (and can) never be assimilated, is a defiant and morale-boosting project. Through the self-aware absurdity of monsterfucker stories trans people express a defiant faith in the possible. In these works all bodies—betentacled, composed of slime or centipede, or constantly morphing under the domed ceilings of subterranean pleasurescares—are shown to not only matter, but to carve and crave matter with every sharpened claw or tooth. That same expression of, and hope for, continued resistance, bleeds from the pages of monstrous memoirs such as those of Riva Lehrer and Matt Lee, whose calls to continuously revisit and reinterpret the history of monstrosity in the context of Othered peoples are combined with a wellspring of affinity for monsters and for their usefulness in articulating the unique challenges faced by contemporary minorities. In such works, as in *The Shape of Water*, *Juniper and Thorn*, and *Dear Mothman*, to continuously and unrepentantly practice self-expression and exploration is itself a form of radical resistance.

The Ecofabulist works that form the basis of Chapter Three repudiate patriarchal and paternalistic attempts to shape the lives of queer women, Black and Indigenous queer people of colour, and those of us caught in the interstices between rigid categories. Through their unflinching portrayal of the ravages of abuse, both *Grey Dog* and *Sorrowland* demand their audiences reckon with not only the history of the oppression of queer people, Black Americans, and women, but that we reevaluate the ongoing impact that such histories have on contemporary people. Through radical identification with the monstrous, all four works under consideration—*Grey Dog*, *Sorrowland*, *Wilder Girls*, and *The Beauty*—ally their marginalized protagonists (and, by extension, authors and readers) with a fecund power that (re)establishes a connection between those protagonists and the Natural world. Ecofabulism, as an emergent subgenre, rejects interpretations of queerness that position it as a purely urban phenomenon and instead use the figure of the monster to make allies of the queer and wild Nature.

In Chapter Four, the post-apocalyptic landscapes of Jeff VanderMeer and Donna Haraway herald not only an end to the Anthropocene, but the opening up of our world(s) to new, monstrous reformulations of the human and nonhuman animal categories, positioning eschaton as both end and beginning. In VanderMeer, this positioning suggests ways of imagining bold futures that

reject anthropocentrism in favour of radical monstrosity. The *Borne* trilogy further centres nonhuman animals in a way that directly critiques the contemporary, ongoing suffering and abuse of nonhuman animals in the context of habitat destruction, factory farming, animal testing and experimentation, and paternalistic stewardship resulting in the euthanasia of disabled animals.

Such monsters open up the possibility to explore identity, embodiment, and visibility for trans authors and audiences, offer—and warn of—a monstrous queerness that balks at civilization, and, in the face of the monster animal, suggest a future in which civilization has been abandoned or destroyed entirely.

In its place, may we imagine something better.

Conclusion

It is 2025. You have just received your edits on what will be your first traditionally published short story. The work is fantasy, featuring as its protagonist an intersex hero descended from two male serpent gods. What interests you most about the story though, is its antagonist: a third serpent god, relegated to the wasteland and who the hero has been tasked to kill in order to make way for her aunt's olive grove. The serpent is well aware she is about to be slain, that hers is a future that has been denied, that from the perspective of industry and progress she is a bump on a road about to be paved. Your favourite part of the story, its most important part, is a speech the serpent makes to the hero and his companion, that articulates the frustrations and sorrows that have flooded into you with increasing fervor since the 2020 pandemic. Your editor, who is very kind and well-meaning but does not share your identity or understand the purpose of the passage, has asked you to cut it.

You do not.

What compromise can be made with tyrants? What is a quarter from a quarter, from a fifth of what, over time, has become less and less my own? When the lives of my children depend on every inch of this desert, when they slip from me malformed or fail to slip at all and rot, instead, inside me, what compromise can be made that returns to me a sliver of what was lost? When the ground grows foul and cruel predators are lured by lush olives, when irrigated streams burst below the earth as soft poison that floods the warm ground with feverish cold, what staying power has compromise? It is not lost on me, child, why they have sent you and not another, for they know there is no danger in it for them any longer. First, they send men with words to soften the bite, that they might compromise your necessity in unseen inches, then later—too late—comes the sword to silence the voice that remains, so no witness survives to bleat about the indignity of the tyrant’s crimes. My bloated body, pregnant with the dead and slowly dying, has been made a tomb. My flesh becomes a monument to that-which-ought-to-have-been-and-never-was. My dreams waste inside me and you come to beg at my door that I should compromise. Which part of the nothing that remains to me do you now ask that I relinquish? None of that which has been stolen can be returned, and time molders on to turn even gods to dust. . . . You have choked the voice from the lives I would have given, before they had a chance to speak. Soon, I will be silent. You shall hear no more from me, and your children will never even know to wonder where I have gone.⁶⁰⁰

⁶⁰⁰ Steve Hugh Westenra, “The True Tale of Yehawellon Son of Serpents, Saltwater Be My Blood and Cedarwood My Skin,” in *New Edge Sword and Sorcery* 2, n. 6, forthcoming 2026. “Steve Hugh Westenra” is my own pen name, used for my fictional writing.

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