Introduction: Extraordinary, Ambiguous and Unsettling

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In the Pacific Northwest during the 1970s, regional sightings of Bigfoot (or Sasquatch) were the subject of news stories and informal speculation. Opinions ranged from dismissals of the monster as “just folklore” to a full embrace of cryptozoology, the study of mythical animals. In 2019, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) made its Bigfoot files from the 1970s available to the public.¹ The 22-page document follows a paper trail based on a request made by Peter Byrne, an Oregon resident and Bigfoot enthusiast. Byrne supplied the Bureau with an unidentified hair sample he had collected. When the results came back, the hairs “were determined to be from the deer family.” Forty-three years later Peter Byrne dismissed the FBI findings. “I’ve interviewed far too many people with credible stories,” he told a reporter from Portland’s KGW news station. At 93, Byrne was still hiking the Oregon Coast Range in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the elusive creature². I understand Byrne’s doggedness. I too have interviewed numerous people, mostly citizens of Olympic Peninsula tribes, about their personal encounters with Bigfoot. People I know and trust shared frank, sincere and detailed accounts of encountering “Him” on rain-swept highways or along fishing trails (Murray 2019). Besides hearing some great stories, I learned this about monsters: the cultural

¹ “Bigfoot,” The FBI Vault, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed May 14, 2021.

² Christine Pitawanich. “At 93 Oregon man still walks the woods in search of Bigfoot,” KGW, Portland, OR, 2019, accessed May 12, 2021.

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work they perform is as important to denizens of the 21st century as it was to their ancestors. For one thing, monsters unsettle us through their “intolerable ambiguity,” which in turn threatens human “understandings of the world, the self, and the relations between the two” (Weinstock 2020, 3).

As an investigator for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and deputy editor for that organization’s journal, Benjamin Radford has untangled ambiguous and paranormal claims around the world for much of his professional career. It can be said that he knows a thing or two about monsters, not to mention ghosts and space aliens. He has investigated and debunked haunted theatres, mysterious crystal skulls and cryptid sightings, a category of mythical or unknown animal species that includes Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster and others. In his book *Mysterious New Mexico: Miracles, Magic, and Monsters in the Land of Enchantment* (2014) Radford claims to have “solved” many paranormal mysteries by relying on academic research from multiple disciplines and through his own painstaking field investigations. Radford’s scientific approach to exploring supernatural claims is to “provide background information ... while guiding the reader through truths and myths about each topic” (2014, 3).

There is no doubt Radford’s goal to expose misinformation and “fakelore” while encouraging more critical consumption of media content is both admirable and necessary in an era where rumors, conspiracy theories and mistruths spread widely across the Internet in a single day. More recently Radford and his colleagues at the *Skeptical Inquirer* are focused on pernicious forms of folklore like misinformation surrounding the Covid-19 vaccine and the spread of conspiracy theories by followers of QAnon³. At the same time, Radford’s assumption, one that is shared by many, is that people mostly cling to paranormal beliefs because they are misinformed. So, when the scientifically minded present alternative explanations based on research, evidence and logical arguments, the public abandons the supernatural realm in favor of a more secular reality. The folklorist David Hufford (1982, 47) saw science’s dominant role in defining truth as being mired in a “tradition of disbelief.” In other words, Hufford stated, “What I know, I *know*, what you know you only believe.” If people readily accepted their beliefs as misinformation in the face of facts, then scientists and paranormal investigators would not still be sparring over the authenticity of giant plaster cast footprints or the use of electronic voice phenomena as scientific evidence of ghosts. In my years of listening to people’s accounts of Sasquatch sightings and ghostly hauntings, science has

³ *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 45, No. 3, May/June 2021.

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rarely won the day. While debunking spurious claims has its place, what intrigues me more are questions about the nature of belief, past and present. Rather than challenge the validity of paranormal claims, I along with other scholars across multiple fields now study *why* people believe as they do, *what* counts as acceptable evidence or proof and *how* their stories are rooted culturally and historically in local belief systems.

Certainly monsters, both ancient and modern, continue to stalk humanity around the globe where they are immersed in complex cultural and historical matrices. The word ‘monster’ is derived from the word *monstrum*, a Latin term that suggests they offer both warnings and revelations. To study where monsters dwell “at the threshold of becoming” (Cohen 1996, 20) is to journey into humanity’s deepest lingering fears about an unknown that hints at both uncertainties and possibilities. Myths about monsters that are anchored to various systems of sacrality may continue to carry weight for thousands of years because their content rings as truth for new generations of believers. Thus, stories about monsters from Sasquatch to the Devil occupy important roles because the terror aroused by their abjected forms also corroborates beliefs about extraordinary realms where humans may encounter the divine.

Monsters linger in the informal stories people share about them. They are cautionary tales resigned to the liminal spaces between nature and culture, life and death, the real and the intangible. At the same time, monsters possess the power to emerge from the margins in order to storm the heart of human existence; the family, the home, the village, the nation. Monsters serve numerous purposes, not the least of which is to complicate the borderlands between safety and danger, self and other. What then do scholars hope to achieve by studying monsters in the 21st century? What rhizomatic relationships hidden beneath the surface, connect monsters to each other and humans in unexpected ways? What can we learn from them? How do we establish common analytical ground? These are fair questions.

While curiosity about the nature of monsters dates back to ancient times, 20th century theorists like Sigmund Freud (the uncanny), Julia Kristeva (the abject) and Michel Foucault (power) were instrumental in building a framework that has provided scholars with tools for rendering monsters legible. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in 1996 added his own theoretical bridge so contemporary scholars from across multiple disciplines could engage with each other more productively. His foundational essay *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* provides “a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender” and marks the origins of contemporary Monster Studies (1996, 3). His larger point has been that we live in monstrous times and analyzing why this is so, is a serious subject that is worthy of scholarly time and attention. Scholars from across academia have answered the call so there has been, especially in the last two decades, a proliferation of edited monster compendiums, books, special editions and

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foundational articles (c.f. Stryker 1994; Asma 2009; Mittman and Dendle 2012; Musharbash and Presterudstuen 2014; Weinstock 2020). The following three examples illustrate the utility of monsters when social theory featuring them is applied to real world issues like gender diversity, media consumption, globalization and culture change. Each of these exposes the dark underbelly where monsters dwell.

Queer theorist Susan Stryker used the imagery of monsters to spawn a new interdisciplinary field, “trans monstrosities.” Her oft-quoted essay *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage* (1994) challenged trans people to reclaim and empower themselves with the abjective language that had been used by Western society to exclude them as unnatural, monstrous creatures. Stryker’s essay exposed “in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism” (1994, 245). Her reflection on the term ‘monster’ in this instance illustrates how they are “both abject and sacred” while their angry rampages emphasize how “defilement is a prerequisite for order” (Braham 2021, 38-39).

More recently, scholars are conducting research on virtual hauntings (Blank 2009) as well as technology’s relationship to posthumanism (Smart and Smart 2017). Ghastly avatars like the Slender Man (Peck 2017), cyborgs (Haraway 1985) and space aliens (Bullard 2016) reveal we are not at home with the ways that the spectral, the uncanny and technology are enjoined. Cohen’s insight that late modernity is characterized by an “ambient fear [that is] a kind of total fear that saturates” our daily lives has only become more apparent in the two and half decades since he published his work. We now add to his concerns fears about the intensifying role of social media and the merger of humans with their technologies. Perhaps this accounts for the Slender Man, a more recent monster that sprang from the Internet where his legend cycle was born to inhabit the imaginations of children and the actual places they frequent. Slender Man’s eclipse of the boundary between the self and its avatars aligns with genuine parental fears about children’s unrestrained use of technologies to access and merge with virtual worlds. Like Slender Man, the Internet itself is monstrous as it is defined by a kind of hybridity where danger lurks at the hinge of the virtual and the real.⁴

Capitalism and globalization narrow the gap between ‘here’ and ‘there’ by providing greater access to goods, services and commodities. At the same time the price of convenience is fear of real and imagined threats. The language of monstrosity reveals the unstable ground where self meets other by warning of the possible perils of invasion and contamination. The

⁴ Ochs, Josh, 2018. “What is Slender Man?” A Guide for Parents, accessed May 12, 2021.

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continuing popularity of zombie books, comics, films and television shows reflects the very nature of those fears. What dangers loiter at the “gates of difference,” ready to breach the integrity of bodily, geographic and social borders? It does not require a global pandemic to see how zombies and alien invasions have come to represent those fears. And it goes without saying that the capitalistic ruins of the Anthropocene are spaces 21st century humans share with monstrous non-humans and where they continue to confront the excesses of modernity (c.f. Tsing et al. 2017).

Contemporary monster theories have primarily been defined by Literary Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, History and Philosophy. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s recent compendium *The Monster Theory Reader* (2020) assembles leading voices reflecting this interdisciplinary dominance in the emerging field. Contributors to the volume offer a wide range of writings about the biological, psychological, historical, literary and sociopolitical roles monsters have played. While many authors evoke topics of particular interest to ethnographers, we and our predecessors have tended to haunt rather than fully embrace interdisciplinary dialogues.

For anthropologists, monsters are nothing new. For decades ethnographers have shared accounts of them. This includes E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1937) ground-breaking book about witchcraft and magic among the Azande, Marjorie Halpin and Michael Ames’s (1980) hard look at Wild Man stories and sightings and Edith Turner’s (1984) provocative essay about witnessing an evil spirit leave an individual in Zambia as they were undergoing an exorcism. Anthropologists (c.f. Goulet and Young 1984; Goulet and Miller 2007) have encouraged giving voice to the inexplicable, unseen and extraordinary experiences they and their interlocutors have encountered in the course of conducting field work.

In 2014, anthropologists Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudtuen published *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond* in order to “open a dialogue between anthropology and the other disciplines interested in monsters: literature studies, media studies, cultural studies, history, gender and sexuality studies, geography, architecture [and] philosophy” (Musharbash and Henning Presterudtuen 2014, 1). They observed that while anthropologists have generations of experience with monsters, the discipline had been slow to join the proliferation of scholars from the Humanities, who focus largely on monsters from Western literary traditions. Anthropologists, Musharbash argues, may counter that narrower range with diverse cross-cultural examples of how local monsters operate in “real” and different ways. Anthropologists with their comparative and cross-cultural approach to understanding culture change, are a necessary addition to these dialogues.

Monsters reveal epistemological and ontological fault lines within societies while hovering between opposing forces like right and wrong, life and death, decorum and anarchy and self

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and other. At the same time, according to Margit Shildrick (2018, 170) they are not “simply a signifier of otherness, but an altogether more complex figure that calls to mind not so much the other per se, but the trace of the other in the self.” It is little wonder humans’ approach “their” monsters with trepidation *and* curiosity, they are as Jeffrey Cohen argues, “our children” (1996, 20). By holding up a mirror for humans to glimpse their frightening doppelgangers, monsters identify the disorder in order and as a result, restore harmony by revealing the dangers posed by imbalance and instability. As such, they have played significant roles as arbiters of how humans distinguish themselves from non-humans and the divine.

The first three articles in this special edition illustrate through their cross-cultural and comparative analyses the paradoxical meanings of monsters in diverse historical populations. Michael Harkin (this volume) explores how humans in two societies historically confronted the monster within as they paradoxically tacked between acceptable behavior and the seductive force of their darker impulses. Harkin compares the central role of “manlike monsters” within the *Beowulf* saga with the mythical cycles and Hamatsa (cannibal dance) ritual made famous by the Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwakiutl) peoples of the Northwest Coast. Like Beowulf and his monstrous and lonely adversary, Grendel, Northwest Coast peoples embraced a logic that obscured through ritualized activities the bright line between human society and its negation. The Hamatsa initiate, like the monster Grendel, retreated to the isolated edges of human society. Only through a series of rituals over several nights was the initiate finally transformed from a cannibalistic monster to a warrior now ready to take his rightful place. As the Spear-Danes and Hamatsa initiates came to understand, true horror it seems resided in how clearly humans saw their own potential to turn monstrous unless they successfully repressed their wild impulses.

Charles Nuckolls next offers a fine-grained analysis of automaticity as “a characteristic of the monstrous” through his historical comparison of the role goddesses from Hindu and Greek mythologies played in delivering “wild” or automatic justice for social transgressions. Ancient Greek and Hindu goddesses of vengeance shared two qualities. The first was the exacting of vicious punishments automatically and without thought. Second, among both ancient Greeks and Hindus sexual sin was connected with pollution or blood, and automatic justice. Each example provides insights into the different ways “processes of domestication” emerged within the rise of the Greek city-state and Hindu households and families.

Kathryn Hudson and John Henderson examine shared characteristics and dissimilarities between *tsitzimime*, monstrous supernatural forces derived from pre-Columbian Aztec beliefs, and their Mesoamerican ethnographic counterpart, *sisimite*. In each instance the

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monsters served to remind humans what they were not supposed to be. Both had wild, unkept appearances, ate their food raw and dwelled in locations marginal to human habitation like forests, ravines and mountaintops. The *tsitzimime* differed from the *sisimite* in that they were usually conceptualized as the “sisters” of the divine goddess mother Coatlicue. The *sisimite* on the other hand merged with Christian supernaturalism following the Spanish conquest. No longer were such spirits associated with Coatlicue but instead were “mostly male agents of the Christian devil.” Despite their differences, their shared wild attributes limited dangerous forces and enforced acceptable social mores.

The “archives of the monstrous,” to borrow Shildrick’s evocative phrase (2018, 167), encourage an ethnohistorical reading of monsters as evidence of silenced pasts and competing worldviews. Indigenous oral traditions about monsters provide a “vehicle for telling history” as Thierry Veyrié argues. Alan McMillian and Ian Hutchinson (2002, 44) caution that oral traditions “may have multiple levels of meaning, rather than describing a single set of historic events.” They are “cultural forms that organize perceptions about the world.” At the same time, Nuu-chah-nulth stories of dancing mountain dwarfs that shake the earth suggest ways that Native peoples “used their cultural landscapes to maintain history and a sense of identity” (Ibid, 60). In a similar vein, Veyrié considers how a multi-episodic story shared in the late 19th century by Pete Snapp, the son of a White settler and Paiute mother, relates to Native American historical responses to settler colonialism. Snapp’s stories of other-than-humans in the mythic past culminate in his promotion of what was at the time, the new Native American Church, and the use of Peyote in its rituals.

Stories of American Southern plantations or aboriginal burial grounds haunted by the ghosts of marginalized others underscore how racism, colonialism, violence and spirits are threaded together by a variety of history-making common to settler colonial nations like the U.S., Canada and Australia (c.f. Miles 2015; Boyd and Thrush 2011; Poole 2011; Gelder and Jacobs 1998). Ghost stories about ‘others’ have long been shared around camp fires and more recently as part of dark history tours (Miles 2015). Ian Puppe’s research about “haunted recreation” in Ontario’s Algonquian Provincial Park goes from friendly to frustrating and even alarming as he navigates between park bureaucracy and place-based supernatural accounts they discourage. His findings underscore how present-day social tensions emerge in the context of shared supernatural stories. Park officials responded negatively to his questions about a nearby haunted ghost town. When the author later accepted an invitation to share a beer and fireside stories with fellow visitors at another campsite, the session took a dark turn as he probed their story of a ghostly Algonquian man seen in the park. Ultimately, the author uses these episodes as a way to frame “identity formation associated with tourism and heritage management.”

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In the final article of this special edition, Jamie Saris weaves the past and present together by contextualizing Western “appetites,” addiction and the monstrous in the period between the publication of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1897 and the release of George Romero’s cult classic, *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. Saris uses stories of vampires and zombies, monsters that consume humans and bleed them dry, to consider how capitalism and consumerism in tangent with new technologies gave rise to modernity’s monstrous appetites. The author’s claims broaden with examples connecting Western society’s oversized appetites with addiction to substances from medications (Dracula and Bayer aspirin made their debut in the same year) to a dangerous reliance on hydrocarbons. The author applies classic economic theory to monsters in order to consider how present-day demand for goods and addiction to substances “structure multiple anxieties, critiques and sometimes even apocalyptic fears at different levels.”

Yasmine Musharbash has identified three ways that anthropologists can contribute to the contemporary study of monsters. They can provide comparative studies linking ethnographic materials that now languish “in either geographic or analytical isolation”; break free of older paradigms that have discouraged dialogue between anthropological sub-areas, and finally, expand the anthropological study of spirits and monsters through interdisciplinary engagement (2014, 15-16). The contributors to this special edition demonstrate in thoughtful and provocative ways, how timely these challenges are.

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