

A Review of 'Monster Anthropology'

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2025-03-17

Contents

References 4

Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (eds.), *Monster Anthropology: Ethnographic Explorations of Transforming Social Worlds Through Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2020), 233 pp., \$54.99 (pbk), ISBN: 1350096253.

Consisting of eleven succinct chapters and a rich theoretical introduction, this edited volume applies monster theory to diverse cultural environs in an effort to demonstrate how anthropology might benefit from monster studies. Articles are arranged not regionally or geographically, but rather thematically, allowing for significant intellectual interplay that ultimately benefits the book's theoretical focus. After an introductory essay, Debbie Felton's chapter opens the volume with an essay looking at monsters haunting Greco-Roman highways. Here, she argues that such narratives reflect not only the real-world threats that lay on roadways, but also the sense of unease over a rapidly transforming empire that relied more heavily on novel roadway technology. In Chapter Two, Indira Arumugam explores the relationship between monstrosity and divinity through a detailed case study of a South Indian village, where the influence of divine monsters (or perhaps we might say monstrous divinities) wanes as electricity and increased cultivation encroach on wild land. In Chapter Three, Musharbash examines the significance surrounding the appearance of a family of giant-like hairy cannibals called *Pangkarlangu* for the Australian Aboriginal Warlpiri people. Her essay is beautiful not only for the rich anthropological contributions framing socially-bound ideas like extinction, but also for her opening reflections on learning 'what it is like to live in a world that is populated not just by people and animal and plants but also by monsters' (p. 60).

The theme of monsters and extinction continues through Mikael Rothstein's Chapter Four, where he examines how Christianization and economic transformations among the Eastern Penan in the Malaysia have threatened and transformed their monsters. In Chapter Five, Christine Judith Nicholls also discusses the impact of colonization in chapter Five, using two Australian Aboriginal monsters—the *Bunyip* and the *Pangkarlangu*—as case studies to demonstrate how changing stories about these creatures reflect the larger impact of British colonization on the Warlpiri people. Chapter Six, written by Helena Onnudottir and Mary Hawkins, explores transforming ideas of ghosts, or *draugar*, in Iceland. Noting ghosts' relationship with the dark in the Icelandic imaginaire, Onnudottir and Hawkins compare historic and contemporary conceptions of the ghosts to show the simultaneous existence of both types of monsters. Chapters Seven and Eight return the reader's focus to Australia, where George Curran discusses how various Walpiri bird-monsters reflect contemporary fears about changing ideas of the self and Joanne Thurman discusses how stories about the *Kurdaitcha*—a Walpiri humanoid monster defined by their malevolent intent—reflect a boundary between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous lifeworlds.

Turning to the final three chapters, Chapter Nine discusses the appearance of significant ghost lore in Fiji following the devastating effects of Cyclone Winston in 2016. Here, author Geir Henning Presterudstuen compares two ghostly accounts linked to the cyclone as a reflection of increasing concerns about climate change. In Chapter

Ten, Holly Hugh reframes the widespread territory deities of Laos as monstrous beings aimed at controlling, and appropriating, local fertility. She argues these deities nuance ideas of political authority in Southeast Asia, ultimately challenging the widespread claim of a ‘galactic polity’ as the region’s foundational model of governance (p. 186). In Chapter Eleven, Rozanna Lilley uses the drawings produced by her own primary-school aged, autistic son as a lens to challenge the culturally-prevalent link between autism and monstrosity. Here, the monsters he draws are neither trauma nor genius, but rather evidence of the foundational human impulse to create, doodle, and draw.

A particular theme that unites all of these diverse offerings is the idea of monsters as reflections of changing social and environmental conditions. Any of these brief chapters would be an excellent addition to an undergraduate classroom, either in a course looking at a specific region—the socio-cultural histories of India, Australia, etc.—or in a more thematically organized course examining the effects of the Anthropocene, reactions to colonization, or larger issues of climate transformation. Importantly for undergraduate readers, each chapter features a generous authorial voice who presumes little prior knowledge and never lets their particular argument overly-dominate the text.

As with many edited volumes, the introduction deserves special note. While much of the introduction may seem to cover ground well-known to those already familiar with monster theory, the short essay serves as an excellent primer for introducing monster theory to the uninitiated. Musharbash and Presterudstuen understandably ground their theory in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s famous 1996 essay *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*—a work that has become foundational for monster studies in general. However, this reader found herself most excited when the authors shared their original innovations beyond Cohen’s seven theses. Indeed, Musharbash and Presterudstuen’s contributions are especially apparent when applying monster theory in the context of anthropological fieldwork. *Monster Anthropology* raises important questions about taking monsters seriously not simply as metaphors, but as beings that research interlocuters—and sometimes the researcher oneself—believe to be truly real and not the literary fiction that Cohen imagines. While especially germane to the field of anthropology, these questions are central for nearly all scholars of culture, religion, or history. In response, Musharbash and Presterudstuen (and Ilana Gershon, in citation) offer the realm of ‘as-if’—living ‘as-if’ these monsters exist while in the field or ‘as-if’ such monsters do not exist while speaking with colleagues. Such a poetic reflection will be invaluable to future researchers across monster studies for years to come.

References

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

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Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, Volume 19 (2025), pp. 1-2.

<<https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.29347>>

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