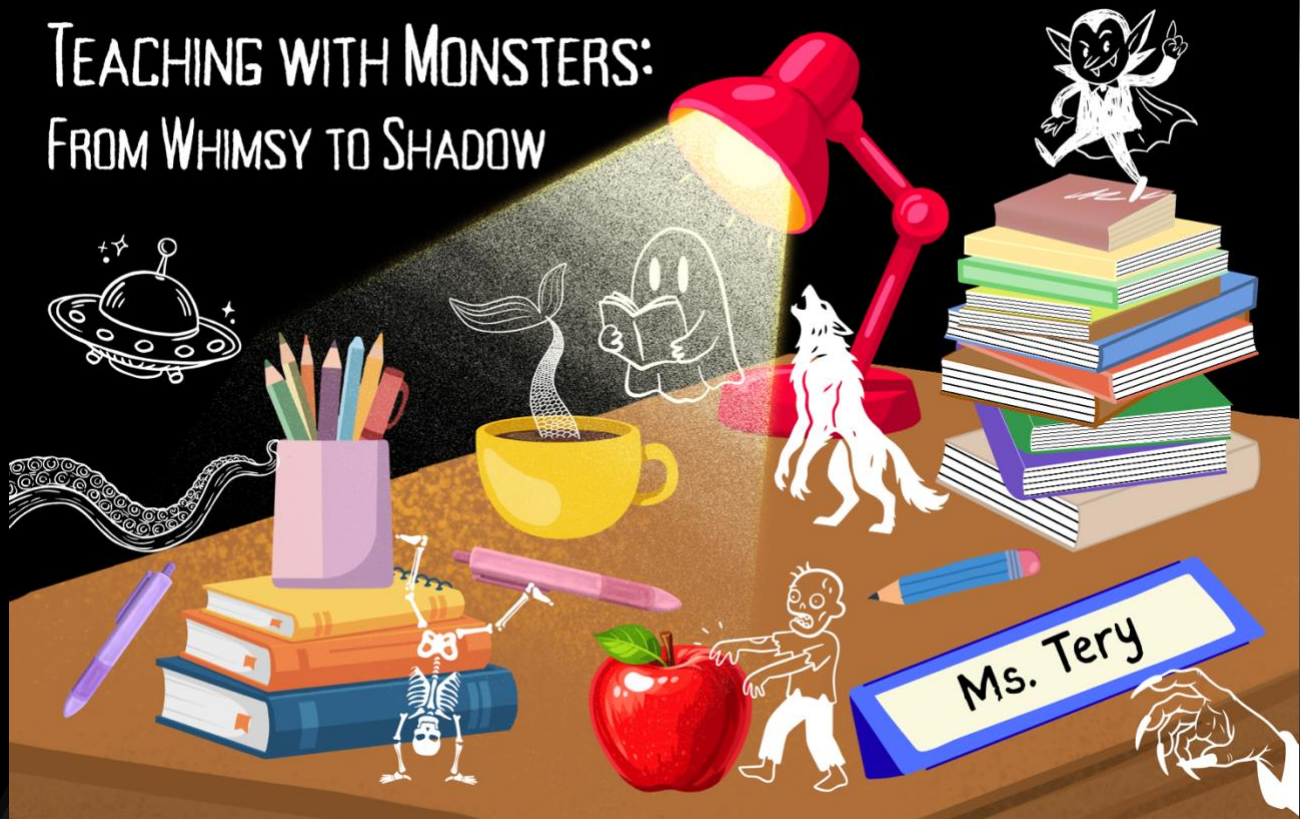


TEACHING WITH MONSTERS: FROM WHIMSY TO SHADOW



Guest Editors: Camille Maria Acosta and Sheila Bock

Journal of Folklore and Education | 2026: Volume 13

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Introduction: Teaching (And Learning) With the Monsters in Our Midst

by Camille Maria Acosta and Sheila Bock, Guest Editors

I (Camille) am a true Chicana at heart; I'm pretty sure if you ripped open my chest, you'd find a prickly pear cactus that smells like creosote and is powdered with Hot Cheeto dust. The pride of my Mexican American heritage pumps through my blood like a drum, a constant and melodic reminder of the millions before me who sacrificed everything to keep me alive. Grandma Licha's tortillas and Tía Carmen's chile con queso serve as those rhythmic reminders. So do Mexican monsters.

Monsters raised me. More specifically, I grew up listening to stories my dad (Thatha) would tell me and my brother Chris about monstrous figures like El Chupacabra, La Mano Pachona, and El Cucuy. My favorite was La Llorona. For those who may be unfamiliar...

A long, long time ago there lived a woman named Maria. She was the most beautiful woman in all of Mexico, muy hermosa, and she herself knew it too. Day after day, male suitors begged her for her hand in romance, but day after day men returned home defeated, con el corazón roto. This was Maria's life until a dashing young gentleman galloped into town and turned Maria's life upside down; ella se volvió loca. She knew in an instant that she had to have him, for he was the only man to match her in beauty and in elegance. Soon they were to be wed, and not long after had two delightful chiquititos. This delight however was short lived, for one damning day the dashing gentleman became grotesque as he rode into town with another woman at his side. He rode up to Maria and pledged his life to this new woman whom he had barely met, because to him his current wife was no longer beautiful. Maria's heart burst into tiny shards of glass, invisible to the eye but painful for those handling it. That night, in a fit of sorrow and anger Maria decided to inflict the same agony toward the man who bestowed it upon her. Maria woke her two boys up, took their hands, and guided them to the river "for a bath." Hand in hand, the three figures immersed themselves in the water...but under their mother's hand, the little niños never came up for air. After the blood red glare of fury faded from sight, Maria realized what she had done. She shrieked from the gallows of her soul, "¡Mis niños!" before letting the river water fill up her lungs. It is said now that this weeping woman, La Llorona, has returned from the hereafter, searching for new children to claim as her own for all eternity.

This is just one version, of course. Throughout Mexican, Chicano, and Nahua history, there have been many, many versions of La Llorona and many iterations of the weeping woman herself—from Chalchiuhtlicue to La Malinche. This version, however, was the one I remember Thatha reciting to me as a child. I remember sadness and anger filling this story whenever my dad would tell us this legend. La Llorona's emotions always stood out to me; they seemed monstrous. Listening to these stories was both terrifying and exhilarating. Snuggled in my parents' bed, my brother and I both clutching stuffed animals, we were safe.

It wasn't until the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, though, that my family and I started to talk *about* these stories. At that point, I was halfway through my MA in Folk Studies at Western Kentucky University. Alone in an apartment, 1,300 miles away from my family and my home in El Paso, while also battling mental health struggles because of undiagnosed OCD, I turned to the familiar stories about La Llorona for a sense of comfort. Ostensibly, I began interviewing my family members about La Llorona for my MA thesis research, but at the same time I sought out these stories because I desperately craved to relive the storytelling experience of my childhood—my brother and I holding teddy bears and Thatha holding us.

Talking about La Llorona with Thatha, my mom, and my brother Chris, I found us talking about things that we hadn't really talked about before: stigmas associated with gender, race, and sexual orientation; Thatha's difficult childhood experiences growing up; Chris's experiences of not fitting the mold of white heteronormativity as a queer Chicano man; my mom's reflections on motherhood; the dangers of machismo and idealized views of "true love"; intergenerational trauma. Our shadows. Talking about La Llorona created space for these conversations in my family. It brought them to light.

It's important to note that while my personal experiences with monstrosity, my family, and Folk Studies are unique to me, the theoretical bridge between people of color and monstrosity has been powerfully researched by a number of BIPOC scholars across disciplines. Many of the Latine scholars, writers, folklorists, and activists who have influenced my work and, arguably, entire generations of monster researchers include Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie L Moraga, Norma Elia Cantú, Orquidea Morales, Domino Renee Perez, Rachel González-Martin, Solimar Otero, and Rudolfo Anaya, just to name a few.

One scholar who has continuously inspired my research with La Llorona and has paved the way for Chicanas to talk about their monstrosities is the Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies scholar Bernadette Marie Calafell. In her book *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, she explores how monsters have been used as a device to represent BIPOC individuals for centuries (2015).

She writes, "I share these stories because they are representative of how we are made monsters...how our difference, or Otherness, gets constructed as monstrosity in a world that has become more and more conservative. I am interested in the ways that cultural anxieties and fears around Otherness, whether they are about race, class, gender, sexuality, body size, or ability, manifest themselves in representations of both literal and symbolic monstrosity" (Calafell 2015, 4). From colonization tactics used to silence minority voices to microaggressions in academia that otherize those of us who are "different," monsters have helped us explain concepts that are too difficult to explain in our everyday lives; concepts that make people uncomfortable.

Calafell also writes about how she has integrated monsters into her educational work. Specifically, she has taught "Monsters in Popular Culture" as an undergraduate course to help students to think critically about topics such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. She writes, "In a time period that increasingly espouses post-racial and post-feminist discourses to a generation that seems willing to accept them instead of critiquing larger structures that maintain inequity and

oppression, sometimes you must find other ways to point out structural inequality” (2015, 117). For Calafell, monsters are inextricably linked to structural inequality and serve as useful tools for teaching about structural inequality in the classroom.

After graduating with my MA in 2021, I began a contract position with the WKU Folk Studies alum Lilli Tichinin and the New Mexico independent folklorist Thomas Grant Richardson at the New Mexico Arts Folk Arts Program in Santa Fe. Through this position, I was able to craft a documentary about my family’s journey with the legend of La Llorona. It featured interviews with Thatha, my mom, and my brother, each sharing different variants and interpretations of the La Llorona legend, highlighting how their personal understanding of its meaningfulness connects to their individual, family, and cultural experiences and how monsters can be communicative tools for cultural groups. The documentary is titled [*La Llorona: Picante Pero Sabroso*](#) in reference to the iconic La Llorona folksong:

*Yo soy como el chile verde, Llorona,
picante, pero sabroso.*

~

*I am like the green chili pepper, Llorona,
spicy, but tasty*

I chose this title to gesture toward the multifaceted dimensions of monsters in our lives. Much like La Llorona, the monstrousness within us all is often uncomfortable, but constant. It’s complicated, yet familiar. It’s unknown, but it’s defining. It’s whimsy and shadow.

One of my goals in making this documentary was to expand the audience for these stories and to show how stories about La Llorona work powerfully to inspire reflection on and communication about potentially difficult topics within communities. They teach us important things about ourselves, our histories, and the world we live in.

I (Sheila) found these same stories to work powerfully in the college classroom setting. In Fall 2024, I showed Camille’s documentary to my undergraduate Honors seminar on “Monsters and Monstrosity” at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV),¹ and Camille joined the class virtually on Zoom to answer questions and participate in the class discussion. Before viewing the documentary, students had read a [series of blog posts](#) published by the Library of Congress that focused on La Llorona, as well as [Permission to Wail](#), a conversation between four Latina scholars of La Llorona (including Camille) as they reflected on “what the weeping woman teaches us about monstrosity, grief, caregiving, and joy” (Eisele 2024). Scaffolded with this rich contextualization, the documentary *La Llorona: Picante Pero Sabroso* inspired a generative discussion about the anxieties La Llorona stories speak to and how they create opportunities for individuals and communities to give voice to issues that can be challenging to talk about. Figure 1, a snapshot of the whiteboard at the end of the class, provides a glimpse into the range of topics addressed in the class’s conversation that day.

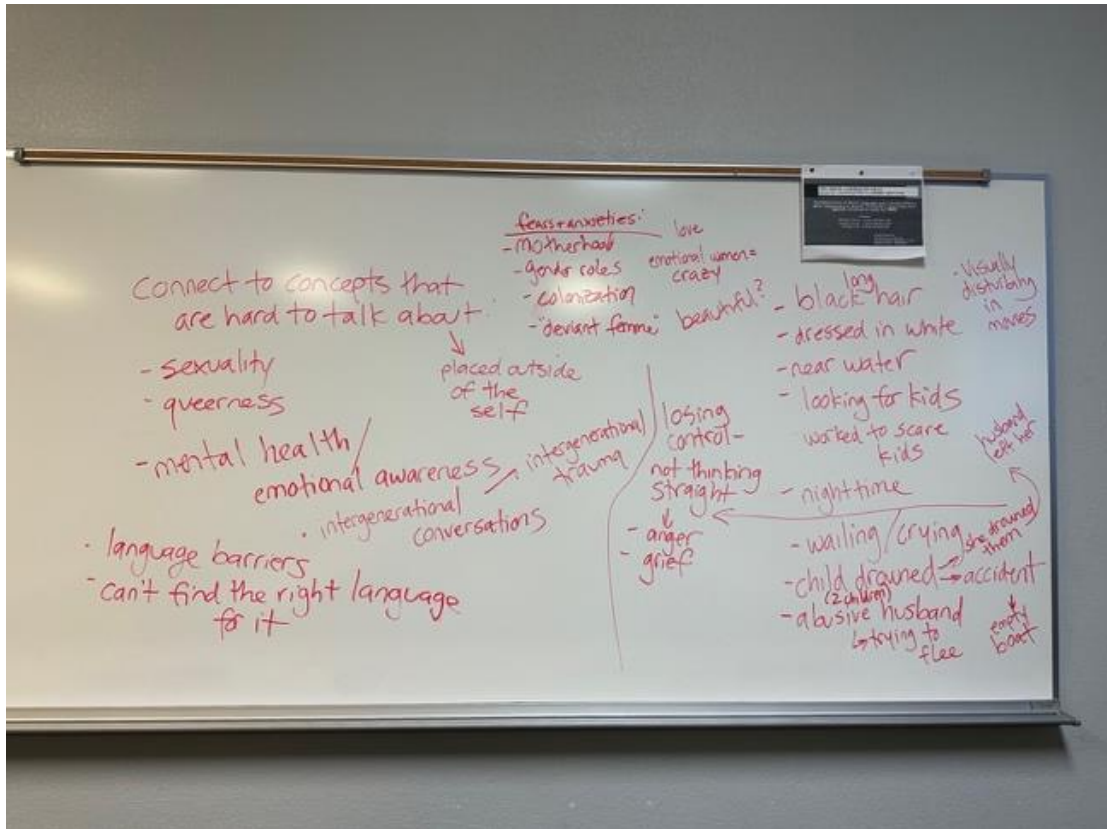


Figure 1.

After each class meeting, I asked my students to write a 400- to 500-word post in the online discussion forum on Canvas reflecting on what we covered during class time. I keep this informal writing assignment intentionally open-ended, providing a range of questions they can use to prompt their writing, including:

What did you find particularly compelling about the class discussion and/or reading assignments and why? What new questions emerged for you? What connections do you see between this week's reading assignments and previous reading assignments? How do the topics covered in class relate to your own experiences or observations? This is your opportunity to expand upon issues you talked about during class discussion or to raise issues you did not bring up in class (or both!).²

Following this particular class meeting, several students used this informal writing to reflect on their own observations and experiences about the ways emotion is and is not allowed to be expressed, as well as both the power and the dangers of "excessive" emotions that cannot be (or refuse to be) controlled. Many of the students grounded their reflections in their own experiences growing up in Latine families and communities, using the critical lens introduced in the readings and class discussion to think more deeply about family dynamics and gendered expectations. Several students, both those who identified as Latine and those who did not, also drew connections to their experiences in relation to mental health.

Notably, the majority of the students also referenced how powerful they found the words Camille used to end the documentary (although this did not come up in the discussion during class):

I like to imagine that maybe in an alternate universe after Maria's husband broke her heart she was able to run home and talk to her abuelita about it. Maybe then her grandma spoke about her previous heartbreaks, so they laughed and cried over pan dulce and café. Maybe in that moment grandma admitted to dealing with depression or anxiety and they both took a deep breath with clutched hands. Maybe that gave Maria the confidence to seek out some therapy or a couple of curandera visits to help her express her emotionality. Maybe after all of that she went home to her two sons and hugged them so tight and maybe they started their own conversations of mental health that day, too. Maybe, even for a narrative on Latinx bodies, the story ends with a happily ever after for once. Maybe. (Acosta 2022)

When we had our next class meeting, I called attention to how many found this reimagining of the tragic story to be so compelling. Revisiting some of the ideas and reimaginings introduced in “Permission to Wail,” I presented questions that would guide our collective exploration for the rest of the semester: What does reimagining monsters and the stories we tell about them accomplish? What new insights or understandings do they inspire?

At the end of the semester, I asked the students to creatively reimagine a monster or motif of monstrosity addressed in the class. Students approached this assignment through a wide variety of formats: visual art, comics, zines, music, a drag show, short stories, and poetry. I share one example here of a student's reimagining, a poem written by Sonoma Caley, that took shape in relation to the powerful ideas shared in Camille's documentary and the class discussions that followed. I am also including brief excerpts from the reflective essay that Sonoma submitted with her poem.³ This work is shared with the author's permission:

For me, there was never any other option for this assignment other than La Llorona. She was the only monster that I connected with, that I could relate to so viscerally both through my childhood memories of hearing her story and later mental health struggles. As Camille Acosta emphasized, La Llorona is a monster that grows with you, laying dormant until you need her most; until you are desperately looking for something to relate to, to hold on to. This conflict yields the intrigue around La Llorona—her strife comes from her self-inflicted grief and loneliness, and yet, she provides comfort and company to so many Latinos. La Llorona is never truly lonely, she finds companionship in the millions of Latinas that share her story and find familiarity in her rage, guilt, and sorrow. Her existence is marked by juxtaposition, eternally lonely and yet never alone. La Llorona warrants our attention because she screams about what the Latino community continuously silences. She is a staunch reminder of the existence of sexism, mental struggles, and generational trauma. This monster acts as a warning, showing us the vital need to fight to break these patterns down with each new generation in order to preserve the community. We cannot progress while holding so tightly to wrongdoings that we pass off as “tradition.”

My reimagining of La Llorona is one of acceptance. Acceptance of weakness, the innately human need to lean on others, and the necessity for change. This version of La Llorona is

a figure of healing, resilience, and female strength. By shifting to focus on the act of building an ofrenda, La Llorona retained her association with death, but her perspective on it takes a notable turn from grief and regret to one of acceptance and transfiguration. La Llorona gains a new sense of agency from her loss, finding peace and purpose via nurturing her relationships with her children and older female figures. This woman knows that love could never be confined to romance and lust. My reimagining aims to inspire discussion about La Llorona as a symbol of emotional endurance and the importance of community in overcoming hardship. In emphasizing feminine strength, I hope readers reflect on the power of intergenerational support amongst women and the potential for grace and reconciliation in the face of life's plentiful challenges.

Ofrenda for a Weeping Mother

Shrouded in darkness, the room flickers to life with the strike of a match
Marigolds glow, lighting the path to el más allá
Pictures lining the table boast faces of those long passed
And yet—tonight—they look different
Warm, ruddy. . . alive
A woman, adorned with a crown of raven hair, sweeps the floor below

Deftly moving around the children giggling and tugging on the skirt of her white dress
She pauses, staring into the center of the ofrenda
The smiling face too tight, too perfect, almost taunting her
A wrinkled hand lands on her shoulder—her mother
And somehow, the shadows tainting the edges of her vision seem to recede

The ofrenda blooms with their efforts
A mug, filled with ponche navideño, still steaming
A worn book, slightly ragged on the edges and yellowed with age
A plaid blanket, countless late-night talks interwoven in its fibers
Her tía joins, adorning the spread with a small bowl filled to the brim with dog treats
Lastly, a letter, whispers of anger and forgiveness wafting softly from still-wet ink

Tía plaits her long hair, weaving memories into each twist
Now, the photograph stares back
But it's no longer mocking
This time, grandmother's knowing smile is bursting with strength

The women's voices hum, blending together to create a harmony unlike any other
A gentle reminder that she could never truly be alone
Could never forget how to love, nor be loved
The woman in the white dress kneels
Tremors wracking her body as she places the final candle
Its flame rises, unperturbed by the weight of her sorrow
And her burden softens
Floating into the air as it mingles with the rising soot

High-pitched laughter ripples through the air
Accompanied by stories of those making the long journey tonight
Here, the woman becomes a memory
Whole, luminous, a mess that was carefully stitched together once more
Her legacy no longer one of sorrow
But of family, of femininity, and of grace

Bursting with tokens of remembrance
The ofrenda stands complete
A testament to love and loss and all of life's great strifes

Hands, old and young, clasp together
And a short oración is said
Low flames dancing perfectly in time with their words

As the wind begins to howl from behind the window panes
She feels a distinct warmth creep into the room
La Llorona no longer weeps, but smiles, her eyes unclouded
“Nuestros invitados han llegado.”

As the Guest Editors, we started with these descriptions not only to situate ourselves as teachers and learners invested in monster pedagogy but also to highlight the powerful roles that monstrous figures can play in both informal and formal educational settings—and the ways these settings can inform one another.

The idea for this special issue grew out of our ongoing conversations about what makes monsters, cryptids, and other legendary creatures so powerful to teach (and learn) with.

Our conversations around this topic were informed by the interdisciplinary field of monster studies,⁴ along with the rich body of folkloristic scholarship on monstrous creatures and motifs, or, perhaps more precisely, creatures and motifs that have taken on the label of “monstrous.”⁵

We also found great inspiration from those who engage in scholarship that extends beyond traditional academic formats and modes of publication. Emily Zarka's show [Monstrum](#) for PBS Digital Studios serves as an excellent example of public-facing scholarship that makes monster education more accessible to the public.⁶ So does the podcast [Monstras: Latinx Monsters & Folklore](#), hosted by Brenda Salguero and Orquidea Morales. Working in the domain of fiction, Rhonda Jackson Joseph creates both fantastical worlds and powerful realities in which the stories of women of color finally get to decide who calls whom monstrous. As we write this introduction, her latest book, *My Monsters Ain't Like Yours: A Collection of Short Stories*, has just been published, using Black feminist intersectional horror to explore the ways that monsters are both personal and larger than personal, linked both to individual experiences and different shared aspects of the human condition (2026).⁷

We understand this issue as being part of a broader conversation among scholars and educators working at the intersections of folklore and monster studies that are attentive to application and practice. One notable example of this work is a [2026 special issue of the journal *Contemporary Legend* on “Monsters, Creatures, and Cryptids,”](#) guest edited by the folklorist David J. Puglia, which includes contributions that, in his words, “make clear that monsters are not merely objects of scholarly inquiry; they are resources actively deployed across a range of contemporary practices” (3). One especially relevant contribution to that special issue is Andrea Kitta’s Research Note titled “Teaching with Monsters.” Another example is the [Spring 2026 issue of *Teaching About Asia*,](#) an open-access teaching resource journal, which includes a section on Japanese monsters/yōkai, with each article featuring pedagogical resources.

Reflecting on the current state and future directions of legendary monster scholarship, Puglia asserts that “Rather than disappearing, legendary monsters have become more elusive, harder to categorize, and more deeply embedded in the cultural systems that produce and sustain them” (2026, 1). Educators seeking to help guide others through explorations of these elusive figures and the cultural systems that produce and sustain them, be they in classrooms, public programming, or at the kitchen table, have approached this endeavor with different learning objectives, strategies, and activities. One of our goals with this special issue is to showcase some of the creative, profound, and thought-provoking ways educators in different parts of the world have worked with monsters in the classroom and beyond.

In giving this special issue the subtitle “From Whimsy to Shadow,” we sought to create space for the broad spectrum of ways we as humans interact with monsters. While most often associated with fears and anxieties, monsters can also serve as entry points into other dimensions of the human experience, including playfulness and creativity, for example when queer drag performers engage with monstrosity in the television show *Dragula*. Speaking about her poem “La Llorona Considers the State of Tortillas,” the folklorist Norma Cantú highlights her desire to remove La Llorona from the realm of horror: “I wanted to make it human and funny... It’s like, yeah, she’s gonna comment about how tortillas are not what they used to be. So, I hope there’s more of that. Reconfiguring the figure” (quoted in Eisele 2024).

Monsters and cryptids can also be linked to regional pride and economic opportunities within communities (Puglia 2022, 25-8). A notable example of a cryptid embodying these dimensions of the human experience is Mothman in Mt. Pleasant, West Virginia, a region often associated with problematic stereotypes by outsiders. As the folklorist Rosemary Hathaway asserts in her reflections on the increasing popularity of Mothman, which in turn has inspired increased tourism to the area, “There’s money to be made with these cryptids, and I am glad they’re doing it!” (quoted in Mallow 2021).

Puglia reminds us, “As monsters are not fixed objects, they can move, be reinterpreted, and be actively deployed...the legendary monster endures not because it can be fixed, but because it can be continually redefined” (2026, 4). Whether dealing with the whimsical or shadowy dimensions of monstrosity, all the contributions in this issue offer insights into how this understanding of monsters, cryptids, and other legendary creatures can be brought to life in learning spaces.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge explicitly that monsters are complicated. They are more than “cultural artifacts” that can be examined from a distance. The same complexities that make the monstrous so pedagogically rich also present ethical considerations that must be considered when we seek to engage with them in our educational practice. In her conversation with Rachel González-Martin in this issue, Domino Renee Perez astutely warns that “we have to really be aware of what we're inviting into the classroom” (2026:21) when we begin to teach with monsters. Indeed, several authors in this issue draw explicit attention to how educators in folklore and related fields can thoughtfully engage with these complexities in the work of teaching with monsters.

While grounded in distinct contexts (from summer family programming at a museum to an elementary school classroom to stage performances to the undergraduate college classroom), the pieces in this special issue provide models and resources that other educators can draw upon and adapt in their own pedagogical work.

In the process, this issue contributes to emerging interdisciplinary attention to monster pedagogy (cf. Browning 2023; Golub and Hayton 2017; Hughes 2009; Karn 2023) by not only engaging with folkloric content but also by featuring work shaped by approaches and sensibilities of the field of Folklore Studies. These approaches and sensibilities include being attentive to both continuity and change in the stories circulating about monsters, cryptids, and other legendary creatures across time, space, and forms of media; understanding that playfulness does not preclude seriousness; and recognizing that monstrosity can serve as a medium to help communicate about topics that can be difficult to address in other ways.⁸ It also includes an obligation to “handle with care,” to reference the title of Rachel González-Martin and Domino Renee Perez’s interview (2026).

As Matthew David Goodwin relatedly takes note of in this issue, teaching *with* monsters implies a methodological approach of collaboration. Taking monsters seriously calls for an emphasis on relationships that extends beyond treating a (legendary, literary, performance, popular culture) text as an artifact that can be extracted from its (personal, social, cultural, environmental, historical, political) contexts for the sake of analysis. Multiple contexts of meaning-making matter. The relationships embedded in the idea of teaching (and learning) with monsters matter.

Together, the contributions to this special issue showcase some of the diverse ways that teaching with monsters can help learners of different ages and in different educational settings develop skills of close reading and critical analysis; navigate ontological uncertainty; and creatively reimagine the world we live in and our place within it.

Camille Maria Acosta is a folklorist and monster enthusiast originally from the border town of El Paso, Texas. She pursued Performance Studies with a BA in Theatre from El Paso Community College and Western Kentucky University before completing her MA in Folk Studies from the same institution. Within this program, she delved into the beauty of Latinx horror through the lens of La Llorona and how monsters are mirrors guiding us toward our own brilliance, our own truth. Upon

graduating in 2021, she pursued folklore and cultural studies work with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress as well as the New Mexico Arts Folk Arts Program, culminating in the YouTube documentary La Llorona: Picante Pero Sabroso. Her work has been featured in several publications including De Los: Los Angeles Times, HipLATINA, Borderlore, and the two-part Tubi documentary series Scariest Monsters in America and Scariest Monsters in the World. In 2023, Acosta launched her podcast [Floaties for Krakens](#), diving into the world of the other and exploring how being monstrous is synonymous with a powerful resilience. Today, she is fulfilling the position of Folklife Specialist under the Kentucky Folklife Program.

***Sheila Bock** is a folklorist and professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Addressing a diverse range of topics, her scholarship employs narrative and performance approaches to examine how individuals and communities position themselves, and are positioned by others, within contested domains of experience. She is the author of numerous articles and book chapters and the book *Claiming Space: Performing the Personal Through Decorated Mortarboards* (University Press of Colorado, 2023). She is an award-winning teacher, and conversations with the brilliant students in her undergraduate seminar “Monsters and Monstrosity” at UNLV helped inspire the theme of this special issue. She trained in Folklore at The Ohio State University, where she received her PhD from the Department of English.*

Endnotes

¹ Taking seriously representations of monsters and monstrosity in specific cultural contexts, while also attending to how these representations change over time, this course examined how individuals and communities use monsters to grapple with cultural fears and anxieties surrounding, among other things, gender, sexuality, race, the environment, technology, mental health, and the body.

² This informal writing assignment serves multiple purposes in my pedagogy. It offers students who are more introverted, or who may take longer to process and articulate their ideas, an opportunity to show their engagement with the ideas introduced in the course. It also functions as a valuable assessment tool, offering insights into students’ understanding of key ideas and letting me know if any concepts or ideas introduced in class need further clarification.

³ This accompanying essay asked students to address the following questions:

- What is your understanding of why monsters matter? In other words, why do they warrant our attention? In your answer, make sure to engage with ideas introduced in **at least 2** of the readings assigned during the first three weeks of the semester. Make sure to include direct quotes and cite specific page numbers from these 2 readings when answering this question.
- Why did you select this specific monster or motif of monstrosity to reimagine for this assignment? What do you find particularly compelling about this monster or this motif? In other words, why does this *specific* monster or motif of monstrosity warrant our attention?
- What connections can you draw between your reimagining and other specific examples of revisioning, reclaiming, and/or resignifying we have encountered in this class? In other

words, what specific examples of reimagining from this class inspired your approach to this assignment, and how specifically did you take inspiration from them?

- Finally, what do you hope your re-imagining will accomplish? What new insights or understandings do you hope it will inspire?

⁴ Within this expansive field, texts that the two of us have found particularly influential include Anaya 1992; Anzaldúa 1987; Calafell 2015; Cohen 1996; Halberstam 1995; Mittman and Dendle 2012; Moraga 2001; Morales 2020; Poole 2011; Rocha 2024; Trujillo 2006; and Weinstock 2020.

⁵ This body of scholarship includes Alcalá and Cantú forthcoming; Barakat 1969; Black and McNeill 2018; Brunvand 1981; De Caro 1985; Daly 2025; Dégh 2001; Dundes 1998; Ellis 2003; Evans 2005; Foster 2007, 2009, 2020; Hawes 1968; Hufford 1982; Kearney 1969; Kitta 2019; Otero 1996; Peck 2023; Perez 2008; Puglia 2022; Roth 2017; Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007; Tucker 2005, and Valk 2015.

⁶ In “Talking Folklore: Getting Others to Take Folklore Seriously While Remaining a Serious Folklorist” (2021), co-authored with Andrea Kitta and Trevor J. Blank, Lynn S. McNeill recounts her experiences seeking to bridge academic and popular understandings of legendary creatures on television shows such as Animal Planet's Finding Bigfoot, offering a thoughtful consideration of how engaging in this public-facing work can help educate the public on what folklorists do and why their work is important. See also McNeill 2026.

⁷ See also the anthology Silk & Sinew: A Collection of Folk Horror from the Asian Diaspora (2025), edited by Kristy Park Kulski, Ai Jiang, and Lee Murray.

⁸ See Rachel González-Martin's article "Un/Believability: Exposing Sexual Trauma Through Latinx/e Supernatural Legends" (2026) for an examination of the relationship between encounter narratives with La Llorona in South Texas and the tellability of stories about sexual violence in Latinx/e communities.

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Handle with Care!



Handle with Care: A Conversation About the Ethical Use of Monsters in Diverse Classroom Spaces

by Rachel González-Martin and Domino Renee Perez

What follows is a conversation between two teachers, Domino Perez and me, Rachel González-Martin, who teach with monsters in our own classrooms. Domino and I have been colleagues and friends for over a decade ever since I moved to Austin, Texas. Domino spearheaded an effort to hire a folklorist in the then brand-new Department of Mexican American and Latina/o Studies that she helped establish at the University of Texas at Austin in 2014. Even now, six years after I earned tenure, she remains a vital mentor in both my teaching and research development. In my time as UT faculty, we have collaborated on a variety of projects, including co-editing a book on the uses of folklore and cultural practices in popular media, *Race and Cultural Practice in Popular Culture* (2018). More importantly, I have sat on her couch and watched documentaries about real-life hauntings and series about encounters with cryptids while we shared how our inherited beliefs in monsters have shaped our outlooks on the world at large. It is only fitting that this conversation occurred around lunch at her kitchen table.

We regularly share perspectives on local and regional mysteries that emerge from our similar, but distinct experiences growing up Mexican American—she being raised in Texas, and I in California. Since we first met, we have openly shared our love of supernatural creatures and various realms of the cultural uncanny. I believe our shared fondness and appreciation of supernatural mysteries have allowed our friendship to grow and deepen over the years. Indeed, Domino's foundational and singular full-length book on the Mexican American legendary specter of La Llorona, *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (2008), has shaped my desire for working with supernatural legends in my own research—showing me the potential of serious research focused on how beliefs in other-than-human entities that circulate within and across media platforms continue to significantly influence the worldview of various ethno-racial communities across cultural, regional, and generational differences.

Monsters, whether referenced through full tales or emerging as passing allusions in conversation, serve as a point of cultural contact and as a possible cultural constant for many minority communities living in diaspora in the United States. In many ways, Domino and I are bonded through monsters, and our shared understandings of how genuine interest in all things supernatural can be a source of social stigma in contemporary society—and that is an important starting point

as we begin to imagine how the idea of “monsters” as classroom tools can affect audiences of learners and how educators need to consider those effects *before* they initiate discussions of monsters and monstrosity in their teaching and learning spaces. Our conversation returns, over and over, to the idea of recognizing the complexity of social context and the challenges of attempting to anticipate audience responses. These challenges emerge as monsters have cultural and geographic homes that need to be recognized and employed as vital pieces of the puzzle of understanding their potential social significances. By the end of our discussion, we arrive at a handful of recommendations that we hope can assist any educator interested in bringing monster stories and themes into their classrooms. The list below offers a summary of these ideas, and readers can see these ideas referenced throughout our exchange. Domino and I both teach at the university level and incorporate folklore into a variety of our classes. The courses we specifically refer to here are the most recent iterations of our courses Folklore and Literature (Perez 2026) and Latina/o Legend Tripping (González-Martin 2025). Domino’s course serves as both an introduction to Folklore Studies and a methods analysis of various folklore forms, including literature, across communities and geographies. It is organized around four central topics, one of which includes monsters and cryptids. Meanwhile in Latina/o Legend Tripping I ask students to read supernatural legend texts and interpret the uses of stories of monstrous figures in Latina/o while considering social identities such as ethnicity, gender, and age. When considering incorporating monster studies into your classroom curriculum, we believe ethical teachers should recognize the following:

1. We need to take monsters and monster studies seriously.
2. We cannot divorce monster texts from their cultural, geographic, and temporal locations and still hope to understand their social significance.
3. Monster stories are community stories that need to be incorporated thoughtfully and inclusively into distinct learning environments.
4. Teaching with monsters can open up discussions of stigmatizing social experiences related to intersectional factors affecting student lives (race, class, gender, age, sexuality, disability, and body size, to name a few).
5. Discussions of monsters take time to contextualize in classroom conversations and should include presenting content and subject materials (the monster(s) and forms under consideration), methods for analysis, critical review, and/or cultural impact.
6. We cannot underestimate the capacity of monster stories to tie into personal experiences of trauma, so we must be prepared to respond with compassion and adequate care.

Selected portions of our hour-long conversation appear below. Additionally, we include a list of media and reading recommendations for students and teachers.

February 11, 2026
Austin, Texas

Rachel González-Martin (RVGM): We're here to talk monsters around the kitchen table! Let's start with an easy question. Can you share a bit about your training?

Domino Perez (DRP): Sure, I am a professor and self-trained folklorist in the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin. My areas of specialization include comparative ethnic American Literatures of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, cultural studies, popular culture, film. And I also do work in young adult fiction.

RVGM: As for me, I am an Associate Professor of Latino Studies at UT Austin. I am a folklorist and an anthropologist by training, and I do ethnographic fieldwork broadly in Latino folklore in the U. S. with a focus on consumer culture and gender performance. I personally love monster stories. I think what sets apart our commentary today is that in our academic discussions of monsters, we pay close attention to issues of race, ethnicity, and intersectional approaches in these fields. I think that's what makes classroom ethics such a significant topic when we consider teaching with monsters.

DRP: When, where, and how we are introduced to monsters matters immensely. Also, what are the purposes or salient features of the monsters? Are they meant to frighten, teach resilience, inspire wonder or even fear? Are the monsters silly or funny? The form in which we first learn or hear about monsters, often at a young age, whether through bedtime stories or picture books, for example, can initiate the idea of monsters that is mediated by a parent, guardian, or even an older sibling who tell us how to "read" monsters in certain ways. In Lauren Christie's *The Evolution of Monsters in Children's Literature* (2020), she discusses the idea of age-appropriate monsters, in other words, monsters that reflect the anxieties, fears, or concerns for children of a certain age, developmentally. So, to my mind, children's literature is a useful starting point for thinking about how we first encounter and learn about monsters.

RVGM: Let's back up for a second and define our terms a bit. "Monster." With so many ways to enter this conversation how do you define monsters and monstrosity in your work or area of focus? What makes a "monster" a monster? And how do you use the term in your work?

DRP: We can define monsters in a number of different ways. If I'm thinking critically, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, immediately comes to mind (1996). But for me, I think I would define monsters as an expression of the co-mingling of social and cultural realities and imagination. But monsters also represent ourselves and others.

RVGM: I tend to define monsters by anything that causes fear, very broadly. It requires thinking with an intersectional lens to get at specifics of community perspectives. Sometimes folks only define monsters by offering up a list of examples from our own experiences, which assumes a shared context that's not always there. That can lead to trouble. Lately, as I have been teaching more often about monster figures and stories, I think about them as a cultural manifestation of unacceptable difference. That is one way that *I'm* comfortable talking about monsters.

DRP: That's what I really like about my definition because it actually accounts for yours, too. I like the overlap there. My training (in film, folklore, literature, cultural studies, Mexican American and Indigenous studies) is so diverse that I have encountered a number of different kinds of specific monsters across different cultures and forms, for example, Mary Shelley's creature from *Frankenstein* (1818), the Xenomorph from Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), or the short story "Deer Women" (2022) from *Man-Made Monsters*, by Andrea L. Rogers, and have included them, along with a number of others in my syllabi. But what I think it's important to say is that I've actually never said, until recently, "I'm going to teach about monsters." Monsters have been far more embedded in my course materials than they have been brought out as a specific area of study, at least until this semester.

RVGM: Okay, tell me about your folklore class this semester.

DRP: I'm currently teaching Literature and Folklore for undergraduate honors students. This past Tuesday, we started our Cryptids and Monsters unit. So, I started off by making distinctions between cryptids and monsters, as well as framing how we might discuss each. Almost immediately the students started asking, "But is a cryptid a monster, and is a monster a cryptid?" and "How do we think about those things?" And so, I said, well, the easiest way to think about it is that a cryptid is almost always a monster, but a monster isn't always a cryptid. I also think that, concretely, Cohen's point in theses IV, that "the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us," helped them get their heads around the distinction, but they were deeply invested (7). They wanted to dig into the material. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that monsters are something they know about. They either have their own stories—which we talk about in class and they're encouraged to share, although obviously nobody is obligated to do so—or they know someone, often several times removed, who has a story about monsters.

Students also know about monsters from pop culture. But, whatever the source, they're anxious to talk about monsters. They're ready to talk about them, because this is an area where they feel like they have some knowledge and authority. What they don't have is a kind of theoretical frame for talking about monsters, and I think that's one of the things that they really appreciated about the Cohen "Monster Culture" article. One, he provides a straightforward critical context, telling the reader, "I am going to approach monsters from a cultural studies perspective." And, two, he takes monsters *seriously*.

RVGM: I think that is actually a really important point. At its core, teaching with monsters in the classroom is about understanding the *context* in which you're teaching and taking monsters *seriously*. And that really connects to building a critical conversation around a topic that is both familiar and very unfamiliar at the same time. I think it'd be useful to know how your class is structured. How do monsters emerge through your syllabus choices?

DRP: The first unit that we just completed is loosely based around "Women in Peril." It included stories they probably know with others in the same category. We read a version of the [Cinderella](#) story that was collected by the Grimms, alongside Perrault's [Cinderella](#) story, a Zuni story about "[The Poor Turkey Girl](#)," and a Russian tale focusing on "[The Baba Yaga](#)" All are easily found online in "[Folktexts: A Library of Folktales, Folklore, Fairy Tales and Mythology](#)" edited and

translated by D. L. Ahsliman. I also assigned Betsy Hearne's "Folklore in Children's Literature," which includes a substantial section on Cinderella stories and variants (2011). In putting all those in conversation, I wanted to get the students comfortable with thinking about what constitutes folklore and what doesn't. It's a hard one, though because it's not strictly a folklore class and it's not just a literature class, so I feel the constraints of both. I consider, "How do I responsibly teach folklore in a way that is not cursory, or doesn't deal with depth of field? And, similarly with literature, how do I do due diligence in both areas?" So, I structure that initial conversation to say, "Let's talk about what are the folkloric elements here" and then "What are the literary elements here?" And then, "What are the places of overlap?" I'm always constantly moving between those two focal points of literature and folklore. Working on getting students thinking about, if these are women in peril stories, where is the peril coming from? This then sets them up for this idea of the monster, because that's our next unit. I want them thinking about what constitutes a monster, who is monstrous, and who's not? We use this as a starting point to discuss some of the more formal elements of monsters and monstrosity, but also just terrible people who are "monsters."

RVGM: And that's what I mean, part of it is the politics and use of the moniker "monster." How do we distinguish Monster (capital M) and monster (little m)?¹

DRP: I think of monster with a capital M as the theoretical idea where we began the conversation. And I think that monster with a little m encompasses the individual monsters.

RVGM: The little m to me is an informal usage. I was thinking about this because our classes use similar materials but have different demographic compositions. I think other than two students, all my students were Latino identifying, and, other than one, female identifying. The cultural knowledge of my class was overwhelmingly Latinx or Hispanic, which meant there were a lot of steps to *accepting* monsters that I didn't have to take. In your class, how do you negotiate bringing up monsters if you have students who might say, "I don't believe in that." Has that ever happened?

DRP: Actually, no. So, two points that I want to make about this. On Tuesday a student asked, "Is there a difference between a personal monster and a cultural monster?" And I said, yes, and yes and no. That's so often my response, but we had just finished reading the short story "The Husband Stitch" in *Her Body and Other Parties*, by Carmen Maria Machado (2017). One of the students then commented, "You know, I had said earlier in the semester that my sister liked to pretend to be the monster under the bed. She would get into the bed, and she would grab my ankle, and she would scare me, and, like, that was my monster." And I said, okay, yes, so that's a very personal experience of a monster that's of your sister's creation.

But think about the Machado story. And think about the ways in which it is scary. Why is it scary that there's somebody under your bed? As a young woman, you're vulnerable. It is scary that somebody could come into your house, and that women are preyed upon. So, actually, what *seems really personal* is connected to something *much larger culturally*.

You know, you could see the light bulb go on, and that's really what Machado's narrator is saying, right? They say, "I don't have to tell you these stories, because you know what happened. You know what happened to me." And then there's this story about this woman in peril, and another

woman in peril, and you could see her understand where the source of the fear and the monster is derived from. I think that was a powerful moment for her and the class. So, no, I haven't had any resistance to or skepticism about our monster discussions in class. Why? I'm not entirely sure.

The students are all high achievers from diverse backgrounds, in terms of education, where they grew up, and their intellectual interests. There's a wide array. I would say my class is, visibly, diverse... maybe a third present as students of color but I'm not certain. Honestly, I expected a healthy bit of skepticism about monsters or a longer period of easing them into talking about monsters, but that never happened and I think I know why. In the first week of class, a white, heterosexual, male presenting student cleared space for monsters to exist through his personal and familial experiences. He shared an encounter narrative, experienced by him and his family. And from his place of privilege, he was saying that monsters exist and so, therefore, monsters could exist.

RVGM: I think that's actually really, really powerful, that when you think about bringing monsters into the classroom it matters who is present and with what opinions. So, if we ask, how do you ethically work with monsters in a classroom, part of the answer must include knowing your audience. Knowing what you're bringing and to whom. How do you make classroom discussions impactful for as many people as possible without promoting stereotypes?

DRP: Yeah, you know, when I first found out that I was teaching this literature and folklore class, my first thought was, "I'm going to teach all cryptids" because, cryptids and monsters, those are my favorites! Things I get really excited about. And then I realized. I have to negotiate these two focal points, literature and folklore, because the students don't really know what they're getting into. When they think "folklore," they think fairy tales, and I can guarantee you there's a good cross section of that class who were there because they thought we were going to be talking about fairy tales. And fairy tales are part of what we're talking about. But that's a unit. It's not the entirety of the class.

You talk about certain expectations that are tied to your particular Latino Studies courses, and Mexican American Studies, more specifically, are also part of my training and part of my background. And, so, ultimately, I'm moving students from this place of disciplinary hegemonic heteronormativity (European folklore and literature) toward *otherness* (American Indian, African American, Mexican American, and Latine, more broadly, folkloric texts), which then serves as a bridge element, as found in Cohen's theses, into monster studies. Throughout the semester, we are always moving toward monsters, even before we identify them as such, in our analysis of the texts and media that represent lore.

This approach means I *have* to attend to the negotiation of literature and folklore, making critical distinctions for each. For a number of external reasons, I also have to be careful and mindful about how I'm crafting my syllabus without sacrificing my integrity as a scholar and a teacher. So often my students will say, "Dr. Perez, did you know that these things were going to fit together in the way that they did? I mean, this is really remarkable." I respond, "Oh, if you only knew!"

RVGM: But you've been building and refining your approach for years, in and outside the classroom space, in your work, and informed by your own interests.

DRP: Absolutely, and so I was telling my students exactly that. I said, you know, there were a lot of things that I had to cut out, because I really wanted to have this whole section on the Mothman. And it just didn't fit with the conversation that I was having, or the trajectory of the conversation that I wanted us to have. And so, I ended up using an image of the Mothman for the class online landing page. I said to them that there was so much that got left on the table. This class said, "Can you show us all the things that you cut?"

RVGM: They asked for the larger bibliography, extra reading, extra resources?

DRP: Yes! They were asking, "Can you give us the extra things that didn't fit into the syllabus design?" And so, I created a resource page on Canvas with links to archives, videos, catalogs, media.

RVGM: I want to hear more about this idea, but from a different angle. You mentioned this idea of thinking about how monster discussions can lead conversations into this place of recognizing *otherness*. But if you only have an hour and a half, three days a week, what are some lesson elements you would have to curate very consciously for that class to be effective? And for the class not to promote ethnic, racial, gender or other, stereotype?

DRP: If I only had an hour to teach monsters, I don't know that I would do it.

RVGM: I want to hear more, because when we think about folks bringing monsters into their conversations in classrooms we have to ask what it means to take monsters seriously, in these places of early, and secondary learning. Even though we know that in a sort of popular culture way, it's an attractive way to get students at a variety of levels interested.

DRP: AND engaged. Well, I think if we're going to talk about and treat the subject of monsters seriously, groundwork needs to be laid in terms of how we talk about monsters. In other words, what is the role that monsters play? To my mind, that requires more than an hour to show monster studies as a serious area of inquiry. What would trouble me is that I would need to know my audience. If I'm a high school teacher or a middle school teacher and I want to teach monsters to my students, I would need to know as much as possible the racial and ethnic makeup of those particular students, not to mention the cultural geographies. Specificity would be incredibly important. But even if it's only two or three distinct groups, how do you ethically and responsibly talk about those regions or the experiences of the peoples in those geographies that give rise to particular monster texts? It's so complex because ultimately what we're talking about here is, at its heart, monster studies, which when done correctly is intersectional.

RVGM: I agree, it has to be. And by intersectional, we mean bringing together narratives of unequal social power, right?

DRP: Yes, understanding how different genders, politics, social and/or cultural history, age, all these factors come together in people's lived experiences.

RVGM: But also understanding how those social factors influence ideas of monstrosity, right? Being able to foreground this idea of *otherness* and fear of otherness. For all the ways we can talk about monsters, we *know* monsters because we're scared of them. Or a subset of our population or community is scared of them.

I was thinking, because, you know, you didn't mention it, Domino, but because your first book was on La Llorona (Perez 2008). I could imagine going into middle school, high school classrooms, if we're here in Texas, or anywhere in the Southwest, given the Mexican American majority and the amount of cultural exchange—among and between groups—that takes place in the region, La Llorona can become a classroom text that is overly generalized. I wonder, can you have a conversation about La Llorona in a room that has no Hispanic, Latino, or Mexican American people in the classroom, let alone in front of the classroom? How do we help people gauge how they host these kinds of conversations that are about stories deeply rooted in local and ethno-racial and regional communities? *Should* they have them at all?

DRP: Part of the reason I haven't brought up La Llorona is that I don't immediately think of her as a monster. I know that a lot of people do, and I think that is the compelling argument Calvo-Quiros makes in his article “Líberanos de todo Mal/But Deliver Us from Evil: Latina/o Monsters Theory and the Outlining of Our Phantasmagoric Landscapes” (2016). He's tying her to specific histories of colonization and looking at the way in which the Latino body gets written as monstrous. But even that article is a perfect example of, as he states up front, not giving an expansive, exhaustive history to talk about how certain events gave rise to particular kinds of Latino monsters or even the monstrous Latino body. If I'm teaching someone who knows nothing about La Llorona, I have to dig into that historical background and context. *I can't just float over the surface*. And, you know, if students ask me, “Dr. Perez, do you think La Llorona is a monster?” My answer is “No, yes, maybe.”

RVGM: This strikes me that from a folklore perspective, we need to emphasize the critical nature of context, and contextual meanings.

DRP: And it's really in texture, too. One of the things that does concern me about how we teach monsters, and to which audiences, and really to which age groups, is that we cannot walk into a classroom or at the end of a lesson, [and] say, “Tomorrow, I want you to bring in a monster story!” Because we don't know the monsters in children's lives. There could be monsters that are reflections of horrible domestic violence, or personal trauma, or food and housing insecurity. You don't know, because of the nature of monsters. So, when we think, “Oh, wouldn't this be a fun assignment for students to do?,” we have to really be aware of what we're inviting into the classroom.

This is why I think if you only have one day to talk about monsters, I don't think you can do it. I wouldn't do it. Ethically, I couldn't do it. We need time to teach students about the nuances associated with studying monsters, about the intersectionalities that are associated with monster studies. If you are a public school teacher in middle or high school, you would need to have a whole unit on it.

RVGM: By taking it seriously and having it be part of a lesson, it can't just be the one-off assignment.

DRP: Right, it can't be "It's Halloween, we're having monster day!"

RVGM: But I think you bring up something I hadn't even thought about, the idea of asking a child, or a young adult, or anyone at this point, to casually bring a monster story to class, is inviting chaos into your classroom with all the potential unknowns. You just asked people to possibly dredge up some very intimate information about themselves without considering the fallout. I hadn't really thought about that before. It's like, monster studies, "handle with care."

DRP: It's the monster in the box. Because once you open that up. You can't close it.

RVGM: Let's return to "The Husband Stitch" (Machado 2017) for a minute. I have been thinking a lot about how people—scholars—frame spooky stories, supernatural stories, or monster stories in different area studies, and develop approaches in diverse ways. Machado's fiction, which I also use in my legends class, is really interesting because she uses folklore and draws on popular spooky children's stories with folkloric roots. What does it mean when something so mundane as prototypical married life, as the subject of her story, can be labeled *monstrous*? We can move from the kooky-spooky to seriously horrifically monstrous lurking in our homes so fast. In this vein, what are our responsibilities as *teachers*? Perhaps this is a question of specificity? Better to focus on one story?

DRP: I think you just came upon a really good answer to "If you only have one day to teach monsters, would you?" If you are going to do that, you would have to focus on *one* monster and extrapolate outward from there. I'd still worry that you wouldn't have enough time. But showing them a case study to model here's how we think seriously about monsters: "We're going to take this monster, and some think she's spooky, and some think she's fun, and there are all these attitudes around it, but, you know, if that's what we see from the closest circle of observation, what happens if we take one step back from that? How does our perspective of the monster change?"

RVGM: But that's as far as you can go. We need to be comfortable with a narrow scope.

DRP: Yes, but it would have to be so, so specific. Even then, you would have to break it down and say, okay, we're going to look at the cultural specifics of this, what is the gender of the monster, for which community or for whom is this figure monstrous?

RVGM: Since we are trying to share advice on the ethical incorporation of monsters, I think one of the things we're both alluding to is that "engagement" can't be a one-off Halloween assignment, if you're sincerely trying to teach about monsters. Better yet, if you're doing a more core area of study, let's say a geography lesson of the Southwest, and were going to talk about who lives here and certain historical periods, you could include a monster story that appears in newspapers. A variety of texts could be brought in as part of a unit that's more specifically oriented toward a people or a place. In this context, students would already have a deeper sense of cultural geographies, and the teacher could go into further detail about the representative monster figure.

However, as a teacher you now must negotiate the cultural significance of monsters as emerging from *violent* pasts in classrooms with adolescents. At the same time, you're putting legend texts and folklore in a place where they're coexisting with historical information. And while in a college-level class students have the time and training to consider how we look at those types of writings together, it's not the same in middle school. Do teachers teach from a place of belief in these cases? How does that manifest for you when you are teaching?

DRP: Do I teach from a place of belief? What a great question. I get that a lot. People always ask, do you actually believe in La Llorona? I'm like, yeah. Absolutely, I believe. You know, if anything, because I don't want her showing up, and being like, "What's not to believe in?"

RVGM: Yes! I feel exactly the same way! I'm trying to protect myself.

DRP: Before we end, I want to go back to Machado's "The Husband Stitch," her version of a Green Ribbon story.² The green ribbon is actually a perfect text for a literature and folklore class. We can start with Washington Irving's "The Adventures of the German Student" (1824), and then we can look at Alexander Dumas' "The Woman with the Velvet Necklace" (1850) to see the popularity of these particular kinds of stories, and, in some ways, those stories are very easy to historicize in their ties to the French Revolution. Then there's this huge gap between 1850 and 1984, when you have Alvin Schwartz's *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories* and his version of "The Green Ribbon" aimed at children (1984). Irving and Dumas are not writing for children.

RVGM: The story is totally adapted into a kids' book, an "easy reader."

DRP: Schwartz's stories, they're spooky, and they're scary, and they're supposed to be spine-tingling, yet they're equally horrific. They're targeted specifically toward children, and it's that popularized version that Machado is picking up on. In a folklore and literature class, it's easy to show how that story evolves, how it circulates, how it's being used, and how people are specifically using it, and for what purpose. You see that very clearly with Machado's "The Husband Stitch" with its critique of patriarchy and its perceived unfettered access to women's bodies (2017). In some cases, we can have students do some of this work on their own to share with the class.

One of the assignments that I have my students do is a Flash Presentation. These occur at the beginning of the class, and students can bring in a fact or an artifact that lends further insight into the text that we're going to be talking about that day. So, for the beginning of the Cryptids and Monsters unit, two students signed up to give presentations. One focused on Mothra, sharing not only how much he loves her, but also about how he went to The Mothra Special Exhibition at the Nijigen no Mori theme park in Japan and did all this fan tourism related to her. Then he took a critical turn to consider how Mothra fulfilled each of Cohen's theses, which was a great way to introduce people to a beloved monster and then demonstrate how this monster fit into a particular schema. My second presenter is the student I referenced earlier, who, perhaps unknowingly, cleared a space at the beginning of the semester when he affirmed the existence of monsters, and his presentation included an encounter (multiple, in fact) as an artifact and was called, "What's in My Backyard?" At the beginning of the semester, he mentioned that he lives in a rural area in East

Texas, and there's all of these strange things that happen out there—floating lights, strange sounds, whistling—so he decided to take what he's learned thus far in the semester and apply it to his own backyard to determine if there is a monster on his property, and if so, what kind?

RVGM: He's legend tripping!

DRP: Absolutely. He provided us with the evidence that something is in his backyard—whistling, disembodied human voices, and decapitated dead animals in the exact same spot in the yard. Then based on the physical evidence and location of his family's property, he offered a list of possible monsters including a Skinwalker, ruguru, and cadaja, and then eliminated each based on cultural history and geography.

What he discovered in the process is that his family home is situated on the edge of the Piney Woods, and in his preliminary investigation of Piney Woods folklore there's not a lot of it documented. At which point, a student in the class shared that she is conducting research in the University of Texas Briscoe Center for American History archives, where she encountered a whole box on regional folklore of East Texas “just sitting there and nobody's looked at it.” In this moment they're teaching each other, with one saying, “Here's the limitations, I've taken what I've learned so far, I've applied it regionally and personally to my experience in East Texas, and this is the wall that I hit,” while another student says, “No, no, there's this archive that you should go and visit.” That's one of the dream moments that we have as teachers. We hope that students become resources for each other, and that they're learning and teaching each other.

Through this assignment, this student experienced a profound moment of incidental learning, not about folklore or monsters, but about himself. He concluded his presentation by stating, “I went looking for monsters, and then I got a little embarrassed that I was looking for monsters.” I asked, “Why did you get embarrassed?” He said, “Because I would rather look for monsters than admit that I have this fear of the unknown, that there's something out there in the dark.”

RVGM: Wow! This is wonderful, because we think about what is the capacity of monsters, what can monster studies do for us? Or what can this monster tell us about a community? What does *thinking* about monsters do for us? Why do we need to make the effort to explore them in their fullness as cultural experiences?

To understand how all these perspectives can exist together, and what is then produced from a conversation or a shared conversation, is going to differ. One element that needs to be reinforced in any classroom, whether it's more advanced intellectually or for a younger audience, is thinking a little bit about *ambivalence*. We're not studying monsters because we're going to dominate and/or easily dismiss our fearful thoughts. The idea is that reflecting on *monstrosity* is about sitting with questions. Also, sitting with the ambivalent feelings is productive as we think about cultural landscapes, social landscapes, and historical landscapes.

DRP: And I think also sitting with the discomfort of that ambivalence. We want an answer, but we might not get an answer, or maybe the non-answer is the answer.

RVGM: Again, like, the idea of legend tripping, or the idea of your student following the breadcrumbs from his backyard to his fears, to, you know, the *Journal of American Folklore* at the turn of the 20th century, and then back to his backyard because he's still finding dead animals.

DRP: But it also demonstrates that the monster always comes back, as Cohen states in Thesis II. It takes us right back to where we started.

RVGM: In the same way for us, how do we present monsters responsibly? If you're taking something from a community that you have no connection to, you really need to think twice about how you present it, or if you present it all. It might require care you do not know how to offer.

DRP: Because you might think that you're modeling a good inquiry into monster studies, but you're also modeling how to be dismissive, or how to minimize cultural belief, the people who actually have those beliefs, or why those beliefs came into existence.

RVGM: Clearly, *responsible* discussions take time and space for curious students to have fuller initial discussions and even follow-up discussions. Committing time to the discussions of the topic also signals respect to communities that take their traditions connected to monstrous creatures or specters seriously. Your classroom exercise might be someone else's closely held spiritual belief. You don't really realize what students will be taking away from the *tone* of that conversation as much as if they remember exact details.

DRP: This is because as a teacher, there's your *explicit* lesson, and then there's the *implicit* lesson.

RVGM: Monsters may appear frightening, but as we think about them as manifestations of *difference* in society, we do need to handle them, their manifestations, with care. Teaching with monsters means you are also considering how, as an educator in general, you can effectively teach with different ideas, different voices, toward different perspectives in your classrooms every single day. Those same values and concerns also emerge in your discussions about monsters. Or, will manifest in your silence.

Any surprises this semester with your classroom discussions of monsters?

DRP: I think one of the things that has been most surprising for me this semester in particular is how excited students are to talk about monsters and how much they wanted a way into that conversation but didn't know where to begin. Based on the way that the discussions have unfolded, they're very thoughtful about monsters. There is this desire to speak about these things that can be fun and spooky. They know there's something more there, but they don't know how to get to the more that's there or that they suspect is there. Opening these kinds of pathways for these conversations and watching them rush through those gates, that's been very exciting. They are willing and open to share if not about their monsters or monsters with which they are familiar, then how they're thinking about monsters.

RVGM: And that they're thinking about monsters! That's really powerful.

As you've said previously, there's something really powerful about monsters. And we know monster stories have always existed. So it makes sense that monsters have become part of our everyday lives, appearing in waves of popularity to respond to the world when maybe we ourselves cannot.

DRP: Monsters can reveal to us what it means to be human, and *that* fact is perhaps the most frightening and joyful thing they can teach us.

Endnotes

- ¹ While we do not develop this idea further here, the use of capitalization of academic terms speaks to the need to distinguish terms that may be contested in different academic or cultural discourse. For instance, in the U.S., it is common to capitalize the name of an ethnic group, such as “Latina/o” but there are folks in academia and in the community who challenge the standardization that is implied by the proper-noun format, instead choosing a lowercase form of the word, “latina/o” to distance their specific use from some wider, standardized use by, say, government offices or schools to signal subjective variability. Similarly, we are thinking about how the word “monster” has contested meanings that vary by someone’s social location.
- ² This comment refers to an ongoing conversation that Domino and I have regarding the story of “The Green Ribbon,” a version of which was popularized by Alvin Schwartz in the children’s book, *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories* (1984).

Media Recommendations

[Cryptid wiki](#) (Reference Materials/Website/Online resource)
[Monster wiki](#) (Reference Materials/Website/Online resource)
[Floaties for Krakens](#) (YouTube series)
[Monstrum](#) (PBS web-series)
Grimm (2011-2017; network series available to stream)
Supernatural (2005-2020; network series available to stream)
X-Files (1993-2002; 2016; 2018; network series available to stream)
[Finding Monster Right](#) (Podcast)
[Monster Hour](#) (Podcast)

Reading Recommendations in Cultural Studies for Educators and Advanced Students

[The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous](#). 2012. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle, eds.
[Monster Culture in the 21st Century](#). 2013. Diem-My T. Bui and Marina Levina, eds.
[Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture](#). 2015. Bernadette Marie Calafell
[Intersectional Pedagogy: Complicating Identity and Social Justice](#). 2017. Kim Case, ed.
[The Monster Theory Reader](#). 2020. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, ed.
[Classic Readings on Monster Theory](#). 2020. Asa Simon Mittman, ed.
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Handle with Care: A Conversation About the Ethical Use of Monsters in Diverse Classroom Spaces
by Rachel González-Martin and Domino Renee Perez

Mustola, Marleena and Sanna Karkulehto. 2019. Wild Things Squeezed in the Closet Monsters of Children's Literature as Nonhuman Others. In *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, eds. Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis. New York: Routledge, 125-42. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429243042-9>

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Transgressing Borders and Teaching Migration with (Literary) Monsters

by Jordan Lovejoy

Introduction

In the 2024 collection *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures*, the marine biologist and writer Ayana Elizabeth Johnson interviews the Louisiana organizer and lawyer Colette Pichon Battle about the role of diaspora, home, and tradition in the face of climate crisis. Battle argues that because migration—and displacement—are a reality of climate change, “Now is the time for us to take these cultural traditions, give them the honor they deserve, and figure out how they can be brought into climate solutions. And as we get to the stage of relocation, we’re going to have to see some rituals and some ceremony” (372). The folklorist Rachel V. González-Martin similarly argues that, especially for minority communities, folklore and traditional processes have long functioned as strategic tools for social survival within place (2021).

Although migration has always been a part of the human experience, academics and policymakers are increasingly concerned with the effects of climate migration, which the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines as “The movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border” (31). On the role of cultural traditions in the face of such movement, González-Martin further explains, “in contexts of migration, diaspora, and other forms of social dislocation, rooting becomes a constant process of revision and reimagination, one that cannot be static, as for many it is wholly speculative”; the act of rooting “therefore occurs at the level of the representational process rather than in place-space... [and signals] a right to transformation, to a value in relevance over presumptions of authenticity” (36). As more and more people are either forcibly displaced or willingly—if even reluctantly—migrate away from their homeplaces because of environmental disaster and climate crisis, how can collective memory, community and kinship values, and

cultural traditions, especially storytelling, be mobilized to both help people reckon with displacement and change and to approach the process of rooting beyond the traditional confines of time and place?

In 2020, in the wake of another widescale crisis, I was a graduate teaching assistant in folklore through the Department of English at The Ohio State University. During the Summer 2020 semester, I taught a section of English 3372: Special Topics in Science Fiction and Fantasy. Because the Covid-19 pandemic was still affecting university processes, this course was offered in an online, asynchronous format. As a folklorist interested in the intersection of traditional culture, literary and vernacular storytelling, and the effects of environmental crisis (including climate migration), I chose to focus this course around how legends, cryptids, and monsters are dynamically (re)shaped through the processes of transmission and reinterpretation into literary forms, especially as people migrate (sometimes by choice, other times by force) and take their stories with them.

I particularly wanted to think with students about what legendary monsters are, the work they do, where they come from, and how they are reshaped through travel or migration. We asked questions like “Why do we tell stories about monsters, and what might those stories reveal about ourselves and our beliefs, relationships, and places?” The course was designed to explore stories about legendary beings; their characteristics and connections; and the diverse cultures, histories, and people legends teach us about. We examined how legends travel through stories and storytellers as well as how we travel with and through those stories too. At the end of the course, I asked students to creatively apply what they learned by designing their own legend migration stories through the ArcGIS StoryMaps platform.

In this article, I provide an overview of the course “Mapping the Legend: Special Topics in Science Fiction and Fantasy.” I offer background on speculative fiction; the relationship among legends, cryptids, and monsters; and the intersection of narrative mapping and Folklore Studies through the context of travel and migration. I argue that storytelling about legendary creatures through literary reinterpretation and creative narrative mapping offers educators an engaging way to explore how legendary monsters both shape and are shaped by our relationships with place, culture, and environment. How can traditional culture, legendary figures, and speculative imagining help us better explore and understand our relationship to migration and environment? What journeys can legends take us on, and how might those journeys help us to imagine other worlds, futures, or possibilities through the intersection of folklore, literature, and migration?

Speculative Fiction and Literary Folklore Studies

Science fiction, or Sci-Fi, explores how we encounter change through topics like scientific discoveries, technological innovations, natural events, or societal shifts. It also offers an approach to understanding the universe and other groups by giving alternative points of view on familiar topics. As a genre, science fiction was traditionally divided into two dominant subgenres: “social” science fiction (formerly referred to as “soft”), which focuses on speculation about society and ethics; and “hard” science fiction, which is generally concerned with scientific truth and plausibility, technical application, and attention to technological detail (Asimov 1953; Wolf 1986; Bould and Vint 2011)¹. As our society continues to address pressing social concerns like racial

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violence (especially in relation to immigration) and environmental issues like climate change (which often force migration and create climate refugees), other subgenres of science fiction offer even further opportunities to explore our relationships with change and the future. Afrofuturism, for example, focuses on the intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and Black liberation, and Cli-Fi (a play on “Sci-Fi” and short for “climate fiction”) often explores the consequences of climate change and how characters live in a world of ecological catastrophe and its effects on life.

Fantasy, on the other hand, comprises imagined worlds, often where magical powers and other impossibilities are accepted, and it is not primarily devoted to realistic representations of the known world. The fantasy genre ranges from vampire and zombie tales to fairy tales and stories of magical realism. According to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, critics generally agree that “fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible” (James and Mendlesohn 2012, 1).

As folklorists know all too well, generic categories often leak into one another, and this overlapping is also true of science fiction and fantasy, especially when questions of belief and plausibility are concerned (Briggs and Bauman 1992). The fiction writers Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin, for example, have engaged in a public debate about these genres and their distinctions. Atwood rejects the classification of her writings (such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Year of the Flood*) as science fiction because, she argues, sci-fi plots could not be possible in today’s world (Atwood 2005; Le Guin 2009; Atwood 2011). Instead, Atwood classifies her novels as speculative fiction, which includes plots about “things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (Atwood 2011, 6). Le Guin, on the other hand, argues that Atwood’s books align with a main goal of science fiction, “which is to extrapolate imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that’s half prediction, half satire” (2009, np). Atwood later noted that what Le Guin “means by ‘science fiction’ is speculative fiction about things that really could happen” and “When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance” (Atwood 2011, 7).

Literary scholars today, like Marek Oziewicz, argue that “speculative fiction in its most recent understanding is a fuzzy set super category that houses all non-mimetic genres—genres that in one way or another depart from imitating consensus reality—from fantasy, science fiction, and horror to their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres, including the gothic, dystopia, zombie, vampire and post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, weird fiction, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, retold or fractured fairy tales, and many more” (2017, 2). Oziewicz argues that speculative fiction is a broad cultural field of production that focuses less on the border work of defining what a genre is or is not and more on the diverse approaches toward and imaginings of the challenges our world(s) face.

Because speculative fiction not only rejects the power dynamics and desire to neatly categorize by genre often found within literary criticism and the publishing industry but also embraces a more open-ended approach toward belief (i.e., who gets to decide what is real or not, plausible or not, believable or not), the term aligns well with work at the intersection of literary and folklore studies. Folklorists already use a range of theoretical and methodological approaches in our work,

including narrative theory, performance analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival research, that help us understand how people make sense of cultural life and the circulation of expressive culture; literary studies, especially speculative fiction, offers another useful approach for folklorists studying legendary monsters, especially as they migrate and shift into new contexts and environments.

Monsters, Legends, and Cryptids

The literary scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen kicked off the contemporary conversation surrounding monster culture in the 1996 edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. In the first chapter of the collection, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Cohen breaks down several arguments or ideas that can help readers understand cultures, groups, and even their own histories through the monsters they create and produce via storytelling. Cohen argues that the body of the monster can represent a cultural moment in time and place that reveals what types of fears, anxieties, desires, and fantasies a group of people had when the monster emerged. He also notes that monsters (much like the things we’re afraid of) can always shift or escape and come back as new things we fear; that they defy neat, easily explainable or understandable categories that humans crave; that we might exhibit curiosity or desire for monsters because they are forbidden; and that we often turn things that are different from us (in whatever way) into monsters to make ourselves feel more comfortable (1996).

Of interest for this article are Cohen’s theses that monsters police or control the borders and boundaries of what we can or could do (or what we want to stop others from doing) and that monsters are of our own making; they show us how we understand the world and how we often make mistakes in understanding and representing things around us as monstrous. In the *Monster Theory Reader*, a follow-up to Cohen’s collection, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues,

The monster is that which unsettles or challenges established cognitive categories and interpretive strategies . . . [it] is a thing that, from a particular perspective in a given context, shouldn’t be, but is. The monster is that which threatens understandings of the world, the self, and the relations between the two—and these are understandings that vary depending upon time and place. (2020, 3)

Quite powerfully, and with a bit of ethical reflection, then, monsters may also have the power to help us reevaluate what we might have previously seen as different or monstrous. As socio-political crises like the violent actions of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency and the related social and environmental violences that drive and/or force immigration and migration reveal, understanding how monster stories function, travel, and transform through transmission—as well as how they can be weaponized by powerful forces to sow division—is more important than ever. Exploring how cultural stories as well as people from diverse cultures have always migrated to new places and reshaped their stories based on those new environmental contexts can also help us better understand and approach a few of the social and environmental crises of our contemporary moment.

Folklore scholarship on belief and (for purposes here) legend is one way to help us navigate that work. The legend scholar Linda Dégh argues, “The legend is a legend once it entertains debate

about belief . . . [and] the sounding of contrary opinions is what makes a legend a legend” (2001, 97). In *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*, Lynne S. McNeill and Trevor J. Blank define legends as “narratives told as true or possibly true, set in the real world and in historical time” (2018, 7). The folklorist David Puglia, studying the intersection of legends and monsters—and how their representations have evolved over time—also notes how these figures serve “as mirrors to environmental anxieties, perceptions of otherness, commercial motivations, and regional identity” (2023, 2); he thus defines the *legendary monster* as “a strange, frightening, or unusual human or creature, real or imaginary, believed or not believed, that is, at the time of the telling, purported but not scientifically verified to exist in our world” (5). Legends then, according to folklorists, contain an element of belief—whether believed or not—and negotiate possibility in their telling, but they are of our world, our environments and cultures. And while not all legends feature monstrous figures, many do; those stories with creatures that may be categorized as “monstrous” in some way or another are the ones of interest here.

At this intersection of legends and monsters (and scientific exploration) is the category of cryptids, those “creatures supposed by some to exist but whose existence has not been confirmed by science” (Weinstock 2020, 20). According to Weinstock, cryptids are unconfirmed creatures that some believe to be mythical while others believe to be real, and the category of cryptid “can cover creatures amenable to ordinary zoology, including variants that redefine a species and creatures thought to be extinct” (20). Famous cryptids include the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, Mothman, and El Chupacabra, and Weinstock argues that their staying power persists because “cryptids ‘weird’ our world, suggesting that it is stranger than we think: more dangerous, but more interesting” (21).

Because of their prevalence in folk and popular culture, cryptid stories may be transmitted both through oral legendry and through literary retellings or reimaginings of those stories. These different forms also affect how the story is (re)told or can respond to different contexts, audiences, or contemporary challenges. As the folklorist Barre Toelken notes, the transmission of traditional forms balances process and structure with improvisation and creative intervention; some elements of a story remain the same with each retelling (what Toelken notes as conservatism) while others are altered based on differences in tellers, contexts, and performances (what Toelken calls dynamism) (Toelken 1996). Cryptid legends might first emerge as oral narratives, in which the legend can change with each retelling based on the situational context of the performance event; while the oral telling may contain some elements of the traditional form, promoting retention, it is also capable of responding to contemporary social, political, or environmental contexts through dynamic variation—should the teller wish to do so. When speculative fiction writers publish a reimagined version of a cryptid legend though, the narrative becomes fixed. Literary authors may use cryptid figures for social commentary or critique of specific political topics, but the contexts the authors are responding to can change (even as the published narrative cannot). As such, new writers or tellers may once again call upon, reimagine, and retell the legendary monster story to respond to their own concerns and/or offer new lessons through these legendary figures. In doing so, they become versed in the traditional elements of the figure while also dynamically reimagining how the legendary monster might function or respond to their own contemporary challenges or concerns; the ArcGIS StoryMaps assignment, for example, similarly offers students the chance to both show their understanding of legendary monsters and to reimagine them in new environments or contexts.

In the “Mapping the Legend” course, students engaged with literary stories about cryptids through guided modules that explored monster and legend dis/connections across cultures and places. They learned common characteristics and interpretations of legendary figures, and they examined how writers either maintained or altered those traditional elements in their literary reimaginings. The final module, “Where Legends Take Us,” also asked students to analyze how writers employ legendary creatures and encounters to expose underlying hierarchies and power systems. We concluded the class with a similar question that we began with: How do our cultural legends and stories move around the world with us, and how do they help us explore the limits of neatly imposed categories, differences, or borders while also helping us understand how migration intersects with larger social, political, and environmental forces?

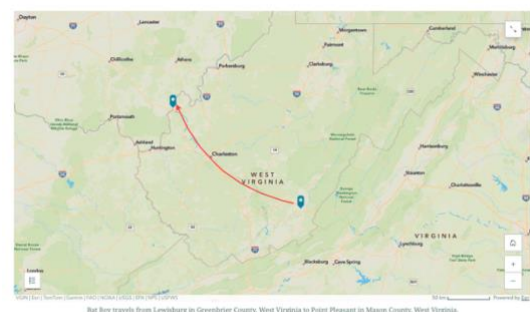
Teaching with Literary Legends

While the first course module of “Mapping the Legend” offered an introduction to how literary scholars analyze monsters and how folklorists study legends, the following modules asked students to dive into specific literary representations of legendary monster stories. They studied and analyzed shapeshifters like werewolves, selkies, and Skinwalkers; bloodsuckers like vampires, soucouyants, and the folkloresque Bat Boy; and other mysterious cryptids like the Sasquatch and El Chupacabra. These stories often emphasize the connections that legendary monsters have with their specific environments, as well as how they might find those natural connections in new places around the world. As they migrate, some of these literary legends also find ways to support, aid, or benefit their human counterparts in new environments. Just as we humans seek comfort in unknown places, our cultural legends do too; adaptation, community, and cultural diversity are strategies for learning new ways to not only imagine but also to survive in changing contexts and environments.

Interrogating Difference and Transgressing Borders

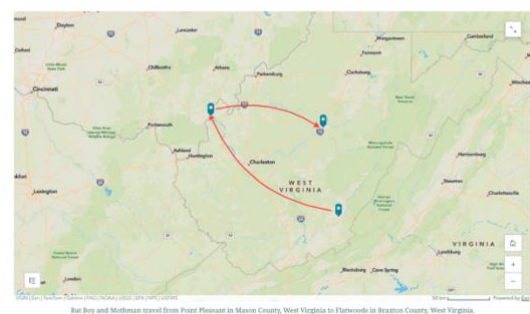
Modules throughout the course focused on common legendary figures and cryptids like the Sasquatch, the Skinwalker (and Coyote), and various types of vampiric monsters. Each of these legendary figures is associated with unknown or off-limit environments or topics, but the literary reimaginings of them encourage exploration, research, and understanding about difference or the unknown; they also emphasize how easily we humans may be swayed to violate our humanity because of populist attitudes, political rhetoric, or even our own desires.

Bat Boy Meets Mothman



Bat Boy hiked through the mountains of West Virginia, feeding on the flies and the frogs—that's all he could find in the woods besides some poisonous snake berries, so don't be grossed out! He needed protein on his hike! He finally found Mothman on the outskirts of Point Pleasant at the TST Area, who introduced him to pepperoni rolls over lunch. They told each other their stories, and Bat Boy was not surprised to hear that Mothman was, in fact, trying to warn the town about the poor infrastructure of their bridge. They connected and built a friendship over being misunderstood and treated as monstrous creatures because of their appearances. Mothman told Bat Boy there are others like them who have experienced the same mistreatment throughout the years, and he asked if Bat Boy would like to be introduced to his friend Braxtie, known, unfortunately, as the Flatwoods Monster by the local humans. Bat Boy was ecstatic at the possibility of making a new friend, and they headed to Flatwoods!

Bat Boy Meets Braxtie



Screenshot of the author's example map for students. Access it here:

<https://arcg.is/18v1CS>.

Students began the second module by reading Sharma Shields' short story about the Sasquatch, "Field Guide to Monsters of the Inland Northwest," from the 2012 collection *Favorite Monster*. The Sasquatch is a gigantic, tall, bipedal hominid figure. Muscular and quite hairy, it is known for leaving large footprints behind, and there are many legendary figures around the world that are similar to the Sasquatch: the Bigfoot in the U.S. and Canada, the Yeti in the Himalayas, the Barmanou in Pakistan, the Batutut in Vietnam, the Chuchunaa in Siberia, the Mapinguari in Brazil, the Ucumar in Chile, the Sisemite in Guatemala, the Yeren in China, and the Yowie in Australia. Wherever in the world these large hairy creatures may roam, though, they are usually tied to the wilderness, the unknown or unexplored landscapes that bring us both awe and anxiety about what lies within them. Shields' story is told from the perspective of the Projectionist, who is working for Dr. Roebuck at an event to promote Dr. Roebuck's new book, *Field Guide to Monsters of the Inland Northwest*. Originally unbeknownst to the Projectionist, his wife, Esmeralda, was also invited purely so Dr. Roebuck could present her to the crowd as a specimen of the Sasquatch species, which her husband agrees to subject her to during the event. As Dr. Roebuck dehumanizes Esmeralda in front of the crowd, measuring her with a yardstick, classifying her physical features and congenial behaviors, and forcing her to undress, the Projectionist also begins to dehumanize Esmeralda. "[H]e saw her as the crowd saw her: enormous, hirsute, terrifying; a creature, with some similarities to a woman, but mostly another thing unto itself. An *It*, of course, had no feelings" (120).

After the event, when Esmeralda asks the Projectionist if he also finds her monstrous now, he recalls the night they met in the forest while he was spelunking; his openness to exploration and her sweetness and confidence had attracted him to her, but his response to her question is unintentionally cruel and still influenced by the dehumanizing attitudes of Dr. Roebuck and his crowd: "'I don't care if you're a monster or not,' he said firmly. 'I love you regardless'" (123). Before leaving him, Esmeralda offers the following parting words: "'People always start out as curious. Then the curiosity turns to fear. They'll come after us . . . I've seen it happen before'" (123). The Projectionist loses his wife because he abandons his openness about who counts as "human" and gives into the dehumanizing tendencies of Dr. Roebuck and his crowd. He also reveals his own loss of humanity in the process.

The Earth scientist and writer Darcie Little Badger's 2017 short story "Skinwalker, Fast-Talker" also explores how humans too often fear the unknown, reject difference, or simplify traditional stories through a literary reimagining of legendary figures like the Skinwalker and Coyote. In Navajo culture, a Skinwalker is a type of evil shapeshifter that can turn into, possess, or disguise itself as an animal, usually wolf-like (Brady and Toelken 1984). It is considered dangerous, harmful, and the antithesis of Navajo cultural values. The story also introduces Coyote, a trickster figure who might scheme or stir up trouble to test or violate moral precepts. In traditional stories, Coyote might represent a vicarious escape from social restrictions until his comeuppance for misbehavior reinforces those restrictions, or he may appear as a generous figure, especially during the time of creation when Coyote took initiative in establishing the natural phenomena of the world (Toelken 1976).

Mel, the protagonist of the story is a journalist for *Bimonthly Weird*; because Mel is a lesbian, her sister, Veronica, will not let her spend time with her six-year-old nephew, Chris, and Mel thus feels an even stronger call to protect her teenage nephew, Junior, from Coyote's trickery. In

“Skinwalker, Fast-Talker,” Coyote is initially mistaken for a Skinwalker by Junior, who “may be Navajo and Apache, but [who] learns about his ancestors’ monsters through Hollywood [like the film *Skin Walking Eve*]. To him, skinwalkers are merely pelt-wearing shapeshifters. Thus, he falls prey to Coyote, a spirit who dances between bodies: human to animal, animal to human” (161). The story helps readers interrogate how quickly we might assume that those who are different from us are automatically dangerous, and the story’s description of the difference between Coyote and Skinwalkers emphasizes why sharing traditional knowledge matters for both moving successfully through the world and for recognizing injustice or pain. When Mel interviews Coyote for *Bimonthly Weird*, he explains shapeshifting occurs by focusing “on your pain—I’m not the real problem.—every moment you’ve been hurt, every person who has wronged you” (168), and she realizes Junior sought out shapeshifting because he, like Mel, felt weighted down by “the world’s apathy and his peers’ cruelty” (169). Through interrogating the borders of the self and opening themselves up to others who also accept difference, both Mel and Junior find peace and support because of their experiences with Coyote.

Like the Skinwalker, the legendary figure of the vampire is also often depicted as a shapeshifter, and, like the Sasquatch, it is also noted in cultures across the world (Dundes 1998). Vampires are usually portrayed as supernatural bloodsuckers, but they can also appear as lifeforce suckers, when they gain strength or power from what would normally fuel someone else. They might have fangs and long fingernails, are usually undead or immortal, and are tied to the night. Because vampire stories set up a predator/prey dynamic, they often address topics like sex and sexuality, gender relations, generational conflicts, community issues, social problems, and desires that transgress social norms.

Nalo Hopkinson’s short story “Greedy Choke Puppy” about the Caribbean legend of the Soucouyant offers a literary representation of the dynamic variation of vampire legends as they occur across culture and place. According to Hopkinson’s story, the Soucouyant is the

Caribbean equivalent of the vampire myth. See also “Azeman.” “Soucouyant,” or “blood-sucker,” derives from the French verb “sucer,” to suck. “Ol’ Higue” is the Guyanese creole expression for an old hag, or witch woman. The soucouyant is usually an old, evil-tempered woman who removes her skin at night, hides it, and then changes into a ball of fire. She flies through the air, searching for homes in which there are babies. She then enters the house through an open window or a keyhole, goes into the child’s room, and sucks the life from its body. She may visit one child’s bedside a number of times, draining a little more life each time, as the frantic parents search for a cure, and the child gets progressively weaker and finally dies. Or she may kill all at once. (2001, 138)

Hopkinson’s story focuses on Jacky, a PhD student studying Caribbean folklore, who lives with her Granny and is also deeply concerned with her ability to find a husband and create a family in her 30s. Granny frequently tries to comfort Jacky and offer advice about the different forms of love available beyond the traditional (and white, western, patriarchal) nuclear family structure—““Love your work. Love people close to you. Love your life” (143)—but Jacky ignores this advice and becomes increasingly unstable in her actions. As the narrative unfolds, we learn that both Jacky and Granny are Soucouyants, and Jacky has killed her friend’s newborn to maintain her own youth and beauty. Granny then finds Jacky’s skin and rubs the inside with hot pepper, ensuring

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Jacky's demise once the sun comes up, which devastates Granny to do. Rather than setting up a good versus evil narrative and pitting Granny and Jacky against one another, Hopkinson's story allows for a more nuanced reading of the vampire legend's transgression of borders: "Jacky's downfall comes specifically because of the actions surrounding a deeply held belief that her worthiness remains based upon her abilities to become a wife and mother . . . Jacky is unable to fully distinguish herself from the problematic nature of community expectations for women" (Brooks 2017, 81-2). As Kinitra D. Brooks argues, "Hopkinson wants the reader to see this as not a question of Jacky and her lack of willpower, but as a testament to the power of narrow societal roles to engross even the most intelligent and modern of women" (82). This literary reimagining of the Soucouyant reminds readers that true power and love come from transgressing the boundaries of societal expectations and that embracing new ways of being can liberate us from rather than trap us within such rigid and limiting categories.

Like a traditional vampire, the Soucouyant is a nocturnal shapeshifter, but the removal of her skin at night reveals the dynamic nature of the legendary life-force-stealing creature. The popularity of vampire-like legends across traditional storytelling and popular culture also makes them great teaching tools for both this dynamic variation we see within traditional forms as well as for contemporary concepts in Folklore Studies like the folkloresque. According to Michael Dylan Foster, the folkloresque is "popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore" that "refers to creative, often commercial products or texts . . . that give the impression to the consumer . . . that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions" (2016, 5). The vampiric figure of the West Virginia Bat Boy, which is not based on sightings or legends but was instead created in 1992 when the mostly fictional tabloid *Weekly World News* reportedly found a half-human half-bat boy in a cave in West Virginia, is one such example. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Bat Boy became a popular figure in the tabloid, traveling around the world, hanging out with Big Foot, dating Taylor Swift, and even running for president. In 2002, Keythe Farley, Brian Flemming, and Laurence O'Keefe wrote and produced *Bat Boy: The Musical*, a dramedy that reimagines the folkloresque legendary monster through a literary performance. The musical focuses on the Bat Boy, who is named Edgar, and the tensions he experiences in his new community; because he is half-bat, half-human, many townspeople refuse to accept him, and their fear of the unknown and refusal to open their community lead to a violent end for many, including Edgar and his adoptive family. Through this legendary monster, the story explores how compassion for others and an attempt to understand—rather than fear—our differing circumstances might lead to connection and acceptance rather than borders and boundaries, both of how we define the self and community. A key takeaway from the play is that being human does not always translate into being humane, and our fears of difference and change often lead to more destruction than transformation.

Each of these literary reimaginings of legendary monsters helps readers interrogate difference and explore the power of transgressing borders, particularly of the self, to find and offer love, community, and companionship. As these stories emphasize, exploring and seeking to understand difference or the unknown helps us learn new things about the world, encounter new ways of being, and find joy or community in new places. They also serve as warnings for what happens to our relationships, traditions, and communities when we choose fear of difference over openness and exploration or comply with strict social expectations of the self and others rather than exploring new ways of being, especially in moments of transition or crisis. The stories teach students about

these traditional folklore figures, but these literary legendary monster tales also emphasize our responsibility to offer care or kindness to others who may experience the world differently because of both internal and external forces beyond their control.

Exploring Migration with Literary Legends

Monster stories often emphasize the connections that legendary figures have with their specific environments, and literary reimaginings of those legendary monsters also offer explorations of how they can find those natural connections in new places around the world. Although Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that monster figures transgress borders and boundaries, more recent literary depictions of legendary monsters can also aid us in exploring contemporary conversations and tensions surrounding migration. The legend of El Chupacabra, for example, also holds elements of the vampire form. The word Chupacabra comes from a combination of the Spanish verb *chupar* (which means “to suck”) and the noun *cabra* (which is a goat), and the neologism is often translated to English as “Goat-sucker.” The legend of El Chupacabra emerged in 1995 near Puerto Rico’s El Yunque rainforest. Eyewitnesses note that it attacks animals, particularly livestock, and has left dead livestock drained of blood lying around (Radford 2011). Since the legend emerged, El Chupacabra sightings have been reported all around the world, traveling west to Mexico, east to Portugal, south to Nicaragua, and north to the mainland United States. Like humans, our legends also travel and migrate, and Rudolfo Anaya’s 2006 young adult novel *Curse of the ChupaCabra* offers a fictionalized journey tracking the Chupacabra’s movements. In the novel, readers travel with Dr. Rosa Medina, a literature professor at Cal State, from Los Angeles to Mexico to New Mexico as she investigates El Chupacabra and discovers its strange connection to drug traffickers.

The novel encourages readers to think about what we fear and the horrors we face, whether they be legendary creatures or sociopolitical problems that emerge in neoliberal systems and through global markets. In contemporary immigration discourse in the U.S., for example, politicians and those wishing to close borders often rely on narratives of both “migrant illegality” and “sensationalist language of ‘drug lords’ (narcos)” to “produce an intensified U.S.-Mexico security framework” (Chávez 2021, 12). Alex E. Chávez has analyzed how, during his first term as president, Donald Trump frequently relied on racialized othering and monsterization of Mexican migrants through statements like, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best” (quoted in Chávez, 14). As Chávez argues, “The suggestion that Mexico sends its people to the United States misapprehends how flows of labor migration are embedded in transnational economies,” and the claim that Mexico intentionally sends people to the U.S. “attribute[s] a vacuous agency to migrants rather than understand[ing] how transnational mobility operates as a survival strategy embedded in a complex of social, economic, and political displacements—in which the United States is implicated, particularly in the Mexican case—and not reducible to sole individual choice” (14).

Anaya’s novel, on the other hand, understands the act of migration as being “as old as the history of humans on earth,” and encourages the value of tradition, neighborism, and building bridges across borders rather than walls at them: “The border could be bridged, or it could become a wall of separation. Hope lay in people’s willingness to live as neighbors. Brave new worlds could evolve where the cultures of the world met” (2006, 165). The rhetorical move to categorize certain groups or cultures as monstrous is also connected to an attempt to exert power over how and where people choose to root themselves and their cultural traditions. The legendary monster—and stories

about it and its natural movements across borders—interrupts the political agendas that seek to marginalize, displace, or even exterminate certain groups of people. As teaching tools, legendary monster narratives often reveal the limitations of a society that monsterizes difference while revealing the larger sociopolitical forces that shape human—and legend—movement, whether by force or choice. They recontextualize traditional forms in literary narratives that often promote connection rather than domination, tolerance rather than fear, and wider understanding of the (sometimes violent) systems that shape our lives—and how we still move, live, and create within them.

Where Legends Take Us: Imagining and Mapping New Stories

Literary retellings of legendary monster stories are one way to teach at the intersection of culture, history, and tradition while also exposing some of the underlying hierarchies and power systems that shape our wider social, political, and environmental contexts. Reading about legendary monsters from other places and backgrounds also helps readers both encounter new cultural beliefs and find connections across different belief systems and geographies of knowing. As with reading literary fiction, encountering the legend can open up the universe to readers, offering new perspectives and taking us on new adventures to unfamiliar places.

A final short story, “Kabu Kabu” by Nnedi Okorafor and Alan Dean Foster, also offers student readers a map for exploring how legendary monsters not only travel beyond the traditional confines of our imaginations but also across the now-realized porous borders of space and time. Kabu Kabus are unregistered, often illegal taxis in Nigeria, and in this story, Ngozi, the protagonist, takes a fantastic ride in one through time and space. As she tries to get from Chicago to her sister’s wedding in Nigeria, she meets several legendary monsters (including a vampire, a masquerader, and a mysterious butcher man). Because these legendary creatures have long traveled back and forth across the borders of time and space, they know how to best guide Ngozi during her travels. When Ngozi and the cab driver are stuck in a traffic jam full of legendary monsters, she realizes how common it is for both humans and their legends to migrate: “‘We all must travel,’ the driver said, keeping his eyes on the way ahead. His hands grasped the wheel firmly. ‘It is the essence of all things, to move and change and keep going forward and backward and around. Even the spirits and the dead’” (2013, 33).

Such literary reimaginings of legendary monster stories emphasize connection and tolerance, interrogate sociopolitical power systems that intentionally monsterize certain groups, and explore how humans and their cultural traditions and stories have always migrated across artificially imposed and (often violently) constructed borders. These narratives also offer readers and students new pathways to explore how our legendary monsters help us understand and reshape a more open and just world built on the long human tradition of movement, migration, and rooting within new contexts and environments.

Taking “Kabu Kabu” as its base, a final assignment for the class asks students to choose their own legendary monster figure and creatively reimagine it in an adventure travel narrative. The assignment asks students to both research specific legendary monsters (who or what they are, how they act, what they do, and where they live or have migrated to) and to creatively reimagine them in new environments or contexts through creative short stories. Through their research and writing, students are asked to engage with questions like: What characteristics does a particular legend

have, and how do those characteristics vary from place to place? Where do we encounter legends, and how are our places tangled up with our stories? Where (and how) do legends migrate, and what can they teach us about ourselves and our traditions through their travels? Students chose to map legendary journeys that involved stories like a young Scottish boy traveling with a Ghillie Dhu to learn how to protect others from water kelpies; how a werewolf learns about literary themes (and himself) by researching how his own legend has influenced and evolved with human behaviors across time and space; and how two Great Lakes legends (Lake Erie's Bessie and Lake Superior's Great Lynx) learn about the limitations of fear and the benefits of tolerance and curiosity by visiting with other lake legends around the world.

Students in this class digitally designed their legendary monster migration narratives using ArcGIS StoryMaps, a user-friendly, geospatial mapping platform that allows users to interactively combine geographic information systems (GIS) with narrative and other multimedia content to spatialize a story; however, a handmade narrative that maps the migration of a legendary monster would also help students explore how our cultural stories also travel to, encounter, and are transformed by new interactions and environments—as well as how they might help us speculate about and perhaps even find comfort, community, and care in those new places. As these legends and their reimaginings remind us, our traditional culture and storytelling practices can help us navigate change and uncertainty, especially as we encounter new contexts and unknown environments.

Migration, Culture, and the Climate Crisis

Contemporary social, political, and environmental crises bring our legendary monsters closer to us, especially as the powerful seek to monsterize certain groups who are being forced into migration by globalized forces that affect and (re)shape our local places and cultures. The wider context of our climate crisis shows that our actions are now creating climate refugees and forcing climate migration—often while politically refusing to both take responsibility for our human actions and for the wellbeing of our fellow humans. It is, in fact, this dehumanization and monsterification—bolstered, of course, by intentionally politicizing belief and weaponizing difference through narrative form—that help these violent processes succeed. If, as scholars in *Latinx Environmentalisms* argue, “literary and cultural productions are crucial to the processes through which social and environmental inequality are constructed,” then “the literary, cinematic, and visual arts [also] provide essential sites for envisioning radical alterities” (Wald, Vázquez, Ybarra, and Ray 2019, 3-4). Might our literary legendary monsters offer us some of those sites for imagining otherwise?

In a recent issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, Thomas Grant Richardson, Jon Kay, Maida Owens, and Tim Frandy collaborated on an article noting current “Urgencies” in the field of folklore studies (2023). Maida Owens, who was the Director of the Louisiana Division of the Arts Folklife Program, focuses her section of the article on why “Climate Change Needs Folklorists” and reflects on the role of traditional and cultural work in the era of climate crisis:

With more storms and wildfires, the general public is realizing that climate change has already started . . . The resulting population displacements are expected to be larger than the 1930s Dust Bowl exodus, the migration west, and the movement out of the South from 1910 to 1970—in half the time. My concern is: What happens to traditional cultures with such displacement? . . . Folklorists have roles to play with vulnerable and receiving

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communities, policymaking, documentation, and analysis. We can help communities retain their traditional knowledge and document it. (2023, 188)

By turning to our stories and reaching across differences—whether they be cultural, political, or environmental—we might be able to hold both an appreciation and awe for what we don’t understand while also making space for both respect and connection across difference. By turning to the literary reimaginings of our legendary monsters within our classrooms, we also aid our students and ourselves in exploring how historical and traditional processes like migration can also be helpful in approaching contemporary challenges like the climate crisis and its associated socioenvironmental effects on our lives and places. Although our legendary monsters have been around for quite some time, they still migrate and adapt to new places, and their continual transformation within and across new environments, borders, and cultures also help us ask new questions: What connections do our different approaches, beliefs, and cultures already hold? How might critical imagining open up new approaches to traditional storytelling through speculative processes like rooting? What kinds of worlds have we built? What kinds of worlds can we hope to imagine? And what kinds of worlds do we want to create as we move forward, across, and beyond the borders of what has already been to imagine what might yet be?

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Endnote

¹ According to Bould and Vint, “hard science fiction” was coined by P. Schuyler Miller in 1957 and “was later used to distinguish fiction rooted in the ‘hard’, natural sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry) from those grounded in the ‘soft’, social sciences (e.g. anthropology, sociology)” (123). Bould and Vint also critique the gender connotations that accompanied this divide and note that science and social systems are ultimately connected.

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Legend-ary Union map <https://arcg.is/18v1CS>

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Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious: A Case Study of Mythological Creatures in Museum Family Programs

by Leigh Dale and Teagan Annesly

This article examines monsters and mythical creatures as protective identity tools—symbolic forms that individuals use to explore, project, and construct ideas of safety, strength, and self-definition—as seen through a practice-based case study at the Philadelphia Museum of Art during Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures, a family-centered museum education initiative. Drawing on museum pedagogy and informal learning theory with an eye toward inclusion, the program used legendary beings depicted in the museum’s permanent collection—particularly hybrid creatures and guardian figures—to help learners explore how adornment, hybridity, and monstrosity function as strategies of care, defense, and self-definition across cultures.

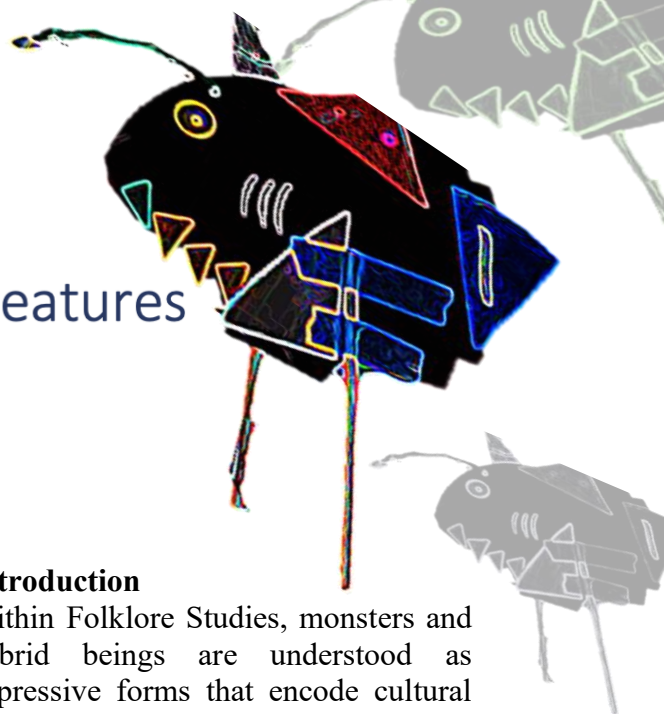
Anchored by object-based prompts including “What do you wear to feel fancy or fierce?,” program staff invited children and families to examine helmets, jewelry, and wearable artworks adorned with protective creatures before designing their own creature-inspired wearables. These activities framed monstrosity not as something to fear, but as a form of empowerment that supports playful engagement with vulnerability, confidence, and belonging.

We outline concrete strategies for contextualizing original works of art through monster-centered pedagogy and offer adaptable lesson structures for classrooms, museums, and community settings. By treating monsters as protective figures embedded in material culture, we argue for their value as meaningful entry points into identity formation, emotional resilience, and inclusive educational practice.

Introduction

Within Folklore Studies, monsters and hybrid beings are understood as expressive forms that encode cultural knowledge, boundary making, and systems of belief. We argue that monsters can function as powerful pedagogical tools: not as symbols of chaos or fear but as material strategies of care and exploration.

The [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) is a major urban art museum with a global collection spanning over 2,000 years of visual culture. The museum serves a diverse regional and national audience, and the Family Programs Department offers a year-round schedule of drop-in studios, guided experiences, festivals, and community-based outreach initiatives. Drawing on the case study of Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures, a family-centered initiative, led by Associate Director of Family Programs Lindsey Bloom, the Family Programs team engaged over 20,000 participants. This article examines how object-based interpretation and artmaking invited children and families to explore protection, identity, and belonging through legendary beings in different areas of the museum’s permanent collection. By framing monstrosity as something one can design, wear, inhabit, and reinterpret,



we positioned monsters as tools for empowerment. This project frames monsters as folkloric forms embedded in material culture and activated through educational practice.

Pedagogical Framework

This project is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework drawing from Folklore Studies, material culture theory, and informal learning pedagogy. Within folklore, monsters and hybrid beings are understood not simply as fantastical figures but also as culturally embedded forms that carry and transmit collective knowledge, values, and anxieties across generations. Looking through an art therapy lens, designing and embodying hybrid creatures offers a reflective process through which participants can safely explore complex emotions and identities. Together, this framework positions “monster pedagogy” as a mode of cultural learning in which symbolic forms—rooted in tradition, yet open to reinterpretation—become tools for exploring protection, belonging, and self-definition.

This study draws on qualitative documentation collected throughout the Summer 2024 program series. Data sources included educator observation notes, photographic documentation of participant work, informal visitor feedback gathered during programs, and post-program staff reflections. This project employs a reflective, practice-based methodology, focusing on patterns observed across repeated interactions rather than formal evaluation metrics. Analysis centered on how participants engaged with themes of protection, hybridity, and identity through both discussion and artmaking. While not intended as a comprehensive assessment, these observations provide insight into how symbolic, object-based pedagogy functions in informal, intergenerational learning environments.

Informal Learning in Museum Contexts

Museums are uniquely positioned to activate monster pedagogy. Informal learning environments privilege curiosity, open-ended exploration, and intergenerational meaning-making. Rather than delivering fixed interpretations, museum educators can invite learners to project, question, and connect.

Object-based teaching further grounds abstraction in physical, material presence. When children encounter helmets adorned with protective creatures or sculptural guardian figures embedded in historical contexts, they see that humans have long used imagery to mediate vulnerability. Protection is not merely conceptual; it is designed, worn, and displayed. It is normalized and externalized as part of the human condition. In this setting, art making becomes a bridge between historical artifacts and personal experience. Learners move from observing how protection has been visualized across cultures to connecting this concept with their own lived experiences. They ask: What protects me? What makes me feel fierce? What do I carry or wear when I need courage? In this way, museum spaces can function as sites where folklore is not only interpreted but also actively reimagined through participant engagement.

Why Monsters?

The decision to center monsters and mythical creatures emerged from both the museum’s collection and a pedagogical interest in forms that invite interpretation, play, and personal connection. Artworks such as *The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail* by George Johnson,

Qiu Anxiong's *Ha Lei*, and a Nepali wealth box adorned with a yaksha, a nature spirit of Hinduism, offered visually compelling examples of hybrid and protective figures embedded in material culture. These objects provided a starting point for designing experiences that were both culturally grounded and open ended. As recurring figures in global folklore traditions, monsters and mythical creatures offer a familiar yet flexible entry point into cultural storytelling and symbolic interpretation. This positions monsters as tools through which participants actively reinterpret and extend traditional forms.

In practice, monsters proved especially effective because they resist fixed meaning, inviting participants to speculate, combine, and reinterpret without fear of being “wrong.” Monsters also support imaginative construction rather than replication. Participants were invited not to reproduce what they saw but to assemble meaning from familiar and unfamiliar parts, drawing on personal experience while experimenting with new forms.

Finally, monsters created a productive distance through which more complex ideas could be explored indirectly. Questions of fear, protection, and belonging—often difficult to articulate directly—became accessible when approached through a creature. Asking “What would your creature protect you from?” or “What makes your creature powerful?” enabled participants to externalize internal experiences and reflect on them through symbolic form. This indirect approach supported both emotional safety and depth of engagement, making monsters particularly well suited to intergenerational learning environments.

Cultural Context

In material culture, monstrosity is frequently apotropaic, designed to ward off harm while also leaving room for more fluid interpretation. A dragon carved into a temple door, a yaksha guarding treasure, or a hybrid creature adorning jewelry does not simply represent protection—it performs it symbolically. These patterns reflect the role of folklore as a system through which communities externalize fear, encode protection, and transmit cultural meaning.

Monsters function as tools for meaning-making: hybrid forms that inhabit liminal spaces between categories. Across cultures, guardian figures, composite beasts, and protective adornments appear on helmets, jewelry, boxes, textiles, and architecture. These beings often sit at conceptual thresholds—between inside and outside, sacred and profane, safety and danger.

For children, monsters operate similarly. They provide a vocabulary for negotiating big feelings: fierceness, vulnerability, individuality. Their hybridity resists rigid categorization. They are neither fully one thing nor another. In this way, monsters offer flexible forms through which identity can be tested, expanded, and playfully reassembled.

Observed Outcomes: From Whimsy to Empowerment

The summer's suite of Art Kids programs intentionally followed an arc that began with playful whimsy and culminated in a sense of personal empowerment. Engaging with unusual and fantastical creatures created a low-stakes environment where children and families could experiment, take risks, and embrace imagination without fear of judgment. The very act of playing with hybrid beasts and whimsical dioramas invited participants to enter a world where the rules of reality were suspended, privileging joy, curiosity, and experimentation.

Composite creatures—mixing parts of the familiar and the fantastic—offered a bridge between the everyday and the personal. Families and children could draw on their own experiences and attributes, crafting creatures that were simultaneously universal and deeply individual. In doing so, the programs supported exploration of identity and expression through tactile, creative practice.



Photo by Albert Yee.

Program Context

Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures was an eight-week, family-centered initiative designed to activate connections across the museum’s permanent collection through a shared thematic focus. Curatorial teams from different areas of the museum’s collection collaborated to highlight mythical beings as a cross-cultural point of entry, foregrounding the global presence of hybrid and protective figures in material culture. The resulting small special exhibitions were *Mythical, Divine, Demonic* (South Asian art, curated by Neeraja Poddar); *Mythical Creatures: China & the World* (East Asian art, curated by Hiromi Kinoshita); and *Mythical Creatures and Symbolic Animals in Medieval Art* (European decorative art, curated by Jack Hinton).

Building on this institutional focus, the Family Programs team developed a suite of interrelated offerings running Friday through Sunday throughout July and August 2024, engaging more than 20,000 participants onsite. Programming included a drop-in artmaking studio, guided family tours, toddler programs, registered workshops, and two pay-what-you-wish family festivals that featured artist demonstrations and performances. A self-guided activity card invited families to explore the galleries highlighting objects adorned with dragons and other creatures (Appendix A).

To extend access beyond the museum, the program included an outreach initiative in partnership with city parks and recreation centers, distributing 6,000 art kits that combined hands-on materials, activity booklets (Appendix B), and museum passes. Additional partnerships with community

organizations supported both program delivery and material production, embedding the initiative within a broader network of local engagement.

Across these formats, the program prioritized accessibility and intergenerational participation. Free and low-cost entry points, off-site distribution, and flexible engagement structures allowed families to encounter the content in multiple ways. This layered approach to access—economic, geographic, and developmental—aligned with the project’s broader pedagogical aim: to create inclusive, open-ended opportunities for participants to explore identity, protection, and belonging through creative and culturally grounded experiences.

Three Program Examples

Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures encapsulated an overall thematic scope of seasonal programming throughout July and August. Programs were organized around three subthemes: Creature Features; Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious; and Homes for Beasts Big and Small (Appendix C). Program examples are outlined below, describing the Art Kids studio project and a highlighted stop on an Art Kids family tour, aligned to each of the subthemes.



Creature Features Studio Project

Combining familiar and unusual parts of animals, George Johnson’s *The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail* and Qiu Anxiong’s *Ha Lei* invited visitors to fuse various animal parts with inanimate objects to create their own mixed-up creature. Using colorful and textured paper of many shapes and sizes, children and their families joined unique limbs together with brads and pipe cleaners, with a finishing touch of googly eyes, foam stickers, and china markers.



Creature Features Tour Stop

Using the same object inspiring the studio project, tours were guided to *The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail* by George Johnson to examine the contrasting features of a real and an imagined creature. The interconnected components of the dragon and monkey ceramic invited imaginative exploration and prompts such as What features tell us this object is a monkey?, What features tell us this object is a dragon?, and What parts of this object are neither monkey or dragon? Diving deeper into this object, children and their caregivers discovered ways of storytelling through objects by learning of the artwork’s point of inspiration: the story of The Monkey King and the Journey to the West. Tour groups then created their own melded creatures using Model Magic and adornment materials such as feathers, pipe cleaners, and googly eyes.



The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail, George Johnson, 2000.
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Estate of Frances and Bayard Storey, 2017-113-1 © George Johnson.
<https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/654c8v12u6tj14ry38bl470r1o2wk081>

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2.

Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious Studio Project

Wearable objects like a torque, a symbolic neckpiece, in our Chinese art gallery adorned with dragons and phoenixes inspired the prompt: What do you wear to make you feel fancy or fierce? Families used cardboard, metallic markers, and adhesive gems to craft their own wearable protection items. An added benefit of wearable art is its visibility throughout the museum during the day. Children wearing their torques were often asked, Where did you make that?



Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious Tour Stop

One tour stop visited *Phoenix-Shaped Architectural Brackets*, 16th-17th century, artist/maker unknown. Close looking invited tour guests to point out features of the phoenix and learn about the symbolism of fenghuang: a pair of phoenixes representing positivity and new beginnings. Visitors created their own phoenix tails out of trim, ribbon, and yarn, parading around artworks and thinking about what mythical creature mash-ups they would want to portray.



Photo by PMA Education Staff.



Phoenix-Shaped Architectural Brackets, artist/maker unknown, 16th-17th century. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of John T. Morris, 1902-912.
<https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/sl145541p31i8x277ml77aq78t7023e7>

3.

Homes for Beasts Big and Small Studio Project

Referencing a Nepali Wealth Box adorned with a Yaksha, families created an offering to the mythical spirit using colored air-dry clay. Over the course of three weeks, the offerings were collected in a large cardboard and papier-mache replica of the Wealth Box, becoming a velvet-lined dreamscape. In addition, families made their own miniature diorama creature homes, prompting questions of what an imaginary beast may need in their habitat in order to eat, rest and live.



Photos by PMA Education Staff.

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➡ Homes for Beasts Big and Small Tour Stop

Family tour groups were led to a stop to spend time with the *Coffered Ceiling from Zhihuasi*, c. 1444, artist/maker unknown. At the center of this ceiling segment a depiction of a dragon peers down at its viewers, surrounded by many relief details. To look closer, families were provided with images of the artwork's details and invited to seek and find the picture within the physical ceiling above them. Discussions guided tour groups to share reasons they think a dragon would be featured at the center of this ceiling, exploring the idea of protection. To extend learning, participants explored etching with textured plates to add and draw details within their own paper outlines of a temple ceiling. At the center of their artworks they could draw a protective creature of their own choosing.



Coffered Ceiling from Zhihuasi
(Temple of Transforming Wisdom),
artist/maker unknown, c. 1444
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Wasserman,
1930-38-1a—n.
<https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/10062a5kpw25id1v15e2w24x7023u41w>

Challenges and Insights

Large-scale festivals and drop-in formats created access but also introduced challenges related to attention, pacing, and meaningful engagement. With high visitor volume, interactions were often brief, making it difficult to sustain deeper dialogue or reflection. To address this, educators developed concise, flexible prompts that could function at multiple levels of engagement. However, the tension between breadth and depth remained: Designing for 20,000 participants required different strategies from those used in smaller, more intimate learning environments. Educators and staff had a less clear understanding of meaning-making when opportunities for facilitated discussion were limited.

Activating multiple spaces across the museum, including galleries, studio classrooms, and festival zones, expanded opportunities for engagement but created logistical challenges around navigation and cohesion. Some families encountered activities serendipitously, while others missed key components because of unclear wayfinding or limited visibility. Interestingly, wearable art became an informal solution to this challenge. Participants who created creature-inspired adornments often moved through the museum as visible markers of the program, prompting peer-to-peer discovery. This emergent form of participant-led visibility suggested new ways of thinking about movement and communication within large institutional spaces.

One of the central tensions of this work involved navigating the balance between encouraging imaginative reinterpretation and maintaining the cultural integrity of the objects and traditions referenced. Hybrid and protective creatures drawn from South Asian, East Asian, and European contexts carry specific symbolic meanings and histories. However, the program's emphasis on open-ended, participant-driven creation sometimes risked flattening these distinctions into a generalized idea of the "hybrid creature." This tension reflects a broader dynamic in folklore education: balancing the transmission of culturally specific knowledge with opportunities for creative reinterpretation. Educators addressed this by grounding each activity in close looking and object-based prompts before moving into artmaking. Even so, this balance remained an ongoing negotiation: how to invite personal meaning-making without detaching forms from their cultural contexts.

Implications for Educators

For educators within museum and community-based learning environments, this case study offers several practical insights for those seeking to engage in folklore as a living, adaptable resource. Composite creatures provide an accessible starting point for learners of all ages and backgrounds. Because these forms resist fixed interpretation, they reduce pressure to “get it right” and instead invite speculation, recombination, and personal meaning-making. Educators can use hybridity to shift emphasis from accuracy to exploration, allowing participants to engage deeply with symbolic ideas without requiring prior knowledge. Three strategies that particularly positioned our folklore in education program for success include:

→ Frame monsters as protective rather than fear-based. Reframing monsters as figures of protection, guardianship, and care opens space for more inclusive and emotionally resonant engagement. Prompts such as What does your creature protect?, What does your creature mean to you?, and What makes your monster powerful? encourage participants to reflect on internal experiences. This approach supports emotional safety while maintaining conceptual depth. The hybridity, or “creature feature” potential of monsters offers an entry point for connectivity to everyday interests. One could identify snake scales on a dragon or include a lion's tail in a mixed monster. Personal reference points support deeper engagement.

→ Begin with objects, then move toward interpretation. Object-based teaching provides a critical foundation for connecting folklore and storytelling to lived experience. Close looking and guided discussion help ground participants in the cultural and material specificity of artworks before inviting creative artmaking. This sequence—observe, interpret, create—supports a balance between honoring traditions and encouraging individual expression.

→ Use art making as a form of reflection. Art making activities are effective when framed as opportunities for thinking and expressing. After open-ended prompts, discussion, and facilitator questioning, learners can be given time to reflect through making. Artmaking acts as a reflective process through which participants explore identity, emotion, and belonging. Emphasizing process over product encourages experimentation and lowers barriers to participation. Participants assume greater agency and have an opportunity to share their ideas, either visually or verbally, and can extend personal meaning-making of their own creation. This also allows for multiple modalities of engagement.

Conclusion: Why Monsters Matter for Education Now

In contemporary educational landscapes marked by uncertainty and social complexity, learners need flexible symbolic tools. Monsters offer precisely this: forms that hold contradiction and represent protection. When children design and don wearable artworks, they experiment with agency. When families collaboratively build beasts or construct homes for guardian creatures, they practice care. When museums present monstrous imagery as important material culture rather than spectacle, they unlock pathways into identity formation and emotional resilience.

These approaches allow learners to externalize vulnerability, build confidence, and imagine new forms of belonging. In doing so, they transform from figures at the margins into central tools for inclusive, imaginative, educational practice. By engaging monsters as folkloric forms embedded in material culture, this work demonstrates how folklore can function as a dynamic educational

tool for exploring identity, emotion, and belonging. In this way, folklore becomes not only something to study but also something learners actively use to make meaning in their own lives. This case study demonstrates how monster-centered, object-based pedagogy can function as a scalable and adaptable framework for engaging identity, emotion, and cultural meaning-making across informal learning contexts. In this way, monster pedagogy offers a model for how folklore can remain vital, responsive, and deeply relevant within contemporary educational practice.

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URLs

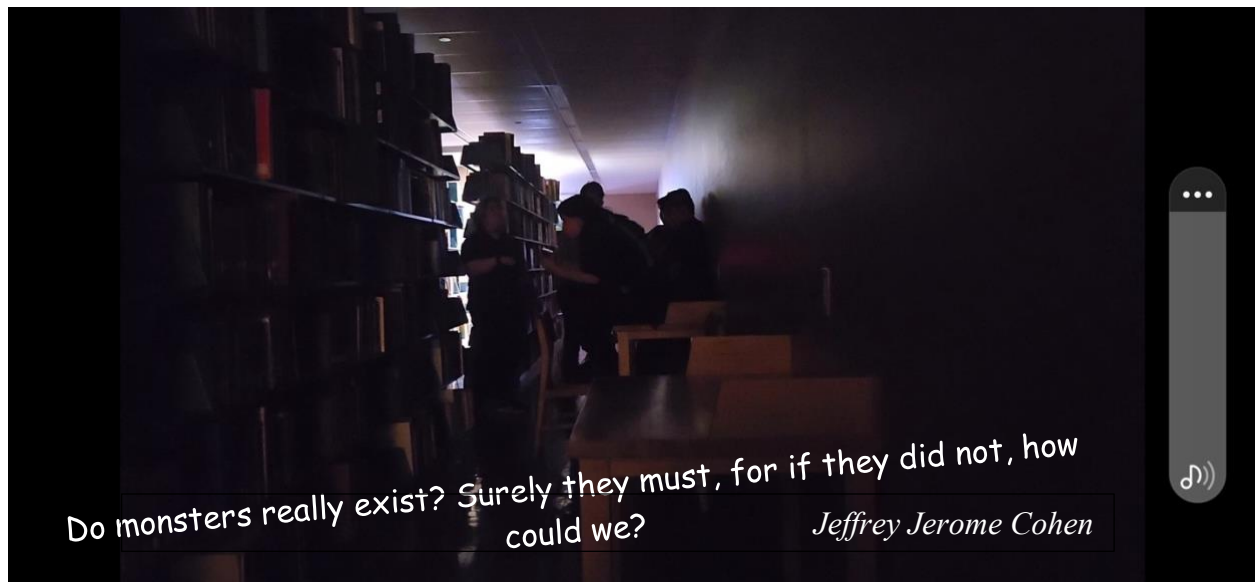
Philadelphia Museum of Art <https://www.philamuseum.org>
The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon's Tail <https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/654c8v12u6tj14ry38bl470r1o2wk081>
Phoenix-Shaped Architectural Brackets <https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/sl145541p31i8x277ml77aq78t7023e7>
Coffered Ceiling from Zhihuasi <https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/10062a5kpw25id1v15e2w24x7023u41w>

Appendices

Appendix A: [PDF of Dragon Parts rack card](#)
Appendix B: [PDF of Mapping Mythical Creatures activity booklet – spreads](#)
[PDF of Mapping Mythical Creatures activity booklet – folding layout](#)
Appendix C: [PDF Art Kids Studio Lesson Plan](#)
Appendix D: [Partial list of objects in Mythological Creatures exhibitions](#)

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Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious: A Case Study of Mythological Creatures in Museum Family Programs
by Leigh Dale and Teagan Annesly



Hunting Ghosts in a College Classroom

by Shelley A. Ingram

When I first received the email asking for proposals for a small humanities education materials grant, I knew I wanted to do something that would benefit our undergraduate folklore students. I just needed to figure out what. My mind first went to a class I had been teaching regularly since 2014 called, with apologies to Avery Gordon, “Ghostly Matters: Folklore and the Literature of Haunting.” It is a literature-based course for graduate and advanced undergraduate students, but one that takes the work of folklorists, anthropologists, and other cultural theorists as the lens through which we read, understand, and interpret books about ghosts. I decided to base my grant proposal on this course.

The class as designed explores the kinds of formal and epistemological topics that I have often structured my own research around: What does it mean to write a haunting? What does it mean to represent ghosts and their hauntings in literature? How does this representation affect the form of the fiction? How does this reflect on the audience? Ghosts tend to crop up in “places rife with wrongs, with traumas that must be seen in order to be expelled and injustices that must be exposed in order to be redressed” (Miles 2015, 16). Haunted literature pushes us to think not just about a world outside the everyday but also about history, violence, unresolved cultural trauma, unexamined injustices, and the power, however fleeting, of a transcendent communion with things unseen. In ghost stories, Colin Dickey reminds us, we find “something crucial to the way we understand the world around us” (2016, 5). The course is therefore about how *fictional* ghosts function as literary mechanisms for moving about a haunted world, for dealing with the trauma of historical existence, for expressing anxieties about modernity, and for reckoning, as the sociologist Avery Gordon argues, not with the return of the past but with the repression of the past in the present (2008, 183). This class is not supposed to be about the actual ghosts that haunt us.

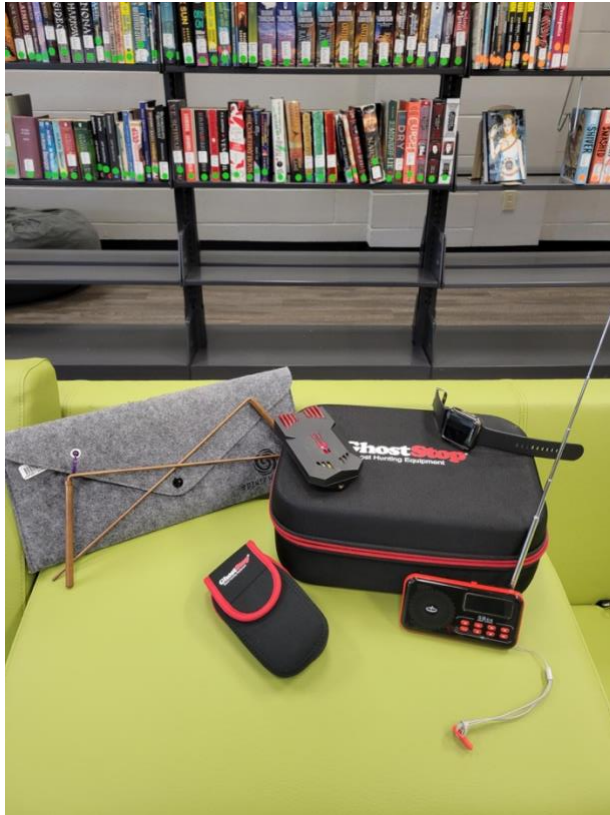
Students attempt to speak with spirits in Dupré Library on the UL Lafayette campus. February 2024. Photograph by author.

And yet, it almost always is. The shift began because I asked each student to tell the class a ghost story. I told them that it didn't matter where the story came from, whether they read it in a book or heard it at summer camp or if it was a story their grandmother told them. I just wanted them to tell it; I called them our "campfire tales." This was not meant to be the sort of collection assignment that students did in an Introduction to Folklore class, nor was it a lesson in proper interview technique. They had to turn in a copy of the story with a simple paragraph explaining where it came from. They did not even have to tell it in real time. They could read it or they could bring in a recording of themselves or someone else telling the story. I just wanted us to have a "back-up" collection, so to speak, to complement what we were reading in class—largely because, as my own literary interests skew away from the traditional and canonical, we were not going to be reading many "classic" ghost stories.

I was following the lead of the folklorist Jeannie Banks Thomas in telling the class that our interest should not be discerning the factual existence of ghosts. Instead, we as folklorists, and students in a folklore class, should care more about how we tell "*stories* of ghosts" (Thomas 2007, 25). Two important readings I assigned toward that end were Ilana Harlow's "Unravelling Stories: Exploring the Juncture of Ghost Story and Local Tragedy" (1993) and, crucially, Bill Ellis' *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults*, as they each look closely at narrative construction and storytelling conventions. Even more, I stressed that we were going to take a literary approach—this was a literature class, after all—and, again as Thomas argues, explore the "varied interpretive wealth" of a ghost legend, whether that legend was in a novel or told as a campfire tale (Thomas 2007, 229n2). Ours was not to decide the existence of ghosts.

That lasted all of about two days. Because as the students began to tell their stories, they were *their stories*. The majority—14 of 20 campfire tales—were memorates, first- or occasionally second-hand personal experience narratives about encounters with the uncanny. Another curious thing that I didn't plan but that happened anyway was that we discussed the stories. A lot. I could count on the first 15 minutes at least of the 75-minute class to be devoted to a discussion of the tale, and often that discussion went longer, 20, even 30 minutes. One consequence of this activity, added to the fact that we were almost always in a circle with the lights low or off, is that the class quickly became *safe*. Ellis notes that "many supernatural experiences ... are told, if at all, under extremely restricted circumstances" for "fear of ridicule" (2001, 95-6). The sharing of their stories, some of which students had never told anyone but those closest to them exactly because of this fear of ridicule, disbelief, or worse, fostered a kind of trust that I have rarely experienced in the college classroom. The atmosphere of intimacy and the openness with which the stories were received by the cohort made telling them a supported, communal activity. While I did manage during our discussions to sneak in questions about things like narrative construction and performance keys—like, for example, the prefacing of the storytelling event with disclaimers—the conversation would inevitably be drawn back to "So exactly how old *is* your house?" or "Did somebody die there?" or "But what did the ghost want with *you*?" I tried never to let these lines of inquiry go too far, because I didn't want the questions to lead to armchair psychoanalysis or to do actual harm to the teller ("Does this angry child ghost mean I'm going to be a bad mother?" was one such conversation). But, on the other hand, how do you treat them like *stories*? How do I say, "as a folklorist, we aren't trying to decide whether or not the story is true" when so many students were *asking me to believe them*?

But this course is not, ultimately, the one I want to focus on here. When Jeffrey Jerome Cohen first posited his seven theses for monster studies in 1996, he sought “a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender” (2007, 3). As I was sitting there brainstorming possible projects to fund through the humanities grant, I realized that what I wanted to give students was a chance to think about ghosts not only as an expression of culture and all of its repressions and returns but also as an experience that they could have and a communion they could experience. I wanted to allow students to embrace ghosts as *real*. So I wrote a grant asking for \$500 to buy two ghost hunting kits.



One of our ghost hunting kits, currently housed in Dupré Library. Photograph by Andrea Broussard.

In each prepackaged kit was a flashlight, an electronic voice phenomenon (EVP) recorder that stores audio, an electromagnetic frequency (EMF) detector, and a spirit box. I purchased dowsing rods separately to add to the bundle.¹ To increase my odds of receiving the grant, I partnered with two staff members from our university's Edith Garland Dupré Library who had keen interests in all things ghostly. We decided that, once my ghost class was over, the kits would be stored in the university's "Library of Things" and made available for any student to check out and use. Our grant was funded and the kits were purchased, ensuring, in a way, a continuing connection between past, present, and future students: the kind of folding of time the ghostly precipitates.

Because of the timing of the grant and our curriculum planning, I could not teach my usual section of "Ghostly Matters." Instead, I developed a new course aimed at a general undergraduate population. Simply called "Ghost Hunting," this course centered paranormal media and, perhaps more importantly, the experience of asking ghosts to speak with us. One of the big

cultural trends of the last 20 years has been the "ghost hunt," with Karen Renner calling it a "new American pastime" (2013, 202). We see this in the proliferation of supernatural hunting TV shows like *Destination Fear*, *Buzzfeed Unsolved*, and, of course, *Ghost Hunters*. I thus designed this course to be about both the act of ghost hunting and its representation in media. Situating ghost hunting as a *practice* that seeks to engage, manage, measure, and even domesticate the monster revealed the many interpretive and analytical paths the course could open.

I believed that having students participate in actual ghost hunts would serve two main purposes. First, it would immerse students in *ostension*, an activity foundational to Folklore Studies about belief and ritual. The second purpose I imagined was to get students to learn about the UL campus and the Lafayette community in an interactive, personal way. Listening to people tell their stories,

visiting local historical sites, and learning about UL history through a search for the supernatural would, I hoped, initiate a connection between students, the place, and the community. After all, as Dickey says, “If you want to understand a place... go straight to the haunted houses” (2016, 3). Amy Lawrence argues that this kind of historical purpose in ghost hunting reality shows often takes a back seat to the exploits of the “talent,” and that “reduced to exposition or backstory, history merely establishes the ominous setting into which our heroes boldly go.” But she also says that despite such decentering of history, “through the use of historical documents, photographs, and even moving images, the past is made vivid” for the audience (2022, 22). I anticipated (or hoped?) that this would hold true for our class as well.

The class was to cover a variety of materials, all focusing on how and why people like to “hunt” for ghosts, including an interrogation of the term itself. We would read a mix of fiction, history, first-person accounts, folk tales, and legends; read scholarship about hauntings and the ethics and history of “hunting;” meet with representatives of a local supernatural society; and watch a variety of digital media centered on ghost hunting. Students would be responsible for a campfire tale, site reports covering the ghost hunts, and a reflection essay. The final project was their own multimedia “ghost tours.” Key to the course was that we would get out of the classroom and into potentially haunted spaces. My plans were set; once registration began, the class was full in less than a day.

To Believe or Not Believe Was Never Really the Question

It was good to have plans. It was even better to realize that my plans could not anticipate or account for the actual work of the course. I will echo one of my students, who wrote in her end-of-term reflection essay that “Little did I know this class would pretty much change my life.” Much like I believed that the campfire tales told in the previous iteration of the course would come from literary instead of personal sources, I thought that students in this class might approach the “ghost hunts” as more of a lark than as a legitimate learning experience. In fact, I was worried that they might find the course content trivial or even insulting. After all, as one student reported about halfway through the semester, her boyfriend told her, “This is the kind of class engineering students make fun of English majors for.” And, as Lawrence notes, “the world of the paranormal is often dismissed out of hand, those who deal in it branded as con artists, their customers superstitious and irrational” (Lawrence 2022, 4). These fears were mostly allayed on the first day of the class when, after announcing that I had received a grant to buy actual ghost hunting equipment, the class *literally* cheered. I had never had a class cheer on the first day of the semester. They were all in.

This all in-ness was no doubt a strength of the course. Ghost hunters, who move in with their “scientific” equipment and methodologies, “generally feel that they are the stalwart few who are giving the supernatural genuine consideration in a world of doubters” (McNeill 2018, 182). Once again, most students enrolled in the course had a pre-existing belief in the reality of the supernatural, with all but one professing to the existence of ghosts or spirits. They did not all believe that a person could *speak* with the dead, but they did believe that the dead existed in a realm that occasionally crossed into ours. In fact, at least two students took the class over the explicit objections of their parents—who objected not because they thought the topic was frivolous, but because they were afraid for the souls of their children. In class students felt free to talk about their most unnerving, uncanny experiences without fear of being judged or ridiculed. The class actually *required* it of them, as we once again began each meeting with the sharing of a

campfire tale. Like professional ghost hunters, students felt that their belief in the supernatural was finally being given serious attention. That does not mean that we didn't talk about belief and disbelief, cynicism and earnestness, skepticism and naivete. We did. But disbelief was not our common starting point. You will notice that in this essay I strive to avoid language of the "I believe that you believe" sort. Following David Hufford's guidance to acknowledge an experience as a truth, when a student says that she spoke with a spirit, she spoke with a spirit.

The course had five primary graded components: 1) the campfire tale, 2) in-class writing, 3) site reports, 4) the ghost tour project, and 5) the final reflection essay, from which I take most of the quoted student material.² We read Nora Fussner's *The Invisible World* (2023), which is a complex novel about a young couple who open their home to a ghost hunting reality show, plus multiple essays and book chapters about ghost hunting, ghost tours, ethics, and haunting. We watched episodes of ghost hunting shows and examined other forms of ghost hunting media. The main events, though, were the site visits. We ended up with five class trips to various haunted places both on campus and off; this is where the story of ENGL 370: Ghost Hunting truly begins.



Students working with dowsing rods in Maison Freetown. March 2024. Photograph by author.

Sites Unseen

When I first began planning this course, I knew our first visit would be to Harris Hall, one of the oldest dormitories still in use on our university campus. Lily is the Harris Hall ghost, and her story is our only well-known campus ghost story. Residential Life was happy to have us visit, although we were understandably only given access to the front lobby, and they equally were happy to have our photo for their social media. Our second site visit was to the Roy House, home to the Center

for Louisiana Studies and the UL University Press. This is the oldest building on campus and one of the oldest in the city. Again, the good folks of the Roy House were happy, if slightly bemused, by the visit, and we once again made it onto their social media. Our third trip was to the Edith Garland Dupré Library. I had heard a few stories of a weeping woman in the women's third-floor restroom, but I initially kept that bit of legendry from my students. We were granted permission to be in the building after closing and were joined by several of the library staff—one of whom dressed up like the ghost of Edith Dupré and scared the crap out of me by walking silently out of the stacks to join us. Once again, we graced their social media pages.

Our fourth visit was arranged after word of our activities made it into the community. We were invited to Maison Freetown, also known as the Maison Creole de Freetown, an African American history museum and cultural center. Erica Fox, the owner and proprietor of Maison Freetown, once described Freetown as “a place where the history is screaming from the pavement, hoping someone will listen” (Fontenot 2024). One of Lafayette's historic neighborhoods, Freetown is “situated on property that was once part of Louisiana Governor Alexandre Mouton's Ile Copal sugar plantation, and just around the corner from Good Hope Hall—a Black-only gathering place and venue during the Jim Crow era, where Louis Armstrong performed dozens of times, while white audiences listened outside” (Fontenot 2024). The house itself had been many things in its time, including a convalescent home and a home for orphaned children. When Fox invited us to visit, it was with the intention to learn about the ghosts that haunted her establishment. Finally, we visited the Burke-Hawthorne Hall Theatre. There were several theater students enrolled in the course, and they had many stories to tell about the supernatural goings-on there. We were granted permission to visit the theater at night and given free rein of the space.



Students use the spirit box and the EMF reader outside a room called “the dungeon” in the Dupré Library. February 2024. Photograph by author.

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock has said that a monster is “that which unsettles or challenges established cognitive categories,” which “threatens understandings of the world, the self, and the relations between the two” (2020, 3). Ghosts blur the lines between categories of life and death, between presence and absence, firmly situating them within the realm of monsters even if ghosts don’t always act monstrosly. Ghost hunting tries to stabilize those categories using scientific language and instruments: EVP, EMF, Estes Method. Much like traditional ritual allows its participants some amount of control over seemingly uncontrollable situations, the ritual of ghost hunting positions ghosts as ultimately knowable and measurable. During our first site visit, one student quickly volunteered to hold the EVP recorder. Later, she admitted that she “personally felt obligated to have these devices in my own hands. I needed that feeling of connection to prove to myself the reality of this concept.” Another student wrote that “This class solidified my belief in ghosts. I believed fully before, but now I know it has to be true. These experiences are too real, too specific to be some sort of confirmation bias or anything like that.” Another said explicitly that “The equipment that we have and their uses is backed by science and the environment. That is enough to convince me.”

Even with such fancy gadgetry, we still had to learn how to conduct a successful visit. Here is where I make a confession: Despite my interest in all things ghostly, I had only ever watched *Buzzfeed Unsolved*. I was simply not very interested in other shows. As Lynne McNeill argues, “the ghost hunters’ goals of proving or disproving the existence of something are not necessarily in line with those of a folklorist, who, while perhaps being personally interested in such a matter, would probably be more professionally interested in the cultural patterns expressed or dramatized by the beliefs” (2018, 181-2). But this means that I was also ill-prepared to lead a ghost hunt. Thankfully, we were visited by experts, Mark and Michelle from the Acadiana chapter of Louisiana Spirits. Our first visit to Harris Hall didn’t show much activity, and Mark and Michelle’s guidance helped my students understand why. We hadn’t been doing it right. With their help, and with the trial and error of our subsequent visits, we collaborated and eventually codified procedural and ethical guidelines for conducting a session, with the relatively simple guiding principle to do no harm to the spirit. One student notated and shared the guidelines via Google Docs:

Before the visit:

- Do your research on the place.
- Make note of different races and ethnicities that may have been at the site and do not use ANY language or slang that may be taken wrong or is outright racist.
- Note that ghosts may not know that they are dead and be mindful of how recent their deaths may have been.

During the visit:

- Introduce yourself and make clear that you are not a threat and that you do not want them to leave. Example: “Hi, is anyone here? My name is [Shelley]. I wanted to see if you’d like to talk to us today. Don’t worry, we know this is your home and we won’t ask you to leave.”
- Use the language of the time or language that is period appropriate. Example: Try to have a French interpreter for older sites. Don’t use too much new slang.
- Make clear the intent that we want to hear what *they* have to say.

- Build trust. Example: if you ask their favorite food or color, start by offering yours.
- Explain the devices so they aren't scared of them.
- Take your time.
- If one specific person is getting many responses, let them keep talking as the ghost may feel more comfortable with them.
- Leave when told to leave ABSOLUTELY NO EXCEPTIONS.

At the end of visit:

- Thank them for their time.
- Tell them to stay and not to follow you home.

I wish that I had time to describe in detail the results of our visits. Of the little boy who held the hand of one student and walked her up and down the stairs of Maison Freetown, asking her to play with him. Of Rosalie, the girl with the soft 3C curls who laid her head on the shoulder of a student who was also a wigmaker. Of Henri, the French-speaking ghost at the Roy House who correctly identified the number of people in the room. And of the unnamed ghost on the third floor of the library, who opened up to a small group of students about his queer identity, noticing that the people he was talking to were just like him.³ But those stories are perhaps for another time.

Of the experiences of ghost hunting, one student wrote:

I loved the idea of interacting with the dead, it's why I became a history major, so I could learn and study the past and remember those who passed. I never imagined I would talk to the dead, and I mean really talk. I wasn't expecting to learn so much from them, like how they felt or even what language they spoke or how they were feeling. There is a type of adrenaline that comes with it. I would feel like my skin was buzzing and my ears would ring. I felt alive after talking to the dead (Irony isn't it).

Cohen emphasizes that monsters provoke desire as well as fear. Ghost hunting makes that desire explicit. For the students in this class, the desires were varied: history, connection, communion, validation. With our ghost hunting kits, we were able to approach our ghostly visits as experiences *and* as revelations of culture and harbingers of meaning.

Theories of Monsters and Theories of Self

Perhaps Cohen's most cited thesis is that monsters institute a "category crisis" because "they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration," which makes them "dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (2007, 6). For the students in the course, the monsters, the ghosts, did not necessarily provoke a category crisis as much as they offered a point of identification. In addition to the events of the site visits, we examined other media portraits of ghosts and hunters. For example, we listened to an episode of the *History is Gay* podcast, "Lavender Apparitions: Interview with Joe Applebaum," and watched several episodes of the too-short-lived YouTube series *Queer Ghost Hunters*.

One student wrote that:

My favorite portion of the class was the discussion of how a lot of queer people relate to ghosts in media and frequently have an interest in ghost lore and exploration. This is a sentiment I express as a queer person myself. I feel a kinship with ghosts in I'm invisible until I'm not, feeling like a person internally but feeling like through people's perception of me I am only halfway human, and people that make no effort to understand and know me making snap judgements and thinking that my status as a queer person is the only thing to talk to me about.

This student explicitly references feeling perceived as only “halfway human” because of their queer identity, suggesting that they themselves are monstrous in their simultaneous invisibility/hypervisibility. We read an essay by Nell Stevens, who writes: “spectral presences, by being seen and not seen, by exerting energy where none was anticipated, spoke to the queerness I felt within me and didn't understand... I experienced my queerness as an unknowable force, something that might well try to lure me out into the cold, something that I tried not to look at directly” (2022). The experience of hunting ghosts—not to trap them, but to commune with them, to learn with them rather than about them—seemed to offer the student above a way to make sense of the perceived monstrousness of their identity and offer them a recourse from negative interactions.

Another result of the “category crisis” brought about by the monstrous is its “ontological liminality” (Cohen 2007, 6). We spent some time in class discussing ritual, with students reading notes I prepared about the ritual process.⁴ As is the case in most of my classes, students really latched onto ideas about liminality that came up during our discussion of this material. One student wrote:

I have ... been thinking about liminal spaces a lot more. I never heard of the term liminal, but after the one class where we started speaking about them, I always consider any place I am in as being liminal.

Here the student, who I will call Rita, conveys a feeling of “always” being in a state of liminality, in “any place I am.” Perhaps the very definition of “ontological,” Rita *is* present and therefore *is* liminal. She had disclosed to the class in her campfire tale that she had experienced several major interactions with ghosts in her lifetime, one of which was “the ghost of what appeared to be a Southern Belle walking in my grandma's hallway.” This revenant appeared to Rita as a decomposed corpse in a fine, handsewn gown (Rita was a theater major who noticed such details of costuming). I could draw connections here between Rita as a mixed-race woman growing up in the Deep South of Louisiana and the rotting corpse of a southern belle dressed in garments of finery, but I think more important is Rita's constant feelings of *liminality*, of being betwixt and between. She was able to give a name to that feeling as an outcome of the course—again, an identification with category crisis rather than a resistance to it.

One last example I'll give here is the final project. Students were to design their own “Ghost Tours,” taking into consideration the ethical, cultural, and historical concerns that arise from such activities. They chose a wide variety of haunting spaces to guide us through, and many focused

locally, borrowing a ghost kit and conducting more extensive investigations in haunted spaces around the region. Most of them, though, chose spaces that were important in some way to their identity. The English major chose haunted libraries, the history major haunted hotels, complete with a video of herself “switching hats” between ghost hunter (baseball cap) and historian (graduation cap). One student who was deeply immersed in issues of social justice focused on spaces of injustice in her hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana, including the courthouse and the “P-farm,” a former prison. One particularly quiet student researched Indonesian revenants as a way to connect to the culture of her immigrant grandmother and gave an outstanding presentation that managed to touch on themes of colonialism, displacement, and gender discrimination while still highlighting how awesome it is to learn about places you may have known little about. Finally, one student dedicated his tour to the people who had been enslaved by Madame LaLaurie in New Orleans. The subject of the popular third season of *American Horror Story*, Delphine LaLaurie is an historical figure famous for the torture and murder of people she enslaved in her household, and the spot where her home once stood is a popular site for ghost tours. This student was a fan of the television show, but he wanted to make sure that we understood that she was not just some monster on the television. She was a human who brought great pain and suffering to other humans. As a Black resident of New Orleans, this student returned the inhumanity, the *monstrosity*, of slavery to the story by reimagining the lives of the people she killed, most of whom remain lost to history.

Trauma, Uninformed

The intensity of belief with which most of the students approached the class turned it into an experience I doubt I can ever replicate, but it brought with it its own complications. First, students were worried that they might invite bad spirits into their lives or bring them home with them from class. This led to some acute anxiety that we mitigated by learning together ways to protect ourselves. By the end of the term, we had a pretty good system in place: a combination of holy water, blessed talismans, and a ritual taught to us by Mark and Michelle, in which we simply asked the spirits to remain in the place they were tied to. To go even further, some students believed that our collective ghost hunting had stirred the spirits in town, taking stories from their friends about increased paranormal activity as evidence that we were affecting the city’s spiritual balance. In future iterations of the course, I would include time and space to discuss and learn protective practices before the site visits began, offering students a way to protect both themselves and their loved ones. We as investigators entered liminal spaces at night, sometimes unintentionally provoked spirits, and always invited contact. Our ghost hunting tested the limits of perceived reality and destabilized our sense of safety because of the “category crisis,” to borrow from Cohen’s seven theses, it instantiated (2007, 6).

A second complication that progressed from the first was that there were moments in which trauma, both the students’ own and that of the people with whom they were speaking, became overwhelming. This was a situation that I did not anticipate, although I should have. In the “Ghostly Matters” course we were able to keep a distance between us and our literary ghosts. That distance was erased almost entirely in “Ghost Hunting.” For example, when researching haunted places for their ghost tours, they were also researching the lives and often tragic deaths of those whose spirits are said to abide there. When we visited Maison Freetown, we spent some time in class discussing the history of the site and planning a respectful approach to the space. However, I was not aware that the proprietor was also looking for people to tell her about her ghosts, as she

herself knew the house to be haunted. Students were eager to help. They bore witness to the home's history, to the lives that had lived there and been lost there, staying at the site for well over three hours. One student reported that "I got really emotional after [meeting a young female ghost] and honestly did not want to leave because I was reminded of just how young this little girl was" when she died. The students gave a lot of themselves, both physically and emotionally, even though one group felt a genuine threat from a spirit they encountered.



Students using dowsing rods in a room in Maison Freetown. Student reported being deeply unsettled in this room. March 2024. Photo by author.

Our last site visit was the most personal of all. One student spoke with her dead grandparents through the spirit box, while another group was in contact with a mutual friend who had been murdered years before. I was not with them during these sessions, as they were free to walk around the theater as they pleased, but when we came together at the end of the night students were visibly shaken and had clearly experienced something deeply emotional. And yet, when I spoke with each of the affected students privately, they were adamant that while the experience was overwhelming, it was also *extremely* positive. While I saw this experience as possibly detrimental to their health, they found it cathartic and healing. Again, Cohen connects monsters to both desire and fear, and one set of our desires and fears is to connect one more time to people who have passed on (2007, 16). Still, I remain troubled by the possibilities that I am now aware that I am ill-equipped to handle. Before I teach the class this way again, I will consult with our student health and counseling centers. Perhaps I can bring in a counselor to speak to the class about what it means to confront resurfaced trauma, and I will ensure that my pedagogy is more intentionally trauma-informed. We

will certainly work together as a class to practice more structured strategies for negotiating difficult topics and emotions. The only way this course really works is if we accept, even if only for the time we are together, the possibility that ghosts are real and that they will speak to us. And with that reality come truths of our history, our pasts, our deaths, our injustices, our unfinished business, our restless spirits, and our monsters.

A Communal Power

Despite my own misgivings about the emotional and mental toll this class took on the students, they remained intensely enthusiastic and committed until the end. While my concerns are legitimate and should be addressed, I discovered that there is tremendous protective power in the community the course created. This is perhaps the primary reason why, despite the heavy affective load of the class, students seemed to thrive. One student wrote that “One of my favorite things about this class was the fact that everyone allowed themselves to be vulnerable” during our campfire tales, sharing a personal story that let their classmates into a small moment of their life. Another student remarked that “the sense of camaraderie and community of the class was so memorable. Everyone contributed, commented, and offered to help each other and that isn’t something that you see often in college classroom settings.” Pointing to the site visits as a community-building activity, one student said they “tied everything together and, in my opinion, unified many of us as a class. The class was able to experience things and grow together in our research. I felt like we were connected on a more personal level, and we understood each other and the places around us and how to properly handle the experiences we were facing.” Another put it rather simply: he felt safe “because we all had each other’s backs and felt as one.”

Avery Gordon has said that “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (Gordon 2008, 8). While we may not have been drawn against our will into the realm of the uncanny, the process was magical and often transformative. Through a multimedia, multi-modal course designed to be experiential, the monsters we encountered were real, and they were sometimes us. I will give the final word to a student, who said “This course has taught me so much about culture and what it means to be ‘human’ through the fascinating study of what it is to be a ghost.”

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End Notes

¹ The spirit box scans radio frequencies from existing FM and AM bands. As the bands cycle, you may hear voices or sounds coming through the static. This is the spirit's attempt to communicate. The EMF meter detects small changes in electromagnetic energy and alerts with lights and sound, while the EVP recorder is worn like a watch. Finally, dowsing rods are another way to communicate with spirits, and this is often the students' favorite device.

² The prompt for this essay was: "This personal experience narrative simply asks you to reflect back on the course and its ghosts. You can revisit a moment in class you want to think more about, an in-class writing assignment you want to revise or expand, a ghost story you heard or one that you didn't hear. What is it that haunts you?" All student writing except where explicitly mentioned is from their submitted reflection essays.

³ In the spring of 2025, I taught a course on folklore and the uncanny. While it was not the ghost hunting course, we did do one after-hours ghost hunt at the library. These students were not nearly as successful as the previous class in speaking to the dead. However, one group offhandedly remarked, "oh, and we think we found a gay ghost on the third floor." Chills, I had them.

⁴ I rely heavily on Catherine Bell's *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* for my notes (1997, New York: Oxford University Press).

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Building Classroom Community and Practicing Deliberative Discourse Through Legends

What the Mothman, the Big Muddy Monster, and the Ghosts of Copp's Hill Cemetery Can Offer Upper Elementary Students

by Justin Kelsheimer

Cryptids: Creatures, often monstrous in nature, reported to exist in legend, but officially undiscovered or outright refuted by the scientific community at present.

Regularly incorporating classroom discussions about cryptid legends has the potential to offer several benefits to upper elementary educators. First, the way that legends negotiate the ground between belief and doubt can lead to increased student engagement and community building through collaborative discourse. Additionally, monster legends can become a pathway to connect community-based knowledge with existing social studies curriculum, allowing students to develop deeper understanding about the cultural groups they study. The greatest advantage of exploring monsters with elementary students is that learning about cryptids can connect students to family experiences, personal memory, and inherited culture and lead to vibrant discussion about their own community and culture. Cryptids are an accessible entry point for folkloric study with elementary school students and a compelling topic of discussion to practice deliberation with peers.

Images from Murphysboro Police Department files on Big Muddy used as primary sources in the classroom.

The image shows a police report from the City of Murphysboro Police Department, dated June 26, 1973. The report is a "COMPLAINT/ACCIDENT REPORT" and is titled "Big Muddy Monster 1973". The report is filed by Mrs. Harry Ray, who is the complainant. The report details a sighting of a large, pale, dirty creature in a field behind her residence. The creature was described as being 7 to 8 feet tall, weighing 300 to 350 pounds, and having a pale, dirty white or cream-colored skin. The creature was also described as having a "mussy" odor to it. The report includes a section for "NATURE OF CLOTHING" with options for Neat, Mussed, and Dirty. The "NATURE OF ATTITUDE" section includes options for Cooperative, Uncooperative, and Beligerant. The "WAS RESTRAINT USED" section includes options for Yes and No. The "HOW RECEIVED C/I:" section includes options for Telephone, In Person, Mail, Patrol, and Other. The "RECEIVED BY:" section includes a line for the name of the officer who received the report. The report is signed by P. Mc Roy, Radio Dispatcher. Below the report is a brown paper bag with the words "Big Muddy Monster" and the year "1973" written on it in black marker.

COMPLAINT/ACCIDENT REPORT		CITY OF MURPHYSBORO POLICE DEPARTMENT		MURPHYSBORO, ILLINOIS 62456		Supplement to: 73-2547	
SUBJECT/COMPLAINANT Mrs. Harry Ray		DOB	AGE	RACE Cauc.	ADDRESS 37 Westwood Lane, Murphysboro, Ill.		
OCCUPATION		SOC. SEC. #	WT.	HT.	HAIR/EYES	UNDER INFLUENCE C/I: Alcohol Other	
COMPLEXION (scars-tattoos-etc.)		NATURE OF CLOTHING Neat Mussed Dirty		NATURE OF ATTITUDE Cooperative Uncooperative Beligerant		WAS RESTRAINT USED Yes No	
TYPE OF INCIDENT/COMPLAINT: Sighting of Unknown Creature		Location Behind # 37 Westwood Lane		HOW RECEIVED C/I: Telephone In Person Mail Patrol Other			
SUMMARY OF COMPLAINT/INCIDENT (include who, what, where, when, why) At approximately 2212 hrs., June 26, 1973, M.P.D. received a phone call from Mrs. Harry Ray, stating that her daughter and her daughter's boyfriend had just seen a large creature in the field behind their residence. Officers Nash and Manning were dispatched to the scene. Upon arrival Officers were met by Cheryl A. Ray and Randy E. Greath, which gave the following account of what had occurred. Randy and Cheryl were sitting on the patio talking when they observed something moving around a patch of small trees in the field behind 37 Westwood Lane. Both Randy and Cheryl watched and observed a large creature walk out of the patch of trees near the edge of the yard and then turn around and walk back into the field. The creature was described as being 7 to 8 feet tall, weighing 300 to 350 pounds, pale dirty white, or cream colored and standing on two feet. Greath stated that he walked toward it and got approximately 30 to 40 feet from it. Greath also stated that it had a mussy odor to it.		RECEIVED BY: P. Mc Roy, Radio Dispatcher					

A Monstrous Pedagogy for Establishing Community, Developing Skills for Deliberation, and Learning About Culture

During my time as a sixth-grade social studies teacher, I recognized the importance of creating a community in which students feel they are heard and their opinions are valued. This notion of belonging aligns with Kate Kane's definition of strong communities, which "have members who have shared goals and experiences, who feel empowered to contribute, who trust in one another, and who feel understood and capable as individuals. These attributes enable teamwork, cooperation, a willingness to negotiate, and the ability to draw on one another's skills" (2016, np). As teachers, we must create conditions where students feel safe enough to be vulnerable with their peers by providing opportunities for them to ask questions or share their opinions with peers and adults. Children develop social knowledge and competencies through interactions with their peers from a very young age (Northfield and Sherman 2004), and research points to discourse as a valuable tool for community building (Lloyd, Kolodziej, and Brashiers 2016).

Two common tools used for "community building" activities—scripted socioemotional learning lessons from "one size fits all" curriculum products and activities sourced from websites like Teachers Pay Teachers—can fail to facilitate genuine discourse among peers. For example, community circles often take the form of question and response activities, in which the teacher proposes a question, often in the form of "Would you rather...?", "What is your favorite...", or "Tell us about a time when..." Such prompts ignore opportunities for students to engage with each other and become teachers asking students a question and students responding to the teacher without any interaction between students.

While these activities may lead to students gaining a superficial understanding of their peers, I hoped to develop activities that allowed students to practice collaborative discourse and examine topics with more depth than simple "getting to know you" questions. I was drawn to legends for a source of classroom conversation because legends, by their very nature, beg to be an object of discussion. Linda Dégh elaborates, "The legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief. Short or long, complete or rudimentary, local or global, supernatural, horrible, mysterious, or grotesque, about one's own or someone else's experience, the sounding of contrary opinions is what makes a legend a legend" (2001, 97). To become a legend, both the storyteller and the audience wrestle with a matrix of doubt and belief; the content of legends provokes discussion on belief based on personal knowledge and past experiences. In her introduction to *Once Upon a Virus*, Diane Goldstein expounds upon what gives legends their dialogic nature, explaining that the legend "captures the extraordinary in the ordinary, the unbelievable twists in daily life, legends provide an index to what intrigues, concerns us, frightens us, and puzzles us about quotidian reality" (2004, xv). Legends make complex cultural realities accessible by distilling beliefs into a representative narrative format.

Legends about cryptids provide a particularly appealing category to explore with students because of the way monsters provoke feelings of fear and fascination and evoke emotional responses. For hundreds of years North American cryptids have reflected the complicated mental dance between humans and the vast wilderness that dominated the continent. Those underlying beliefs informed legends created by Native American communities and European settlers as they moved west. As the United States evolved, so have its monsters; in more recent times fears of nuclear war and the

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Cold War paralleled a rash of cryptid and UFO phenomena in the 1950s and 60s. Cryptids are interesting to elementary students; shows such as *Gravity Falls*, *Monster Quest*, and *The Unexplained* have brought cryptids to living rooms across the country and have elevated some to pop culture status. While the commercialization of monsters in the U.S. is a complicated issue (Puglia 2024), the level of exposure to legends my students received through media and literature consumption provided a foundational knowledge to draw upon during classroom discussions. Cryptids also pose an interesting counterpoint to other paranormal entities: You can move beyond the dichotomy of just “real” or “not” and examine a greater spectrum of belief, and some chose to identify with the possibility of their existence as a yet discovered species instead of outright rejecting the validity of tales of their existence.

Selecting Legends

At the onset, selecting a legend for classroom discussion might seem daunting, but the vibrant smorgasbord of cryptid literature and folk-produced internet content offers a substantial library for teachers to draw upon. Books such as the *Weird U.S.* series¹, or Kelly Milner Hall’s *Cryptid Creatures* (2019) are readily available, provide brief overviews of legends, and can be easily supplemented with online research. Although curating a set of legends requires an outlay of labor the first time through, work can easily be divided among colleagues interested in participating in similar discussions and can be used in subsequent years.

After several weeks of experimentation, I identified a few criteria to determine which legends to use for discussion, depending on what deeper connections I hoped students would make. I gave careful consideration to which legends would be interesting to students, which had been documented well enough to provide a background substantial enough to form a basis of discussion, which were readily accessible to source, and which would be most relatable based on my students’ experiences and knowledge base. The more they already knew about a legend, the stronger their opinions when time came to discuss the content with classmates. Using these criteria led to three generalized categories of legend that I found most effective for generating discourse, exploring personal and family culture, and learning about tradition and storytelling that supplemented learning about historical events in my social studies curriculum.

First, I gave priority to legends that related to the topics we covered in class, and the discussion questions could lean heavier upon the prior knowledge and experiences of the students because I could make certain assumptions about what information they brought to the table. We covered many topics in U.S. history and geography, and examples of legends that paired well include the “Angel’s Glow” in the aftermath of The Battle of Shiloh, stories of Revolutionary War spirits that reside at Copp’s Hill Cemetery in Boston, or tales of the Thunderbird from the Southwest and Sasquatch in the Northwest when we covered Westward Expansion. These discussions benefited from students having some insight into the legend’s cultural and temporal context because of classroom conversations we were having, providing a way to orient folkloric study with history and geography lessons.

The second group of legends, local and semi-local tales, required more work to collect and prepare, but I found them the most rewarding because of the personal connections students made with their experiences, their families, and our inherited community culture. Some were readily accessible,

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Some legends with local connections included Sasquatch sightings in Southern Illinois (which seemed to be a favorite, no doubt because of the high number of Bigfoot legends in our locale), tales of phantom conductors and trackworkers on the old Vandalia Railroad right of way, and the Piasa bird, a chimera-esque man-eating bird that supposedly inhabited the rocky bluffs along the Mississippi River. Connecting specific sites, environmental features, and occupational stories to local legends is key for educators researching their own local legends and monsters.

for example, the Big Muddy Monster, a Bigfoot-like creature that was sighted close to our small rural community, because it received substantial police and media documentation in the 1970s. Others required talking to community members to gather legends such as one about a spectral railroad worker who was killed in a freak accident nearby. Because of increased individual commitment based on family and personal experiences, students took strong stances. Below I outline the careful framing that was required to ensure that students were free to debate their beliefs while still engaging respectfully with the diverse opinions of their peers. It was clear that students enjoyed learning about and discussing local legends with their classmates.

Finally, some legends about cryptids didn't directly connect to our local area or classroom curriculum but still let students discuss the importance of cryptids and other legends of the paranormal and their ability to reflect on the fears and beliefs of different cultures in a given temporal context. I used this type of legend infrequently, typically only when I couldn't find one that connected to our curriculum or had a local setting. Most were selected based on student interest; once we were engaging with cryptid legends regularly, students would ask to learn about some of the cryptid and paranormal "heavy hitters" such as the Mothman, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Roswell Incident of 1947.

Framing Discussions

For our cryptid discussions, I chose to step back and assume the role of discussion facilitator rather than act as the primary source of knowledge in our room. I found Hoskins, Kolodziej, and Brashears' model of Facilitate-Listen-Engage for classroom discourse helpful in organizing our conversations (2016). This model allows teachers to begin a conversation but transition to a support role as students engage in discussion. These student-led discussions flip who is the primary source of knowledge in the classroom. Students learn from each other, and the educator is free to monitor the civility of conversations, learn from students while listening to conversations, and answer questions as they arise.

To facilitate our classroom discussions, I began by reminding students of ground rules for behavior during the activity. First, students needed to carefully listen to the legend, as details could support their arguments about the validity of the legend. Second, when students were discussing topics with their classmates, they could debate their viewpoints, but discussions needed to be civil and grounded in mutual respect; the goals were to explore possibilities the legends raised, discuss how we understood their veracity, and talk about how legends reflected culture in the communities where they originated, not to determine any objective truth about the validity of the legends. Third, students would have several teacher-generated questions about each legend to discuss first, but once these questions were answered students were freed to orient their conversations as they pleased. When appropriate, I would preface the legend with any relevant connections to course

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material and context I thought would be helpful, such as when or where the legend originated, and major events going on in the immediate geographic area when the legend originated.

Once we covered our ground rules and I provided context to the legend, we transitioned to the listening phase of this dialogic model. Students sat quietly as I read a version of that week's legend. Students were encouraged to take notes but could not ask any questions until I finished. Then, students had approximately five minutes to ask questions about the legend and formulate an argument about the veracity of what they had heard. Sentence starters such as "I believe _____, because _____", "This legend might have been created because people felt _____ about _____", or "I have a hard time believing _____ because _____" can be helpful for elementary students to gather their thoughts and could be provided in a handout. They should begin to become more comfortable supporting their opinions with evidence as they engage in collaborative discourse on a regular basis. During this stage I also provided a written summary of the legend and additional information such as the contextual information I had shared before reading the legend.

Following this, students broke into small groups and began the discussion component of our activity. Students had approximately ten minutes to discuss the questions I provided as well as anything else they found interesting or relevant. As students talked, I walked around monitoring them and answering questions that arose during their discussion time. As the time wrapped up, we got back together as a class, and several groups of students would share their reflections with the whole class.

An Example: The Big Muddy Monster

Summary Overview of the Legend

(Written using information in the [local police case file and read](#) and provided to students in a handout.)

In June and July of 1973, the town of Murphysboro, Illinois, was rocked by reports of a monster that looked like Bigfoot. Police were called out on several occasions to investigate calls from people who claimed to have seen a tall, hairy, ape-like creature. Eyewitnesses described the monster as seven to eight feet tall, covered in mud, and smelly. Some said the monster made thumping or unnatural screaming sounds. Most of the sightings happened after dark.

At the location of the first report of the monster, officers found matted grass where the creature was said to have been standing. Officers attempted to track the creature with a dog, and found a trail marked by occasional deposits of slime. Eventually the dog led the search party to an area too dense with brush to proceed. The officers also attempted to have the dog search an abandoned barn, but the dog refused to enter. Officers entered the barn but found nothing and called the night's search off.

Several more reports of the monster came in; most from local children. A few nights after the first sighting, officers went to investigate a local boat ramp where teenagers claimed the monster approached their car. At the ramp, officers found footprints in the mud 3 to 4 inches

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deep, 10 to 12 inches long, and 3 inches wide. When officers returned with boots to photograph the prints and investigate the area surrounding the site, they found more footprints, which appeared smaller than those at the ramp. The footprints were erratic in spacing; some were close together, others were five to six feet apart! During the investigation, officers and the witnesses heard a shrill scream in the woods and returned to their car and requested assistance. Police investigated the site with the floodlights on their car and photographed the footprints, which you will have a chance to see.

Sightings continued over several weeks. The Big Muddy Monster was even reported to have appeared at a local carnival, and the owner said that it seemed to be interested in some ponies they kept in a pen for pony rides during the day. Local hunters and curiosity seekers attempted to find the monster, but none succeeded. In November, a *New York Times* article on the creature thrust Murphysboro to center stage, but the additional publicity did not bring the local police department any closer to solving the mystery. Sightings have continued to roll in from the area around Murphysboro, but not near as frequently as in the summer of 1973.

Today, the town celebrates their cryptid. There is a statue of the beast, as well as several festivals commemorating the legend. In our discussion you will put yourself in Police Chief Toby Berger's shoes. Do you think the creature has an ordinary explanation, like teenagers playing a joke, or did the citizens of Murphysboro really see a yet to be discovered creature?



Photo of the Big Muddy statue, courtesy of the author.

Additional information provided to students:

- Police reports from the [Murphysboro Police Department case file](#)
- Drawings from the Murphysboro Police Department case file
- One or two letters to the police chief from the Murphysboro Police Department case file for each group

Sentence stems to help students develop arguments:

- After reading the police reports, I am more/less convinced that the Big Muddy Monster could exist because _____.
- I believe _____ because _____.
- I find this legend hard to believe because _____.
- In addition to what we heard about and read in the police reports, I also have heard _____.
- People responded to sightings of the Big Muddy Monster by _____. I think this is because _____.

Questions to answer before engaging in free discussion:

- How is this monster legend similar to legends about Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest? How is it different?
- Murphysboro is only a short drive from our town. How do you think our community would respond if somebody reported a similar creature? How would you react?
- If you were the police chief and received reports like the ones we read from the case file, how would you handle it? How do the verbal reports, pictures, and drawings help you decide whether to believe this legend?

Classroom Implications

Regularly centering conversations around legends about cryptids and other paranormal phenomena in my sixth-grade classroom led to several positive outcomes. Legends were a fun and interesting platform for students to practice the skills necessary for deliberative discourse. Additionally, students made deeper cultural connections to social studies content as discussion of legends pushed beyond traditional social studies learning to include community-based knowledge. Discussions about legends also allowed students to draw upon their personal experiences, funds of family knowledge, and inherited culture in conversations with their classmates. During these activities, my sixth graders proved that upper elementary grades can be an ideal space to begin to engage in these conversations, as students are old enough to be able to examine the cultural identities that underlie legends.

The ability to engage in civil discourse is paramount for participation in a democratic society. The more elementary students can practice discussing competing ideas with their peers in a thoughtful, respectful manner, the more prepared they will be for civic engagement as secondary students and adults. Discussing legends about cryptids can be a lower stakes topic for students to explore depending on the context, and serves as an entertaining vessel for practicing relevant skills such as listening to multiple viewpoints, analyzing multiple sources, and using evidence to support arguments. As I observed my students' conversations, I noticed that students who participated less in conversations about more serious themes were more likely to talk about cryptids with their peers. Students also did an excellent job remaining respectful to classmates; they would debate each other whether they found legends to be believable, but I never observed conversations devolve into personal attacks. During a conversation about sea monsters reported in the Great Lakes, a girl observed that she and a classmate in her group disagreed about whether there were sea serpents in Lake Michigan or whether somebody could have seen something else like a log or large fish. At the same time, they managed to agree that it was possible that somebody saw

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something in the lake, or that people could have made a story about seeing a monster for entertainment. Finding middle ground amid competing beliefs could have been more difficult during a conversation about a more serious topic, but the levity of cryptid legends provides a safe space for students to practice debate and deliberation.

During these activities, I also found the study and discussion of legends a nice supplement to conventional social studies content. Our history and geography lessons provided a background about the time and place legends originated, and legends served as an entry point for students to explore some of the cultural identity of the groups that created each legend. For example, during our unit on Westward Expansion, we discussed stories of the Sasquatch in the Pacific Northwest. During regular class time, we looked at images of early settlements and forests in the regions. In each class during our cryptid discussion, students brought up the way that the wild setting could make legends about the creatures more believable, and that attacks from wild animals could have been a major fear that Native Americans and early settlers would have dealt with when living in and traveling through what would become western Washington and Oregon. While this fear wasn't something that we covered in class, analyzing the legend allowed students to draw the conclusion that the remoteness of the Pacific Northwest made for an ideal setting for a story about an unknown creature.

The most significant positive outcome was that legends provide students the opportunity to bring personal history, family traditions, and community culture into spaces that they may not have otherwise. For instance, during discussions about the Big Muddy Monster, some students suggested that they knew somebody or had heard of somebody who had an experience with unknown creatures in Southern Illinois. One boy talked about how he and his father thought something had followed them when they were deer hunting; a girl shared a story they heard from an older brother about noises they heard in the woods when hanging out late at night at a friend's farm; and one student excitedly told the class that there were tons of Bigfoot sightings in Illinois and his dad knew several pipeline workers who had seen or heard creatures while at work. During our discussion on the Mothman, a student talked about how her family would tell scary stories around bonfires they had at their house, including one about the Mothman. This directly led to a class conversation about what contexts their families enjoyed telling stories in and what made those experiences fun or scary.

It was not uncommon for discussions to draw in other legends students had heard about outside class. Once while discussing Revolutionary War era ghosts in a Boston cemetery, students connected that legend to several local ghost stories about traumatic events and places such as where a barn fire had occurred or a car accident had supposedly happened. Students not only connected that legend with ones they heard locally but also in their discussion with their peers one group expressed that people might develop ghost stories to cope with tragic events. Following our small group discussion about sea monsters, several boys were excited to share stories with their class about catfish the size of small dogs living in a nearby river bothering people tubing in the river or eating small animals that wandered close to the water; they pointed out that they were real animals, but the stories were similar to those about monsters. Their comparison of motifs from our cryptid legend with tall tales occurred without any prompting by me and indicated students were thinking beyond the legend of the day to stories they had heard about the local area outside school.

Conclusion

While not the endgame of folkloric study in elementary classrooms, cryptid legends provided an accessible doorway for my students to engage in folklife study. Legends of cryptids and other paranormal phenomena proliferate in written, visual, and online media, which means that many students have been exposed to cryptid legends by the time they reach upper elementary school. Discussions about legends were more effective classroom community building activities than “get to know you” tasks I had attempted in the past, because they involved students in dialogue with each other. Other positive outcomes included how the personal negotiation between belief and doubt that defines the legend genre became a platform to practice deliberation and discussion skills in a way that was meaningful to them. Conversations about legends also became a place for students to explore cultural expressions related to social studies content, and legends helped bring personal experiences and local culture into classroom conversations. When used as a source of classroom discussion, cryptid legends can be a valuable tool for educators to use for collaborative discourse, community building, and cultural exploration.



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Endnotes

¹ *Weird U.S.* is a series that chronicles our nation's local legends and weird things in each state, written by various authors and published by Sterling Publishing of New York City. The series originated with *Weird NJ*, a magazine published by Mark Moran and Mark Sceurman.

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Building Classroom Community and Practicing Deliberative Discourse Through Legends: What the Mothman, the Big Muddy Monster, and the Ghosts of Copp’s Hill Cemetery Can Offer Upper Elementary Students
by Justin Kelsheimer



We Are All Monsters Here: Teaching Monstrification by Making and Becoming Monsters

by Dru Pagliassotti

This essay introduces an undergraduate honors course that approaches monsters as products of monstrification, a discursive act of interpellation. Students move from analyzing to creating and inhabiting monsters, and the monsters they produce reveal concerns about identity, embodiment, and technological encroachment that echo themes from internet folklore and creepypasta traditions. By examining monsters as constructs of participatory meaning-making activities, students grasp that monstrification can affect themselves as well as others.

Monsters, whether drawn from traditional myths and legends or more contemporary digitally mediated cultural narratives, function as “meaning-making machines” (Halberstam 1995, 21). As is often noted in the field of monster studies (e.g., Beal 2022, 1; Scott 2007, 1; Weinstock 2020, 2), monsters (*monstrum*) have historically served as signs intended to show or reveal (*monstrare*), or remind, admonish, advise, warn, or teach (*monere*) anyone capable of correctly interpreting

Figure 1. Digital collage for Self as Monster assignment, by S. Stahoski. Reproduced with permission.

them. In other words, “[m]onsters are, at their base nature, by their essential ontology, pedagogic tools” (Mittman 2017, 19) or, more simply, “[t]he monster’s body is a pedagogical body” (Cohen 2017, 228).

Note to Educators: Assignments that include student self-reflection alongside topics that may be triggering or traumatic require additional care and scaffolding in the classroom. Please ensure that you and your students know what resources are available as support if you include a personal monster-creation component to the assignment.

However, teaching monsters in the classroom poses ethical and pedagogical challenges. The language of monstrosity has, especially in Western culture, been used to justify exclusion, violence, and oppression by casting certain bodies, identities, and behaviors as less than human, even actively dangerous. Moreover, Western monster-theory narratives that treat monsters *only* as symbolic figures—as expressions of psychological anxieties, social fears, or evolutionary responses—may privilege analytical explanation over lived cultural understanding.

Douglas E. Cowan notes that approaches that merely “explain away” monsters risk not only dismissing the possibility of the monster itself but also the cultural and religious frameworks within which such beings are meaningful (2025, 25). Avoiding epistemological ethnocentrism might require regarding monsters as, ultimately, relational and rhetorical constructs—the products of a process of “monstrification.” That is, to label something or someone a “monster” is to perform an act of interpellation, a discursive maneuver that positions its subject within cultural systems of meaning and power: Monsters are spoken into existence. This perspective shifts the focus from “explaining away” monsters to examining how they are bestowed an identity as monsters. Analysis of the purposes and consequences of such monstrification may then follow.

This essay focuses on two assignments in the undergraduate honors course *We Are All Monsters Here* that approach monsters as the consequence of monstrification; it also discusses trends that have emerged in students’ monster-creation presentations that seem to situate their practices adjacent to the tradition of participatory storytelling, especially as practiced within the genre of internet horror.

In *We Are All Monsters Here*, students are asked to analyze monsters as cultural texts and engage with the processes by which monstrosity is assigned, resisted, and, sometimes, embraced. In doing so, they discursively transform shared anxieties into culturally recognizable narrative and symbolic forms. These assignments help students differentiate between two related actions: *interpellating* the monster, bringing it into being through various discursive practices, and *interpreting* the monster, explaining what it means within its cultural and historical context. Students move between these tasks throughout the semester, first analyzing examples of monstrification, then monstrifying contemporary social anxieties, and finally confronting the “monstrous self” by monstrifying themselves or reflecting on how they have been monstrified by others. It is, after all, a disquieting truth that we can be, and probably have been, interpellated as monsters by somebody else at one time or another. Understanding that monstrosity is not only something we impose on others, but that others may impose on us, helps students interrogate the ways in which social identities are constructed, contested, and transformed. Two texts anchor this progression: Cohen’s (1996) essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” provides the foundational analytical framework

to which students return throughout the semester, while Valente's (2010) poem "A Monstrous Manifesto" reminds students that identifying as a monster can help establish solidarity with others who have been marginalized and monstrified.

Class assignments were designed according to principles of student engagement (James and Brookfield 2014, Chap. 1) that emphasize personal relevance, multimodal learning, and unfamiliar or unexpected tasks. For instance, weekly assignments might ask students to photograph "uncanny" campus spaces or map a hypothetical zombie outbreak onto the campus and local community. These tasks encourage students to reinterpret the familiar environment in which they live through monstrous perspectives and situate themselves as both analytical outsiders and potentially threatened insiders.

In addition to engaging students with monster narratives and theory, the assignments also seek to familiarize them with processes of monstrification, gradually moving them from critique to creation to self-recognition. To avoid inadvertently promoting monstrification, *We Are All Monsters Here* focuses discussion on nonhuman monsters, although that may include monsters that appear human or were at one time human, such as zombies. Students are discouraged from describing regular humans as "monsters," a conversation that begins on the first day of class when, inevitably, someone answers the questions of "what's your favorite monster?" or "what monster scares you the most?" by referring to an ordinary human such as the fictional serial killer Dexter or the real serial killer Ed Gein. This begins what will become a semester-long discussion of monstrification. Although these ordinary humans might be described as *inhuman*, they are not *nonhuman*; their actions may be monstrous, but to describe them as a monster, students are reminded, is to exercise a rhetorical strategy often employed to encourage racist, religious, and political prejudice and excuse oppressive actions, laws, and policies.

To better illustrate the point, on the second day of class, students break into groups to view and discuss examples of human monstrification in the media: the 1800s media coverage of Jack the Ripper, which includes speculations about the Ripper's social class and background; contemporary political news coverage in which politicians label opponents as monsters; wartime propaganda depicting nations/religious groups as monsters; and political cartoons from the late 1800s and early 1900s that depict different racial/ethnic groups as monsters. These examples expose them to different ways in which monstrification has been used as a strategy of dehumanization and provides real-world context for some of the analyses they will read later in the semester. Because of the offensive nature of the imagery involved, however, instructors should clearly explain the purpose of the exercise beforehand and provide examples that avoid turning the activity into an experience of individual exposure or vulnerability for any students whose identities might be implicated by a monstrifying image.

Monster Creation

The Monster Creation project, assigned about halfway through the semester, marks a key pedagogical turning point in which students shift their focus from interpretation to interpellation. Working in small groups, students must design original monsters that embody some current, socially relevant anxiety, framing their work with Cohen's seven theses and other concepts drawn from monster theory. To encourage a creative approach and draw attention to the larger social context of monstrification, students are asked to present their monster within a fictive framework;

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for example, teams have chosen to be scientists at a national research conference, activists trying to protect a monster during a congressional hearing, podcasters investigating mysterious deaths, and a public relations team trying to rebrand a monster, among other scenarios. They must also create and present appropriate artifacts related to the monster, its creation, and/or its reception.

In a sense, this is a monstrous assignment. Monsters transgress, collapse, and challenge our ontological categories, as Cohen's third thesis asserts, and this assignment violates what are often taken to be natural boundaries between "play" and "scholarship," "truth" and "fiction." Presenting academic material in a playfully fictive format is an unfamiliar exercise to many students. However, allowing students freedom in how they create and present their monster makes the project personally meaningful, and adding a role-play component requires them to work in a variety of modalities. Team members are encouraged to apply skills and concepts from their majors and minors to the project, resulting in presentations that have included detailed descriptions of parasitic lifecycles or how alien prosthetic brain and spinal cord implants might work, debates over rebranding techniques for a malignant algorithmic monster, and lists of warning signs that may indicate monstrous infection. Student artifacts have included poetry, paintings, sculptures, sounds, newspaper articles, videos, and documents such as a congressional bill proposing a law to protect supernatural entities. About half the teams have chosen to present in costume. During the post-presentation question-and-answer period, the audience probes the mythology and assumptions behind the monster and soon begins asking questions that refer to the previous teams' monsters; this inspired in-character responses from both teams that unintentionally began weaving together a new monster mythos specific to each semester.

Although race, gender, and sexuality have been historically significant sites of monstrification, and remain subjects of controversy in public discourse, the overwhelming majority of monsters that students have created for this assignment focus on anxieties surrounding the self, such as loss of identity and cognitive control or bodily instability and malleability. This may indicate that students are internalizing the course's caution about the monstrification of marginalized groups, but it also suggests that students associate the task of co-creating a monster, its backstory, and its artifacts with their previous experiences, often in middle and high school, consuming participative internet folklore—particularly creepypasta's typically apolitical themes of anxiety and unstable subjectivity. Students' collaborative work creating a monster and its accompanying narrative for classroom consumption might be considered analogous to contemporary folklore production, with the teams drawing on the established techniques, traditions, and tropes of online horror, even though the dissemination of their newly created horror is primarily limited to the classroom and any websites or media accounts that they set up for their presentation.

Student-created monsters that point toward the loss of self and/or of the consciousness of self have usually taken the form of social media memes or viral algorithms, echoing contemporary concerns over the psychological effects of social media and too much "screen time" in general, as well as fears about the effects of generative AI on creativity and original thought. Students admitted that they struggle with their own social media habits or are concerned by the ways friends and family members have been affected by biased or incorrect online information. Their self-aware memes and algorithmic monsters encroaching on body and mind draw on familiar creepypasta territory inhabited by monsters such as [Smile Dog](#) or [Ben Drowned](#), collapsing what Cooley and Milligan describe as "the comfortable dichotomy of subjects acting upon objects by creating narrative

spaces in which haunted objects encroach upon the lives of their victimized subjects” (2018, 194). Along similar lines, new monsters representing anxieties about bodily permeability and transformation, often resulting from biotechnological experiments gone awry, point to body-horror themes of violation, mutation, or destabilization of the flesh as a site of identity (Halberstam 1995; Creed 2020, 216) and may share company with creepypasta monsters such as [Jeff the Killer](#) or the victims of [The Russian Sleep Experiment](#). Students have mentioned being inspired by contemporary anxieties around assigned versus self-identified sex and gender and the constellation of issues surrounding cultures of body-shaming and lookism.

Additionally, corporate manipulation and cover-ups have been central to many of the new monsters’ backstories. In addition to being common tropes in science fiction and horror, students noted that their choices reflected media coverage of corporate malfeasance and concerns over the unethical behaviors of some billionaire CEOs and their corporations. However, a majority of the students’ scenarios depicted small-scale investigators, such as podcasters, successfully uncovering unethical experimentation and confronting the corporate perpetrators of monstrosity. In three cases, the scenarios included scientific or corporate representatives inadvertently revealing themselves by the end of the presentation: taken over by the monsters they had created or exposed as a result of competitive in-fighting. These narratives may help assuage students’ sense of social powerlessness by allowing them to roleplay scenarios in which individuals call shady corporate behavior to account. Yet, while most presentations acknowledged Cohen’s second thesis—that the monster always escapes—by pointing out that the monsters or techniques leading to their creation haven’t been stopped, few directly engaged with the classic horror-genre question their scenarios seemed to pose: is the creation or the creator more dangerous? Nevertheless, by roleplaying scenarios that called corporate creators to account, students wrote themselves a victory over which it seems they considered to be the more dangerous of the two.

The Monstrous Self

The final class project, The Monstrous Self, returns students to the monstification of ordinary humans that was discussed at the beginning of class. By this time, however, they have been armed with a semester’s worth of reading, discussion, and reflection. Referring to Valente’s poem, “A Monstrous Manifesto,” and Cohen’s seventh thesis, “the monster stands at the threshold ... of becoming,” the assignment asks students to represent themselves as a monster that could, for example, represent some stigmatized or secret aspect of themselves or some deep fear or concern they harbor that arises to transform them. Students are invited to draw, paint, photograph, or record themselves as the monster, or write a personal essay or story narrated by their monstrous self. In addition to this creative work, they must write a short reflective essay that applies monster theory to explain why they chose to monstrify themselves in such a way.

Although the rest of the assignments are either posted openly in class discussion boards or presented in front of class, this assignment is individually completed and available only to the professor. Instructors adopting the assignment should review institutional policies regarding their federally or institutionally mandated reporting responsibilities should a student disclose certain types of information—including sexual harassment, sexual violence, or abusive conduct—in the context of the assignment and advise students, in class and in the assignment’s written instructions, about the types of content that could trigger a reporting requirement. It’s important that students

understand that any promise of confidentiality has limits so they can make an informed decision regarding what they want to share with their instructor.

In this assignment, students engage with processes of monstrification not solely as an interpreter or interpellator, but also as the *interpellated*. They are asked to inhabit the body of the monster and consider the lived experience of being monstrified. Their creative submissions have included sketches, digitally manipulated photographs, a sculpture, acrylic paintings, short stories, and monstrous dialogs. Two students gave permission to reproduce their “Self as Monster” images for this article as credited (Figures 1-3); their images represent manifestations of the personal anxieties or fears, or social expectations or stereotypes, that they felt made them “monstrous” in their own or others’ eyes. Their reflective essays remain confidential.



Figures 2 and 3. Sculpture for Self as Monster assignment, by C.A.T. Second image shows detail. Reproduced with permission.



Some students choose to engage with externally applied dehumanizing rhetoric by reflecting on ways in which they have been the subject of monstrification by others because of ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, disabilities, medical conditions, or past actions.

Others take a more psychological perspective, monstifying themselves by exaggerating their inner drives, anxieties, or fears and depicting the ways in which this exaggeration might reveal itself in a monstrously embodied sense. Student work, which can range from painfully frank and vulnerable to somewhat distant and objective, requires them to examine themselves as both a subject called out by the rhetoric of monstification and an agent who may adopt, reshape, or resist that rhetoric. Many students sought to resist monstification, but some identified strengths in being a “monster,” including styling themselves as fierce defenders of others who share their backgrounds or as destructive monsters intent on shattering others’ prejudices and biases.

The monsters that students create and inhabit over the course of the semester reflect not only their individual anxieties but also their participation in evolving systems of storytelling—particularly those of internet horror, wherein processes of monstification shape the ways in which fear, identity, and power are understood and negotiated. Framing monsters as discursive constructs—products of an interpellative process of monstification—avoids dismissing the reality of monsters within cultural and religious belief systems while emphasizing that monstrosity emerges through acts of perception and description that are always entangled with power. In this way, *We Are All Monsters Here* strives to leave students prepared to recognize, navigate, and negotiate monstifying rhetoric, whether applied to others or to themselves, long after they leave the university.

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We Are All Monsters Here: Teaching Monstification by Making and Becoming Monsters
by Dru Pagliassotti

Classroom Connections

The following full assignment instructions are geared toward honors-level college undergraduates but may serve as jumping-off points for other educators.

NEW MONSTER PROJECT

Possible Learning Goals

- Analyze monsters as reflections of cultural anxieties.
- Apply theoretical concepts to original creative work.
- Explore how media and folklore shape public fears.
- Practice collaborative storytelling and presentation skills.
- Demonstrate mastery of a specific artistic technique or genre convention through original monster creation.

Notes and Adaptations: The Representation section can be adapted to different educational levels, disciplines, or historical/cultural contexts. The Application of Theory section may be revised to emphasize concepts in other fields or removed entirely for less theory-focused settings. The Monster Art and Artifacts component can also be tailored to specific media, e.g., photography classes might emphasize staged or digitally manipulated photographs, journalism classes might require investigative articles, science classes might focus on fictionalized scientific evidence, etc. The Presentation requirement may be adapted or waived; other presentation modes might include gallery-style art displays, short films, magazine layouts, and so forth.

Original Assignment Prompt

In small groups, design an entirely original monster that reflects what you feel is a significant concern or anxiety in our present world.

Representation: Describe your monster's appearance, abilities, name(s), and the cultural or societal fears it represents. Try to connect your monster to contemporary anxieties, tensions, prejudices, or social changes rather than relying on broad or timeless fears. If you can, draw upon your own fields of study. A monster informed by concepts in math, exercise science, music, etc. will stand out in an interesting and original way. You may also wish to consider your specific generational and/or cultural experiences as you create your monster.

Application of Theory: Integrate several of the “Seven Theses of Monster Culture” into your monster’s design and story. For example, your monster might embody a marginalized group, punish transgressive behavior, collapse categories we take for granted, represent hidden cultural desires, or guard social boundaries. You are also encouraged to incorporate other relevant psychological, philosophical, or sociological concepts discussed in class.

Monster Art and Artifacts: Creatively situate your monster within the world by developing evidence of its existence and interaction with society. Unless your monster is invisible, you should illustrate it in some way, without using generative AI, for your presentation. If it is invisible, provide other evidence of its existence. In addition, describe and, if you wish, create artifacts related to your monster's existence. Possible artifacts include:

- inscriptions and/or runes
- masks and/or statues
- talismans
- ballads and/or nursery rhymes
- investigative reports
- witness statements
- media coverage
- scientific documents
- environmental evidence
- audio recordings
- legal records.

Class Presentation: In 15-20 minutes, present your new monster to the class. Instead of relying on a traditional informational slideshow, consider presenting your monster in a more immersive or performative manner. Perhaps your team is a group of monster-hunters describing the monster it's about to investigate for a podcast or documentary. Perhaps your team is a group of scientists or government officials briefing us about this new threat. Perhaps your team consists of cultists who worship this new monster and are evangelizing to us. Perhaps you're a group of college students heading into the big city and talking about the monster that haunts the neighborhood or structure you're about to visit. You may still include a slideshow to convey key information, but feel free to use it within a more creative context.

SELF AS MONSTER

Possible Learning Goals

- Reflect on identity and social labeling.
- Explore metaphor and symbolic self-representation.
- Apply theoretical concepts to lived experience.
- Practice creative expression alongside critical analysis.
- Apply techniques of exaggeration, symbolism, stylization, or metaphor to transform aspects of the self into a creative monstrous form.

Notes and Adaptations: Because this assignment invites personal reflection and vulnerability, instructors should clearly communicate that students may approach the assignment metaphorically, autobiographically, humorously, or entirely fictionally. The Creative: Visual segment and the Reflective Essay, without the theoretical component, are the most adaptable to various educational levels and purposes. The visual option is the most AI-proof creative choice if that is a concern. Although this reflective essay is geared to show off mastery of class-specific concepts and theory, it could be adapted to show awareness of historical or cultural traditions, psychological concepts, or simply left as a personal explanation of the student's creative work. Instructors wishing to use it as a knowledge test might require it to be written in class. Turning the reflective essay into a public presentation should be done with caution, as this assignment asks students to make themselves vulnerable, but it might be appropriate in some contexts.

Original Assignment Prompt

We are all monsters—sometimes in others' eyes, sometimes in our own, sometimes in certain situations, sometimes in certain places. But being a monster isn't all bad. Monsters are powerful. Monsters can protect and avenge. Monsters hold out the possibility of transgression, freedom, and change.

Working individually, represent yourself as a monster, either something archetypal or completely new. For example, your monstrous self might make visible some secret or repressed aspect of your identity; a stigmatized identity you have been unwillingly assigned by others; an identity, belief, or behavior you willingly hold that others perceive as threatening, transgressive, or difficult to understand; a deep fear or anxiety you harbor; and so forth. Unless otherwise specified by the instructor, generative AI should not be used to produce the creative or written components of this assignment. This assignment has two parts.

PART ONE. Creative [Choose One]

1. **Visual:** You may choose to **draw, paint, photograph, sculpt, or video yourself as the monster.** Transform or stylize your self-representation in ways that emphasize metaphor, symbolism, exaggeration, or emotional truth rather than simply reproducing your everyday appearance. Thus, if you take photos or a video of yourself, you will need makeup and/or costuming, and/or apply digital manipulation. If you're drawing or taking photos of yourself, turn in at least four images of your monster-self in different moods or poses. If you are painting or sculpting yourself, you may turn in one to two paintings or sculptures, depending on the medium and level of detail used (discuss with your professor). If you are creating video, your video(s) must equal at least four minutes of content, primarily featuring you as a monster. Works in physical media must be physically turned in; digital media can be uploaded. You may turn in more than the minimum required.
2. **Written:** You may choose to **write a personal narrative from your monstrous-self's perspective and in your monster-self's "voice."** This essay should be significantly different from the final reflective essay; for example, this narrative

might be an autobiographical anecdote about a significant event or difficult choice that contributed to the development of your monster-self, a description of your monster's first appearance, an essay about your monster-self's dreams and goals or deepest fears, or an argument between your real self and your monster self. Be creative and make sure your "monster voice" is distinct from your "scholar voice." Your essay should be 1,000 to 2,000 words long.

PART TWO. Reflective Essay

In addition to the creative part of the assignment, you must write—using your "scholar voice"!—a separate short reflective essay (around 1,000-1,500 words) about your monstrous self. Demonstrate your understanding of key concepts in monster theory and your ability to apply those concepts to your "monstrous self," whether that monster involves anxieties and fears, beliefs and behaviors, or assigned sociocultural identities.

Your essay should thoughtfully address questions such as: What makes me monstrous? Is my monstrous identity known to others or secret? Is it something others have bestowed upon me or something I've bestowed upon myself? Is my monstrosity a stigma or a strength? Do I want to deny/overcome this aspect of myself or accept/embrace it, and why? What does my monstrosity mean within the context of my community or culture—what function does it serve?

As you write, draw on and apply concepts from class to add depth and context to your reflections. Please cite relevant sources as appropriate and add a reference list at the end; references will not be included in the essay's word count. Choose and consistently apply a formal citation/reference style such as MLA, APA, or Chicago.

Writing this essay might bring up strong emotions, so give yourself time. Although your essay should be academic in nature, your emotional responses are an important part of the reflective process. If the assignment resonates with you personally, consider responding in ways that feel constructive and supportive, whether through conversation, creative expression, community engagement, reflection, or professional support.

Monstrosity, Pedagogy, and the Snake-Son: Reimagining Shona Folktales in Informal and Formal Education

by Ignatius T. Mabasa

This article examines how Shona folktales deploy monstrosity as both a cultural and a pedagogical resource across informal and formal educational contexts. Focusing on the tale of a witch and her snake-son, the study explores how oral storytelling has historically functioned as a community-based system of education, transmitting social norms, ethical values, and survival strategies. At the same time, the article argues that such narratives offer rich possibilities for contemporary educational practice, particularly in classrooms and community workshops addressing gender-based violence, mental health, and social justice. Drawing on monster theory, feminist thought, and postcolonial perspectives, the analysis demonstrates how the monstrous body encodes anxieties around marriage, secrecy, and vulnerability, while also enabling creative and critical engagement with difficult topics. By bridging Indigenous knowledge systems and modern pedagogical approaches, the article positions Shona folktales not as static cultural artifacts, but as dynamic tools for teaching, dialogue, and empowerment.

Introduction

Folktales are often treated as relics of the past, or repositories of cultural memory preserved for entertainment or heritage. Yet within many African societies, including among the Shona of Zimbabwe, folktales have historically functioned as powerful pedagogical tools. They have educated, warned, entertained, and shaped moral consciousness within the community. This article advances a dual argument. First, it positions Shona folktales as Indigenous systems of informal education, embedded in everyday social life. Second, it demonstrates their relevance as resources for contemporary formal pedagogy, particularly in addressing complex and sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, mental health, and social justice. Using the folktale of a witch and her snake-son, the article explores how monstrosity operates as a narrative device through which communities negotiate fears surrounding gender, sexuality, secrecy, and social breakdown. By tracing the pedagogical work of this tale across both informal and formal contexts, the article highlights the enduring educational power of folklore.

The Folktale

A woman who was a mysterious witch lived with a huge monstrous snake who was her son. She did not have a human child. One day she decided to find a girl for her snake-son to marry. She talked to a girl whom she told how hardworking, kind, and good-mannered her son was. The witch woman told the girl that her son had gone to faraway lands to buy jewelry and fine linen for resale. In traditional Shona society, it was normal for a girl to agree to marrying a man she had not seen before. This was also common in other societies. In Europe, there were even marriages by proxy where a woman wedded a husband who was not there and someone would be sent to stand as proxy (especially royal marriages that were negotiated between families).

Among the Shona, belonging to a family and kinsfolk is more valued than looks or money. So the girl agreed and went to stay with the woman. The woman used to sing a strange but catchy song whenever she was grinding finger millet. The girl loved the song, but she was warned never to sing it. One day, the witch woman left her new daughter-in-law alone at home while she went to a *nhimbe* (a communal work gathering). Before she left, she asked the daughter-in-law to grind some millet for their supper and reminded her never to sing the strange song. When the witch woman left, the girl took some finger millet and started grinding. She got carried away and found herself singing the forbidden song, “My husband, my husband, oh how I long to see you.” Then she heard a deep booming voice coming from the granary, “Hush, hush, my dear wife. I am here, in the silo.” The girl was fascinated by the exchange with the deep voice, and so she continued singing. However, as she continued singing, the huge snake in the granary was getting bigger and bigger, until it burst the building and went for the girl. The snake wanted to catch the girl and eat her, but she ran to where villagers were gathered with the huge monster following her. When she reached the gathering, she collapsed. The villagers heard the deep singing voice of the approaching monster and saw how it destroyed trees and anything in its path while pursuing her. Some fled in terror, but others stood their ground and fought the snake using hoes, axes, picks, and shovels until it died. When the witch realized her son was dead, she attempted to escape, but the villagers captured her and banished her from the community.

Cultural Context: Marriage, Community, and Social Order

Shona social organization has historically emphasized relationality, kinship, and communal accountability. The proverb “*rooranai vematongo*” (marry within the community) reflects a cultural logic designed to minimize risk, particularly for women entering marriage. Marriage was not an individual decision but a collective process involving elders, kinship networks, and a trusted intermediary (*munyai*) (Gelfand 1977).

This system functioned as a social safeguard. Families maintained the right to intervene, visit, and assess the well-being of the bride. These practices ensured not only her safety but also her integration into the new household. This explains why when the groom’s representatives went to pay the bride price to the girl’s family, they announced the mission of their visit by the words “*tiri kutsvagawo sadza*” (we are here to ask for someone who will cook *sadza* for our family). The act of cooking *sadza* (a Shona staple dish) not only symbolized both labor and belonging but was also grounded in the philosophy *musha mukadzi* (a woman makes a home).

This relational system was underpinned by *hunhu/ubuntu*, a philosophy of interdependence and shared humanity (Mapara and Mudzanire 2013). Practices such as *nhimbe* (communal work gathering) reinforced this ethic, serving not only as economic cooperation but also as spaces of communication, social monitoring, and knowledge exchange. Against this backdrop, the snake-son folktale represents a breakdown of these protective structures. The young woman is married without communal oversight, verification, or kinship involvement. Monstrosity, therefore, emerges not only in the snake but also in the collapse of social systems meant to safeguard individuals.

Folktales as Informal Pedagogies in Shona Society

I am a Shona folklorist and storyteller who started telling stories before I could read or write. In traditional Shona society, folktales function as informal yet highly effective systems of education. Storytelling is participatory, dialogic, and embedded in everyday life, often led by elderly women whose performances combine narrative, song, and audience interaction. The snake-son folktale exemplifies this pedagogical role in several ways.

First, it teaches social vigilance. The narrative warns against marriages that bypass communal processes, highlighting the dangers of secrecy and isolation.

Second, it encodes taboo subjects that include sexuality, deception, and violence through the use of metaphor. The snake becomes a symbolic representation of hidden danger within intimate relationships, allowing sensitive issues to be explored indirectly.

Third, it promotes critical awareness. The daughter-in-law's curiosity and eventual transgression demonstrate the importance of questioning authority and seeking knowledge. This reflects an Indigenous form of critical literacy grounded in interpretation and lived experience.

Fourth, it calls for reflection that keeping secrets can be a dangerous thing because some secrets can end up destabilizing and even traumatizing whole communities. The witch's keeping a monster snake-son did not ultimately guarantee peace of mind or social security. This makes the story serve as a warning that such lifestyles often end in tragedy.

Finally, the communal killing of the snake reinforces collective responsibility, while simultaneously critiquing the community's earlier failure to intervene. In this sense, the folktale educates not only individuals but also the community itself, reminding it of its ethical obligations.

Through these functions, the folktale operates as part of a living educational system, shaping behavior, values, and social consciousness.

Monstrosity in Formal Educational Contexts

While rooted in oral tradition, the snake-son folktale also offers significant potential for contemporary formal education. Educators often turn to monsters because they serve as liminal figures, marking boundaries of acceptable behavior and embodying what a community wishes to exclude or regulate (Cohen 1996; Douglas 1966). In the Shona folktale, the witch represents a distorted form of motherhood: instead of nurturing, she deceives and endangers her daughter-in-law by hiding the true nature of her son. Her snake-son embodies monstrosity both physically and symbolically, his grotesque growth paralleling unchecked desire and the dangers of suppressed truth.

In classroom settings, the folktale can be mobilized to:

- Introduce symbolic analysis and narrative interpretation
- Explore gender, power, and social norms
- Facilitate intercultural dialogue on constructions of “the monstrous”
- Encourage creative and participatory learning

For educators, this tale offers a way to discuss the social process of monsterization: how individuals or groups are cast as “monstrous” to regulate norms (Gilmore 2003). Students can examine how individuals or groups are labelled as deviant or dangerous, and how such labels operate in contemporary contexts, including stigma, marginalization, and social exclusion. In this way, the folktale becomes not simply an object of study but also a pedagogical tool for critical engagement.

Learning Complex Subjects Through Monsters

One of the most compelling reasons to teach with monsters is their ability to open up difficult conversations. The snake-son folktale allows educators to address complex subjects in culturally resonant ways.

Gender and Sexuality: The tale highlights women’s vulnerability in deceptive marital arrangements (Schmidt 1992). This Shona tale can be discussed alongside stories like the Danish King Lindorm tale (see Appendix) in which a snake-son demands a wife, and when a beautiful princess is found and brought to her husband, she “is not allowed to see her groom until the ceremony; and as soon as they get into the bridal chamber he ‘splits her apart’” (Pettitt 2023). Of interest is the violence exhibited by both snake-husbands in these two stories.

The Environment: The snake’s destructive emergence reflects anxieties about ecological imbalance, underscoring human fears about nature’s destructive power when boundaries are transgressed (Zvarevashe 1990). Shona people call themselves “children of the soil,” demonstrating the deep relationship between them and the environment (Kahari 2016). When people maliciously kill animals, burn forests, extract minerals, or cut down trees, they disrespect Mother Earth and disrupt the balance of *pasichigare*, the precolonial days when the earth was still settled/stable/unmoved.

The Body: The snake’s monstrous expansion symbolizes fears of uncontrollable desire and transformation (Cohen 1996). The grotesque size and swelling may also be a way of educating girls about the way the male sexual organ gets roused, especially when taking into consideration the belief that snakes may also have phallic associations (Tracey 1934). In the King Lindorm folktale, while the snake does not swell, the act of splitting the princesses apart can be used to discuss difficult gender-based violence issues like rape and passion killings.

Mental Health: The forbidden song represents suppressed emotion that erupts when silenced (Kristeva 1982). Yet, the unspoken trauma is not only affecting the girl but also the snake-son and the witch woman who live in isolation, without family. While we see the witch woman going to join others at the communal work gathering, when all the people go back to their homes after the work, she is further isolated since she has now lost her snake-son, her daughter-in-law, and her home because she has been banished.

By embedding these issues within narrative, the folktale enables discussion without direct confrontation, making it particularly effective in contexts where cultural taboos limit open dialogue.

Pedagogical Applications in Contemporary Settings

Monsters endure because they embody contradiction: They are both frightening and fascinating. The Shona expression “kuyevedzwa nemavara eshato” (being dazzled by the python’s beauty) captures this duality. This emotional complexity makes monsters effective pedagogical tools. They engage learners imaginatively while allowing exploration of fear, curiosity, and transgression in meaningful ways. Three settings that engage the appeal and power of monsters today follow below.

1.

Gender-Based Violence Education

The folktale can be used in workshops to explore themes of deception, silencing (“hush, hush”), and hidden danger in intimate relationships. Participants can relate the narrative to lived experiences, creating a culturally grounded entry point into discussions of gender-based violence. The emotional manipulation and deception by the witch are a form of violence because they constitute a breach of trust that causes deep psychological and emotional harm on the girl. In the King Lindorm tale, the snake-son’s act of killing his victims by splitting them apart is the worst form of gender-based violence one might see.

2.

Classroom Pedagogy

Educators can design interactive activities such as:

- **Role-play and alternative endings**
 - Become a character in this folktale: the daughter-in-law, the witch, the snake-son, or a villager. Explain your understanding of what is happening in the story. Describe your fears and wishes.
 - Imagine other possible endings of the folktale. How would things have been if the girl had not started to run, if the villagers had taken action before, or if the snake had confessed at the outset? Would the girl have loved the snake-husband if he had turned into a handsome man with super powers?
- **Critical rewriting from marginalized perspectives**
 - Rewrite the story as told by the daughter-in-law from the perspective of her interior monologue.
 - Can you trace “silence” in the story? What interests are served by the silent parts?
 - Tell the story again from the perspective of the witch or the snake-son and explain what drives them. Are they merely “monsters,” or do they react to social exclusion, loneliness, and intimidation?
 - Translate the folktale into a contemporary context, such as online communication or migration. Who or what may now serve as the “snake”? How does deception function in the new reality?
- **Comparative folklore analysis**
 - Compare the story of the snake-son with another folk narrative in which a secret husband or wife is hidden, such as Kirin Narayan’s “The Daughter-in-Law with No Groom” (1997) or the Danish folktale, “King Lindorm” (2026). Discuss

their similarities and differences regarding danger portrayal (see Appendix for summaries of these tales).

- How do the stories interpret gender norms, marriage, and social values? What do you think about how they use language?
- **Visual and creative interpretation**
 - Illustrate a significant episode of the folktale (such as the emergence of the snake, the girl singing, or the confrontation of the community). Add a brief description of what it highlights.
 - Translate the folktale into another form of expression (comics, video, poetry, or music). How does such translation affect the message?

These approaches foster engagement, creativity, and critical thinking. They also give voice and agency to learners (Freire 1972).

3.

Mental Health Education

The hidden and growing snake provides a powerful metaphor for:

- Suppressed emotions
- Trauma
- Psychological distress
- Dangerous secrets

Such metaphors enable culturally accessible discussions of physical and mental health in contexts where direct discourse may be difficult.

Shifting Meanings of Monstrosity

The symbolic meaning of the snake evolves across time while retaining core associations. Traditionally, it represented fears surrounding unknown husbands and unsafe marriages. In contemporary contexts, it may signify gender-based violence, toxic relationships, or hidden illnesses and diseases such as HIV and AIDS (Muchemwa 2002). Shona audiences might find empowerment in reimagining the snake not only as danger but also as a challenge to oppressive structures of marriage and gender. By tracing these continuities and changes, educators highlight the adaptability of the folktale: The snake remains a powerful figure precisely because it can be reinterpreted to address new contexts while still carrying echoes of its earlier symbolic work (Mapara and Mpofu-Hamadziripi 2014).

It could also be interesting to look at the monstrosity and witchcraft in this story as a possible commentary on colonialism. Parui (2025) observes that Tsitsi Dangarembga's book *Nervous Conditions* (1988) presents colonialism as a "witchcraft" or unnatural, alienating force that destroys Indigenous identity and imposes mental, emotional, and social "nervous conditions" on its subjects. Being colonized essentially creates a state of perpetual anxiety, tension, and neurosis. This adaptability reflects the dynamic nature of folklore. As Raymond Williams (1989) suggests,

culture consists of both inherited meanings and newly produced interpretations. The snake remains constant, but its meanings shift.

The Shona still use traditional idioms that reference snakes as metaphors for today's behaviors. Examples are:

Mwana wenyoka inyoka. (The young one of a snake is still a snake.) This is the equivalent of the English idiom, a chip off the old block.

Uri nyoka chaiyo. (You are such a snake.) This is used to communicate emotional anguish by someone who has had something evil done to them.

Kunakurirwa nyoka mhenyu. (To have someone toss a live snake at you.) The idiom means to be put in harm's way because the snake can bite you, the equivalent of the English idiom to throw someone under the bus.

Rava zuru rakapinda nyoka. (An anthill that one saw a snake going into.) The idiom means to continue being afraid of something from past experiences or encounters.

Hakuna dunhu risina nyoka. (There is no area without snakes.) Evil people are found everywhere.

Chakashata chakashata nyoka haigarwi nayo mumba. (Evil will never turn into good, humans do not share a house with a snake.) Here the snake signifies an evil person, specifically a witch who should not be befriended because they will harm you.

Kurova munhu senyoka yapinda mumba. (To beat up someone like a snake that has entered a house.) A snake is greatly feared and loathed such that if it is found in a house it is beaten to a pulp.

Monsters, Marginality, and Voice

Monsters also function as symbols of marginality and, at the same time, resistance. The witch, although vilified, represents exclusion, loneliness, and alternative forms of power. Her actions, while harmful, reflect an attempt to negotiate belonging within a system that has marginalized her. At the same time, the daughter-in-law's voice, which is expressed through song, becomes a site of both danger and empowerment. Her act of singing breaks imposed silence and reveals hidden truth. From an educational perspective, this highlights the importance of voice, agency, and critical engagement. The folktale thus aligns with pedagogical frameworks that emphasize speaking against oppression and questioning authority.

Teacher Tip from the Editors:

Ask your students to identify proverbs or sayings they know that include a snake or other monsters in your class discussion.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Shona folktale of the witch and her snake-son operates across two interconnected pedagogical domains. As an informal educational system, it transmits cultural values, social warnings, and interpretive skills through communal storytelling practices. As a formal educational resource, it provides powerful opportunities for engaging learners in critical discussions on gender, physical and mental health, and social justice. Its enduring relevance lies in its adaptability. While rooted in specific cultural contexts, its themes

resonate across time and space. Monstrosity, therefore, is not merely a source of fear, but also a tool for reflection, critique, and transformation. By bringing Shona folktales into contemporary educational spaces, educators can bridge Indigenous knowledge systems and modern pedagogical practices, creating learning environments that are culturally grounded, critically engaged, and socially meaningful.

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Appendix: Two Tale Summaries

Summary of the King Lindworm Tale

A “half-man, half-snake” lindworm is born, as one of twins, to a queen, who, in an effort to overcome her childless situation, has followed the advice of an old woman who tells her to eat one of two roses, one red, one white, but not both. She forgot and ate both, causing the first twin to be a lindworm. The second twin is perfect in every way. When he grows up and sets off to find a bride, the lindworm insists that a bride be found for him before his younger brother can marry. Because none of the chosen maidens are pleased by him, he eats each until a shepherd's daughter who spoke to the same crone is brought to marry him, wearing every dress she owns. The lindworm tells her to take off her dress, but she insists he shed a skin for each dress she removes. Eventually his human form is revealed beneath the last skin. Some versions of the story omit the lindworm's twin, and the gender of the soothsayer varies. (King Lindworm 2026)

Summary of The Daughter-in-Law with No Groom

A merchant and his wife have no son but desire a daughter-in-law. The wife suggests a deceptive plan: Marry a girl by using a dagger to represent the non-existent groom. The wedding takes place, and the bride moves in with her new in-laws. They lie to her, claiming her husband is away working. Unhappy and suspicious, the bride notices her mother-in-law strictly forbids her from opening a specific cupboard. One day, fueled by curiosity, she opens it and discovers a very handsome boy hidden inside. He explains that he cannot leave his confinement unless a specific condition is met: There must be a feast with no one to serve, and the merchant must call out, "If anyone is listening, come out to serve." Seizing the opportunity, the daughter-in-law arranges a feast. Once the guests are seated and a server is needed, she instructs her father-in-law to repeat the exact phrase at the door three times. The handsome boy emerges from the cupboard, serves the happy crowd, and is finally freed to live openly as her husband. (Narayan 1997)

“Against life as we know it”: Working with Werewolves to Create Disability Counterstories

by Claudia Chiang-Frost

Werewolves can be seen as ableist portrayals of disability, as their monstrosity/disability is a punishment, something to fear, or fix. I, a multiply disabled person, have always been fascinated by monsters and the ways I see myself represented in their stories. Like werewolves, I suffer from a painful condition that requires accommodation, can lead to isolation, and ultimately feels out of my control. As I started my senior year of college, I began to experience mysterious symptoms. I would wake up with swollen stiff hands and painful shoulder blades and elbows. I’d find clumps of hair on my pillow and rashes over my body and found myself exhausted even after a full night’s sleep. When I tried to talk to family members or doctors about it, everyone said “that sounds normal” or “it’s probably because you work so much.” I started upsetting people, as my exhaustion meant I started to miss things—work, assignments, volunteering, hangouts. My mind felt slower, and my breath was short. I felt besieged by something. I didn’t know what to say, I didn’t know what was wrong. My symptoms reached their peak during a study-abroad experience in Cuba, a time when I slept most of the day, and the rashes in my arms and legs became larger, bloodier, so alarming that others would ask if I’d been bitten by something. I felt monstrous and tried to hide the rashes as best I could. When I returned home, I went to yet another doctor, and this one, at last, said that what I was experiencing was not normal. It took another year of referrals and tests and waiting for a diagnosis to receive it: I had systemic lupus erythematosus, an autoimmune disorder. The word *lupus*, meaning wolf, was used to describe the rashes victims experience, which look like wolf bites (Chabner 2013). Lupus, and my last name Lopez (now dropped), came from the same root word. Wolves were a part of me.

I’ve spent the years since grappling with this disease. There are times I am in remission and can pretend I don’t have a disability. Then comes a flare-up, when my symptoms suddenly return, sometimes for seemingly no reason. During those times, being disabled can mean isolation, shame, mostly frustration. My family is too scared to learn anything about it—sometimes I wish I also didn’t know about what lupus can do to my body. Friends offer cures they promise will fix it (turmeric, cinnamon, yoga, crabgrass tea, this diet, but no, this diet is better). But it will *not be fixed*. I must live with these transformations. But I’ve found comfort in the unexpected—monster stories. Werewolves in particular spoke to me: the violent transformations that happened *to them*, their isolation, the bruises and scrapes that seemed to remain even once in “human” form, the frustration with being incurable. I started to think about their stories through a disability studies (DS) lens as I began to write and research about the ways disability can look like in higher education.

In the lesson plan suggested for college students that follows, I present various werewolf stories, reveal the ableism within them, and present a prompt to elicit a counterstory. Through rewriting these stories, students examine the ways ableist narratives of werewolves create a normative and right body/behavior and a “deviant” one (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8). In my classroom as a Gender

Studies instructor, I find that using counterstories encourages students to imagine a better world—here I apply them so we can imagine better worlds for monsters while also offering ways to disrupt, challenge, and oppose ableism.

Disability and Monstrosity

The link between disability and monstrosity is long-standing. In the medical field, not only are many illnesses named after monsters but also the “scientific study of birth defects and developmental disorders is known as teratology, or literally, the study of monsters” (McMahon-Coleman 2016b, 194). This link exists in entertainment, too. For example, the sideshow/freak shows of the 1800s would meld these ideas, hiring people like Julia Pastrana, who had some form of hypertrichosis, which causes hair to grow in unexpected places and to longer lengths than usual, and was called the “bear woman” and “hybrid woman” (Garland-Thomson 2003). This is because, like monsters, disabled people are ascribed “freakdom” status (Garland-Thomson 2012, 344), setting them apart from the able-bodied, the normative, the non-monstrous body. Cohen (1996) argues that monsters signify something “other than itself”: The monster incorporates “fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (4). Biklen and Bogdan (1977, cited in Rubin and Strauss-Watson 1987) identified ten common literary portrayals of disabled people: pitiable, victims, sinister, props, a “super-crip,” burdens, asexual, a joke, incompetent, and isolated. These tropes appear in monster stories, as monsters are often victims, sinister, or isolated. Since the 1980s, the field of folklore has explored the topic of disability, “usually to identify and explore the stigmas associated with disabilities,” however, the field often does not engage with DS scholarship, which would examine the social, cultural, and political aspects of disability (Prahla 2024, 269). Here, I use DS and Folklore Studies to examine how monsters show our fear of the disabled body and mind and the ways we try to control them.

Werewolf Stories: Reading Contemporary Narratives

Harry Potter

In the Harry Potter universe, a fictional world populated by humans, wizards, elves, and other supernatural creatures, werewolves are seen as evil, and Remus Lupin, bitten by a werewolf as a child, is the sole exception (Rowling 1999). Lupin transforms during full moons, a total body and mind transformation taking place. In this universe, werewolves are not hunted, but they are ostracized into werewolf-only communities and are unable to work among wizards. This gives rise to angry communities and extremists, including the one who bit Lupin as a form of revenge on Lupin’s family of wizards. Like disabled people, Lupin is unable to access schooling until he has accommodations (a private and safe space to turn into a werewolf; days off around the full moon, as well as a potion to control his monstrosity). His condition is kept secret from all but the school’s headmaster as people’s reaction to his condition is to ostracize him: “When they know of my affliction, they can barely talk to me!” Lupin says about those who discover he is a werewolf (Rowling 2003, 175).

As an adult, he again finds that his accommodation needs leave him unable to attain employment. He is fearful and ashamed of his condition and avoids romantic relationships and parenthood. He is briefly employed as a professor by his old schoolmaster, yet he is ultimately forced to resign after the students’ parents discover his werewolf status. Rowling has spoken

about how this portrayal is a metaphor for *people's reactions to illness and disability* (Fraser 2002), and scholars have connected it to HIV/AIDS (Bérubé 2016; Napolitano 2016). It is always the monster who must change, not their community that has ostracized them (Leduc 2020). This, Leduc (2020) argues, is similar to the medical model of disability: pushing for surgeries and medicines to erase disabilities, rather than providing access or acceptance to the disabled, to monsters. This model also seeks to prevent the “disease” from being passed down.

Despite his difficulties, Lupin tries to find worthiness in his monstrousness by using his supernatural strength for good, as he becomes a soldier against the forces of darkness attacking the wizarding world. During one battle, he is killed. His willingness to sacrifice for others and his shame around his condition make him different from the other werewolves of the Harry Potter universe and grant him acceptance among the heroes of the story, those fighting against dark forces (Rowling 2003). Lupin, then, fits the pitiable victim stereotype of disabled people that Biklen and Bogdan (1977, cited in Rubin and Strauss-Watson 1987) suggest; he is a “good” disabled person/werewolf, unlike those who are angry about their exclusion. Still, could the school have fought to retain him? Would challenging and pushing parents past their fear of werewolves have done more for the future acceptance of other children who could have been born or turned into werewolves?

Supernatural and Ginger Snaps

The popular CW television series *Supernatural* focuses on two brothers, Sam and Dean, who hunt supernatural creatures across the United States. The episodes largely take a monster-of-the-week approach, and in one episode, a woman, Madison, discovers she is a werewolf (Gamble 2007). Madison initially does not realize she was bitten and has been transforming, including a transformation during which she ate her ex-boyfriend.¹ The brothers are the ones to deliver the news as Madison herself does not know about the existence of werewolves. Madison's struggle to realize she is a werewolf feels reminiscent of the struggle for diagnosis many disabled people experience, and her difficulty accepting she is a werewolf resembles the difficulty of accepting an incurable illness diagnosis. Madison is unable to accept the risk that she might hurt someone, and so she asks the brothers to kill her.

Note to Educators: This narrative includes references to suicide and suicide ideation. Ensure you and your students know how to find support and mental health resources.

The show comes back to this theme in a later season, when Claire, a teenage girl being raised by monster hunters, is bitten by a werewolf and the hunters are on a race to find a cure before her condition becomes permanent (Yockey, Perez, and Glynn 2017). Dean suggests different ways the condition could be managed if they do not find a cure, but Claire feels she would be too dangerous for her loved ones to be around. Claire's anxiety regarding her potential future is reminiscent of the disabled experience, as the DS scholar Garland-Thomson (2012) argues that “people with disabilities ... do not have predictable narratives of their future” (351). She has not met a werewolf who is allowed to live, so she cannot imagine a life in which her transformations are managed safely. Perhaps she could sense that others were uncomfortable co-existing with something difficult—like disability, with making space for it, and so it is

deemed too much, or too risky. Within the Supernatural universe, Madison's and Claire's choices mark them as "good" and selfless. This contrasts with other werewolves like Ginger, from the film *Ginger Snaps*, who relish in their condition (Fawcett 2000).

Ginger is a teenage girl and outcast at her high school, as is her sister Bridget. Ginger and Bridget are friendless, frequently bullied, and seem disconnected from their parents. But the girls are extremely close to each other and are enamored with ideas of violence and death, creating tableaux portraying ways that one or both sisters could die in a horrific accident. Their connection, however, is suddenly interrupted as Ginger seems to begin her menstruation one day. Her sudden hairiness, hunger, sexuality, and strength scare Bridget, but Ginger seems intrigued by it, even as she discovers she is slowly turning into a werewolf. Ginger attacks those who have bullied or hurt her, empowered by her condition, and is ultimately marked as too wild, too angry, too sexual, and is killed when she refuses a cure. She, like many disabled people, does not want to be cured, instead, she wants to maintain her autonomy as a werewolf and to figure out what her life could look like.

Supernatural, in another season, features a different way Ginger's story could have played out. The brothers encounter an old friend, a hunter named Garth, who has become a werewolf (Glass 2014). Initially he is embarrassed by his condition, and keeps it secret from the brothers, but he is eventually found out living with a pack. Garth's life is spared, as he convinces the brothers that thanks to the community he is now a part of, he's learned to navigate his condition and control his hunger so he can choose not to eat humans. Could Madison and Ginger have come to the same place of peacefulness and control over their condition with time and in community? Perhaps as they reconciled their identities as being women *and* wolves, embodying ableness and disability at different times, they would become more comfortable navigating their lupine status. Being in community with those who share their condition or disability status is often vital to the well-being of disabled people; there they receive empathy, care, and support (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). If Ginger and Madison had been allowed to live as werewolves, the *Ginger Snaps* and *Supernatural* universes could have learned a way for them and others to navigate lycanthropy, a model for imagining new ways of living for able-bodied people and disabled people, as disabled people demonstrate that there are alternative ways to live and engage with the world (Garland-Thomson 2012) given that they have to be creative to live in a hostile world. Other werewolf encounters, then, could have come to happy endings. Instead, death is most often what the characters are willing to consider or can imagine.

Monster Studies in the Classroom

Ableist narratives create the "acceptable" and "right" body/behavior, and the "wrong one" (Garland-Thomson 1997). Disabled people and monsters are portrayed as "something" wrong, an example of what we must not be, and, if we are, these stories serve as a warning (Leduc 2020; Quayson 2007). Impulsivity and sexual desires, for example, are exhibited by the "wrong" bodies of werewolves. In literacy education there's the idea of stories acting as windows into other lives or mirrors reflecting our own experiences (Sims Bishop 1990). Students who might relate to the behaviors, illnesses, and desires of these monsters are instead offered distorted mirrors.

Educators in a literature, writing, or media classroom, then, can present werewolf and other monster's stories using critical literacy strategies to challenge ableist narratives. By equipping students to interrogate texts, question social structures, analyze the stereotypes they are exposed to, and discuss the impact of them (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 2015), students can develop their "sociopolitical consciousness and exercise productive agency toward transforming hegemonic structures and systems" by telling their own counterstories (Young et al. 2021, 503; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Through storytelling, disabled and able-bodied students can learn to apply critical literacy to examine the dominant narratives that are commonly accepted.

Through this lesson plan, students will think about a) perspective in narratives, b) normative and deviant cultural traits as established through narrative text, c) character traits, and finally, d) their knowledge and perspectives relative to those items, which allows for students to ponder the connection between monster portrayals and disability and to challenge the ableist narratives that may be embedded in many monster stories. The first step is done by helping students practice creating counterstories. Young et al. explore the concept of Counter Fairy Tales as a way for Black girls to tell their stories, as these counternarratives "expose, challenge and disrupt antiblackness in English education" (2021, 501). These counter fairy tales can challenge who we think of as the monster, the punishments presented as acceptable, or even the characters' aspirations that lead them to make their choices. For example, they can be asked, "What would this fairy tale or monster story look like in your neighborhood? What goals would the monster have?" Kim and Cho (2017), meanwhile, recommend a critical literacy strategy in which children re-tell a fairy tale from the perspective of a different character, like telling the three little pigs story from the perspective of the hungry wolf. Like these, counterstories focusing on monsters could be a powerful tool for students to challenge ableist narratives with their authentic stories and empathetic counter-narratives. Below, I share a lesson plan inspired by Garland-Thomson's (2012) call to preserve disability rather than erase it or fix it and Bell and Robert's model to "construct alternative stories geared toward social justice" (2010, 2295). Ultimately, counterstories can help students become "active producers of knowledge about the social, political, and phenomenological understanding of disability" (Mitchell and Snyder 2005, 633), as students "re-write and re-read" narratives to challenge dominant and often harmful messages (Young et al. 2021, 504).

Monster stories are ubiquitous, unlike stories of disabled people, who are often rendered invisible. Through reframing monster stories as ones of disability, we expose the dominant narratives of disability and reveal the harm of stories that seek to "to cure, fix, repair or deny" monstrosity/disability (Mitchell and Snyder 2005, 630). We should not seek to build a world without monsters or disabled people. Instead, we can let the monstrous/disabled body help us "probe the contours and boundaries of what we take to be human" (Garland-Thomson 1996, 1). Through these encounters and new understandings, we can become "more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able" to engage with care and even enchantment (Bennet 2001, 131).

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"Against life as we know it": Working with Werewolves to Create Disability Counterstories
by Claudia Chiang-Frost

Sample Lesson Plan

GRADES College

SUBJECT AREAS Literature, Creative Writing, and Media Studies

MATERIALS Internet access, paper, pen, markers, Post-its

TIME Two 60-minute class sessions

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify dominant narratives in monster stories and the ableism within them.
- Create counterstories.

PRE-CLASS STUDENT WORK Students should read and create notes about this article (excluding the lesson plan).

FACILITATION NOTES This activity will work best if students have been introduced to the concept of the different models of disability. A good reading on the topic is the disabled cartoonist and writer Dave Lupton's 2021 article "A basic interpretation of the models of Disability" available on [Disability Arts Online](#), which was written to be used "as a resource for those people with little or no understanding of the various models of disability" (24).

RECOMMENDED MEDIA

- "Against life as we know it": Working with Werewolves to Create Disability Counterstories" - essay portion
- If time allows, the class could watch *Ginger Snaps* or the *Supernatural* episode "Heart" Season 2, episode 17

CLASS SESSION 1

WARM-UP (3 minutes)

- Have students approach the whiteboard and create a list of monsters. You can have them initially brainstorm on their own and then add to the whiteboard.
- Students might ask about the type of monsters they can list. Does a sexy vampire count? Does a bunny vampire like Bunnacula count? What about monsters they were told about in childhood? I encourage you to say yes, so they are thinking broadly about the title of "monster."
- A virtual classroom or a large lecture could do this activity using word cloud software or a shared slide students can type in.

REVIEW (10 minutes)

Ask students what stood out to them from the reading. Review the ten common portrayals of disabled people in literature in particular. Ask if they see any of these in the monster examples they listed previously. For example, Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film

franchise is a supernatural “monster,” and his visible disability in the form of burn scars is used to scare audiences. Frankenstein’s monster is a villain *and* pitiable in his monstrosity/disability.

LECTURE (10 minutes)

Guide students through the definitions of dominant narratives and counternarratives, discussing the ableism inherent in dominant narratives.

Keywords

Dominant Narratives	Counternarratives
Mainstream	Resisting, critiquing, exposing biases and misconceptions in the dominant narratives

Ask students:

- Why do these dominant narratives have power?
- Whom do these narratives benefit?
- Why do counternarratives matter?
- What are some ways their own cultural groups engage with different monsters? Are there any specific to their community?

Students can discuss in pairs or do independent writing. Then have students share their thoughts in a full class discussion.

GROUP WORK (10 minutes)

Hand out materials so that students can write in groups. This can be space on the whiteboard or easel pads. Have students draw a large Venn diagram in the middle. Breakout groups in a virtual class could make a copy of a slide you prepared with a Venn diagram.

Prompt: What is different about monsters we’re supposed to like and monsters we are scared of? Some answers might include: the characters explore a journey of redemption, they are sexy, protectors, pitiful, have a soul, punish others, are tragic figures, are unruly, powerful.

DISCUSSION (15 minutes)

Have students share their answers.

Ask: What dominant narratives and counternarratives do you see in your examples?

Students might see, for example, that disfigured characters are more likely to be seen as “evil,” like Scar from *The Lion King*. Maybe they see that more likeable characters tend to be ones with more remorse.

EXIT ACTIVITY (2 minutes)

Have students write responses to these prompts:

- Write down two takeaways from today.
- What questions do you have, or what do you think was missing from our discussion that we could discuss?

CLASS SESSION 2

WARM-UP (2 minutes)

Ask students to think about a counterstory they are familiar with (from family or cultural stories, films, tv, or literature).

REVIEW (10 minutes)

Address student takeaways, questions, and/or suggestions for further conversation.

WRITING ACTIVITY (20 minutes)

Ask students to think about a dominant “monster” narrative. It can be one that was addressed during the last class period, but it does not have to be. Can they think of ways to counter the ableist narratives within? Examples:

- What would the Little Mermaid’s story look like if her muteness and tail weren’t things that needed to be fixed?
- What if La Llorona’s emotions weren’t feared but instead listened to?
- What would Madison’s story from *Supernatural* be like if she had been able to be in community with other werewolves who did not eat people, instead of being isolated?

Have students write this story in the form of poetry, a mini-play, comic panels, or traditional story. *(This can be done in groups and/or individually as well as being used as the entire activity or as a pre-write/rough draft.)*

SHARING ACTIVITY (20 minutes)

If this was a group activity, students should choose one speaker for their team. The rest of the group should move to another group, to hear that group’s speaker. They should be able to hear a few groups this way.

- If this was a solo/paired activity, students should get in small groups to share their stories.
- If this was a take-home activity, you should reserve another class session for sharing, perhaps in groups of three.

CLOSING DISCUSSION (5 minutes)

Ask: What was your favorite counternarrative you heard from your classmates today?

EXIT NOTE (3 minutes)

Have students respond to these prompts:

- What was something that surprised you?
- What connections can you make to your real-life experiences?
- Write down two takeaways from today.
- What questions do you have?
- What do you think was missing from our discussion?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Other activities include having students talk about how they feel as they challenge their own ideas of disability through these activities and what dreams they have as/for disabled and able-bodied people. *These dreams too can be a form of resistance against dominant messages.*

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Endnotes

¹This seems to echo disabilities affecting memory and impulsivity, and werewolves are often used as allegories for addiction and mental illness, as in Martin Millar's Wolf Girl young adult novels (McMahon-Coleman 2016a).

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Rusalki as Bridge, Counter-Archive, and Ethical Method in Holocaust Theatre Education

by Danielle Wirsansky

Introduction

There is a moment that repeats itself whenever I use theatre to teach the Holocaust—whether in a classroom, a community setting, or a post-show conversation. Someone arrives prepared to talk about facts: dates, perpetrators, policies, and the scale of violence. Someone else arrives bracing against feeling: I can’t handle this, I don’t want graphic details, I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing. Between these positions sits a central pedagogical problem (Lindquist 2007, 24). Holocaust education does not fail because we lack information; it falters because approach is difficult. How do we bring learners close enough to historical violence to understand its stakes, without turning suffering into spectacle or allowing emotional overwhelm to become avoidance (Singer 2020, 4)?

In *The Secrets We Keep*, I approached that problem through folklore—specifically through the rusalki, water-associated legendary beings from Slavic traditions often linked to women who died violently, prematurely, or unjustly and who return, unresolved, to haunt the moral world of the living (Dynda 2017, 83-4). The musical’s premise is simple in outline and ethically complex in motion: “In the mystical realm of the rusalki, a Jewish Polish woman, tragically taken during the Holocaust and turned into a rusalka, discovers an unexpected chance for revenge when she befriends a young woman who unknowingly carries the bloodline of her murderer” (Wirsansky 2024). In other words, the story begins after death, in a realm that refuses closure. Its central question—what justice can mean when the world has already permitted atrocity—does not invite the audience to look away from history. It asks them to stay with history’s pressure in another register: one where the dead speak, where moral injury persists, and where vengeance and forgiveness are not tidy opposites.

I write from the position of both educator and playwright. I wrote *The Secrets We Keep* as part of my broader work using theatre as a mode of Holocaust education, and my analysis here emerges from that dual perspective. I imagine this approach as most appropriate for upper-level high school students, college students, and adult/community audiences, particularly in settings where learners have already received basic historical grounding in the Holocaust. It works best when learners have enough context to understand that the folklore frame is a mode of interpretation, not a replacement for historical evidence.

About the photos throughout the article: Scenes from *The Secrets We Keep*, performed in April 2024 at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Produced by White Mouse Productions. Photos by Danielle Wirsansky.

That register creates possibilities, but it also demands boundaries. Because violence against women can be reproduced as spectacle even in work that aims to condemn it, the musical's ethical method depends on staging knowledge without staging violation (Solga 2009, 1-2).

I chose rusalki in part because they are a Slavic legend rooted in the very region of Europe where the Holocaust's most concentrated violence unfolded—against Jews, and, in gendered ways, against women (Dynda 2017, 88; Kühne 2010, 133; Lower 2005, 9). That geographic and cultural specificity matters: The legendary being is not decorative but situated.

This article argues that rusalki function in Holocaust theatre education in three interlocking ways. First, they operate as a pedagogical bridge: a recognizable folklore structure that invites approach while guiding learners back toward historical specificity. Second, they operate as a counter-archive: a form capable of holding grief, rage, moral injury, and irresolution without pretending these experiences substitute for documentation. Third, they operate as an ethical method: a way to address gendered harm and the body without staging violence as spectacle, and without using “monstrosity” as an alibi that de-historicizes perpetrators.

Framework — Monsters as Meaning-Making Tools in Holocaust Education

This special issue's premise—that monsters, cryptids, and legendary beings operate as powerful communicative tools—captures something educators routinely see in practice: Learners often approach what frightens them through story before they can approach it through analysis (Cohen 1996, 3-4). Legendary beings function as cultural “meaning-making machines,” not because they simplify reality, but because they give people forms for naming what otherwise stays unspeakable: anxiety, danger, otherness, grief, moral rupture, and the boundaries of the human (Halberstam 1995, 69; Cohen 1996, 4). In classrooms and community learning spaces alike, monsters can create an entry point into complex subjects by organizing attention and emotion—helping learners move from avoidance into articulation, and from articulation into inquiry (Cohen 1996, 4). Monster frameworks can fail here if they become a smoothing device—turning historical catastrophe into a generalized morality tale that offers catharsis without accountability.

A crucial distinction in this terrain is between monsters as creatures and monsterization as a social process (Beyer et al. 2019, 12). In this article, I treat monstrosity less as a label—something that certain figures “are”—and more as a communicative practice that marks bodies and groups as outside the human community (Bandura 1999, 194). This matters profoundly in Holocaust contexts, where dehumanization was not metaphorical but institutionalized: a political and cultural technology that enabled exclusion, dispossession, humiliation, and mass murder (Bandura 1999, 194; [Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004](#), 13). A responsible “monster pedagogy” therefore cannot simply relocate evil into the inhuman. It must help learners analyze how monsterization operates—how people become framed as killable, contaminating, or less-than-human—and how those framings are made persuasive (Bandura 1999, 194).

This is where the rusalka becomes pedagogically useful in a specific, situated way. As Slavic legendary beings, their place-based rootedness matters for two reasons. First, it resists abstraction. When “the Holocaust” becomes a floating symbol of evil, learners can discuss it at a safe distance;

a regionally resonant legendary figure can help restore a sense of embeddedness—communities, languages, landscapes, and social proximity (Cohen 1996, 4). Second, it raises an ethical responsibility: Folklore is not interchangeable. Legendary beings carry histories of meaning that shift across time and space, and educators must avoid treating them as aesthetic props (Cohen 1996, 4-5). In *The Secrets We Keep*, the rusalka is therefore not a fantasy overlay but a culturally situated frame that supports historical specificity while opening space for moral questions that documentary narration alone may not fully hold.

Folklore's pedagogical power here is not that it makes atrocity "easier." It makes **approach** possible (Cohen 1996, 4). The legendary gives learners a form through which to confront the persistence of moral injury: that injustice does not end when the event is over, that grief can remain unassimilable, and that desires for vengeance and fantasies of repair can coexist with impulses toward forgiveness (Caruth 1996, 4; Shay 2014, 182).

Pedagogical Bridge — Tethering Folklore to Historical Specificity

The musical's most direct bridge between folklore and historical specificity occurs in a scene informed by Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors*, in which violence against Jewish people by Polish neighbors is described through a barn burning that Luba, the musical's Jewish Polish protagonist who becomes a rusalka after her murder, is powerless to stop (Gross 2001, 7; Persak 2011, 410-11). The scene shifts the audience from mythic atmosphere into a historically situated problem: violence enacted not only by occupying forces but also through local participation, proximity, and community self-exoneration (Gross 2001, 86; Persak 2011, 410-12). The rusalka frame makes the scene approachable, but the scene itself refuses abstraction. What the audience confronts is not generalized evil, but human violence enacted within communities.

The Counter-Archive — What Performance Holds That Evidence Alone Cannot

If the bridge function of *The Secrets We Keep* tethers the legendary realm to historically situated violence, the show's counter-archive work explains why the legendary frame is not merely decorative. By **counter-archive**, I do not mean an alternative set of facts, nor a license to invent history. I mean a form that can hold what often exceeds the capacities of conventional historical narration in educational settings: the persistence of grief, the instability of moral categories under extreme violence, the felt consequences of inherited harm, and the problem of irresolution (Taylor 2003, 19-21; Shay 2012, 59-60). Holocaust pedagogy rightly foregrounds evidence—testimony, documents, scholarship, historical context—because denial and distortion remain active threats (IHRA 2019, 10; IHRA 2019, 39-40). Yet evidence alone does not answer what learners should do with what they now know; the counter-archive names the space where knowledge becomes ethically and affectively consequential (Taylor 2003, 20-1; Shay 2012, 59-60).

Performance is particularly suited to counter-archival work because it produces meaning through bodies in shared time (Taylor 2003, 20-1, 44). Theatre does not simply tell an audience what happened; it stages relationship—between characters, between past and present, between speaker and witness (Taylor 2003, 20-1). That relationality is educational: It asks audiences to hold contradiction, remain present through discomfort, and negotiate historical knowledge in public (Taylor 2003, 2, 20-1).

The end of Act I offers a second example. The rusalki prepare for Trinity Week, the one week of the year when, according to some Slavic traditions, these water-associated female spirits are allowed to leave the rivers, lakes, or other bodies of water to which they are bound (Dynda 2017, 96-7). In many traditions, rusalki are understood as the restless spirits of women or girls who died violently, prematurely, or unjustly, often by drowning; their attachment to water therefore marks both the site of death and the condition of their unresolved return (Dynda 2017, 83-4). What begins as ritual and permission changes as Luba articulates her pain: The other rusalki are overwhelmed by her grief and gather into a collective (Wirsansky 2024). Trinity Week becomes an embodied metaphor for the limits of permission—one week of exit, a lifetime of return—and gives the audience a structure for feeling the constraints that history imposes even after the event is “over.”

Seen this way, the rusalka is not simply a monster figure but a counter-archival device: the returned dead whose continued presence insists that the past remains morally unfinished (LaCapra 2001, 89-90). This insistence is especially useful in Holocaust education because students often seek closure—an ending that restores balance, assigns clear moral roles, and allows the subject to be concluded (LaCapra 2001, 90). The counter-archive refuses that demand. It makes room for the fact that atrocity creates lives that cannot be “repaired” into wholeness and histories that cannot be neatly resolved into lessons that reassure (LaCapra 2001, 90). In the show’s world, the dead return not because of supernatural spectacle, but because injustice is not over simply because time has passed (LaCapra 2001, 89).

At the same time, counter-archival work must remain accountable to historical specificity ([United States Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.](#), 1-2). A common concern about allegorical or folkloric approaches to atrocity is that symbolic forms may detach audiences from evidence. Yet the problem is not symbolism itself. Folklore, metaphor, and narrative can communicate forms of communal, affective, and moral knowledge that official records may not be designed to hold. Alessandro Portelli’s work on oral history is useful here: He argues that the importance of oral testimony may lie not only in its adherence to fact but also in its departures from fact, where “imagination, symbolism, and desire” emerge; in this sense, even “wrong” statements may remain psychologically or meaningfully true (Portelli 1998, 67). The rusalka does not replace the historical record; she gives form to the unresolved meanings that remain after the record has established what occurred.

Ethical Method — Gender, the Body, and Refusing Spectacle

If the counter-archive names what performance can hold, an ethical method determines *how* it holds it. This is where “teaching with monsters” becomes most vulnerable (Cohen 1996, 4-5; Singer 2020, 4). Legendary beings can make difficult histories approachable, but approachability can slide into distortion; ambiguity can slide into relativism; and emotional intensity can slide into voyeurism (Singer 2020, 4). The question is not whether such content should be addressed—silence is its own distortion—but what it means to address it without reproducing harm as spectacle (Singer 2020, 4). For that reason, *The Secrets We Keep* relies on an ethical method built around three practical guardrails (Singer 2020, 4).

Guardrail 1: No spectacle of harm

The first principle is a refusal of the assumption that seriousness requires display (Solga 2009, 1-2). In Holocaust-related work, there is often pressure—explicit or implicit—to “show what really happened” to prove fidelity (Singer 2020, 4). Yet staging violence can produce a contradictory result: Instead of sharpening ethical attention, it can train audiences to consume suffering as dramatic content (Solga 2009, 2). The female body is particularly vulnerable to this logic, because theatrical traditions have long treated violence against women as a catalyst for plot or a shorthand for “darkness” (Solga 2009, 1-2).

In *The Secrets We Keep*, this principle shaped two key staging choices. The violence inflicted on Luba—the harm that leads to her death and transformation—is never shown directly but suggested through shadow and implication (Wirsansky 2024). Likewise, the show opens with a man harassing Luba and the rusalki dragging him away to kill him, yet the death is also suggested rather than depicted (Wirsansky 2024). These choices allow the audience to understand violence and consequence without being asked to consume bodily harm as proof of seriousness.

This principle can translate directly to pedagogy. In classroom or community settings, “no spectacle” means educators do not rely on graphic materials to compel seriousness (Singer 2020, 4). It means choosing sources and images deliberately, preparing learners for what they will encounter, and prioritizing contextualization and reflection over shock (Singer 2020, 4; [Echoes & Reflections 2023](#), 1).

Guardrail 2: No monster-as-alibi

The second guardrail rejects the pedagogical comfort of calling perpetrators “monsters.” In genocide education, this move can feel morally clarifying, but it can also function as an alibi: If perpetrators were inhuman, the violence becomes safely exceptional, and the analysis of institutions, social dynamics, and neighbor participation recedes (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 8). *The Secrets We Keep* instead uses monstrosity to reveal a process—how violence remakes those it touches, how revenge can reproduce the logic it condemns, and how communities can participate in harm while maintaining self-narratives of innocence (Gross 2001, 7–8).

Luba’s central moral conflict is structured not around defeating a supernatural villain but around what it would mean for her to become the agent of violence against an innocent descendant (Wirsansky 2024). The finale crystallizes this refusal: Luba realizes that killing the descendant would not restore justice; it would make her monstrous “like the people who turned her into a monster,” and she rejects that transformation (Wirsansky 2024). The ending denies catharsis without denying rage: harm is shown as something humans choose, inherit, and risk reproducing unless they actively resist it (Bandura 1999, 194; Nussbaum 2016, 5).

For educators, “no monster-as-alibi” means framing legendary beings as tools for analyzing social processes rather than metaphors that evacuate history (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13). It means asking learners not “Who is the monster?” but “How does monsterization work?” and “What comforts are we reaching for when we label someone inhuman?” (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13; Bandura 1999, 194).

Guardrail 3: Choice and care in learning

The third guardrail is methodological care: designing learning environments that allow agency, minimize coercion, and recognize that difficult material can reactivate personal histories (Echoes & Reflections 2023, 1). This is not an argument for avoiding hard subjects but for building structures that make hard subjects teachable: clear framing, content advisories, guided reflection, and norms that keep discussion from drifting into voyeuristic curiosity or moral grandstanding (Echoes & Reflections 2023, 1; Lindquist 2007, 24; Singer 2020, 4). The show counters that risk by treating the rusalka not as a seductive horror trope but as a moral and communal figure: the returned dead whose presence exposes the unfinishedness of injustice and the cost of perpetuating violence (LaCapra 2001, 89–90; Wirsansky 2024).

Portable Practices—

What Educators Can Adapt

Although *The Secrets We Keep* emerges from a specific artistic process, the pedagogical value of legendary beings lies in their portability (Cohen 1996, 4–5). Educators and community practitioners do not need to reproduce the musical to learn from it. What transfers is the method: how a legendary figure can help learners approach difficult history while remaining accountable to evidence and ethical boundaries (Singer 2020, 4).

First, begin by treating the legendary being as a frame for inquiry, not an answer (Cohen 1996, 4). For a rusalka, the demand might be: What does it mean for the dead to return? What obligations remain when harm is irreversible? What kind of justice is imaginable after mass violence? This shift keeps folklore from becoming purely decorative and helps prevent students from treating the “monster” as a metaphor that ends discussion rather than opening it (Humpherys and Babb 2020, 34).

Teacher Toolbox

Discussion Prompts

(Adaptable across settings)

- What does the returned dead demand from the living—memory, justice, acknowledgment, responsibility?
- Where does the story insist on historical specificity, and where does it refuse “closure”? Why?
- What is the difference between vengeance and justice here, and what does each one cost?
- When does “monstrous” function as an analytic category (a process), and when does it function as an alibi?
- What does the work refuse to show—and what ethical claim is that refusal making?
- How do community dynamics (*Neighbors*, social proximity, participation) change how we understand violence?
- What do we do with histories that cannot be repaired? What forms help us hold that?



Second, build an explicit handoff from folklore to historical specificity. In practice, this means pairing the legendary frame with at least one piece of historical evidence—testimony, a document excerpt, a scholarly account—and then asking students to describe what each form can and cannot do (Singer 2020, 1; IHRA 2019, 10). What can the archive establish? What can it not transmit as felt experience? What can folklore hold without substituting for documentation?

Third, normalize the idea that atrocity learning produces irresolution (Britzman 2000, 77). Here, counter-archival forms can help. A short reflection practice—journaling, a structured discussion circle, a brief creative response anchored to a specific historical detail—can make room for grief, anger, and moral discomfort without drifting into vagueness (IHRA 2019, 9, 10). The key is the anchor: Learners should be asked to attach their response to something historically specific (a place, a date, a documented pattern of violence, a defined social dynamic such as neighbor participation), so that affect remains accountable to history (IHRA 2019, 10).

Fourth, when legendary beings engage gendered violence and the body, use boundaries as part of the pedagogy rather than an afterthought. Educators can adopt the same approach by establishing a “no spectacle” norm: Avoid relying on graphic materials to prove seriousness, prepare learners for difficult content, and guide discussion away from violent detail toward systems, choices, and consequences (Singer 2020, 4; Echoes & Reflections 2023, 1).

Finally, incorporate “monsterization” as an analytic lens rather than a moral label (Bandura 1999, 194; Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13). In Holocaust contexts, learners may reflexively call perpetrators “monsters” (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research 2004, 13). Rather than treating that impulse as wrong, educators can treat it as a teaching moment: What work does that label do for us? What does it obscure? How did monsterization operate historically as a process of dehumanization, and how does it operate socially today? This move keeps the legendary being from functioning as an alibi and uses monstrosity to deepen, rather than flatten, historical understanding (Bandura 1999, 194).

Conclusion

Teaching with monsters is not inherently liberatory, and it is not inherently dangerous. Its value depends on method (Cohen 1996, 4-5). In Holocaust education, legendary beings can either become a way of floating above history—turning atrocity into mood—or they can become a scaffold that allows learners to approach what they otherwise cannot hold, while remaining anchored to evidence and specificity (Lindquist 2007, 23-4; Singer 2020, 4). *The Secrets We Keep* offers one model of the latter (Wirsansky 2024). The rusalka operates as a pedagogical bridge that invites approach while returning learners to historically situated questions of community violence and complicity; as a counter-archive that holds grief, moral injury, and irresolution without claiming to replace documentation; and as an ethical method that refuses spectacle—especially in the representation of gendered harm—while insisting that violence’s consequences remain legible (Cohen 1996, 4-5; Singer 2020, 4; Wirsansky 2024).

In the space between whimsy and shadow, the legendary can create a language for what learners struggle to name: the persistence of injustice, the temptation to reproduce violence, and the

difficult work of refusing that reproduction (Cohen 1996, 4-5). When educators and artists treat monsters not as metaphors that end analysis but as forms that open inquiry—forms disciplined by evidence and ethics—legendary beings can deepen communication about history in classrooms and in community settings (IHRA 2019, 10; Singer 2020, 5).

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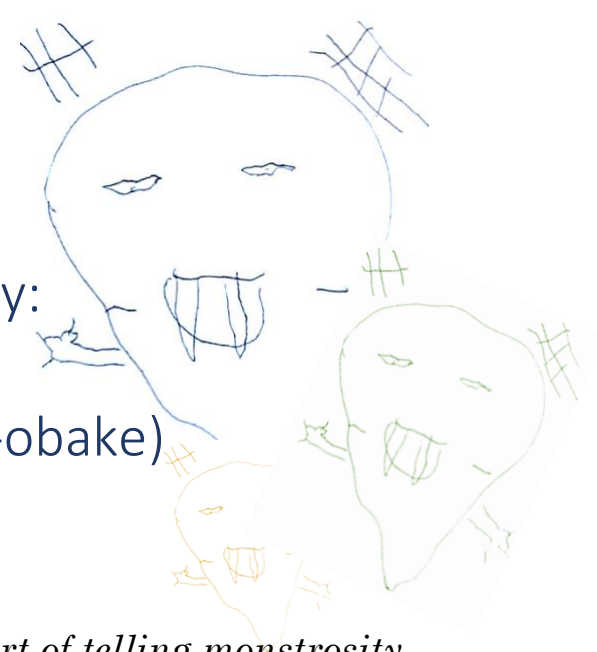
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Waste Not a Phantasmic Pedagogy: Childhood Monsters and the “Wastefulness Ghost” (Mottainai-obake)

by Robert Dahlberg-Sears



Monsters are bodies tumbled into bodies; the art of telling monstrosity requires stories tumbled into stories.

(Swanson et al. 2017, M10)

Introduction

In this short article I introduce a common piece of caregiver and children’s folklore in Japan, the Mottainai-obake (もったいないお化け) or “wastefulness ghost,” through the lens of personal interactions and considerations raising children in Japan. Originating in a [television advertisement campaign](#), this apparition transitioned from screen to tabletop and illustrates how monsters can be deployed to encourage preferred behaviors. By contextualizing this childhood monster and its transition from media to mealtime I include it as an example of a broader monster pedagogy in Japan. How monsters are presented and structured plays a role in their reception, and this should be kept in mind, especially when it comes to entangling (or untangling) them with or as heuristic devices. The Mottainai-obake is the ghost whose soul motivates this paper, yet when discussing monsters and Japan, more exemplary creatures likely come to mind first.

Growing up in the 1990s, my childhood felt filled with a panoply of everyday encounters with weird, uncanny, wondrous, and monstrous tales. Fed by family, books, television, and the burgeoning video game market, I had little idea that the differing media and geographic contexts of these stories and creatures within them might influence my future as a scholar studying primarily Japan-related topics or that they might influence my pedagogical experience. The video game category was (and remains!) a startlingly important introduction to monstrous beings for a global audience of children at that time. For example, the Pokémon, or “pocket monster,” videogame franchise and its multimedia expansion across our imaginations through trading cards, toys, branded foods, and clothing and home goods is particularly remarkable.¹ One of the most widely recognizable “millennial monsters,” pokémon are “border crossers with identities culled from a (monstrous) blend of the familiar and unfamiliar” (Allison 2006, 32). These playful creatures reimagine animals and everyday objects into fantastic forms for a global audience even while closely resembling the panoply of yōkai, a catchall term for monsters (and more) from Japan whose discourses are expressed most simply as the *weird* (Foster 2009).²

Illustration features a drawing by the author’s daughter of the Mottainai-obake.

Note on Japanese words and names: All full names are listed in Surname-Given name order. All Japanese words with long vowels are listed with a macron dash above them.

Despite their sometimes-strange appearances, pokémon help to normalize the monstrous through their substantial co-presence in everyday life and may even carry a didactic value. The basis of many pokémon media narratives hinge on ideas of cooperation and friendship between monsters and humanity, a key element of early childhood and primary education. Additionally, the memorizing and reviewing of encyclopedic knowledge available about them may help to reinforce good educational strategies such as structured repetition (Davis 2026, 9). Nevertheless, although pokémon as contemporary monsters are connected to positive socialization and pedagogical possibility as a “natural part of life,” which are “not only ... ‘normal’ but, in some instances, are expected to occur,” didacticism is not their primary purpose (Walker 1995, 2).

Childhood monsters function more usefully as heuristic devices than the above monsters for children. Formed as narratives of variable complexity, these stories cater to children while asking them the evergreen question of monster studies, one which even adults may find difficult to answer at times: “[T]hey ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 1996, 20). I move now to introduce one form of childhood monster below, followed by the aforementioned Mottainai-obake, its context, and how it came to enter folkloric circulation as a way of exploring how new contemporary monsters take shape.

An Unfinished Plate

The earliest exposure to a childhood monster I can recall was a bedtime story my father told me that he titled “the green paw.” In it, a young child, who just *happened* to share my name and *happened* to live in a house much like ours, hears a noise in the dark from the first floor and creeps out of their room for a look. This curiosity leads them through the darkened house to the basement door from under which a scratching is heard before a green paw reaches out. It is later revealed as the family cat stuck in the basement and whose paw is covered in green wall paint.³ I remember this story, even now, as it was told to me prior to having my poor vision and high levels of astigmatism corrected with eyeglasses. Every night, the shadows cast by the nightlight in my room danced, moved, or swayed in ways defying the supposed dissipating power of the light and reinforced the possible existence of this green pawed goblin. Whether or not my father meant to do so, the effect of this monstrous invention was that I also became reluctant to leave my room overnight for any reason.

Thirtyish years later, my (then) three-year-old sat at our dinner table with a small amount of carefully separated food remaining on her plate. Recently I had begun to notice some food pickiness at mealtimes and received reports from her daycare class leader of similar behavior. This was both an unsurprising and familiar response as I was such a renowned picky eater during my childhood that even distant family whom I only met once a year were acutely aware. But our early-year contexts were oceans apart, literally: While I grew up on outskirts of St. Louis, my daughter was an immigrant in Tokyo, Japan, navigating mealtimes with different modes of valuing food and waste. The term used for picky eating and food aversion in Japanese is *suki-kirai* (好き嫌い), a word-phrase literally meaning “like-dislike,” and it is generally applied to the context of children’s food preferences.⁴ Glancing at her plate, my daughter seemed to consider for a moment before putting down her utensil and turning to ask in a voice both curious and perhaps also seeking reassurance, “Papa, is the Mottainai-obake (“wastefulness ghost”) real?”⁵

In their contribution to the 2018 volume of the *Journal of Folklore and Education*, Higgins and Rogers discuss the interconnectedness of family, foodways, and education, noting that “conversations around the table are often heuristic” (Higgins and Rogers 2018, 60). While also at the table and regarding food, the heuristic frame of my child’s question takes a different trajectory from discussions between parents and children aimed at scaffolding and developing foodways knowledge. Instead, my daughter proffered a question of discernment; not, what is this manner of monster, but what should I do with it?

The Wastefulness Ghost

Monsters come in as many forms and circumstances as are imaginable. Sometimes they are tied to places: For example, common childhood locations are those beyond the safety of one’s room, under a sleeping area, in the closet, or occupying the toilet. For others, certain actions summon or draw out their presence. Turning off the lights and calling out, visiting somewhere at a certain time of day or year, or even something as small as crossing a circle of flowers. The Mottainai-obake (もったいないお化け), or “wastefulness ghost,” questioned by my daughter is a being of the latter variety. Elsewhere, this same monster is glossed as the “No-Waste Ghost” (Siniawer 2018, 178), but neither translation fully encompasses the weight of the words that name it, its functions, or its social use.

The word “mottainai” (勿体ない) is a compound of an uncommon noun meaning the shape or appearance of a thing (“mottai” 勿体) and a word that marks negation or lack (“nai” ない). “Mottainai” is used as an assertion that the essential purpose or role of something is going unfulfilled (Hasegawa 2013, 1). As a spoken phrase, it is often used to express a sense of dissatisfaction with inability or lost opportunity. One might describe a downpour on a holiday or not visiting a famous place when nearby as “mottainai.” Perceptions of possessing the quality of “mottainai” can also be used, such as the case of the ghost presented here: Food going uneaten becomes “mottainai.” Today, an “obake” (お化け) is commonly represented in images and translated in a way familiar to Euro-American English-speaking audiences: a floating, often white, person-shaped sheet, a “ghost.”⁶



A selection of images when searching simply “お化け” (obake) using Google Images. The majority resemble the floating bedsheet model of ghost.

Despite this representation and translational commonality, and although the category of obake includes ghosts, specters, and phantoms, it does not refer specifically to them. The word “obake” names “something transformed,” or that changes its shape. Particularly when used by or in discussion with children it refers to a general monster or any weird or strange creatures.⁷ As an informal observation, while accompanying my daughter at local parks, playgrounds, and her daycare all in the northwestern area of the 23 wards of Tokyo, a common declaration that would set kids running would be the announcement, “お化けがくるよ～ (There’s a monster coming).” The term yūrei (幽霊) more closely aligns with the depictions above. Both are categories of yōkai, a broad category noted earlier as encompassing many types of monsters one might encounter in the supernatural landscape of Japan. Foster (2015, 25), interpreting the scholar Komatsu Kazuhiko, distinguishes that yūrei “are not just some vague scary presence, but rather they are associated, often by name, with a specific person who once was living.” The yūrei is endowed with a connection to personhood; it is the “ghost” of someone, meanwhile an obake is a general denizen of the world of the weird.

With this framework in place, just what does the Mottainai-obake, as a modern yōkai, actually do? How the Mottainai-obake usually appears might go something like this. In the course of eating a snack or meal a child espouses pickiness or does not want to finish their food. Their caretaker then chooses to remind the child of the ghost, invoking its possibility by declaring, “If you don’t finish your food the Mottainai-obake will come out.”⁸ There is an imposition of *something happening* at this point, though it is unclear quite what that might be. The if-then statement begins a ritual that opens the way for the monster to appear should food go to waste, tasking the imagination of the child with creating a *something* that they would disprefer rather than stating it outright.

How the Mottainai-obake developed this particular power derives from its surprisingly recent origin and transition into the realm of oral caretaker/child folklore. Speaking briefly about the Mottainai-obake to a daycare worker in their 50s recently, they espoused a feeling that they had been told not to waste food through pickiness as a child, and that perhaps there had been monsters that appeared similarly to the Mottainai-obake but they could not think of any particular name for them. It would have been about the time they were a child at the height of Japan’s post-World War II economic growth, the so-called “economic bubble” period of the 1980s, when concerns about growing amounts of everyday waste proliferated in the actions of everyday citizens and at all levels of government (Siniawer 2018, 169-82). One response to this was the production of five pedagogically minded public service announcement commercials between 1982 and 1985 by the Ad Council Japan and Dentsū Osaka based on the popular animated children’s show, “Manga Nippon Mukashibanashi” (まんが日本昔ばなし “Manga Japan Tales of Long Ago”). The series was originally produced for Japanese children overseas to enjoy adaptations of Japanese tales, legends, and fables, and the overtly moralistic PSAs involved some of the same staff, including the familiar voices of the two narrators Ichihashi Etsuko and Tokita Fujio, to call upon the flavor of the TV show.⁹ The first PSA premiered in 1982: a 60-second tale about food waste titled, “Mottainai-obake.”¹⁰

Set in an indeterminate, premodern Japan of the past, an old Buddhist monk invites some local children to his mountain temple for a meal. While eating, the children delight in picking out items of food, such as radishes, beans, fish, and carrots, from their meal and declaring aloud their distaste while laughing and discarding the items from their plates to the worry of the old monk. Later, in the dark of the night the children are surrounded, likely after having been awoken, by the wavering shapes of several dark-clothed specters whose heads are in the shape of various foodstuffs discarded and not eaten by the children earlier. These transformed specters, true obake, eerily whisper “mottainē, mottainē” as the children clutch each other and declare, “I’m scared! (kowai 怖い)” or “I’m sorry! (gomennasai ごめんなさい).” Ostensibly the next morning, the monk smilingly explains to them, “Those are called the Mottainai-obake (Sore ga ‘mottainai-obake’ to iu mono ja yo”).” As he speaks, the children’s trays of food transition on-screen from full to a final grain of rice being plucked from a bowl. Shifting to a broader view of the mountain temple and characters, the monk’s voice queries, “Is everyone trying to make sure the Mottainai-obake don’t come out? (“Minna mo mottainai-obake ga den you ni shitoru ka nō?”)”

The “Mottainai-obake” commercial continued broadcasting into the 1990s and became a shared piece of mediatized storytelling for parents to reference with children when discussing the possibility of food waste. The didactic possibilities attached to this example are also the root of its transition from mass-media culture into that of folklore proper. Newly created in 1982 with the trappings of a ghost story, the morality of a fable, and the framing of something received from the indeterminate past via linguistic and visual style, the commercial is, in the words of Michael Dylan Foster, an “allusion to folkloric motifs, characters, and tale types [that] can give a work the semblance of being based on ‘real’ folklore even when there is no direct link with specific referents in a given tradition. Such works operate through a sort of elusive allusion, as it were, or what I call ‘fuzzy allusion’” (2016, 42). Rather than folklore, it is *folkloresque*.¹¹ Over time, the Mottainai-obake transitioned away from its audio-visual folkloresque media form to become a piece of purely oral folklore accompanying children’s mealtime. Tolbert, expanding on Foster (2016, 56-7), describes the relationship between folkloresque and folklore as a Möbius strip in that they “exist not in opposition to each other but in a state of constant creative tension and connection” (Tolbert 2024, 10). With the loss of the visual aspect of the story, the monk’s concluding question is free to enter the imaginations of children who are unfamiliar with the original folkloresque image of the Mottainai-obake. The generation of a new vernacular form for it to be used by caretakers and children “locates authenticity [of the monster as folklore] within the minds of the participants in popular culture” (Tolbert 2016, 37). The wavering forms of foodstuff-headed humanoids are replaced by the commonly generalized image of the obake as sheet-ghost. The lack of visuality also turns the threat of the obake on its head, as the children’s frightful reactions to the closely surrounding specters in the PSA are not communicated with the simple phrase, “The Mottainai-obake will come out.” Instead, the listening children borrow what narrative resources they need to fill in the signifying phantoms.

Our monsters and ghosts help us notice landscapes of entanglement.

(Swanson et al. 2017, M8)

When asked to draw a picture of the Mottainai-obake when this article began to take shape, my daughter drew the image below with no other input.

Haunted

Prior to my daughter's dinnertime question, I had never mentioned or called upon the Mottainai-obake in our home before. The various strategies my parents employed to prod me to finish my food rarely ended in anything further or new being eaten. But I was curious; this ghost is so common that even despite not having been raised in Japan I was aware of it as an early childhood heuristic of shokuiku (食育), "education about eating" (Okano 2020, 133).¹² So how did my daughter encounter it and in what context? One recent poll on reducing food waste conducted in a Japanese elementary school in the town of Tsuyama, Okayama prefecture found that of 38 parents polled, more than half said they try to appeal to children's feelings or sense of propriety through such pedagogical tools as the Mottainai-obake or reminding the child of the work that went into preparing the food (Tokuhiro et al. 2013, 170). I considered my daughter's question for a moment before deferring an immediate answer and inquiring about where she had heard about such a thing:

"Daycare," she responded simply.

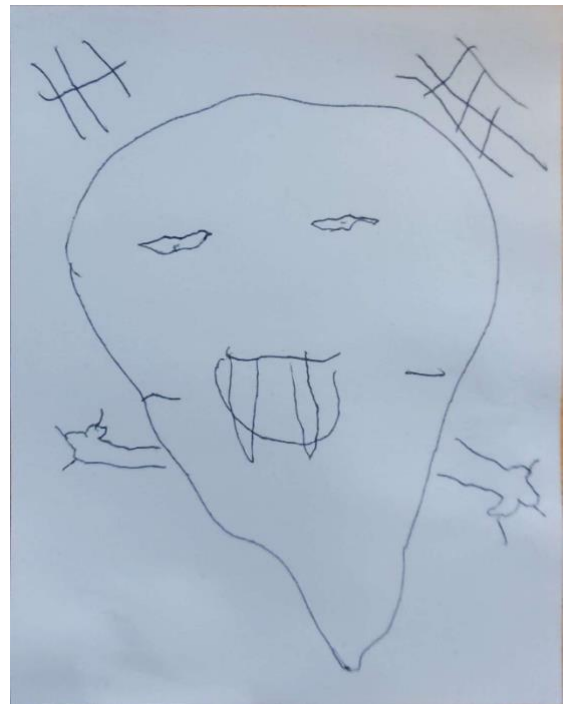
"And what does the Mottainai-obake do?"

Switching to Japanese, and likely reciting what her daycare caregivers might have mentioned, she replied, "Tabenokosu to detekuru (When you don't finish food, it comes out)."

"And then what happens?"

She considered for a moment but was unable to offer an answer. I pressed a final time to ask, "So what is the Mottainai-obake?" Seemingly forgetting her earlier trepidation, she offered cheerfully, "It's a ghost!" At this point I returned to her question of the ghost's existence and assured her that I had never encountered such a spook. Not wanting to spoil a good piece of folklore though, I added, "Maybe someone else has seen one."

Monsters' forms and purposes are sometimes difficult to disentangle from the stories we tell about them, and their weird pedagogical potential may not be immediately obvious. It is unlikely, for example, that the Ad Council of Japan anticipated the expansion of the Mottainai-obake beyond its original place as a morality tale to become a common vernacular folk monster. The educational



A line drawing in black on white paper of a rounded bedsheet model ghost with two long fangs protruding from its mouth and sharp claws. Two hash-mark shaped "scratches" appear in the upper left and right corners.

benefits of a possible visit from a phantom food haunt are likewise difficult to ascertain. But the continuing multi-decade boom in popular culture circulations of yōkai, not just as pokémon but in all their weird and wondrous forms, seems unlikely to dissipate anytime soon either. Even in 2026, I still encounter displays of the yōkai Amabie that rose to fame during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic through the association with reproducing and/or showing its image and warding off illness. Adopted by everyday folks and government outlets alike, the case of Amabie is a “thought-provoking example of how and why societies invent and deploy monster figures in response to events that threaten or otherwise impact the public good” (Landeck 2026, 3). Similarly, the Mottainai-obake illustrates how monsters’ roles and entanglements with the public good are connected to the needs of the present folk who circulate them through story or image alike. A specter haunts the mealtimes of Japan. Its outline is fuzzy and its voice now absent, but it very much wants you to eat.

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Endnotes

¹ I note this particular period for the absolute breadth of new monsters introduced by the Pokémon franchise. It goes without saying that the continued expansion of the series and growth of its monster roster continues to do the same, but the proverbial dam broke with the first introduction of Pokémon to the world. Since the global success of the series, it has been almost taken for granted that new monsters will come and become familiar as well, which was largely unimaginable prior.

² The category of yōkai is summed up by Michael Dylan Foster as “variously translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order deity, or, more amorphously, as any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence” (2009, 2).

³ This narrative arc aligns with what Silvia Ann Grider remarks on as a typical children’s ghost story in the United States where they are “usually quite short, monoepisodic, and conclude with an incongruous and jokelike punch line” (Grider 2007, 111). The presentation of this tale was always a bedtime story, took no longer than five minutes, and usually ended with a kind meow from the housecat (of course, named for and resembling our own) exiting the basement after being released from his unknowing mischief.

⁴ “Suki-kirai” is a strangely composed set of two verbs together, although not linked by the first modifying the second as per the usual serial verb construction in Japanese. The term is used as a descriptive category of preferences often deployed in the negative sense to discourage the development of food avoidance, or to lightly admonish those deploying them. While usually aimed at children, adults can also have the term used to refer to their pickiness, particularly as a kind of childish behavior.

⁵ My daughter echoes the same concern as Jeffrey Cohen, who declares “do monsters really exist?” as the ultimate anxiety surrounding monsters and monster theory (Cohen 1996, 20).

⁶ Grider (2007, 113-16) details a possible explanation for this stylistic depiction’s ubiquity in Euro-American imagery as linked to persistent representations of the bubonic plague’s sweep of Europe during the 15th century and the number of enshrouded bodies depicted in art at the time.

⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the meaning of obake and its variants, see Foster (2009, 247) and Foster (2015, 17-9).

⁸ While variations exist, the incantation usually invokes an if-then statement such as presented, in Japanese: “食べないともったいないお化け出ちゃうよ” (Tabenai to mottainai-obake dechau yo).

⁹ While tales such as those produced in “Mukashibanashi” may also contain an ethic or moral component, they are drawn from sometimes over 1,000 years in the past and framed as such. Mottainai-obake especially is completely new, although framed as older and likely influenced by preexisting discourses on wastefulness or the possibility of many things coming to possess a spirit within them.

¹⁰ Alongside the 60-second version, a 30-second and an English version were also produced, although I have only been able to view the full minute version as archived on YouTube. See Mottainaiobake AC Japan Hōkoku Sakuhin Ākaibu for information.

¹¹ Komatsu Kazuhiko links the Mottainai-obake and tsukumogami, items that gain a spirit or life force and become yōkai after 100 years. He notes anxieties around both discarding and not properly mourning the “retirement” of a well-used tool or an object being simply left to age, resulting in its attaining a spirit born from the power imbued in it through use and the distaste the spirit carries at being treated in such a manner. This negative feeling after being disposed of is similar to the appearance in the commercial form of the Mottainai-obake (Komatsu 1998, 193-7).

¹² Okano uses the term “education about eating” to include both the pedagogical approaches *about* eating taught in school contexts, “including healthy eating, consumption of local produce, food production, and food self-sufficiency and security,” and the demands on local formal and informal institutions to play active roles in that education. She also distinguishes this term from other common translations of shokuiku into English such as “nutrition education” and “food education.”

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URLs

Japanese language version of original “Mottainai-obake” commercial <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6be2lvKKdo4>

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Waste Not a Phantasmic Pedagogy: Childhood Monsters and the “Wastefulness Ghost” (Mottainai-obake)
by Robert Dahlberg-Sears

“Taking the Hand of the Monster”: Teaching Critical Mystery Studies in New Mexico

by Matthew David Goodwin

We have to begin in media res. If I begin in the beginning—at one of the many beginnings—you might get the sense that this has all been figured out with one thing inevitably leading to the next, which is not the case. It’s Summer 2024 and I’m hosting a graduate-level field school to explore some of the unique and mysterious locations in New Mexico. We are sitting in complete darkness, in a small chapel next to San Francisco de Asís Mission Church, and we are there to see a mysterious 19th-century painting called *The Shadow of the Cross*, by Henri Ault. The painting depicts Jesus in front of the Sea of Galilee, and when the chapel docent turns off the lights, the background of the painting gradually begins to glow faintly, and a silhouette of a cross appears. The docent explains that Ault did not intentionally create the effect, and that the kind of paint that could glow in the dark was not invented yet. After a while of sitting in the dark, I begin to have the perception of moving and roiling shapes on the canvas, monstrous, ghostly, and bit unnerving. Everyone is seeing something a little different, but for me the painting is coming alive, and I wonder, “Is my mind creating this effect because of the sensory deprivation? Is there actually something in the painting causing this?” The docent is very insistent that the church does not designate the painting as a miracle, but as a mystery, which seems prudent to me given the claims of the skeptic Joe Nickell (2025) to have a non-supernatural explanation for the painting’s effects. Whatever the

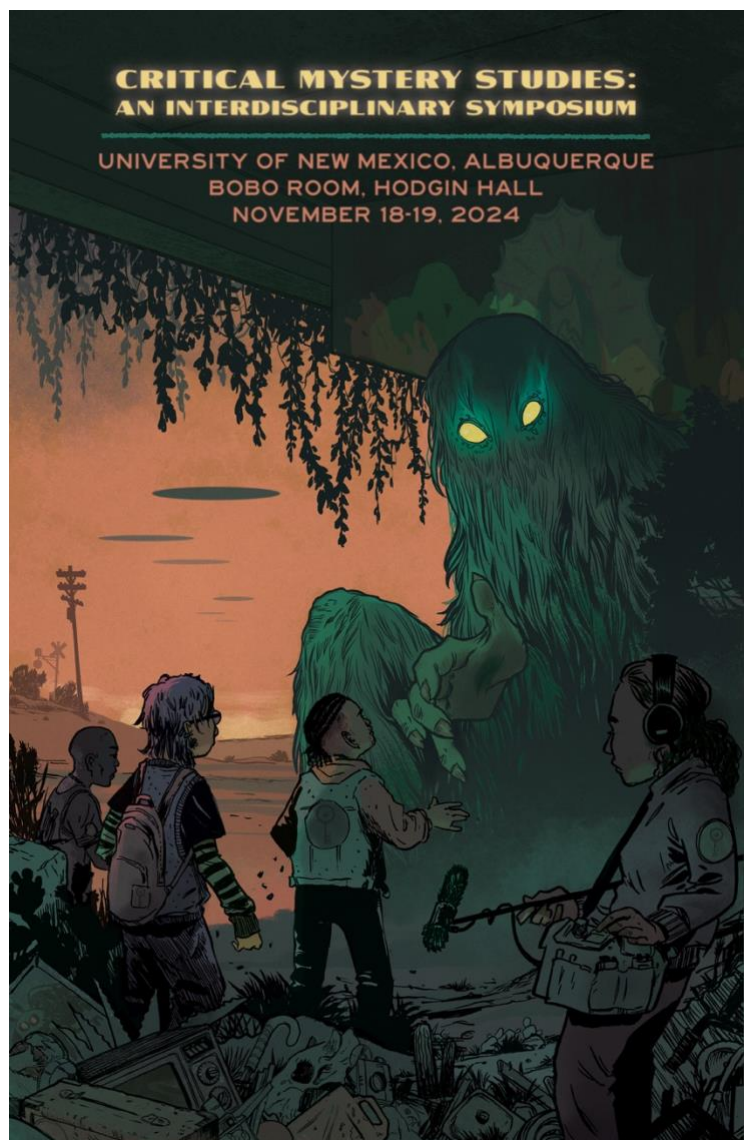


Figure 1. Poster for CMS Symposium, created by Cayetano Valenzuela, 2024.

explanation, the experience *feels* liminal, an event between myself and the painting, combining into something new. Many people report having some sort of spiritual experience with the painting, and I can see why. The optical effects bring to mind my father, who had experienced hallucinations because of Parkinson's and died from the disease. One moment in particular stands out during the worst of his hallucinations, when he needed me to tell him whether the children nightmarishly stuck in the couch were real or not. I became his reality check, when he was no longer himself, my grounded and practical dad. But here I am in the dark, having a weird feeling that perception can easily become unmoored, and I feel the loosening of the hold grief has on me. Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) writes concerning the liminal that "Transformations occur in this in-between space" (243). And yet, even when we have the experience of liminality, and as is the case with the most important of human experiences (love, death, meaning, memory), I still cannot help but try and figure out if the truth is inside of me or if the truth is out there.

One year earlier. In my course on Chicana and Latina science fiction, I was chatting with my students about the infamous Taos Hum, a strange humming noise that some people hear in New Mexico, and it suddenly occurred to me: Could I teach a course that would include this topic and other similar mysteries such as monsters, ghosts, and aliens? I hesitated (my brief moment of what I would call "Academic Mystery Anxiety") but quickly remembered how supportive my department and department chair are and decided to move forward with the class.¹ I taught "Mysteries of New Mexico and Beyond: An Introduction to Critical Mystery Studies" in Spring 2024, and it is now one of the regular courses offered by the Chicana/o Studies Department at the University of New Mexico. A fantastic group of graduate students took an interest in the class, and the discussions have been extraordinarily vibrant, not only because of the curiosity-inducing topics but also because of the collective effort needed to sketch out the key terms, methods, and contours of a new field. Here is our current description:

Critical Mystery Studies (CMS) is the critical and interdisciplinary study of mysteries such as monster sightings, ghost hauntings, and alien encounters, among many more. We examine the role of mystery in the long traditions, histories of resistance, and cultural expressions of BIPOC communities, and at the same time, we explore how mysteries are entangled with racism, sexism, coloniality, and other systems of oppression. Studies within CMS explore the nature and meaning of mysteries, the discourses surrounding them in their specific geographical and cultural contexts, their representation in fiction and film, and how mysteries have been reclaimed, reinterpreted, and reappropriated by cultural creators.²

CMS combines the analysis of mysteries with critical discourses such as Critical Race Theory and Feminist Philosophy, and, in this way, the field has mapped out new territory. Nevertheless, CMS is in dialogue with the whole range of what we can call "Mystery Studies," which includes early texts regarding the epistemology of mysteries such as Immanuel Kant's (1766) *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and Gurney, Myers, and Podmore's (1886) *Phantasms of the Living*, as well as more recent works from religious studies such as Diana Walsh Pasulka's (2019) *American Cosmic*. I would also discover that there was a good deal of scholarship that would fall under the category of CMS scattered throughout the traditional academic fields, as well as the smaller fields that have significant overlap with CMS, such as Hauntology and Monster Studies. To learn from those already doing this work, in November 2024, I co-organized an interdisciplinary [CMS symposium](#)

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with UNM faculty members Nahir Otaño-Gracia (Medieval Studies) and Sarah Hernandez (Native Studies), with graduate student organizers in Chicana/o Studies acting as respondents for the faculty talks. What became clear was that by combining an attention to the strange and fantastic with a critical analysis of systems of oppression, CMS provides a powerful source of illumination of our cultural landscape. And now you see why we needed to start this essay in media res, and why we keep uncomfortably returning to what Anzaldúa calls the “nepantla” region, the in-between realm, “la tierra entre medio” (243). Not only are the typical experiences we examine in CMS best described as liminal, but the framing of this field is also a bridging and adjoining of fields, as this academic space is an “always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (243). This is why the title of the course is always “and Beyond,” and the topics we discuss are always “among many more.”

I was initially drawn to the title of this special issue, “Teaching with Monsters,” because it dovetails so clearly with the course motto: “Taking the Hand of the Monster.” I am certainly teaching about monsters and their varied histories in the course, and as a class we are reflecting on monsters, but teaching “with monsters” implies a close collaboration, even co-teaching. In the same vein, taking the hand of the monster positions the students and myself as relational to the monsters, and that, indeed, monsters cannot be understood otherwise. To take the hand of the monster is to let them guide us through their side of the story. Through this position, as María Lugones (1987) recommends, we can enter the world of the monster with an attitude of playfulness, creativity, and love rather than arrogance. She writes, “there are ‘worlds’ that we can travel to lovingly and travelling to them is part of loving at least some of their inhabitants...by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (17). The monster is often placed in binary opposition to the human, but the entrance into the world of the monster shows to us, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996) writes, that the monster “refuses easy categorization” and has an “ontological liminality” (6). If we take the hand of the monster and step into their liminal world, transformations occur, and we are forever altered. The goal of CMS is not to determine once and for all whether El Chupacabras or Bigfoot are real or not, much less to find and capture them, but to transform ourselves. Collective transformation has always been a foundational purpose of the academy, even if forgotten.

CMS is a bridge across the liminal, but to me and to many of my students, it is nevertheless an intellectual and spiritual home. Anzaldúa writes, “Most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of ‘home’” (243). The work of CMS always begins with our own monstrous companions, with what is close to us, with what is personal and meaningful to us and our communities, as we form our own localized genealogies of mystery. In our case, we begin the class with discussing the state motto of New Mexico, “The Land of Enchantment,” connecting it to the long history of colonization in New Mexico, the colonial travelers who wanted to escape modernity, and the historied tales of *brujería* in the state. It is then vital to take a further step and counter this colonial history of enchantment, which became the source of tourism for the state, by reminding ourselves that entering the world of the monster is not entering into some pre-rational space beyond cultural and intellectual formation. Every monster will have some discourse surrounding it and running through it, as with the countless writings about Bigfoot, even if few are academic. With some understanding about our New Mexican genealogies of mystery and related concepts, the students are ready to theorize monsters, ghosts, and aliens.

For each of the three main sections of the course (Monsters, Ghosts, and Aliens), I demonstrate four steps the students can put into practice in their critical essays and final projects: 1) Understand the Escenario, 2) Examine the Entanglements, 3) Engage Intersectional and Comparative Analysis, and 4) Create the Mystery. The first step is to understand the “escenario,” which refers to the complex interplay of people, events, and systems that evolve over time. Given the nature of mysteries as something hidden and elusive, there must also be a “scene,” a face or an interface, that we can actually perceive, engage, and analyze.³ This step of the investigation is generally accessible to students who are familiar with examining the larger context or assemblage of a cultural phenomenon. El Chupacabras is an important example of the sort of monster mystery in which the escenario is almost entirely absent from the outward-looking face of the monster, since many people do not know that El Chupacabras was born in Puerto Rico in 1995, and from there that it migrated quickly throughout Latin America and U.S. Latinx communities. A year and a half after its birth, El Chupacabras was linked to the discourse of the “alien invader” in the television show *The X-Files* (Gates 1997). El Chupacabras continues to be a Latinx monster used to express the concerns of Latinx communities, but only because it has been continuously liberated from its ties to the figure of the “alien invader” by authors such as Rudolfo Anaya, David Bowles, and Tato Laviera (Goodwin 2021). I think that Cohen (1996) was right that “the monster always escapes,” (4) but for Latinx monsters, that escape occurs through considerable struggle and communal transformation.

To take the hand of the monster comes with a degree of danger and discomfort, as we hear the stories of violence and trauma. The second step of a CMS investigation is to examine the “entanglements” of the mystery, which refer to how mysteries are woven with the threads of cultures or systems of oppression in such a way that they become something new. To be entangled indicates that the threads are woven together so tightly that it may be impossible to untangle them. This use of the term was inspired by Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez’s (2023) essay “Building Silver Bridges: Paranormal Apparitions, Settler Heritage, and Indigenous Erasure in the Ohio River Valley,” in which he discusses how the 1966 sighting of the Mothman came to be tied to the deadly Silver Bridge collapse of 1967 in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Montgomery Ramírez shows that there was already a discourse of disaster in the cultural background through the settler myth of Indigenous curses on the settlers, such as the purported “Cornstalk curse.”⁴ The Indigenous people who lived in the area were first designated as “savage,” but after the Indigenous communities were forced from the area, they then became, in the minds of the settlers, the perpetrators of supernatural curses. Montgomery Ramírez observes that the “connection of Mothman to disaster entangles it with the ‘Indian curse’ settler myth” (95). The result is that this settler myth gains new life in the Mothman monster, cementing a colonial mindset far into the future. Such powerful entanglements, however, can be loosened, as was the case when the Mothman became something of a queer icon. Nevertheless, as Gyasi Hall (2026) notes, even with its queer rebellious energy, the new Mothman can become entangled with the bloated system of consumerism in the U.S. in the form of trinkets and T-shirts. There is a fallacy in the idea that criticizing how the monsters are entangled with systems of oppression will ruin them, or somehow make these fun stories into depressing claims about the world. In my experience, critical analysis gives the monsters energy and frees them, at least temporarily, from their stultifying ties to sexism or racism. As Michael Trujillo writes in *Land of Disenchantment*, critical analysis involves a defacing such that “the mystery revealed may become more powerful” (22).

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As the previous paragraph shows, entanglement can be, and usually is, composed of multiple and complex threads. The “Beyond” part of the course title, “Mysteries of New Mexico and Beyond,” points to this depth, as well as to the value of intersectional and comparative analysis for CMS. Tiya Miles (2015) in *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* takes this approach in her exploration of the history of and ghost stories about the New Orleans socialite Madame Delphine Lalaurie, who abused and horrifically tortured her slaves. Her mansion is a common stop for New Orleans ghost tours, and her biography is told alongside the stories of her later appearances as a vengeful ghost. The stories told about her are, of course, overtly tied to the institution of slavery; however, Miles points out that it is Lalaurie’s gender and sexuality that have formed the emotional register of the stories because she was a Creole woman, a domineering wife, and it seems that she was in a relationship with her Black coachman, Bastille. Miles writes: “Due to her Frenchness, gender nonconformity, and strange relations with African Americans that were at the same time too close and too cruel, Madame Delphine Lalaurie is portrayed as a person beyond the pale” (72). New Orleans ghost tours place the horrors of slavery upon the shoulders of this mad horrific Creole woman, while white men are only vaguely present in the background. The truth is that torture was not an aberration of the system of slavery. It is just that her tortures were made public when the cook, who was chained to the stove, set the mansion on fire, and all the torture victims were publicly taken out into the street. After reading this essay, the students then take this intersectional analysis and move it in a comparative direction, discussing other communities or cultures that highlight stories of violent women. The story of La Llorona which is well-known to students in New Mexico comes in quickly, as it is focused on a woman who murders her children after being betrayed by her husband. It becomes clear to students that these two characters occlude the violence of men even as the women bear the stigma of what Barbara Creed (2015) calls the “monstrous-Feminine,” referring to the fact that for the male horror gaze, it is precisely the gender and sexuality of women that is the source of monstrosity (3). CMS then provides a liminal space for the figures of La Llorona and Lalaurie to come together, separated from the monsterizing gaze, and in doing so, students see how gender troubles monsters.

The fourth step of a CMS investigation takes a different tact, more artistic and creative. One of the key texts in the course is the essay “La Llorona, El Kookoóee,⁵ and Sexuality,” by Rudolfo Anaya (1992), which is important because it takes all four steps the students used for their assignments. After a critical analysis of the two monstrous entities and how they were used by Anaya’s religious community to control the sexuality of the youth, he nevertheless affirms that figures such as El Cucuy and La Llorona have a higher purpose than cautionary tales or religious scare tactics. For Anaya they are significant to human development because they serve as “guideposts” for understanding our lives when there is “a crisis of self-identity” (51). We understand the story of La Llorona one way as a child (stay away from the acequias at night) while as an adult we understand it differently (as a source of gender discrimination). The story, through this difference in interpretations, mirrors our development back to us, and in fact, it is in the moment of “a crisis of self-identity” that we need the monster, because the liminal monster can be of comfort to someone who is also in a liminal state. The problem for Anaya is that Chicane monsters are being decimated, not only by modernity but also by the imposition of Anglo monsters through education and media. For this reason, Anaya decided to give artistic and ritual expression to El Cucuy. In Fall 1990, Anaya and fellow artists constructed a Cucuy monster for his community, giving space for everyone to write down their worries and concerns and then burn

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Figure 2. Veladora with the logo of the Speculative Detective Agency. Logo created by Cayetano Valenzuela, 2025. Photo by Violet Goodwin-Otaño.

them along with the monster. Anaya comments: “As the sun set and the Kookoóee went up in flames, we realized that we had created a truly moving communal experience” (55). Monsters are not problems to be solved, but communal transformations that emerge.

Throughout the course, we give new life to our monsters with thought experiments and imaginative readings. As Domino Renee Perez (2008) observes, after Chicanas began to go to college in greater numbers, the new La Llorona stories often located her in cities and universities, and so it became important for my class to imagine La Llorona encounters on the UNM campus (33). To this end, the students read and then expand on Cathryn Merla-Watson’s (2024) speculative thought experiment in which she imagines the protagonist of Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek” as moving past her La Llorona stage and becoming a student at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. The class also collaborated with my colleague Alex Hernandez and his Hialeah Hobgoblin project for which we devised a cross-cultural encounter story at the duck pond in the center of the UNM campus where La Llorona finally finds a child creature to nurture: [“El Güije in New Mexico.”](#) We take the hand of the monster wherever we are.

The movement from critical work to creative activity throughout the course prepares the students for the final project, which can take the form of either taking on the role of a speculative detective and solving a case, or creating a work of fiction centered on a speculative detective. The project topics range from following the monsters created in the Navajo uranium mines to examining the discourse about the metaphysics of Bigfoot. We discuss the difficulty of investigating these kinds of cases, and I encourage alternative modes of detection, including conspiracy yarn boards with their emphasis on complexity as well as various forms of divination with their reliance on intuition. These methods can help provoke us to move past the standard story of the monster, so we can listen to what the monster wants to tell us. The final project is also framed around the students becoming agents of the [Speculative Detective Agency](#) (SDA), an actual detective agency that I founded in 2021. The SDA is a hub for a variety of creative projects, including a literary anthology and various Live Action Role Playing (LARP) events and performances. The final event of the semester is a gathering at my house in which the students are ceremoniously inducted into the

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Here is a sample of the poetry we read at the SDA Induction Ceremony:

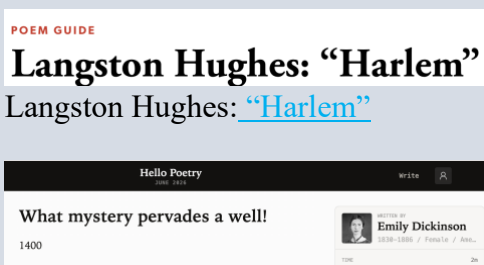
In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa



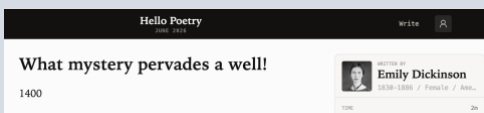
Ada Limón: [“In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa”](#)



Elizabeth Acevedo: [“La Ciguapa”](#)



Langston Hughes: [“Harlem”](#)



Emily Dickinson: [“What mystery pervades a well!”](#)

Speculative Detective Agency, receiving their own veladora that they can light when they need to solve a mystery, or to create one. As we eat bowls of pozole, we read a medley of mystery poetry and collectively ponder life, the universe, and everything. Ada Limón eloquently describes the conjunction of mystery and poetry: “For me, poetry is the language of mystery, it exists in the liminal spaces, the between worlds of waking and sleep, the places where extreme clarity turns into a surreal and unarguable truth. I feel my most free when I am making poems, when I am not searching toward an end goal but instead when I’m unraveling the strangeness of my own human experience...” (Dintino 2024).

Let us end where we began, in the cool dark chapel next to San Francisco de Asís Mission Church. After the docent turns the lights on, we make our way to the threshold and then step into the blinding light of summer. As my eyes begin to adjust, the wider world takes on a liminal aspect, now infused with things we cannot explain. New Mexico has a particularly strong genealogy of mystery, and deep wisdom throbs at the heart of New Mexican cultures which preserve the liminal mysteries, but in reality, these kinds of spaces that encourage the experience of the liminal can be found everywhere. Most major cities in the world have a ghost tour, and probably multiple ones, that are in need of some critical analysis. Everywhere religious institutions and alternate spiritualities guide people to the gates of mystery. Folktales and official reports

worldwide tell of strange encounters with monsters, ghosts, and aliens. The insistent questions and concerns might be different from place to place, but CMS can truly be taught anywhere.

Matthew David Goodwin is an Associate Professor in the Chicana/o Studies Department at the University of New Mexico. His research is centered on Chicanx and Latinx science fiction and *Critical Mystery Studies*, with further interests in philosophy, digital culture, pilgrimage, and larping. He is a co-editor of the *Latinx Archive* speculative fiction trilogy: *Latinx Rising*, *Speculative Fiction for Dreamers*, and *Not Your Papi’s Utopia*. His study *The Latinx Files: Race, Migration, and Space Aliens* introduces the field of Latinx science fiction and demonstrates how the alien has been reclaimed by Latinx creators. He has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and is an active agent in the Albuquerque office of the very much real *Speculative Detective Agency*.

Endnotes

1 AMA is the anxiety felt about the swirling blank circle at the heart of all mysteries, the thing that resists understanding, as well as the fear of judgment by our academic peers. Because many of the topics discussed in CMS are not normative, they create insecurity in students and scholars and often do in fact incite the judgment of others in the form of belittlement or scorn. AMA is ultimately the fear of transformation, to shed our skin and become vulnerable, and continue in our journey of human development. Rather than being mired in AMA, and to oppose this tendency, the work of authentic scholarship that stays true to oneself, as well as monster creation that connects us to the curative fonts of creativity in our cultures, gives us a degree of agency to work through anxiety rather than react to it.

2 There have been many people involved in the development of CMS, and given the space, I can only give a partial list. The graduate students include Marc Anaya, Paris Baldante, Colton Campbell, Valerie Chavez, Christy Frederick, Audrey Garcia, Sergio Garza, John Hardberger, Ruben Loza, Kristian Macaron, Ashley Martinez, Rebecca Martinez-Baca, Gabino Noriega III, Dante Olivas, Dominique Rodríguez, and Travis Torres Thompson. Faculty and artists include Bernadette Marie Calafell, Ayden Castellanos, Dale Ray Deforest, Jennifer Nez Denetdale, Ramona Emerson, Sarah Hernandez, Michael Lechuga, Kara McCormack, Cathryn Merla-Watson, Paul Edward Montgomery Ramírez, Richie Narvaez, Nahir Otaño Gracia, James Padilioni, Antoinette Rael, Jenny Rice, Sara Rivera, Michael Trujillo, Cayetano Valenzuela, and Irene Vasquez. A heartfelt apology to anyone unintentionally left off this list.

3 There are a variety of meanings of the term “mystery” and a variety of levels of understanding what a mystery is, from the epistemological to the ontological. From the beginning of CMS we have been considering what mysteries are, but the shorthand description we use is that a mystery is a question that resists understanding and that has gained a depth that the everyday question lacks. In addition, we typically are examining the more fantastic or big question mysteries rather than the mundane ones.

4 The “Cornstalk curse” refers to the supposed last words uttered by Shawnee leader Hokolessqua (translated to “Cornstalk”) in 1977. According to legend he proclaimed: “I came to the fort as your friend and you murdered me. You have murdered by my side, my young son . . . For this, may the curse of the Great Spirit rest upon this land. May it be blighted by nature. May it even be blighted in its hopes. May the strength of its peoples be paralyzed by the stain of our blood” (Montgomery Ramírez 2023, 89).

5 El Kookoóee is the phonetic spelling of El Cucuy (or El Coco), the boogeyman common in New Mexico, which is meant to give Chicax people who are English speakers access to this monster.

URLs

Critical Mystery Studies <https://criticalmysterystudies.com>

The Speculative Detective Agency <https://speculativetectiveagency.com>

The Latinx Archive <https://latinxarchive.com>

Ada Limón: “In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa” <https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/a-poem-for-europa>

Elizabeth Acevedo “La Ciguapa” <https://www.latinopoetry.org/featured-poems/la-ciguapa>

Langston Hughes “Harlem” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

Emily Dickinson “What mystery pervades a well!” <https://hellopoetry.com/poems/3969/what-mystery-pervades-a-well>

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Jabberwocks and Snallygasters: Exploring the Role of *Dungeons & Dragons* in Environmental Education

by Andrew D. Thaler, Erin Z. Anderson, Naomi F. Farabaugh, Andrew Kornblatt, Romaric Moncrieffe, Travis Neilsen, Rae Pendergrass, Heather D. Penney, Leigh J. Thaler, E.C.M. Parsons

The Last Hunt for the Jabberwock

Nyles cautiously approaches Soothsore Dam, her comically oversized battleaxe at the ready. The tiny fairy barbarian is poised to strike. There is a rustle in the forest below. Professor Cinnamon McWhiskey Biscuits emerges, dragging a massive, pungent bait ball. The saccharine scent of malted grains wafts through the still air. Plumbeus, wielding a pair of wish-forged daggers, tumbles awkwardly from the undergrowth.

The trees shake. The forest is afraid.

The Jabberwock, with eyes aflame, rises above the canopy, burbling as it approaches the terrified heroes.

Standing atop the dam, Honhk hefts Snicker-Snack, the rude and wholly unhelpful broadsword who has done nothing but mock the adventurers on their journey through these whimsical woods. The Jabberwock casts its gaze upon the hateful sword, the only weapon in all the Warren that can harm it. White-hot fire bursts from its eyes, blazing across the river, striking the sword as Honhk plunges it into the dam's heartstone.

Soothsore Dam crumbles. Water pours forth as the wishstones holding back the swamp shatter. The river surges. From deep in the swamp, the melodious ribbits of cheering Frogfolk are heard. The forest that was once their home will become their home once again. Downstream, a village of Rabbitfolk braces for the oncoming flood.

The Jabberwock turns its uffish gaze towards the soggy heroes...

Thus begins the third and final act of the [*Last Hunt for the Jabberwock: A Feywild Adventure in Ecologic Succession*](#) (Thaler 2024). Throughout this *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) campaign, players explore the ecology of a strange forest, study the impacts of a magical dam, and meet the communities that grow, thrive, toil, and suffer in this altered ecosystem. They discover how the history and ecology of a fire-dominated forest is shaped by the loss of keystone species. They unravel the environmental and social implications of building a dam that brought prosperity to one community while depriving another. As they reach the climactic conclusion, the players must decide how to balance the needs, desires, and fears of many different peoples based on what they have learned about this strange and whimsical forest.

The Last Hunt for the Jabberwock is a story about environmental justice, ambiguity, and the hard choices that must be made to heal a damaged land. It is an adventure built for educators and designed to be used within the framework of formal and informal environmental education programs. Included with the adventure are lesson plans, built around Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, which help students understand the context of the adventure through real-world examples of succession in fire-dominated ecosystems as well as the environmental and social consequences of building and removing dams. Those lessons combine in- and out-of-game activities that help inform decision making in this imaginary forest. Throughout the journey, players will encounter creatures from local legends. Some will be friendly, while others are spoiling for a fight.

The Last Hunt for the Jabberwock is part of a growing movement to integrate games, both serious and silly, into educational programs. Successful implementation of games creates immersive, meaningful experiences for students through a learn-by-doing approach to complex topics. Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs)—collaborative, storytelling-driven games in which players assume a character and act out their motives and actions through discussion and dice rolls—have increasingly found a home in both formal and informal educational settings. In addition to knowledge production in diverse subject areas, these games promote positive attitude and behavior changes, social-emotional learning such as social awareness and empathy, and increased communication skills while engaging with multiple learning styles (Tan and Nurul-Asna 2022). TTRPGs encourage creativity, social interaction, and improvisation as the players shape the story's outcome.

Creative Role-Play and Collaborative Storytelling in the Classroom

At their core, *Dungeons & Dragons* and other TTRPGs are tools that allow students to engage in creative role-playing and problem solving in a shared fantasy world in which dice introduce random elements into the adventure. As collaborative storytelling engines, they allow students and

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teachers to explore new and challenging concepts in a safe environment, guided by a game master who sets the tone and pace of the adventure. TTRPGs can serve as dramatic rehearsals where players can view complex and challenging issues from multiple angles and tackle decision making when there is no right answer. In working toward a common goal, players negotiate the competing needs of their party by building and rebuilding consensus (Haarman 2022). TTRPGs are autotelic—it is the experience, rather than the outcome, that is important.

Since 2019, a raggedy band of marine science misfits who call themselves the Cephalosquad, of which the authors of this piece are members, have run a *D&D* "actual-play" podcast, [*Dugongs and Seadragons*](#). "Actual play" is a term for podcasts and live events in which the performers play a TTRPG to an audience. Actual plays involve performance and improvisation in addition to the mechanics of the game. The *Dugongs and Seadragons* podcast has an environmental education twist. Everyone involved in the adventure is an ocean scientist, artist, educator, or student. Through *Dugongs and Seadragons*, the team has explored concepts of overfishing, marine pollution, whaling, ecosystem-based management, Indigenous rights, and environmental justice, all while sharing their love of ocean science and fighting creatures inspired by real marine animals and legendary maritime monsters.

In its eight-year history, *Dugongs and Seadragons* has produced over 370 episodes across the main storyline and several shorter stories, with over 70,000 downloads. The podcast has frequently broken into the top ten most downloaded for both Science and *Dungeons & Dragons* podcasts. The Cephalosquad have performed live shows at both pop culture conventions and scientific conferences. Monsters, especially those based in folklore, can provide shared cultural or place-based touchstones that help players engage in heroic role-play. To bring natural history-inspired monsters into the adventure, Cephalosquad members produced several books integrating marine science into *D&D*, including [*Scientific Secrets of the Salt Marsh*](#), [*Scientific Secrets of Avernus*](#), and [*Scientific Secrets of Icedwind Dale*](#). These modules make it easy for educators to drop specific monsters into existing *D&D* adventures.

One such adventure is *The Curse of the Snallygaster* (see Appendix), a beginner adventure for *Everyday Heroes*. *Everyday Heroes* is a TTRPG based on the 5th edition of *D&D*, which uses the same familiar rulesets of *D&D* but replaces magic and mediaeval mayhem with skills, gadgets, and specialized equipment more appropriate for grounded, realistic storytelling in the modern era. In *Snallygaster*, the players work for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Special Cryptid Unit, where they investigate sightings of strange creatures throughout the country. Namely, players hunt the elusive Snallygaster, a Maryland cryptid described as a winged bird-like reptile with a metallic beak, sharp talons, and, sometimes, tentacles. Some theories hold that the original Snallygaster, first documented as a story of 18th-century German immigrants (Fair 2013), was a heron attempting to swallow an octopus.

Throughout this adventure, which includes lessons plans and is designed to be played over a few classroom sessions, players learn about methods for studying wildlife, including conducting line transects, placing camera traps, and doing eDNA analysis. *The Curse of the Snallygaster* can also be played as an "actual-play" adventure, in which conservation and science professionals run the

game for a live or recorded audience as a novel and entertaining tool for teaching students about careers in wildlife conservation.

Other Examples of Creative Role-Play in Educational Settings

There are myriad opportunities for implementing creative role-play into informal educational programming. In a long-running program through his local library, Thaler explores concepts of censorship and book banning, as well as the value of reading, with mixed student groups from elementary through high school. He has published a complementary expansion to the 2025 *D&D* Starter Set, which adds these themes to a pre-made campaign.

A collaborative short series with the podcast [Marine Conservation Happy Hour](#) explores local history and folklore in a duet of adventures set in Colonial Williamsburg just after the Revolutionary War. The players learned about colonial medicine, colonial taverns, historically appropriate food, the history of the College of William and Mary, and piracy (in particular the infamous Blackbeard, whose crew was tried in Colonial Williamsburg). The stories involve local legends and [incorporate St. Nicholas and Krampus into the creation of the American Christmas](#).

There are many systems, like *Everyday Heroes*, which take the ruleset from *D&D* and integrate them into other science and fantasy franchises. [Doctors and Daleks](#) is a TTRPG based on 5th Edition *D&D* that places players into the *Doctor Who* universe rather than the Forgotten Realms of *D&D*. This system uses persuasion, logic, and problem solving, rather than violence, to overcome encounters with monsters from science, history, and folklore. Parsons runs *Doctors and Daleks* adventures that include searching for Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest and exploring U.S. Antarctic research stations, with a focus on learning about the National Science Foundation's polar program.

D&D and other TTRPGs can offer tremendous value for environmental educators. Access to the outdoors is not equitable (Parkin et al. 2025) and many students, particularly those in urban and suburban settings, may lack direct access to large parks, forests, and wilderness areas (Thomas et al. 2022). Even in rural areas, automobile dependence renders wild spaces out of reach for many students (Hemby et al. 2023). Social gatherings for young people are increasingly geared toward digital spaces. This phenomenon results in students who rarely interact with wilderness and are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with wild spaces.

Creative role-play, grounded in environmental themes and settings, allows students to explore and interact with unfamiliar places in a comfortable space that creates opportunities for emotional risk-taking without physical risk and can help promote an appreciation for the natural environment in situations where access to wild spaces may be limited. Even wholly virtual experiences that place a focus on natural exploration can inspire more direct engagement with environmental issues (Fletcher 2017). These experiences provide new ways to talk about natural processes, using fantasy as a buffer against the fatalism of environmental change and allowing students to explore solutions in a controlled setting (Niedzwiedz et al. 2025). The structured rules of TTRPGs allow the teacher to guide discussion in productive directions while encouraging exploration. Controversial topics become more approachable when discussed in the abstract, using fantastical worlds and monsters inspired by familiar folklore, rather than real-world scenarios.

Practical Considerations

Whether in the form of extended, semester-long campaigns like *Jabberwock*, or shorter, focused adventures like *Snallygaster*, TTRPGs offer students an opportunity to see how their own emotions are affected by engaging in situations and perspectives that differ from their own (Haarman 2022). These games make space for the instructor to explore new ways of teaching using pre-existing systems, which allow educators to focus on the lesson rather than the mechanics of the game (Burenheide and Allen 2025).

Integrating a *D&D* campaign into formal or informal lessons does not have to be a difficult or time-consuming task. With over half a century of material, much of which is designed around nature-based themes, there is a plethora of adventures to choose from. *D&D* may not be the right choice for every program. *D&D* and its connection to the moral panics of the 1980s can still run afoul of school guidelines and face resistance from parents. Other TTRPG game systems offer similar experiences with varying levels of complexity. All TTRPGs generally follow the same basic gameplay loop: A game master, who oversees the experience, describes a scene. The players decide what they want to do in that scene. The game master then uses the rules of the TTRPG to decide how that decision will be resolved, usually, though not always, through a dice roll. The story then continues, using the outcome of that encounter to determine how the game master describes the next scene. Choosing a TTRPG with which teacher and students are already familiar (which, in most cases, will be *D&D*) eases the task of integrating it into an educational program. The less time you need invest in teaching rules, the more time you can focus on the adventure and the lesson.

D&D, with its massive back catalog, numerous rulebooks, and universe of miniatures, maps, and accessories can seem daunting, but the game itself is resource agnostic. The core rules for the current version of *D&D* have been released free under a creative commons license as the [System Reference Documents 5.1](#) and [5.2](#). While it can be helpful to have the three main rulebooks (the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*), they are not necessary to play. You can start with nothing more than a set of dice, a character sheet, and the free online rules. The fewer accessories and barriers to play, the greater the opportunities to encourage imagination. Even the rules can be cast aside in favor of imagination. The “Rule of Cool” allows game masters to discard the official rules in favor of rewarding their players for especially novel or creative solutions that may violate the written rules of the TTRPG but better capture the spirit of the adventure.

Note to Teachers

Combat, death, and violence are an inherent part of *D&D* (nearly two-thirds of the 2014 *Players' Handbook* is dedicated to combat and combat-focused magic [Albom 2021]), and excessive violence may not be appropriate for classroom gaming. *D&D*, particularly the 5th Edition, provides numerous alternatives that allow the players to seek nonviolent solutions to challenges facing them. The strict structure of combat in the ruleset can serve to incentivize non-combat approaches, which work within a system that offers infinite variability through the advantage/disadvantage system. However, we also believe that part of the act of heroic role-play (and opportunities for student joy) should include the occasional drawing of swords or casting of fireballs, when appropriate.

The major resource limitation for playing *D&D*, or other TTRPGs, is time. These games lend themselves to two- to four-hour sessions, which can be shortened if necessary, but longer play sessions tend to yield more rewarding experiences. Some adventures, like *Snallygaster*, can be run as a single event, with players completing the story in one session. Others, like *Jabberwock*, are played over several sessions with players completing the campaign over months. This does not always fit into a conventional classroom schedule. To account for time limitations, *Jabberwock* has been designed with smaller bite-sized adventure chunks that can work with either a limited classroom schedule or stretched out over longer sessions of a few hours.

The instructor's time is also a critical consideration to successfully implementing a TTRPG into the classroom. Preparing for a *D&D* session, especially when you are new to running games, can take almost as much time as running the actual game, if not longer. Instructors need to familiarize themselves with the story and the rules and prepare any materials, props, or lessons ahead of time. With practice, this preparation time can be substantially reduced.

Conclusion

Our students are hungry for adventure. *Dungeons & Dragons* and other tabletop role-playing games offer a portal for formal and informal educators to engage their students in complex environmental topics that center decision making on the students. Combining learning with creative, imaginative play, while incorporating real-world scenarios into fantasy settings with monsters drawn from shared stories, can be a powerful tool for challenging students to explore solutions to the problems they face in their own world. This allows them to take an active, rather than a passive, role in addressing seemingly abstract global challenges.

Whether facing the threat of environmental change or staring down the slaving, tentacular jaws of the Snallygaster, through creative role-play students can see themselves as the heroes of their own environmental stories.

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Erin Z. Anderson prepared the artwork, and E.C.M. Parsons created *The Curse of the Snallygaster*, provided in the Appendix, below.

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URLs

Last Hunt for the Jabberwock <https://www.dmsguild.com/en/product/505687/the-last-hunt-for-the-jabberwock-a-feywild-adventure-in-ecologic-succession>

Dugongs and Seadragons <https://open.spotify.com/show/4fALIkq95JBf2gfeCInBt5>

Scientific Secrets of the Salt Marsh <https://www.dmsguild.com/en/product/304375/scientific-secrets-of-saltmarsh>

Scientific Secrets of Avernus <https://www.dmsguild.com/en/product/314770/scientific-secrets-of-avernus>

Scientific Secrets of Icewind Dale <https://www.dmsguild.com/en/product/331050/scientific-secrets-of-icewind-dale>

System Reference Documents 5.1 <https://www.dndbeyond.com/attachments/39j2li89/SRD5.1-CCBY4.0License.pdf>

System Reference Documents 5.2.1 https://media.dndbeyond.com/compendium-images/srd/5.2/SRD_CC_v5.2.1.pdf

Marine Conservation Happy Hour <https://marineconservationhappyhour.libsyn.com/williamsburg-pt-1-the-apothecary>

MCHH Christmas Special <https://marineconservationhappyhour.libsyn.com/krampus-a-christmas-eve-special>

Doctors and Daleks https://cubicle7games.com/en_US/doctors-and-daleks

Appendix: *The Curse of the Snallygaster*

(starts on following page to preserve formatting)

A Note to Teachers

Designed for high-school students, *The Curse of the Snallygaster* adventure is built around a local legend about smuggling, rum runners, and a monster. Middle-school educators may adapt this role-playing game by substituting themes as appropriate.



The Curse of the Snallygaster

**A 5e-Compatible Tabletop Role-Playing
Adventure for 1st-Level Characters**

E.C.M. Parsons

CREDITS

Author: E.C.M. Parsons

Cover Art: Erin Z. Anderson

Layout: Andrew D. Thaler

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First Edition, 2026

Disclaimer: Great Blue Herons are large birds with sharp, bayonet-shaped beaks. They are shy but can be dangerous, possibly more dangerous than the Snallygaster itself. They are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Snallygasters need no such protection.

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MEET THE SNALLYGASTER

GAME SYSTEM

This adventure is compatible with most 5e-based tabletop role-playing games, including the *Everyday Heroes*™ role-playing game system. The adventure can be easily adapted for many other tabletop role-playing game systems.

ADVENTURE SETTING

St. Michaels, a small town on the Maryland Eastern Shore with a long, rich history

ADVENTURE LENGTH

One 3- to 4-hour session

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The Snallygaster is an elusive Maryland cryptid described as a winged birdlike reptile with a metallic beak, sharp talons, and, sometimes, tentacles. Although rooted in the folklore of 18th-century German immigrants, some skeptics believe that the original Snallygaster was a heron attempting to swallow an octopus.

In the 1920s, the backwoods of Maryland were home to bootleggers (people who produce or sell illegal alcohol) who used the legend of the Snallygaster to scare off revenuers (federal agents who sought to

enforce liquor laws during Prohibition). A century later, St. Michaels residents report glowing eyes in the mist, claw marks on barns, and livestock found drained of blood.

Locals whisper that the Snallygaster has returned. The U.S. Cryptid Field Research Team (a special division of U.S. Fish and Wildlife) is sent to investigate.

Unknown to them, a small-time smuggling ring has revived the legend to hide their modern rum-running operation—funneling illicit liquor from the coast to the mountains. The Snallygaster that locals fear is a man in a glider suit, using pyrotechnics and sound devices to frighten off witnesses.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not, to the best of our knowledge, actually have a cryptid division, although it is rumored that they maintain a database of Bigfoot sightings.

MISSION BRIEFING

Objective: Investigate and document the reported Snallygaster sightings near St. Michaels, MD.

Secondary Objectives:

- Determine if the threat is biological, paranormal, or human in origin.
- Avoid public panic or media leaks.
- Coordinate with local law enforcement discreetly.

SCENE I: ARRIVAL IN ST. MICHAELS

SETTING: TOWN OF ST. MICHAELS

It is an early Wednesday evening when you arrive in St. Michaels. The town is quiet. The tourists, who usually throng the streets, will not return until the weekend. Members of the U.S. Cryptid Field Research Team come from all over the country and don't necessarily know each other.

Introduce your characters.

After your party gets acquainted, your first stop is the police station, where the friendly but skeptical Chief Beattie Ramsey expects you. The police station is next door to the St. Michaels Library, which has been offered to the team as a base of operations.

Sheriff Beattie "Bea" Ramsey

AC: 11, HP: 16

Skills: Persuasion +3, Insight +2, Investigation +3

Equipment: Radio, flashlight, revolver (1d8+2)

Practical, dry sense of humor. She is skeptical of "monster" talk but happy to let federal agents handle the weirdness. If befriended, she'll cover for them when the press comes snooping.

If asked about anything unusual, Beattie mentions that the jail regular Chunky hasn't been up to his usual low-level shenanigans recently.

ENCOUNTER: MEET THE CHIEF

Interview Chief Beattie Ramsey. She shows blurry phone footage of "the creature" flying over the Crab Claw Restaurant.

This is the most exciting thing to happen to Beattie Ramsay in a long while. Usually, she has to deal with upper-class drunks driving erratically, picking fights on Carpenter St., or skinny dipping in Muskrat Park. She doesn't believe that the Snallygaster exists but enjoys the change to her usual routine.

The party can visit restaurants, coffee shops, bars, or one of the various tourist shops to chat with some of the locals. They get a variety of opinions including:

- "Chunky said he saw it eat a snakehead!"
- "It's probably some kid playing a prank."
- "It'll be good for local tourism."

SKILL CHECKS

- **Persuasion (DC 12):** Gain Sheriff's trust and get access to the evidence locker (scraps of scales that are actually roofing tar).
- **Investigation (DC 10):** Spot inconsistencies in the video — the "tentacles" look like an octopus.

SCENE II: THE FALSE SIGHTING

SETTING: FOXY'S HARBOR GRILLE

This scene sets the tone: part cryptid mystery, part natural history, part bureaucratic misadventure.

Bea sent you to Foxy's Harbor Grille for dinner. Your server, Whit Tilghman, overhears you and reveals that she heard strange noises and saw the shadow of a giant bird near Church Neck Road. She was sitting with her ex-boyfriend, Ed, in his car when it happened. She makes sure the party knows that he is her ex-boyfriend.

As you walk back from the restaurant through Muskrat Park, you see a huge, winged shape flying off with squirming, writhing tentacles emerging from its mouth. A camera flashes and someone shouts:

"Snallygaster!"

ENCOUNTER: THE FALSE SNALLYGASTER

This Snallygaster is a Great Blue Heron that stole an octopus from the dumpster behind Foxy's, the result of an unsuccessful attempt to add calamari to the menu, which spoiled when the shipment was delayed.

Can the team uncover the truth before yet another blurry Snallygaster photo spreads online? This scene should be funny and confusing, not dangerous. The agents may

chase or capture it for cryptid analysis, only to discover that it's just a bird.

False Snallygaster (Great Blue Heron)

AC 12, HP 9

Skills: Perception +3

Peck: +4 to hit, 1d4+2 piercing.

Frightened Flutter (Reaction): If startled, the heron flaps noisily, knocking over unsecured items in a 10-foot radius (DEX Save DC 11 or fall prone).

SKILL CHECKS

- **Perception (DC 12):** Spot the bird's true form.
- **Nature (DC 10):** Identify both the Great Blue Heron and octopus.
- **Athletics (DC 12):** Chase it for fun, possibly leading to someone falling in the water by Muskrat Park.
- **Persuasion (DC 12):** Convince the curious bystander not to post the photo online.

After the false alarm, the agents can return to their B&B for a debrief about the day's activities. The team should spend the next day or two setting camera traps, taking eDNA samples from around town, running transects, and questioning townspeople. The longer this takes, the more tourists arrive looking for the Snallygaster, especially if the photo leaked online.

Clues should slowly lead them to Ballintober Farm.

SCENE III: BALLINTOBER FARM

SETTING: BALLINTOBER FARM

The road to Ballintober Farm is heavily forested and occasionally floods at high tide. Built during the Prohibition Era, the farm most recently was the disreputable residence of a high-ranking government official. It has, in recent years, fallen into disrepair.

The few locals who pass through the area have reported hearing screeches and seeing glowing eyes in the woods.

Investigating the area will reveal an old, abandoned distillery and a rum stash hidden inside.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING?

The old docks and boat ramps at Mount Misery Farm are used by recreational ne'er-do-wells to smuggle cheap rum, undermining the excellent distillery in town. They have set up a remote-controlled sound rig and LED drones to deter tourists and nosey neighbors. Their rum stash is hidden in an abandoned distillery at the back of the farm.

SKILL CHECKS

- **Technology (DC 13):** Trace the sound source.
- **Stealth (DC 12):** Approach unseen.

- **Perception (DC 10):** Spot recent tire tracks from a pickup truck.

ENCOUNTER: RIGGED DISTILLERY DEFENSES

A hidden loudspeaker attached to a motion sensor will trigger a Snallygaster scream, forcing a DC 11 WIS Save or become Frightened for 1 round (harmless but startling).

- **Perception (DC 12):** Notice wiring.
- **Technology (DC 13):** Disable loudspeaker.

COMPLICATION: TRIPWIRE FLARE

A hidden tripwire releases a flare and a mechanical screech, causing a temporary panic. You must be actively searching for traps to avoid setting it off.

- **Stealth (DC 13):** To avoid setting off the flare.
- **On failure:** +2 to hit, 1d4 fire damage, and alerts nearby **Smugglers**.

SCENE IV: FACE THE SNALLYGASTER

SETTING: ABANDONED DISTILLERY

"Hidden in the abandoned distillery at the back of Ballintober Farm, you finally meet the Snallygaster. As you approach the building, a tall, winged figure takes to the sky, swooping through the fog, glowing eyes blazing."

BUT IT'S ACTUALLY...

Ed "Chunky" Buchanan, ex-pilot and current rum runner, is wearing a motorized glider rig coated in phosphorescent paint and rigged with sound emitters. Ed uses the glider to appear and vanish dramatically and attempts to frighten the party with loudspeakers and flares.

If reduced below 5 HP, he surrenders, ranting:

"I just wanted to be left alone! It's not my fault the come-heres will believe anything!"

COMBAT/CHASE ENCOUNTER

Ed tries to scare the team off or escape with a truckload of rum while his accomplices (2–3 smugglers) attempt to cover his retreat.

FOES

Smuggler

AC 12, HP 11

Skills: Intimidation +2, Athletics +3

Club or Wrench: +3 to hit, 1d6+1 bludgeoning.

Pistol (if armed): +3 to hit, range 30/90 ft., 1d8+1 piercing.

Flees if bloodied, serve as lookouts or rum-runners at the abandoned distillery.

Ed "Chunky" Buchanan

AC 13, HP 22

Skills: Deception +4, Piloting +4, Perception +2, Technology +2

Revolver: +4 to hit, range 40/120 ft., 1d8+2 piercing.

Glider Dive (Recharge 5–6): Chunky dives up to 40 ft. in a straight line; any target in the path must succeed on a DC 13 DEX save or take 2d6 bludgeoning and be knocked prone.

Flash Bomb (once per encounter): Creates a burst of light and sparks; all within 15 ft. make DC 12 CON saves or be blinded until end of next turn.

CONCLUSION: THE SNALLYGASTER UNMASKED

After capturing or exposing Ed, the team learns that the smugglers revived the Snallygaster legend to keep curious locals, tourists, and law enforcement away from their bootlegging operation. What they didn't expect was that the Snallygaster would attract far more attention than some low-level rum running.

St. Michaels has quite the reputation for high-quality rum, and Chief Ramsey would rather keep it that way. The Snallygaster has been drawing crowds, and news of bootleggers would be bad for the tourist business. She thanks the team for their efforts and offers them a handshake deal:

"Let's just say we bagged ourselves a big bird and keep the mystery alive."

REWARDS

The team receives an **Excellence in Public Discretion** commendation from their agency. As they pack up to leave, their phones start buzzing. There are rumors of another Snallygaster sighting across the state line.

OPTIONAL TWIST: IT WAS A REAL CRYPTID AFTER ALL!

As you check your equipment, you notice that one of your camera traps captured something winged and reptilian flying past the moon.



LESSON PLAN: INVESTIGATING *THE CURSE OF THE SNALLYGASTER*

Life Science lesson using creative role-play.

OVERVIEW

In the adventure *The Curse of the Snallygaster*, students become wildlife investigators working for the fictional U.S. Cryptid Field Research Team. Through collaborative storytelling, scientific investigation, and environmental observation, students learn real biological field methods while exploring how scientists distinguish evidence from misinformation.

TIME REQUIRED

2–3 class periods (45–60 minutes each)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Explain how scientists investigate wildlife sightings.
- Identify basic ecological field methods including camera traps, transects, and eDNA sampling.
- Distinguish between evidence and assumption.
- Analyze animal adaptations and behavior.
- Collaborate to solve a scientific mystery.
- Practice scientific observation and communication skills.

MATERIALS

- *The Curse of the Snallygaster* adventure
- Teacher-prepared “evidence cards” (photos, tracks, witness statements)
- Local maps of parks, towns, or wilderness areas
- Student notebooks or science journals

VOCABULARY

Cryptid: A creature from legend or folklore whose existence has not been confirmed

eDNA: Environmental DNA collected from water, soil, or air

Transect: A line scientists follow to count or observe organisms

Camera Trap: Motion-activated wildlife camera

Adaptation: A trait that helps an organism survive
Observation: Information gathered using senses or tools
Evidence: Data used to support a conclusion

LESSON 1 – THE MYSTERY BEGINS

Warm-Up (10 minutes)

Ask students “If people reported seeing a monster in your town, how would scientists investigate it?”

Write responses on the board.

Discuss:

- Eyewitness reliability
- Animal misidentification
- Scientific skepticism
- Importance of evidence

Introduction to the Snallygaster (10 minutes)

Introduce the Maryland cryptid that a Great Blue Heron may have inspired.

Explain that in the adventure:

- Witnesses believe they saw a monster.
- Investigators collect scientific evidence.
- Many sightings may have natural explanations.

In Game: Wildlife Investigation Teams (25–30 minutes)

Divide students into investigation teams.

Each team receives:

- Witness statements
- Blurry “monster” photos
- Environmental clues
- Wildlife information cards

Students must determine:

1. What evidence is reliable?
2. Which clues are biological?
3. Could the “monster” be a real animal?

Encourage students to think like wildlife biologists.

LESSON 2 – FIELD METHODS

Mini-Lesson: How Wildlife Scientists Study Animals (15 minutes)

Introduce real field techniques used in the adventure.

1. Camera Traps: Researchers use them to photograph elusive animals.
2. Transects: Scientists walk measured paths and record observations.
3. eDNA Sampling: Animals leave DNA traces in water or soil.

Discuss:

- Why these methods are useful
- Strengths and weaknesses of each
- How evidence can be misinterpreted

In Game: Design a Cryptid Investigation (25 minutes)

Student teams design their own investigation plan using assorted local maps.

They must decide:

- Where to place camera traps
- Where to collect eDNA
- What animals might be misidentified
- How to avoid false conclusions

Students create:

- A simple field map
- A hypothesis
- An evidence collection strategy

LESSON 3 – PUTTING EVIDENCE TO THE TEST

Discussion (10 minutes)

Ask:

- Why do monster stories exist and what can they tell us about communities?
- Why do people sometimes misidentify animals?
- How can social media spread misinformation?

In Game: The Final Reveal (25–30 minutes)

Reveal that the in-game Snallygaster was actually:

- A staged hoax
- Based partly on real wildlife behavior
- Amplified by rumors, tourism, and local legends

Students evaluate:

- Which evidence supported the truth?
- Which clues were misleading?
- How did scientific thinking solve the mystery?

Students complete a short reflection:

“What is the difference between believing something and proving it scientifically?”

Assessment

Formative Assessment

- Participation in discussions
- Investigation notebook entries
- Team collaboration

Summative Assessment Options

- Scientific investigation report
- Wildlife evidence presentation
- Reflection essay
- Creature adaptation project

Notes for Instructors

The role-playing elements can be light or extensive depending on classroom comfort. Combat from the original adventure can be removed entirely.

Focus should remain on investigation, ecology, evidence, and scientific reasoning.

This lesson works especially well for:

- reluctant learners
- collaborative classrooms
- STEM enrichment
- library programs
- environmental education clubs

Additional Discussion Questions:

1. Why are eyewitness accounts sometimes unreliable?
2. How can folklore be inspired by real animals?
3. Why is scientific skepticism important and how does it differ from denialism?
4. Are there instances when too much skepticism can cause you to miss something important?
5. What happens when misinformation spreads online?

6. What kinds of cultural value do stories about cryptids have even when they are not scientifically supported?

Next Generation Science Standards

MS-LS2 Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics

MS-LS2-1. Analyze and interpret data to provide evidence for the effects of resource availability on organisms and populations of organisms in an ecosystem.

MS-LS2-2. Construct an explanation that predicts patterns of interactions among organisms across multiple ecosystems.

MS-LS2-4. Construct an argument supported by empirical evidence that changes to physical or biological components of an ecosystem affect populations.



BAD BUNNY'S BATICANO

Bad Bunny's "Baticano": Teaching Moral Panic as Digital Folklore

by Nathian Shae Rodriguez

Why Teach "Baticano" as a Monster Text?

Bad Bunny released "[Baticano](#)" on Halloween (October 31, 2023) as part of his album *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana*. Directed by Stillz and featuring Steve Buscemi, the black-and-white video stages an overt gothic homage: Bad Bunny performs as both a somnambulist figure and a Nosferatu-like vampire, moving through expressionist set design, cemetery choreography, and devotional imagery. This visual narrative is anchored by ominous, syncretic beats and lyrics that interrogate themes of sin and judgment (Huft 2022), making music a literacy pathway for analyzing how the performer is monsterized. These multimedia layers—word, sound, and image—invite moral interpretation beyond genre play, highlighting domestic violence framed by a portrait of Jesus and a father angrily shutting off a television when two men kiss. Those moments make the video a productive site for discussing how sexuality, religion, family authority, and respectability become flashpoints in public discourse.

By Summer 2026, the official YouTube upload had surpassed 25 million views and displayed more than 22,000 comments. Students recognized the comment section as a familiar cultural space: a public arena where strangers argue not only about what a text "means" but also about what it does—what it authorizes, threatens, or normalizes. "Baticano" operates as a monster text by featuring a literal vampire while simultaneously generating a second monstrosity through discourse—a double play that is key to this module's analysis of moral panic. Online posts and stitched videos label the work "dark," "evil," "Satanic," or "occult," alongside counter-claims that it is "just art," "just Dracula," or simply Halloween performance.

For example, a TikTok account branded as a truth-telling watchdog described the video as “full of occult imagery” and argued that the lyrics position Bad Bunny as an “industry puppet” (The Truth Is 2023). Christian and conservative social media posts amplified a warning-tale logic (“Invite evil into your home...”) and encouraged viewers to boycott. In adjacent threads, other users contested these claims (“it’s just Dracula for Halloween”), defended pluralism (“there is nothing wrong with occult practice”), or negotiated identity (“I’m Christian and his music slaps...not sure if I’ll stop listening”). Rather than treating these arguments as noise around the “real meaning” of the text, I use them as the lesson: The discourse is the folklore.

Course Context

This module was developed for an upper-division undergraduate elective in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at San Diego State University (SDSU), a large public university in Southern California and a Hispanic-serving institution. Enrollment is approximately 50 students and the course has run multiple times since Fall 2025.

As a Hispanic-serving institution, the campus context matters. Students regularly navigate competing narratives about Latinidad, religion, gender expression, and respectability in public culture.

The course explores and deconstructs mediated representations of intersectional Latinx/e identities by analyzing the music, career, and influence of the Puerto Rican artist Bad Bunny. It emphasizes: 1) digital media and audience reception; 2) the global flow of media from South to North; 3) the relationship between Spanish-language/Latinx/e media and U.S. English-language media systems; and 4) the sociopolitics of race, ethnicity, geography, gender, and queerness in lyrical and visual performance.

As a Hispanic-serving institution, the campus context matters. Students regularly navigate competing narratives about Latinidad, religion, gender expression, and respectability in public culture. For many students at this border-proximate institution, this navigation manifests as tension between traditional familismo—which often emphasizes conservative Catholic values and rigid gender roles—and the transgressive, queer-coded expressions of modern Latinx/e artists. In classroom discussions, students frequently describe the category crisis (Anaya 2012; Cohen 1996) of defending Bad Bunny’s artistic merit to older family members who view his occult or gender-bending aesthetics through a lens of moral panic or cultural betrayal. “Baticano” lands pedagogically because it sits at the collision point of religious symbolism, erotically explicit reggaetón confession/boasting, and queer visibility, while also providing a recognizable monster tradition (the vampire) with a long history of fear/desire dynamics.

Bad Bunny as Cultural Anchor

Bad Bunny is a particularly effective cultural anchor for pedagogy because students encounter him as more than a musician: He circulates as a platform-native figure whose performances, fashion, interviews, collaborations, and controversies are already embedded in students’ everyday interpretive habits—hot takes, screenshots, “explainers,” and comment-thread debates. That ubiquity matters for teaching because it allows theory to meet practice in real time: Students can test concepts about representation, framing, and identity negotiation against a living media ecosystem rather than a sealed “text.” This approach aligns with other classroom-based Bad Bunny

pedagogies that describe him as the hook that brings students into the room. Because many students arrive already familiar with his work, that familiarity can increase confidence and allow instructors to move more quickly into complex theories and histories than they otherwise might (Díaz and Rivera-Rideau 2024).

This course's use of Bad Bunny as an anchor is intentional: It follows a critical pop culture pedagogy approach that uses mediated examples students already encounter to facilitate critical dialogue, make theory legible, and connect analysis to lived experience (Rodriguez 2020). In my work on intersectional critical communication pedagogy, I similarly argue for classroom practices that foreground relevance through reflection on identity, discussion of lived experience, and the integration of real-world examples in real time, including mediated/pop culture texts (Rodriguez 2022a). In this sense, the “Baticano” module treats students’ feeds as curriculum—functioning as both digital folklore archives and real-time laboratories for practicing evidence-based interpretation, discourse analysis, and ethical engagement.

In this course, folklore pedagogy is foundational to my scaffolding for student learning. This module treats students as participants in vernacular systems of meaning-making rather than observers looking at culture from the outside (Uddin, Alam, and Talukder 2025). Within this framework, Bad Bunny functions as a bridge between academic critique and professional media literacy (Díaz and Rivera-Rideau 2024; Rodriguez 2020; 2022a). I scaffold that work through structured prompts, “checks,” and reusable classroom tools that make interpretation more transparent and actionable (Cruz 2025). Students practice close reading and cultural analysis alongside fieldwork-adjacent skills such as tracing circulation and identifying interpretive communities (DuBois et al. 2018).

“Baticano” in the Larger Bad Bunny Conversation

“Baticano” is also pedagogically useful because it sits inside a broader public conversation about Bad Bunny as a figure who resists traditional boundaries, thereby making these boundaries more visible to students for analysis. Prior audience discourse around Bad Bunny’s gender-bending performances—such as research on “Yo Perreo Sola”—shows how quickly his work becomes a flashpoint for policing machismo, queerness, and respectability in Latinx/e pop contexts (Rodriguez 2022b). Across his career, audiences have debated what his work does to—or for—norms of masculinity, sexuality, and respectability in Latinx/e and U.S. popular culture. Whether praised as expansive and modern or criticized as corrosive and “too much,” he is routinely positioned as a cultural symbol through which people argue about gender expression, desire, religion, and the limits of public visibility.

“Baticano” condenses those tensions into a single text. Its monster aesthetics invite genre play, but its religious imagery and scenes of domestic authority invite moral reading. The lyrics reinforce the visual’s Gothic defiance, with lines like “Si Dios es bueno, por qué el hombre es malo?” (“If God is good, then why is man evil?”), directly mirroring the video’s interrogation of moral hypocrisy. That combination makes it ideal for teaching monsterization as a discourse process, while acknowledging that musicality offers another literacy pathway for exploring these themes: how communities attach moral meaning to bodies, images, and sounds; how they narrate threat; and how they instruct others to respond (Cohen 1996; Huft 2022). This process is evident in what

Norma Mendoza-Denton (1996) calls the “performance of Chola identity,” where specific aesthetic markers like dark eyeliner and lipstick are read by outsiders as signifiers of deviance and threat (50). Just as the Chola mask triggers moral judgment, Bad Bunny’s use of gothic and devotional imagery, syncretic beats, and transgressive lyrics generates a monsterized discourse that attempts to police the boundaries of Latinx/e identity.

Nosferatu as a Shared Monster Vocabulary

Nosferatu functions as a kind of shared monster shorthand and functional icon (Senf 2025): Even when students have not seen the film, the vampire’s visual grammar reads immediately. This portability allows the vampire to function as both spectacle and a carrier of a durable cultural history of boundary anxieties: desire and danger, seduction and threat, contamination and protection (Cohen 1996). Nosferatu is historical and transnational: Its imagery has repeatedly been rewritten across decades, countries, and music genres within both U.S. and Latin American Gothic traditions, demonstrating the enduring influence of Murnau’s adaptation as a visual template for new cultural meanings (Fisiak 2025).

For this lesson, the point is not to master film history or trace the localized origins of the vampire; it is to notice how a familiar monster template helps online publics build competing stories about what the text means and what it does—especially when religion, sexuality, and the family/home are at stake.

Text Snapshot: What “Baticano” Puts into Play

- The video uses a black-and-white gothic/expressionist visual style; cemetery choreography; resurrection/awakening motif.
- Bad Bunny performs as a somnambulist/vampire figure, invoking Nosferatu-like iconography.
- Religious imagery appears alongside scenes of harm and control (domestic violence framed by a Jesus portrait; moral authority staged in the home).
- A father angrily turns off a TV when two men kiss, foregrounding the policing of queer visibility.
- Lyrics repeatedly invoke confession and forgiveness (“God forgive me...”) while also rejecting moral monopoly (“no one has the right to judge in the name of Christ”).
- Online responses split between genre/context framing (“Halloween Dracula”) and threat framing (“occult,” “portal,” “industry puppet”), creating a live archive for analyzing monsterization as digital folklore (Ellis 2004).

One productive extension of this intertextual reading is to connect the video’s queer-visibility moment (the father covering a child’s eyes when two men kiss) to a longer vampire tradition associated with encoded queer meanings, positioning the vampire as an outsider figure (Fisiak 2025). This lens shows how monster talk can function as proxy language for policing sexual norms in the home; popular queer-horror stories likewise frame Nosferatu—often noting Murnau’s sexuality—as an allegory of anxieties about modernity, including homosexuality (McConnell 2024). In class, I prompt students to trace the visual parallels between the father’s policing in the video and historical moral panics surrounding queer-coded horror (McConnell 2024). Students identified how the vampire functions as a “border-crosser” not just between life and death but also

between accepted and deviant sexualities, and they note how the domestic setting stages violence under religious iconography in a way that primes moral-panic readings (Fisiak 2025, 140).

Monsters, Meaning-Making, and “Monsterization”

Folklore can be understood as a repository of collective beliefs and traditions, offering a lens for examining how cultural narratives shape identity, prejudice, and power (Uddin, Alam, and Talukder 2025). Monsters are one especially vivid site where those beliefs and traditions get narrated, argued over, and taught—often through stories that make cultural boundaries visible. This ambivalence is part of the vampire’s durability as a teaching monster: Even when the figure is framed as objectively horrifying, audiences remain drawn to its power, a paradox that reveals how desire and danger can travel together in monster discourse (Senf 2025).

Monster theory’s usefulness for teaching is its insistence that monsters are not primarily biological or supernatural facts; they are readable cultural bodies. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” offers portable propositions for classroom application, including: the monster as an embodiment of a cultural moment; the monster’s recurring return “in slightly different clothing”; the monster as a category crisis; and the monster as a border guard that warns against transgressive movement (Cohen 1996). In this sense, calling something “demonic” or “Satanic” is not only an insult; it is a map of the speaker’s anxieties and a technique for policing the possible. Judith Halberstam (1995) frames monstrosity as historically conditioned meaning-making. This is evident in Chicano literary traditions, such as Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (2012), which uses monstrous folklore to challenge religious orthodoxy (105). Placing “Baticano” in this lineage reveals how the video functions as a vernacular tool for defining the limits of faith and belonging. This multi-valence (Ponce Castañeda 2026) allows students to analyze how identical aesthetic cues can trigger wildly incompatible, competing narratives.

To operationalize monsterization as a communicative process, I borrow from framing pedagogy. Justin Huft argues that monsters help students see how societies communicate fears—moral decay, uncertainty about the future, anxiety about outgroups, and spiritual unknowns—and how frames are amplified, transformed, and extended through cultural storytelling (Huft 2022). I adapt this approach to a platform discourse context: Rather than reading monsters only in horror plots, students analyze the rhetorical infrastructure of monster talk in stitched videos, warning posts, and comment threads.

Because the module treats comment threads as vernacular texts, it also draws on work that demonstrates how “monster” language can shift from stigma to affiliation. In their study of Lady Gaga’s “Little Monsters,” Click, Lee, and Holladay show how social media can intensify fan identification and community meaning-making (2013). “Baticano” discourse reveals a different, parallel dynamic: “Monster” becomes a label used to stigmatize (“demon,” “puppet,” “portal”) even as other users neutralize the label through genre framing or invert it through pluralist claims.

Why a Gothic Music Video Is a Particularly Effective Monster Text

Because “Baticano” is an explicit homage to Gothic cinema, it allows students to practice intertextual reading: how a contemporary music video borrows, remixes, and reanimates earlier monster traditions. To make this productive, students first examine the visual grammar of

Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) by watching a short video analysis, [How Nosferatu Laid the Groundwork for Gothic Cinema](#) (One Hundred Years of Cinema 2016). This allows them to identify how specific motifs—such as the somnambulist's stiff gait or the use of expressionist shadows—are recycled in the video to signal monstrosity. In class discussions, students successfully connect these traditional narrative cues to the video's contemporary setting, noting how the vampire's intrusion into the normative home updates the historical anxiety of the outsider-invader for a modern audience.

Drago Momcilovic argues that gothic-themed music videos complicate one-to-one models of adaptation and may “undermine, counter, or exceed” a song's lyrical sentiments through spectacle and intermedial reference (Momcilovic 2023, 2-3). That insight helps students reconcile the gap between the video's stylized horror world and the competing claims made about it online: The video can be simultaneously a genre performance and a trigger for moral panic. This analysis relies on the previously discussed “amalgam of word, sound, and image” where the track's intertextuality of ominous beats and transgressive lyrics work in tandem with the visual narrative and “initiate innovative readings of familiar motifs” as older Gothic conventions are remixed for contemporary audiences (Dobrogoszcz, Handley, and Fisiak 2024, 17).

Teaching Module: From *Nosferatu* to “Not in My House”

Learning Goals

- Identify monster aesthetics and genre cues in a music video (gothic lighting, expressionist staging, vampiric iconography).
- Explain monsterization as boundary-policing discourse (faith, sexuality, family, respectability).
- Code vernacular evidence styles in online claims-making (symbol-hunting, scripture, vibe/affect, translation, contextual receipts).
- Compare competing interpretive frames without adjudicating belief claims as true/false.
- Practice ethical analysis of public discourse involving religion, sexual explicitness, and queer visibility.

Materials

- YouTube videos: One Hundred Years of Cinema's *How Nosferatu Laid the Groundwork for Gothic Cinema* and Bad Bunny's “Baticano.”
- De-identified excerpt packet of public posts/comments (TikTok/Facebook/YouTube discourse).
- Coding worksheet (Frame type, Monsterization mechanism, Evidence style, Object of protection, Call to action).
- Exit ticket prompt or short reflection: “What does the monster help people say?”
- Optional creative extension handout: “The Baticano” folklore field guide entry.
- Optional extension reading: McConnell's (2024) short public-facing history of queer horror cinema.

Procedure (75-90 minutes)

1. Warm-up (5 min): Students quickwrite a definition of “monster” and name one boundary a monster crosses.
2. Mini-lecture (8-10 min): Introduce a minimal toolkit—monster as cultural body; category crisis; border police; fear/desire (Cohen 1996). Students watch the *Nosferatu* short video analysis to establish the visual grammar of the genre.
3. Guided screening (10-12 min): Students watch “Baticano” music video and respond to prompts focused on aesthetics, religion, domestic/public boundaries, and lyrical themes of hypocrisy/confession (Huft 2022).
4. Four-station close reading (20 min): Students rotate through stations (Aesthetic/Genre; Religion/Confession; Domestic/Family; Sexuality/Visibility) with a printed sheet of the song’s lyrics to facilitate “word-sound-image” analysis.
5. Digital folklore lab (20 min): In pairs, students code 8-10 de-identified excerpts using the codebook.
6. Synthesis discussion + exit ticket (10-15 min): Students map competing frames to evidence styles and propose what social work each monster story performs.

Reproducible Classroom Materials (Student-Facing)

The items below can be copied directly into a student handout or LMS page. The excerpt set is a sample; instructors can swap in additional de-identified comments from YouTube, TikTok, or other platform discourse that students are already encountering in their feeds.

Student Handout 1. Viewing Checks + Exit Ticket

Before viewing (2 minutes):

- What do you expect from a Halloween-released gothic music video? Name two conventions you anticipate seeing.
- When people call a video “dark” or “evil,” what kinds of evidence do they usually point to (images, lyrics, vibes, symbols, context)?

During viewing: Answer any two viewing checks.

- VC1: Identify two visual choices that cue “gothic/monster” (lighting, shadow, posture, setting, camera angle, movement).
- VC2: Where does religion appear (explicitly or implicitly)? What kind of moral authority is being staged?
- VC3: Identify one “category crisis” moment (sacred/profane, private/public, childhood/adulthood, queer/straight). What boundary is being policed or tested?
- After viewing (3 minutes):
 - What does the video make easy to interpret as “dangerous,” and why?
 - What does the video make available as “genre performance,” and why?

Exit ticket (two sentences):

In this discourse, the monster helps people say _____.

A counter-reading reframes the monster as _____.

Student Handout 2. Coding Lab: Codebook + Sample Excerpts

Codebook (choose at least one from each category):

- Frame: FP (faith-protection), MP (moral panic), CS (conspiracy-symbol hunting), AE (genre/context), ID (identity negotiation), HU (humor/irony).
- Evidence: SF (symbol reading), SR (scripture), VB (vibe/affect), TR (translation/lyrics), TX (context/receipts), TS (testimony/certainty).
- Protects: FM (family/home), CH (children), FA (faith), CU (culture/respectability), SE (self/identity).
- Action: PR (pray), AV (avoid/boycott), WR (warn/share), PU (punish), LT (learn more), NX (none).

Sample excerpts (de-identified): Code each excerpt, then name one pattern you see.

- 1) “Invite evil into your home—don’t be surprised when it shows up.”
- 2) “He’s just playing Dracula for a Halloween-themed music video—nothing more, nothing less.”
- 3) “I used to like him until I heard the lyrics about Baticano. He’s telling us exactly who he serves.”
- 4) “I’m Christian and his music slaps... not sure if I’m going to stop listening.”
- 5) “It is okay if everybody isn’t Christian or Muslim. There is nothing wrong with occult practice.”

Assessment

- Coding accuracy: Students justify their codes with a phrase from the excerpt.
- “Monsterization Case File” (2-3 pages): Summarize the video’s monster logic + coded dataset + two patterns + reflection.
- Optional creative extension: Write a folklore field guide entry (“Baticano”), plus a short reflection naming codes used.

Pedagogical Bridges: Keeping Eyes on The Text, Keeping Care in The Room

Three teaching moves help this module stay analytic rather than turning into a debate about belief. First, I keep students’ eyes on the text (both the visual narrative and the lyrical narrative) before moving into interpretation. I use Visual Thinking Strategies-style prompts to move students from reaction to observation (Gastón-Greenberg 2025, 80-2). By pairing specific visual timestamps with lyrical excerpts, students practice a multimodal literacy that treats the music and the imagery as a single, syncretic text (Huft 2022).

Second, I structure discussion using before/during/after reading moves and “reading checks”—adapted here as viewing checks and coding checks—to chunk the labor of interpretation and to make space for think–pair–share before whole-class discussion (Cruz 2025, 39-40). Third, because the discourse touches religion, sexual explicitness, and queer visibility, I build an opt-out path and avoid requiring personal disclosure. This aligns with guidance offered for teaching sensitive materials: Speak generally, do not mandate personal experiences, and foreground respectful discussion expectations (Hartmann 2022, 116).

Artifacts and Evidence: What Students Produce

To document learning without creating heavy grading labor, I collect three low-burden artifacts: 1) completed coding worksheets; 2) two-sentence exit tickets; and 3) a short case file that includes a coded appendix. This sequence mirrors a basic folklore pedagogy principle: Because folklore functions as a repository of collective beliefs and traditions, students are never “outside” culture—they are already participants in vernacular systems of meaning-making (Dundes 1980; Uddin, Alam, and Talukder 2025).

In practice, students often bring prior knowledge of Catholicism, Pentecostalism, brujería/witchcraft discourse, and conspiracy cultures. Rather than flattening those differences, the module treats them as interpretive resources and asks: What counts as proof here? Who is authorized to interpret? What kind of safety is being promised?

In a different context, DuBois and colleagues describe the impact of field-based documentation tools on this recognition, as students realize that culture “occurs all around them” and that they can use everyday settings as sites of analysis (DuBois et al. 2018, 14-6). In my course, the “field site” is the platform discourse itself. Crucially, this discourse does not merely react to the video; it actively participates in the meaning-making process, as online participants employ the vampire’s themes of contamination and plague to frame the very act of viewing as a ritual exposure with spiritual consequences (Leferman 2025).

Table 1. Recurring “Legend Ingredients” in Monsterization Discourse (Template)

Legend Ingredient	What It Does (social function)	Example Phrasing (De-Identified)
Contagion/Entry	Frames media as a gateway that can “bring” danger into the home; intensifies urgency (Cohen 1996).	“Invite evil into your home...”
Plague/Contamination	Turns the monster into a carrier of moral/physical infection; makes “exposure” feel consequential; intensifies urgency and avoidance (Leferman 2025)	“plague,” “infecting,” “contagion,” “don’t invite it in”
Portal/Threshold	Turns viewing into a ritual act with consequences; encourages avoidance or counter-rituals (Ellis 2004).	“opening of a portal...”
“Think of the children”	Centers moral protection; authorizes censorship and boycott (Cohen 1996).	“That’s what we’re teaching our children.”
Symbol as Proof	Treats visual resemblance as evidence; builds authority through decoding (Ellis 2004).	“Why does he look like...?”
Genre Alibi	Reframes fear claims as misreadings by invoking context (Halloween, Dracula).	“just Dracula for a Halloween themed video.”
Identity Negotiation	Shows lived complexity; reveals how belief and pleasure coexist.	“I’m Christian and his music slaps...”

Instructor Reflection: Managing Heat, Care, and Complexity

Teaching with “Baticano” requires a pedagogy of care because the discourse touches religion, sexual explicitness, and queer visibility—topics that can quickly become personal. Three facilitation moves have been crucial. First, I name the analytic stance explicitly: We are studying how meanings are made, not deciding which metaphysical claims are correct. This reframes disagreement as data and reduces pressure on religious or nonreligious students to defend identity positions.

Second, I de-identify public posts and avoid directing traffic to creators. Students work with excerpts rather than usernames, and we do not click through to harass, mock, or engage with individual posters. This keeps the focus on discourse patterns rather than individuals.

Third, I build an opt-out pathway. Students who do not want to engage spiritual-warfare language can code only genre/aesthetic explanations and meta-comments, then complete the same frame→evidence→action analysis. Hartmann’s 2022 guidance for teaching sensitive materials also applies here: Speak generally and do not require students to share personal experiences (116). In practice, students often bring prior knowledge of Catholicism, Pentecostalism, brujería/witchcraft discourse, and conspiracy cultures. Rather than flattening those differences, the module treats them as interpretive resources and asks: What counts as proof here? Who is authorized to interpret? What kind of safety is being promised?

Classroom Connections: Discussion Questions and Adaptations

- 1) Genre and meaning: What does gothic style do here? What meanings become possible because the video invokes classic horror?
- 2) Evidence and authority: What counts as proof in different comments (symbols, scripture, “vibes,” dates/context, translation)?
- 3) Borders and protection: What is each frame trying to protect (children, family, faith, cultural order)?
- 4) Visibility and censorship: What does the “turning off the TV” scene suggest about queer visibility in the family/home?
- 5) Hypocrisy and moral economy: How does the domestic violence scene complicate claims that this is “about protecting the family?”
- 6) Monsters return: If this discourse returns whenever there is a big performance moment, what does the return tell us about cultural anxiety?

Adaptations

- 6-12: Use shorter clips, emphasize “how do we know?” evidence styles, and avoid explicit lyrical content.
- Community workshops/libraries: Focus on digital folklore as community storytelling; discuss how warning narratives travel.
- Media literacy units: Pair with a second “moral panic” artifact and compare evidence styles across communities.

Final Thoughts

“Baticano” is useful for monster pedagogy because it leverages the playful and shadowed duality of Bad Bunny’s public persona—a Latinx/e cultural icon who simultaneously occupies the role of global pop superstar and monsterized folk devil. This tension teaches two lessons simultaneously: (1) monsters as aesthetic tradition (Gothic cinema remixed into music video form), and (2) monsters as discourse (how publics narrate danger, teach norms, and police boundaries through vernacular storytelling). More broadly, bringing current pop culture topics into the classroom stimulates student engagement and provides tools for thinking critically about the world around them—especially when instructors supply the historical and political context that audiences may otherwise miss (Díaz and Rivera-Rideau 2024; Rodriguez 2020; 2022a). This was evident in my students’ ability to move beyond “cancel culture” reactions to instead analyze how specific TikTok warnings functioned as modern “legend tripping”—a practice of testing the boundaries of rumored supernatural threats (Ellis 2004).

Momcilovic’s (2023) argument that Gothic music videos often exceed or unsettle lyrical meaning helps students understand why a single text sustains competing readings, while Huft’s (2022) framing-based approach reveals how fear is organized through narrative. In an HSI context, these lessons are not abstract; they manifest in students’ own lives. During discussions, students often shared how they negotiated these “monster stories” with their families, using the module’s toolkit to explain the video’s genre alibis to parents who viewed the work as a literal spiritual threat.

This module uses platform discourse as an archive of vernacular teaching. Treating monsterization as digital folklore offers a way to talk about difficult subjects through a figure that resists easy classification. By examining Bad Bunny as a “boundary figure,” students leave the module better able to identify how evidence is constructed, and how communities teach each other what to prohibit and what to desire—often in the name of protection.

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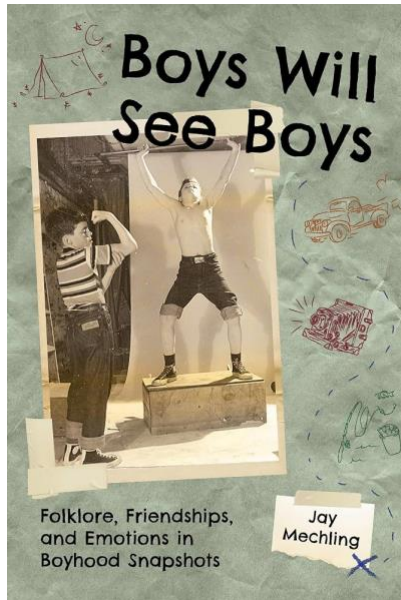
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Journal of Folklore and Education Reviews



Boys Will See Boys: Folklore, Friendships, and Emotion in Boyhood Snapshots, by Jay Mechling
(Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2026, 228 pp.)

Mary Sellers is an English professor at the Community College of Aurora in Aurora, Colorado.

“Every American adult, male and female, thinks they understand boys.” With these provocative words, Jay Mechling begins the first chapter of his latest book, *Boys Will See Boys*. The book taps into his decades of research into boyhood and young adulthood echoing some of the themes discussed in his ethnography of the Boy Scouts, *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (2001/2004), and analysis of vernacular photographs of soldiers, *Soldier Snapshots* (2021). His goal in his latest work was to “read the snapshots taken by boys of boys

in order to understand how their collective behavior in their friendship groups, away from adult surveillance, gives us valuable information in understanding the dynamic relationship between boys’ nature and their socialized second nature, between their internal experiences and their external realities of their group culture and society” (174). In other words, Mechling sets out to explain what boys do and find valuable when they escape from the watchful eyes of authorities.

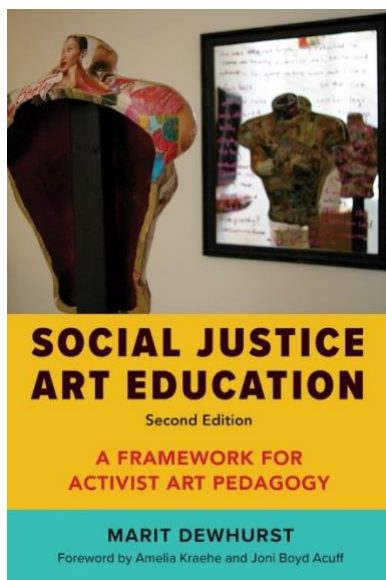
In addition to his primary goal, Mechling also set out to write the book “in a way that preserved the scholarly observations but set aside (or explained) any scholarly jargon, in order to make the book readable for the general audience” (7). He succeeds admirably with both goals.

In his introduction, Mechling lays out his methodology in an orderly and understandable way. He chose film camera photographs of boys that he felt were taken by other boys. His subjects were predominantly white, American, middle-class, and aged 10 to 26 years, although he includes a comparative section on Hitler Youth in similar camping settings.

After the introduction, the book is divided into two parts: “Theory” and “The Snapshots,” and each section uses a plethora of scholarship in folklore studies, boyhood studies, and psychoanalysis. The first part, “Theory,” encompasses chapters on boys’ nature, male adolescence and identity, and boys’ friendships. “The Snapshots” features eight sections. The first two discuss the material culture of boys. The next two chapters focus on bonding and masculinity displays. A discussion of deep play and fantasy precedes an analysis of Hitler Youth and their similarities to American boys. The book ends with the idea that these photos of boys serve as melancholy souvenirs. These

chapters could serve to introduce visual ethnography to a class or to discuss the importance of explaining and defending one's interpretations with scholarship.

This book can be used by a wide audience. Mechling uses a vast array of sources to provide a solid defense of his methodology and interpretations of photos, making it appealing to academics. He drew heavily on the work of Simon Bronner, Alan Dundes, Gregory Bateson, and Nancy Chodorow, although hundreds of researchers receive mention. Despite the heavy use of scholarship, the book remains approachable and entertaining for a non-scholarly audience, even a high school one, although that audience may find the psychoanalytic interpretations such as "wrestling both is and is not sex" to be new to them. This book fulfills its purpose by admirably helping readers and scholars explore not only why "boys will be boys" but how "boys will see boys."



Social Justice Art Education, Second Edition: A Framework for Activist Art Pedagogy, by Marit Dewhurst
(Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2023, 176 pp.)

Claire Denny is the Folk Arts Education Specialist at the Folk Arts - Cultural Treasures Charter School in Philadelphia.

Marit Dewhurst's *Social Justice Art Education, Second Edition: A Framework for Activist Art Pedagogy*, expands upon her foundational tenets in her original publication. In this edition, Dewhurst acknowledges and responds to current political and social landscapes educators find themselves in the United States. As more educators attempt to navigate polarized conversations pertaining to equity, identity, and the role of education in society, this book presents both a practical guide and a reflective call to action for educators committed to art activist pedagogy.

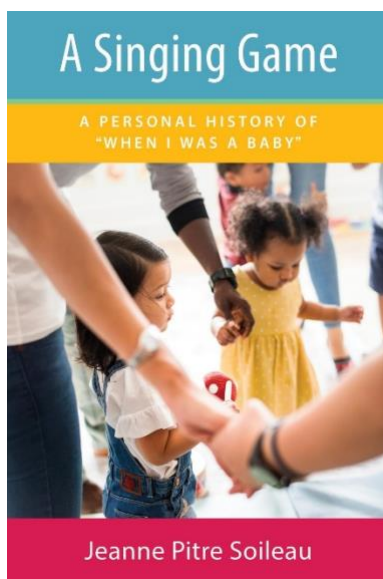
The updated edition maintains the framework of the first publication, namely, an exploration of the three interconnected processes of activist artmaking: connecting, questioning, and transforming (previously labeled as translating in the first edition). These concepts provide a flexible structure for understanding how participants, with a focus on student youth, engage critically with injustice through artistic practices. Dewhurst emphasizes that social justice art education (SJAIE) is not merely for creating artwork "about" injustice, but rather is concerned with how the art is made, how relationships are built, and how power is brokered throughout the creative process. This distinction and exploration of the "how" is expanded upon in the second edition.

Dewhurst reframes activist art as a collaborative and deeply contextual educational practice by focusing on instruction instead of product alone. Throughout the book, the reader is provided thought-provoking activities, guided questions, as well as possible extensions to her work and

research. Reminders of positionality, power dynamics, and the importance of critical examination of practices before engaging in SJAE are central to the book's messaging as well, as it requires the reflective practice SJAE embodies.

There are points throughout the book where the ambitious scope of SJAE work could be perceived as overwhelming. Dewhurst openly acknowledges that activist artmaking is "messy, complex, and challenging" and requires flexibility. Readers may benefit from practical instructions to help further the work among those not as familiar with SJAE teaching but inspired by its potential. Regardless, the second edition of Dewhurst's book deepens conversation pertaining to art-making and activist pedagogy, which is rooted in relationship building, cultural legacies, and a vested interest in achieving social change.

For arts- and justice-minded individuals seeking to deepen their pedagogical practice, this text serves a vital and condensed resource. At the book's conclusion, Dewhurst encourages readers to continue to evolve their preparatory work, practices, and "radical dreams" through the inherently collaborative work of social justice art education.



A Singing Game: A Personal History of "When I Was a Baby," by Jeanne Pitre Soileau
(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2026, 123 pp.)

Sara Mendez is the founder and Executive Director of the Catholic Arts and Sciences Academy.

In *A Singing Game: A Personal History of "When I Was a Baby,"* Jeanne Pitre Soileau takes an unusual approach to children's folklore. Instead of surveying dozens of games, she follows one singing game, "When I Was a Baby," across more than 150 years. The result is part memoir, part folklore history, and part case study. Through historical collections, decades of her own fieldwork, and contemporary online performances, Soileau shows how children reshape the game to reflect the world they know. As the lyrics, gestures, and performance styles change, so do the social values and cultural experiences they express.

The book's greatest strength is its combination of careful scholarship and personal reflection. Soileau describes becoming what she calls an "accidental folklorist" while teaching in New Orleans during the early years of school integration. What began as playground observations grew into decades of collecting children's lore throughout Louisiana. Those experiences do more than tell the story of her career. They show how long-term fieldwork develops through trust, curiosity, and careful listening. For students learning ethnographic methods, those chapters are just as valuable as the historical analysis that follows.

The book also demonstrates the value of studying a single tradition in depth. By comparing versions collected from the 19th century through the present, Soileau reveals how children revise performances to reflect changing ideas about family, gender, race, humor, and everyday life. Her comparisons between African American and white performances are especially compelling. She avoids reducing those traditions to simple differences. Instead, she highlights distinct performance styles while showing how both communities continually recreate the game in response to their own experiences.

The narrow focus will not appeal to every reader. If you want a broad introduction to children's folklore, this is not that book. The detailed comparison of dozens of variants occasionally slows the pace. At the same time, that close attention is exactly what makes the study convincing. By staying with one tradition, Soileau demonstrates how much cultural history can emerge from a single playground game.

For educators, *A Singing Game* offers an excellent model for teaching folklore as lived experience rather than as a collection of texts. The book fits especially well in undergraduate and graduate courses on folklore, ethnography, childhood studies, oral tradition, and qualitative research. Individual chapters would also work well in methods courses because they illustrate participant observation, documentation, and performance analysis in accessible ways. Although the book is not written for K–12 classrooms, it reminds teachers that children's play deserves serious attention. What children sing, perform, and pass to one another is more than entertainment. It is cultural knowledge in motion.

Soundtracks: Community, Culture, and Music

Jennifer M. Mellizo and Logan E. Clark, Guest Editors

Publication scheduled for Fall 2027. [Sign up here](#) for updates.

All inquiries may be sent to info@jfepublications.org.

Full articles due February 1, 2027, to our submission portal.

The *Journal of Folklore and Education* (JFE) is a peer-reviewed, multimedia, open-access journal. We publish significant scholarship with academic articles and classroom applications side-by-side to encourage deep thinking and practical use. JFE is intentional in being accessible to all communities and invites co-authorship to highlight partnerships between teachers, artists, and community organizations.

We invite submissions to our 2027 issue, “Soundtracks: Community, Culture, and Music.” We seek submissions that

- Connect community-embedded music to state and national education standards.
- Consider strategies for music transmission and engagement in formal and informal learning environments.
- Offer scaffolding to teach technical skills in a variety of music genres, traditions, and cultures.
- Support artists and tradition bearers in amplifying and sustaining their work.
- Illustrate outcomes of integrating music and other arts across subject areas and settings, including K–12 education, higher education, museums, and community organizations.
- Connect music to the lifeworlds of students and their communities.
- Bring music listening, engagement, and performance alive for learners of all ages.

Topics such as culturally responsive pedagogy, memory, literacy (lyrics), pedagogies that are formal and informal (e.g., notation, orality/aurality), and with attention to global, local, and regional practices will inform this issue. Submission formats may include articles and media that share best practices, lesson plans and project toolkits, case studies and classroom pilots, and materials that showcase folk and traditional artists and their art.

Our audiences include:

- K-12 teachers across all subject areas
- Educators working in higher education
- Teaching artists in diverse settings, including private lessons, school residencies, afterschool programs
- Community educators working in a range of contexts, including but not limited to libraries, youth groups, arts councils, museums, parks and recreation, solidarity gatherings, and media
- Students and community members who view music as a gateway for the exploration of complex topics

About the Guest Editors

Jennifer M. Mellizo is the Education Specialist at Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Prior to this position, she was a K–8 general music, band, and choir teacher in Laramie, WY, for 22 years. Jennifer holds a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, an MA in Music Education, and a BA in Music Education, all from the University of Wyoming. She was the Albany County School District #1 Teacher of the Year in 2016 and a 2021 U.S. Fulbright Scholar to Spain. Jennifer is a member of the *Journal of General Music Education* editorial board. She publishes research and practical articles in a variety of peer-reviewed journals and frequently presents her work at regional, national, and international conferences. She is author of *Re-Imagining Curricula in Global Times: A Music Education Perspective* (Springer, 2023).

Logan E. Clark is the Special Projects and Content Manager for Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. She graduated with a PhD in Ethnomusicology from UCLA in 2017, focusing on marimba music in contemporary Mayan migrant communities in Los Angeles and Guatemala. She has also published articles and essays in English and Spanish on Mayan traditional dance and intangible cultural heritage. Logan has administrative and programming experience with a variety of organizations, including the World Musical Instrument Center at UCLA, *Ethnomusicology Review* academic journal, and the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law. Logan plays and sings mariachi music and was a member of UCLA's official mariachi Mariachi de Uclatlán, and now plays with the DC-based Grupo Fénix.

We are grateful to our 2027 Advisory Committee for their input on this special issue:

Patricia Shehan Campbell, University of Washington Professor Emerita

Juan Díez, Sones de México Ensemble

Christian Folk, Music Education Specialist, Smithsonian Institution

Maureen Loughran, Director and Curator, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Kofi Maxwell, Sankofa African Drum and Dance Ensemble

Dwandalyn Reece, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution

René Rodgers, Birthplace of Country Music Museum

Jane Vidrine, Louisiana Music Museum

Jennifer Walden, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Brandi Waller-Pace, Decolonizing the Music Room, Fort Worth African American Roots Music Festival

More About Submissions: *We seek submissions of articles, model projects, multimedia products, teaching applications, and student work accompanied by critical writing that connects to the larger frameworks of this theme.* We particularly welcome submissions inclusive of perspectives and voices from underrepresented communities. Co-authored articles that include teachers, students, administrators, artists, or community members offer opportunities for multiple points of view on an educational program or a curriculum. We publish articles that share best practices, offer specific guides or plans for implementing folklore in education, and articulate theoretical and critical frameworks.

The *Journal of Folklore and Education* (ISSN 2573-2072) is a publication of Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education. Additional information about submissions, including our citation guide and article formats may be found at <https://jfepublications.org/for-authors>.

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Soundtracks: Community, Culture, and Music

Jennifer M. Mellizo and Logan E. Clark, Guest Editors

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We are grateful to our Advisory Committee for their input on this special issue:

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About the Guest Editors

Camille Maria Acosta is a folklorist and monster enthusiast originally from the border town of El Paso, Texas. She pursued Performance Studies with a BA in Theatre from El Paso Community College and Western Kentucky University before completing her MA in Folk Studies from the same institution. Within this program, she delved into the beauty of Latinx horror through the lens of La Llorona and how monsters are mirrors guiding us toward our own brilliance, our own truth. Upon graduating in 2021, she pursued folklore and cultural studies work with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress as well as the New Mexico Arts Folk Arts Program, culminating in the YouTube documentary *La Llorona: Picante Pero Sabroso*. Her work has been featured in several publications including *De Los: Los Angeles Times*, *HipLATINA*, *Borderlore*, and the two-part Tubi documentary series *Scariest Monsters in America* and *Scariest Monsters in the World*. In 2023, Acosta launched her podcast *Floaties for Krakens*, diving into the world of the other and exploring how being monstrous is synonymous with a powerful resilience. Today, she is fulfilling the position of Folklife Specialist under the Kentucky Folklife Program.

Sheila Bock is a folklorist and professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Addressing a diverse range of topics, her scholarship employs narrative and performance approaches to examine how individuals and communities position themselves, and are positioned by others, within contested domains of experience. She is the author of numerous articles and book chapters and the book *Claiming Space: Performing the Personal Through Decorated Mortarboards* (University Press of Colorado, 2023). She is an award-winning teacher, and conversations with the brilliant students in her undergraduate seminar “Monsters and Monstrosity” at UNLV helped inspire the theme of this special issue. She trained in Folklore at The Ohio State University, where she received her PhD from the Department of English.

About the Editors

Paddy Bowman is Founding Director of Local Learning and creator of numerous folklore and education resources. She was awarded the Benjamin A. Botkin Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Public Folklore and is a Fellow of the American Folklore Society. pbbowman@gmail.com

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