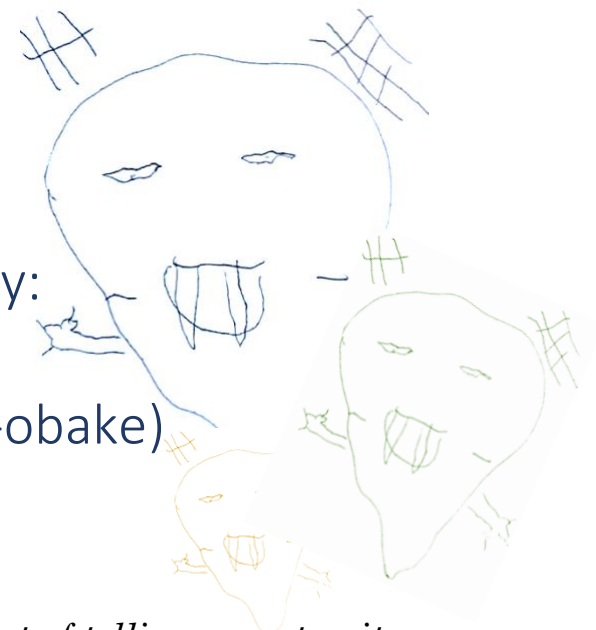


Waste Not a Phantasmic Pedagogy: Childhood Monsters and the “Wastefulness Ghost” (Mottainai-obake)

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 “おばけ” (obake) using Google Images. The majority resemble the floating bedsheet model of ghost.

Journal of Folklore and Education (2026: Vol. 13)

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

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.

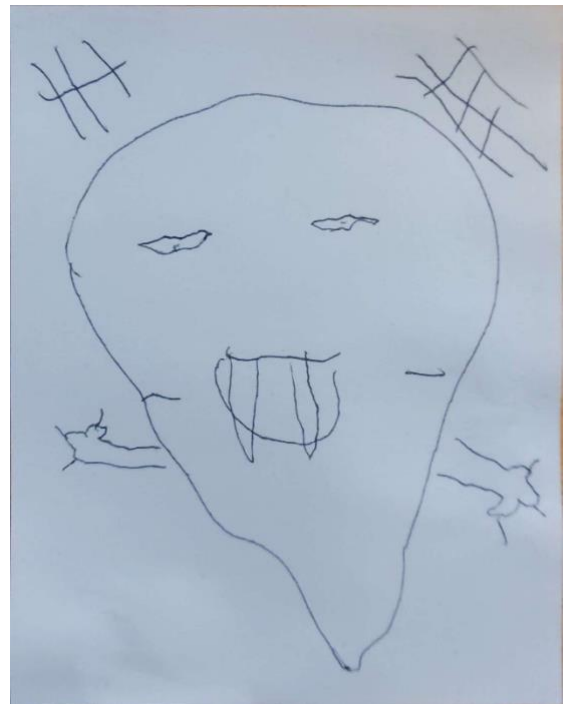
"And what does the Mottainai-obake do?"

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.

Robert Dahlberg-Searss is an independent scholar residing in the city of Sendai in Miyagi prefecture, Japan. His research focuses primarily on modern cultural circulation and change in Japan, although usually through the lens of music. He earned a PhD from The Ohio State University in Musicology with specializations in Ethnomusicology and Folklore in 2025.

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.”

Works Cited

- Allison, Anne. 2006. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. Monster Culture (Seven Theses). In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davis, Ann Marie L. 2026. From Bestiaries to Pokédexes: Ordering the Otherworldly in Japan’s Monster Traditions. *Education About Asia*. 29.1. <https://www.educationaboutasia.org/article/id/1845>
- Foster, Michael Dylan. 2009. *Pandemonium and Parade Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2015. *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2016. *The Folkloresque Circle: Toward a Theory of Fuzzy Allusion*. In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, eds. Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert. Logan: Utah University Press, 41-63.
- Grider, Silvia Ann. 2007. Children’s Ghost Stores. In *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore*, eds. Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Hasegawa Kei. Saraba, Mottainaiobake [Farewell, Mottainai-Obake]. 2013, *Shunjū*, May.
- Higgins, Lisa L. and Kate Haag Rogers. 2018. Eating Your Homework: One Family’s Intersections of Science, Place, Foodways, and Education. *Journal of Folklore and Education*. 5.1:53-63. <https://jfepublications.org/article/eating-your-homework>
- Komatsu, Kazuhiko. 1998. Ikai wo Nozoku [Examining the Spirit World]. Tokyo: Yosensha.
- Landeck, Mindy. 2026. Monster Pedagogy: Sources and Strategies for Unleashing Yōkai in Your Classroom. *Education About Asia*. 29.1. <https://www.educationaboutasia.org/article/id/1849>
- Mottainaiobake AC Japan Hōkoku Sakuhin Ākaibu [Mottainai-obake AC Japan Broadcast Creation Archive]. *AC Japan*. <https://www.ad-c.or.jp/campaign/search/index.php?id=127>
- Okano, Kaori. 2020. *Education and Social Justice in Japan*. New York: Routledge.
- Siniawer, Eiko Maruko. 2018. *Waste: Consuming Postwar Japan*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
- Swanson, Heather, Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, and Elaine Gan. 2017. Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies. In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, M1-M14.
- Tokuhiro, Chie, Chie Ikeda, Manami Ueno, Ruri Shimizu, Yuka Shimomoto, Yuichirō Seno, Nana Tetsuno. 2021. Shōgakusei to sono Hogosha oyobi Kyōshokuin no Shokuhin Rosu Shōgen ni Kansuru Ishiki ni tsuite [Awareness Survey About Reducing Food Loss Among Elementary School Children, Parents, and Teachers]. *Mimasaka Daigaku / Mimasaka Daigaku Tanki Daigaku Daigakubu Kiyō*. 66:167-72.
- Tolbert, Jeffrey A. 2016. Introduction. In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, eds. Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert. Logan: Utah University Press, 37-9.
- . 2024. Introduction: The Value of Recursion. In *Möbius Media: Popular culture, Folklore, and the Folkloresque*, eds. Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1-35.
- Walker, Barbara. 1995. Introduction. In *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*. ed. Barbara Walker. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1-8.

URLs

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

Journal of Folklore and Education (2026: Vol. 13)

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