

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.

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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.
Barton, Julie. 2005. The Monsters of Depression in Children’s Literature: Of Dementors, Spectres, and Pictures. *Journal of Children’s Literature Studies*. 2.1:27-39.
Jaques, Zoe. 2015. Introduction: Special Issue on “Machines, Monsters and Animals: Posthumanism and Children’s Literature.” *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children’s Literature*. 53.1:4-9.
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Handle with Care: A Conversation About the Ethical Use of Monsters in Diverse Classroom Spaces
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