



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

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

Mapping the Legend: Transgressing Borders and Teaching Migration with (Literary) Monsters
by Jordan Lovejoy

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?

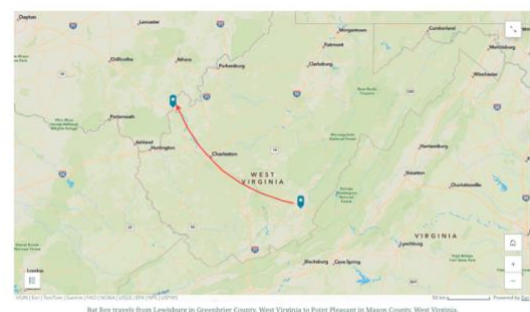
Teaching with Literary Legends

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

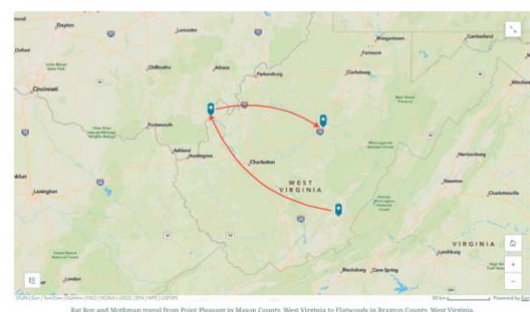
Modules throughout the course focused on common legendary figures and cryptids like the Sasquatch, the Skinwalker (and Coyote), and various types of vampiric monsters. Each of these legendary figures is associated with unknown or off-limit environments or topics, but the literary reimaginings of them 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

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

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

Mapping the Legend: Transgressing Borders and Teaching Migration with (Literary) Monsters
by Jordan Lovejoy

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?

Jordan Lovejoy is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at the College of the Holy Cross. She holds a PhD in English with an interdisciplinary specialization in folklore from The Ohio State University. Her work explores literary and vernacular forms of environmental storytelling, flood narratives, strategies for climate change communication, and environmental justice action and advocacy work in Appalachia and the American South.

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.

Works Cited

- Anaya, Rudolfo. 2006. *Curse of the ChupaCabra*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Asimov, Isaac. 1953. Social Science Fiction. In *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future*, ed. Reginald Bretnor. New York: Coward-McCann, 157-96.
- Atwood, Margaret. 2005. *Writing With Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose, 1983-2005*. Berkeley: Carroll & Graf Publishers.
- _____. 2011. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, 1st ed. New York: Doubleday.
- Blank, Trevor J. and Lynne S. McNeill. 2018. *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Bould, Mark and Sherryl Vint. 2011. Cold War, Consumerism, Cybernetics: The 1950s. In *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 121-49.
- Brady, Margaret K. and Barre Toelken. 1984. *Some Kind of Power: Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Briggs, Charles L. and Richard Bauman. 1992. Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. 2.2:131-72.

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

Mapping the Legend: Transgressing Borders and Teaching Migration with (Literary) Monsters
by Jordan Lovejoy

- Brooks, Kinitra D. 2017. Black Women Writing Fluid Fiction: An Open Challenge to Genre Normativity. In *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 56-94.
- Chávez, Alex E. 2021. Gender, Ethno-Nationalism, and the Anti-Mexicanist Trope. *Journal of American Folklore*. 134.531:3-24.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. Monster Culture (Seven Theses). In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 3-25.
- Dégh, Linda. 2001. *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dundes, Alan. 1998. *The Vampire: A Casebook*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Farley, Keythe, Brian Flemming, and Laurence O'Keefe. 2002. *Bat Boy: The Musical*. Dramatists Play Service.
- Foster, Michael Dylan. 2016. Introduction: The Challenge of the Folkloresque. In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, eds. Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert, Logan: Utah State University Press, 3-33.
- González-Martin, Rachel V. 2021. White Traditioning and Bruja Epistemologies: Rebuilding the House of USAmerican Folklore Studies. In *Theorizing Folklore from the Margins: Critical and Ethical Approaches*, eds. Solimar Otero and Mintzi Auanda Martínez-Rivera, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 22-41.
- Hopkinson, Nalo. 2001. Greedy Choke Puppy. In *Skin Folk: Stories*, New York: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.
- International Organization for Migration. 2019. International Migration Law: Glossary on Migration, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf
- James, Edward and Farah Mendlesohn. 2012. *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, Ayana Elizabeth. 2024. Diasporas and Home: Interview with Colette Pinchon Battle. In *What if We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures*, New York: One World, 364-79.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 2009. The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood. *The Guardian*, August 28, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood>
- Little Badger, Darcie. Skinwalker, Fast-Talker. In *No Shit, There I Was*, ed. Alex Acks, Alliteration Ink.
- Metzger, Nadine. 2013. Battling Demons with Medical Authority: Werewolves, Physicians and Rationalization. *History of Psychiatry*. 24.3:341-55.
- Okorafor, Nnedi and Alan Dean Foster. 2013. Kabu Kabu. In *Kabu Kabu*, ed. Nnedi Okorafor, Gaithersburg, MD: Prime Books.
- Oziewicz, Marek. 2017. Speculative Fiction. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, ed. Diedre Shauna Lynch. New York: Oxford American, <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/61883/chapter/547841578?searchresult=1>
- Puglia, David J. 2023. The (Mostly) Unseen World of Cryptids: Legendary Monsters in North America. *Humanities*. 13.1:1-15.
- Radford, Benjamin. 2011. *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Richardson, Thomas Grant, Jon Kay, Maida Owens, and Tim Frandy. 2023. "Urgencies" in the Field: Three Perspectives. *Journal of American Folklore*. 136.540:181-95.
- Shields, Sharma. 2012. Field Guide to Monsters of the Inland Northwest. In *Favorite Monster: Stories*, Pittsburgh: Autumn House Press.
- Toelken, Barre. 1996. *The Dynamics of Folklore (Revised and Expanded Edition)*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- _____. 1976. The "Pretty Languages" of Yellowman: Genre, Mode, and Texture in Navaho Coyote Narratives. In *Folklore Genres*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos. Austin: University of Texas Press, 145-70.
- Wald, Sarah D., David J. Vázquez, Priscilla Solis Ybarra, Sarah Jaquette Ray. 2019. *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. 2020. Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory. In *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1-36.
- Wolf, Gary K. 1986. *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

URLs

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

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

Mapping the Legend: Transgressing Borders and Teaching Migration with (Literary) Monsters
by Jordan Lovejoy