Monsters

YASMINE MUSHARBASH, *Australian National University*

Monsters are not only key protagonists in myths, legends, fairy tales, fiction, and films; they also haunt cellars, cyberspace, and crossroads. Based on encounters with monsters in their fieldsites, anthropologists define monsters as inherently social entities but with a defiant relationship to order. This entry showcases that monsters haunt humans in culturally distinct ways. Emphasising the comparative potential of monsters, it highlights the ways in which their study reveals much about what monsters are, about society, and about time and space. Anthropology has made key contributions to the study of monsters: from the meticulous documentation of local monsters in early ethnographies, via regional theoretical frameworks and a gradual increase in singular works concerned with individual types of monsters, to recent comparative monster anthropology. Anthropology continues to have much to offer to those interested in monsters, especially in these times of planetary crises, disasters, catastrophes, ruination, and their accompanying rise of monsters.

Introduction

We are living in a time of monsters. As the planet is ravaged by climate change, pandemics sweep across the globe, fires and floods consume entire regions, extinction rates rise exponentially, and waste clogs up the environment, globalised media and popular culture conjure up new monsters at breakneck speed. There is a contemporary profusion of monsters, which far exceeds the recent renaissance of vampires and zombies in variation and volume (think anything from the re-emergence of dragons, via new creatures of the deep, to the abundance of creatures hunted in assorted monster-hunter movies, books, and TV series). This explosion of new monsters into popular culture serves well to highlight their capacity to colonise the human imagination in times of crisis. There is something infectious in this far beyond pop culture. Anthropology, certainly, is being swept up in the momentum: attention to monsters *as* monsters is steadily proliferating in twenty-first century anthropology.

Interestingly, though, while it was not until recently that the term 'monster' entered the anthropological canon (Mikkelsen 2020: 6), the ethnographic record has been teeming with creatures that can be subsumed under the umbrella term 'monster' since its earliest beginnings. This entry showcases what anthropology can contribute to general concerns with an interest in monsters. It first draws on ethnography to contour a broad definition of what monsters are. The entry then illuminates different trends in anthropological engagements with beings that can broadly be defined as monsters across the ethnographic record. Lastly, it identifies the promises that a new engagement with the category of

monsters in anthropology carries both for anthropology itself and for others interested in monsters and their meanings. Overall, this entry shows that monsters are exemplary agents which convey the weight of radical sociocultural transformation and change. At the same time, anthropology is a treasure trove showcasing that monsters are much else besides.

Monsters are key actors in myths, legends, fairy tales, fiction, and films, but they also haunt cellars, cyberspace, and crossroads. Anthropologists are concerned with monsters because they frequently encounter them in their fieldsites, via stories told by interlocutors, by observing social action relating to or caused by them, or by sharing experiences of being haunted. These monsters thus possess agency in spades, which distinguishes them from their fictional pop culture cousins. While the primary characteristic of fictional monsters is being metaphors, anthropologists, as Michael Dylan Foster puts it, work 'with monsters productively not (only) as metaphors or reflections of human imaginings but as real actors capable of changing society and culture, and capable also of being changed' (2020: 213).

Monsters are also wily. They not only unsettle the orders of the people they haunt, they also easily escape the confines of any definition you might try to catch them in. What exactly they are, what exactly they do, what exactly they mean—the answers always crucially depend on the people they haunt, anthropology tells us. This entry therefore proposes a broad anthropological understanding of monsters as non-human social actors who are other-than-the norm, always contingent on the humans they haunt, the times and the places in which they operate, and with a profound awareness of social rules, taxonomies, and classificatory schema that they then subvert—including, naturally, this very definition. Why then, you may ask, try and define them at all? As Geir Henning Presterudstuen and I put it, 'it allows us to gather, contrast, and compare (ethnographies of) a great variety of different beings that otherwise would not be considered in the same conceptual space' (2020a: 2). In addition, employing the term 'monster' in anthropology opens up avenues of communication between anthropology and interdisciplinary monster studies—a young but rapidly growing field spanning literature, media, film, cultural and gender studies, history, geography, and psychology, among others.[1] An anthropology of monsters thus enhances not only comparisons between different types of entities (say, fictional monsters and social ones) but also deepens cross-engagement with the theorisations that accompany such different monsters, respectively.

This entry offers an overview of what an anthropology of monsters has to offer. It does so in two distinct parts. The first is concerned with ethnographically contouring the details of the aforementioned monster definition with a focus on four topics central to anthropology: the monstrous body, monsters and place, monsters and time, and monsters as social beings. This first part emulates Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (a medievalist widely acknowledged as a founding father of interdisciplinary monster studies), who offered 'a set of breakable postulates' (1996: 4) in lieu of a fixed definition. It emphasises that monsters' very trait of habitually disrupting categories, undermining taxonomies, and violating order makes them 'a walking

anthropology', as Rupert Stasch puts it (2014: 196), which is why monsters 'compel us to rethink the parameters, methods, and objectives of anthropological inquiry', according to Foster (2020: 213).

The second part ponders the utility of the general term 'monster' in anthropology by looking back and re-examining some past studies through the lens of monster as a category. It also highlights the benefits of employing the broad category of monster in this current time, by exploring key directions of contemporary anthropological analyses of monsters, focussing in particular on monsters and alterity, monsters and environmental crises, and monsters and change.

The conclusion reflects on anthropology's main contribution to the interdisciplinary study of monsters: insights arising out of ethnographic explorations of the intimate entanglements between monsters and the humans they haunt.

Contouring the anthropological definition of monsters

What do a dwarf, an octopus so large it could cover an entire village, an invisible sorceress, a water leopard, a zombie, and a ghost have in common? From an anthropological point of view, the one commonality they share is that they all violate order: one is too small, one too large, the next one is there but invisible, another exists in an element it does not belong in, one lives when it is dead, and the last is neither dead nor alive.

As Stephen Asma, a philosopher and eminent historian of monsters formulated it, 'monsters, from Aristotle's time to the present, always disrupt neat categories of taxonomy' (2009: 125). Looking at this anthropologically means that monsters are not a pre-existing category of phenomena that share this feature, but that this feature is what makes a phenomenon a monster. Monstrous bodies have in common that they disrupt taxonomies, and as any anthropologist will tell you, taxonomic systems are socio-culturally distinct. Any particular monstrous body, as a taxonomic disruption, is equally socio-culturally distinct. Put simply, only if people classify, say, animals and humans as distinct categories can a monster take a shape

by disrupting this taxonomy.[2] That is to say, their very bodies place monsters in the realm of culture, as they depend on subverting the taxonomic schema of the people they haunt. Monstrous bodies are 'always impossible; they always cross un-crossable categories' (Musharbash & Presterudstuen 2020a: 4); yet, importantly, they always do so in culturally legible ways. The monstrous body is fantastic, especially if we consider 'fantastic' in its original Greek meaning, where *phantastikós* signifies that which is *imaginable* as opposed to imaginary (see also Musharbash 2014a: 8-11).

There are a number of ways in which monsters embody taxonomic transgression.[3] Hybridity is one, and early monsters are exemplary of this; so much so that David Wengrow (2014), who explores monsters from the Bronze to the Iron Age, calls them 'composites'. Their bodies are literal assemblages: the head of one

animal, wings from another, a body from a third. Examples of early hybrid monsters with which we are still familiar include griffins, sphinxes, and centaurs. A multitude of other kinds of hybrids across any number of taxonomic categories, of course, is not just conceivable but is recorded across the anthropological record.

Transgressing states of animation is another way for monsters to disrupt taxonomies. The most prominent among these are the states of being dead or alive: ghosts, spirits, zombies, vampires, and more fall into this category. Monstrousness in these cases hails from being neither dead nor alive, or being both, dead *and* alive. The anthropological literature records ghosts and spirits across the globe (see, among many others, Blanes & Santo 2013, Bubandt 2012, Mills 1995), and note that neither zombies nor vampires are in any way limited to popular culture. While the contemporary cinematic zombie's genealogy is commonly related back to the Haitian *zombi*, which in turn made the transatlantic journey from Africa to the Caribbean in the slave boats, other zombies never left Africa and proliferated there (see, amongst many others, Cannon 1942; Comaroff & Comaroff 2002; Niehaus 2005). Vampires—undead monsters who drink the blood of humans—appear across time and space in countless cultures (see Weiss 1998 and White 2000 for examples from Africa).

Other ways of taxonomic transgression are more fluid. One example of this are shapeshifters, creatures who are sometimes human, sometimes animal. Further significant aspects of the monstrous body are its size (often much larger or much smaller than the original category, such as dwarves or the giant octopus). Then, there are culturally specific markers of monstrosity which render a monstrous body unnatural, such as horns (on beings to whom they don't 'belong'), or long nails, hirsuteness, and so forth. Lastly, the monstrous body is often endowed with powers that far exceed what it should 'naturally' be capable of, including excessive speed and/or strength, the ability to become invisible or teleport, and so forth. These literal superpowers highlight the monster's supernaturalness.

Next to embodiment, anthropologists take the physical presence (or, emplacement) of monsters to signify meaning in multiple ways. First and foremost, monsters as a rule are local, vernacular, and environmentally contingent. In other words, monsters are deeply emplaced. An illustrative example of this is summed up by Mathias Clasen:

> We find different shape-shifters in different ecologies: a were-tiger in India and other Asian regions, a were-bear in North America, a were-leopard in Africa, a wereboar in Greece and Turkey, a were-crocodile in Indonesia and Africa, and so on (2012: 225).

To turn this on its head:

> An Anito [an Indigenous Taiwanese malicious spirit] in Paris, Huldufólk [an Icelandic type of fey] in the Australian tropics, or a Minmin Light [central Australian luminoids] in LA would elicit either very different, or just as likely, no responses at all from humans there (Musharbash 2014a: 11).

Within their deep emplacement, however, monsters often are simultaneously 'out of place'. As Stasch puts it, they are 'physically present in the place but clashing with the ideas understood to go with it' (2014: 211). This is why we often find monsters in the margins, at crossroads, in the dark, underground, under the bed, and so forth: they should not be there, so this is exactly where they are! This is also why indicator events that happen 'out of place'—such as the flowering of a shrub out of season, the cry of a diurnal bird at night—indicate monstrous presence (see also Musharbash 2016, Turpin *et al.* 2013). Often, their presence 'out of place' signals danger, but this must not necessarily be so. Consider, firstly, that monsters can signal danger also by being exactly where they are expected to be, in naturally dangerous places. To give some examples from the aquatic realm: it is in the vicinity of rip currents and whirlpools that mermaids are said to dwell, the deepest and darkest waterholes are home to rainbow serpents, and a treacherous salt lake in Australia's Western Desert is where *ngayurnangalku* (malevolent cannibal beings) haunt. Secondly, and demonstrating monsters' cunning ability to escape too-tight definitions, they can also be exactly where they are meant to be and signal safety. For example, the vicinities of shrines and altars often are dwelling places of protective spirits, and the presence of *milarrlpa* (benevolent place-specific spirits) in Australia's Tanami Desert is a sign of well-cared-for ancestral Country.

Perhaps even more complex than monsters' relationship to place is their relationship to time, but here as well there are some distinct patterns as well as exceptions to the rule. Generally, monsters are deeply contingent on the temporal schema of the humans they haunt. For example, monsters tend to prefer nighttime over daytime to be active in contexts where this inverts the temporality of human sociality. This way of monsters 'being in time' can be expanded from a day/night cycle, to annual cycles and seasons, and on to epochs. In other words, monsters find their niches in each society's temporal schema, so that the presence of certain monsters, say, at night, in spring, during the full moon, has a dual effect: emphasising the monstrousness of the monster and simultaneously re-enforcing the meaningfulness of temporal schemata.

For anthropologists, this means that it becomes possible to look comparatively at different temporal schemata through the times when monsters haunt. This is possible not only on daily or seasonal cycles, but also by looking at deep understandings of time. For example, if people have a time before the beginning of history, monsters may or may not hail from there. If people live in an unchanging and eternal 'everywhen', monsters may or may not be part of this, and so forth. Much as temporal ontologies differ, so do the ways in which monsters integrate or subvert the temporal ontologies within which they haunt. The point here is that no matter *how* monsters relate to time, that relationship always reveals something about a society's temporality (and, in the process, helps define monsters).

Another way to investigate the relationship between monsters and time is to explore how monsters change across time. This is a major trope in monster studies, where often fears and monsters are related to each other, and a common argument is that as societal fears change, so do monsters (see, amongst many others,

Asma 2009 and Pool 2011). Such diachronic work is rarer in anthropology, but where it exists, it presents exciting insights into temporality as much as into monsters, as for example Foster's (2009, 2012) work on Japanese *yōkai* (supernatural beings) across time.

The monster, says Cohen 'is born as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment' (1996: 2), and—once translated into anthropology—this is probably the primary way in which anthropology relates monsters and temporality. Anthropologists recurrently highlight how monsters are expressive of profound socio-cultural change. In anthropological analyses, monsters seem to herald change in 'the times' and pinpoint the consequences of this change through changing themselves. For example, Katie Glaskin (2018) investigates cultural change among Bardi and Jawi people in the Kimberley region of Western Australia through analysing the fading of complexity among spirit beings, showing how the knowledge about spirit beings becoming less differentiated is intricately linked to Bardi and Jawi experiences of colonialism and capitalism. On the other side of the world, Paul Manning (2005) critically engages with capitalism through tracing the transformations of tommyknockers (gnome-like creatures who dwell in mines) as they migrate with the miners from the Cornish mines to the US. Rupert Stasch (2016) investigates social ruptures experienced by Korowai people in Indonesian Papua through the movement of their dead to the 'big city', and Nils Bubandt (2008) explores the repercussions of violent communal clashes in North Maluku, Indonesia, through the emergence of traumatised ghosts.

Parallel to the particular ways in which monsters are embodied, emplaced, and temporally contingent, they act both in accordance with and by rupturing the social norms of the people they haunt. Haunting, in the anthropological literature, is not necessarily loaded with negative connotations. In this vein, this entry uses the verb 'to haunt' as a catchall phrase to capture the manifold ways in which monsters are inherently social (even when they are anti-social). I have argued that anthropologists understand monsters as social actors deeply embedded in the cultural fabric 'not least because they are intimately familiar with their interlocutors' responses to the presence of monsters' (2014a: 6). This entry singles out two types of response to exemplify anthropological understandings of monsters as social beings: the variety of emotions engendered by them, and examples of the kind of social practices performed in the presence of monsters.

Against popular understandings, the emotions that monsters elicit when encountered by anthropologists in the field far exceed fear. It is true, many monsters are terrifying: they can frighten, hurt, and potentially kill people—think only of the *bunyip*, which lurks in deep black pools in the River Murray in southeastern Australia, and is known to drown people in the river's depths; or, the *windigo* of Algonquian-speaking First Nations, whose greed and selfishness propels its cannibalistic blood thirst. But not all monsters terrify humans. Many monsters are more ambivalent—think Cornish tommyknockers or Islandic *huldufólk*, for example, who may warn people about imminent dangers, play tricks on them, or lure them away from their kin, but for a while only. Others, again, are protective; many emplaced spirits, for example, are conduits between people, ancestors, and land, and their presence steeps the living in a sense of wellbeing and

safety.

In turn, humans react to the presence of 'their' monsters in culturally specific ways, be they embodied or ritualised. These are practically limitless, but include actions and practices such as flight, avoidance, greeting, calling out, singing, leaving gifts, chanting, keeping lights on at night, bowing, specific hand gestures, turning the body, hurling abuse at them, brandishing fire sticks, fighting them, and so forth. The specific social practices humans engage in response to 'their' monsters can be read as a mirror that reflects back to the observer who people are and what haunts them.

Monsters across the anthropological record

From its earliest beginnings, the anthropological record has been populated by beings that fit into the definition of monsters put forward in this entry. However, *how* monsters were included differs across time. The different ways can broadly be classified into four distinct (if at times overlapping) trends, the first three of which did *not* employ the term monster. In the foundational phase of anthropology, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, anthropologists meticulously described multitudes of local monsters (as per the entry's definition) and included them in their ethnographies. They soon began to focus on fewer monsters (broadly defined), such as malicious spirits, analysing them and their presence in more sustained manners. This lead to regional paradigms, such as the anthropology of witchcraft.

Over the last three decades of the twentieth century, anthropology saw a gradual increase of works that concentrate on single, specific monsters (not labelled thus) outside of well-established regional paradigms. This included, for example, ghosts, the devil, and aliens. Over the past decade, works emerged that employ the term 'monster' strategically, quite possibly in response to the ways in which the new century is permeated by monstrousness.

By providing an overview of key ethnographic examples from each trend, this entry highlights the enduring presence of monsters in anthropology as well as some of the different kinds of frameworks within which they have been conceptualised. In tandem, these trends underscore the meaningfulness of monsters as an analytic category and they provide a path towards more fully grasping the great contemporary importance of the concept.

There is nary a classical anthropological work that does not include descriptions of local monsters; they are teeming across the pages of *The golden bough* (Frazer 1890) and populate many an ethnography that followed. Look at ethnographies by early anthropologists, and you will find *mulukuausi*, deadly flying witches; an octopus so large it could 'cover an entire village with its body; its arms […] thick as coco-nut trees'; and 'big, live stones, which lie in wait for sailing canoes, run after them, jump up and smash them to pieces' (all in Papua New Guinea's Trobriand Islands, as described in Malinowski 1922: 76, 234-5, 241)*.* Across the sea, in the Andaman Island, there are *lau*, spirits who eat the flesh of the dead, may cause

illness or death, are considered to be more dangerous to strangers than locals, but can also be friends with magic users (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 136-9). And up in the Arctic, Inuit are haunted by the *kalopaling*, a 'fabulous being' that appears like a human in a feathered outfit but lives under the sea and can capsize ships; the *uissuit*, a 'strange people that live in the sea. They are dwarfs and are frequently seen'; and the *tornit*, a people who shared the land with the Inuit many years ago, 'much taller than the Inuit [with] very long legs and arms. Almost all of them were blear eyed. They were extremely strong' (all in Boas 1964: 212-3, 226-8).

These examples are but the tip of the iceberg of a veritable cornucopia of monsters in early ethnographies—except that early anthropologists did not employ the term 'monster' as a category for these creatures. Even though they were not collated under any umbrella term, they were as matter-of-factly included in early ethnographies as were descriptions of local climate, fauna, flora, kinship, or ritual. As an example, consider how Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1956), a leading British social anthropologist, includes beings who easily fall under the broad definition of monsters in his note on the ways in which the Azande of north-central Africa categorised their totems (emblematic species with which different social groups identify) in the early half of the twentieth century. Evans-Pritchard lists the totems by category: first, named ones (based on mammals, birds, reptiles, and crustaceans) followed by an unnamed category which he describes as 'creatures [that] may be supposed not to exist, though the experiences they stand for are, or may be, actual' (1956: 108). These creatures include a crested water snake called *ngambue*, a rainbow snake called *wangu*, the *moma ima*, which is a water leopard, and the *gumba*, which is an entity known as thunder-beast (1956: 108.). The point to note is that the inclusion of monsters as totems is not what Evens-Pritchard finds striking, but rather that there are no plant totems. In other words, monsters were taken as a given. Their presence, or, minimally, people's belief in them, was not an issue early anthropologists grappled with. The concern rather was with 'where' in an ethnography and in analysis they belonged. In this vein, Bronislaw Malinowski (dubbed the founding father of participant observation, anthropology's core method), when mentioning deadly flying witches called *mulukuausi* in a paper about spirits of the dead, explains:

> But all these data really belong to the chapter about sorcery and evil magic, and have only been mentioned here, where the mulukuausi interest us, as especially connected with the dead (1916: 357).

The foundational phase of anthropology is thus characterised by expansive inclusion and meticulous description of multitudes of local monsters—and, an implicit and sometimes explicit understanding of monsters and humans cohabiting the worlds studied. Early anthropology's preoccupation with 'discovering' the 'Native's point of view' meant that *how* people made sense of monsters was at stake, not the fact that monsters existed in the fieldsites visited by anthropologists.[4]

The expansive inclusion of all beings retrospectively catchable under the broad definition of 'monster' is countered by the development of regional theoretical paradigms. A number of anthropologists soon focused on one regionally salient 'monster' (never called that), leading to more sustained analyses of these respective monsters and the developments of specific theoretical frameworks. An illustrative example is witchcraft as an anthropological topic where it relates to more-than-human witches—either known or unknown persons endowed with superhuman and magical powers.[1] Such witches may be able to fly, become invisible, kill with magic, and more. They can be wholly evil or are protectors, and are often embroiled in local misfortunes on a wide scale, from making a person slip to being entangled in disasters from pandemics to natural catastrophes (for an overview, see Moro 2017).

As anthropologists increasingly focused on witches, they often abandoned other local monsters. However, this allowed them to develop in-depth, complex, influential, and lasting theoretical engagements. Take two prominent works in the field of African witchcraft studies, for example, by Evans-Pritchard (1937) and Peter Geschiere (2013). The counterpoint to the time-depth is that these engagements are regionally distinct. So distinct, in fact, that anthropologists working on witchcraft in Africa and anthropologists working on witchcraft in Melanesia had progressively less and less to say to each other (Patterson 1974)—and even less to discuss with anthropologists who were focussing on monsters other than witches (say, malicious spirits or ghosts, two other monsters responsible for vast bodies of anthropological work). Stasch sums up the effect of this process of specialisation on the studies of monsters in anthropology by affirming that 'in anthropology, scholarship on monsters has been quite dispersed, despite the existence of a strong tradition of work on witchcraft and many excellent accounts of other monsters in specific settings' (2014: 195).

Revisiting such regional paradigms with an understanding of their protagonists as *monsters* impels new conversations that open up fascinating comparative possibilities, and in return offer ethnographically rich, fine-grained analyses of specific monsters.

A gradual but distinct shift took place in ethnographies from the later twentieth century onwards, towards beings that fall under the monster definition given here. While rarely theorised as *monsters*, these beings are employed as a lens through which to explore sociocultural aspects of inequality, gender, and race in contexts of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and extractivism. Among countless others, examples of this development include studies of aliens in the US (Lepselter 2016), demons in Sri Lanka (Kapferer 1983), ghosts in Indonesia (Bubandt 2012), spirits (Blanes & Santo 2013) and the wildman (Forth 2008) across the world, *yōkai* in Japan (Foster 2015), and zombies in Africa (Comaroff & Comaroff 2002). These works do not form a canon as other regional paradigms do. However, if gathered together as works which share in common that they are dealing with monsters in one shape or form, they become a productive source displaying the rich and nuanced comparative potential of monsters in anthropology. This can be analysed in

a multitude of ways, exemplified in the following by a focus on ethnographies of monsters and alterity (from the Latin word *alter*, for otherness).

In anthropology, perhaps the best-known monsters of alterity roam in South America, where they have generated many fascinating analyses, not least since Michael Taussig's seminal work, *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America* (1980)*.* Here, Taussig analyses how displaced peasants in Columbian sugar cane plantations and Bolivian tin mines make sense of the injustices of capitalist exploitation through worshipping a devil figure known as *el Tío*. Almost forty years later, Anders Burman (2018) took this vein of analysis of monsters as alterity the furthest in his study of the *kharisiri*, a monster haunting the Indigenous populations in the Bolivian Andes. The *kharisiri* looks like a white man, said to have its roots in either Spanish soldiers and/or friars, and steals the kidney fat of locals. He shows how not just the monster and the 'white man' (standing in for colonialism), but also the anthropologist as well as anthropology as a discipline, can be said to share four characteristics: '(1) they are 'strange'; (2) they are powerful (relatively speaking); (3) they are exploitative; and (4) the resources they extract are used in "strange" contexts' (Burman 2018: 52). Other analyses of the *kharisiri* play on the roots of the monster and capitalism trope, but then examine how it extends itself to acute contemporary issues, for example, racial violence (see, among many others, Canessa 2000).

The Ecuadorian and Peruvian counterpart to the *kharisiri* is the *pishtaco* (Weismantel 2001), another body-fat-stealing monster. Its evil exploits epitomise gender, race, and class alterity perfectly: a white male figure, with church, military, and business associations, who steals the kidney fat of local people. The equivalent of kidney fat (life, power) in the Andes seems to be blood in parts of Africa, where monsters of alterity take the form of white vampires who steal the blood of locals. Much as in South America, the genealogy of these monsters goes back to the roots of colonialism, so much so that Luise White (2000) speaks of 'colonial bloodsucking' in her analyses of countless examples of stories about Africans being slaughtered (or kept in pits) for their blood to be used for the treatment of anaemic diseases. Contemporary forms of these vampires continue to haunt and steal blood (life, power) in contemporary guises (see, amongst many others, Weiss 1998).

In Indonesia, seventeenth-century Portuguese soldiers, transmogrified into [animal](#)-like wild-but-Western giants, continue to haunt locals in ways that uncannily speak to the [Anthropocene](#) (Bubandt 2019). In Malaysia, the *jenuing*, who existed as evil female spirits with maggots in their hair, are now driving logging trucks (Rothstein 2020). Their transition perfectly encapsulates how monsters not just embody alterity, but can also and with ease change over to the Other's side. The same is true of *kurdaitcha* in central Australia. They are pre-colonial monsters—human-like but endowed with supernatural strength and speed and driven by a lust to kill—who are said to have cohabited in the desert with humans since time immemorial. Today, however, they are allied with non-Indigenous Australians. This allows them to pursue their life's desire of killing Aboriginal people even more successfully than before (Musharbash 2014b).

The most recent developments in anthropology concerned with monsters build on previous, more comparative work to employ the term 'monster' strategically. Some anthropologists now theorise a vast multitude of beings as monsters. Presterudstuen and I (2014, 2020b) call this new field 'monster anthropology'. Bringing together interdisciplinary theorisations about monsters and ethnographic material about all manner of creatures, beings, and other-than-humans, we propose that employing the umbrella term 'monster' drastically increases anthropology's comparative possibilities in areas that were previously investigated in either geographic or analytical isolation (Musharbash 2014a: 15). This approach aims to bridge the conceptual gap between monsters encountered in the field (by locals and/or anthropologists) and interdisciplinary monster studies. It demonstrates that theoretical debates in interdisciplinary monster studies can very productively inform anthropological understandings of monsters, up to a point: the nub lies in the tension between empirical experiences of monsters and understandings of monsters as fictional or part of folklore (see especially Musharbash 2014a). In turn, the empirical experiences of 'living with monsters' are the primary contribution anthropology can make to interdisciplinary monster studies (for narrative ethnographies vividly capturing various ways of living with monsters across the globe, see contributions in Musharbash and Gershon forthcoming).

A parallel development is taking place at the interface between anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS): Anna Tsing *et al.*'s volume, *Arts of living on a damaged planet* (2017) draws on monsters and ghosts to grapple with how to understand local repercussions of the Anthropocene. They put forward that monsters lend themselves ideally to readings of what ails the planet, as they 'have a double meaning: on the one hand, they help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements; on the other, they point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man' (Swanson *et al.* 2017: M2.). Scholars in this tradition make a categorical distinction between monsters on the one hand and ghosts on the other, and employ monsters in analyses of different forms of embodiments while ghosts serve to explore how people relate to place (their 'emplacements').[6] As Heather Anne Swanson *et al.* put it: 'ghosts […] help us read life's enmeshment in landscapes, monsters point us toward life's symbiotic entanglements across bodies' (2017: M2). Their approach highlights the fruitfulness of making monsters central to anthropological investigations into change and transformation, generally, and the crises of the Anthropocene most specifically.

It is no accident that monsters are resurging in anthropology as the Anthropocene reveals its force, and planetary crises in a multitude of shapes and forms reach all points of the Earth. As climate change worsens and its effects brutally impact the lives of people across the planet, monsters come to the fore of anthropological analyses *as monsters*. Monsters seem to jump at the new opportunities granted and wreak havoc in new but always culturally legible ways—even if what they say is that there is no legibility to what is happening. Their acts can be almost trivial, like *minis,* spirits living in the treetops around a temple in Tamil Nadu, India, who refused to catch the rice balls thrown up to them during an annual festival (Arumugam 2020) in a response to environmental degradation, or like ghosts starting to haunt differently

as cyclones become more destructive (Presterudstuen 2020). Yet even these small monstrous acts poignantly illuminate what it means to live in crisis. They can become quotidian, just as the never-ending series of disasters may be, or they can be momentous and apocalyptic.

The ways in which monsters change, not just allegiance but in all manner of ways, has been identified by Presterudstuen and I (2020a) as a crucially salient aspect of what they are. We suggest six axes along which to analyse monster change and transformation, namely: examining the ways in which new monsters emerge (e.g., Frankenstein's monster, during the Industrial Revolution); investigating how monsters adapt to new circumstances (for example, how new infrastructure like electricity may repel some monsters and draw new ones nearer); how monsters might be appropriated (say, by capital, or the settler-colonial state); the ways in which monsters can amalgamate (like the Algonquian *windigo*, who acquired more werewolfish features as French-Canadian voyageurs started intermingling with local Indigenous people), as well as their extinction (which often goes hand-in-hand with missionisation) and, of course, monster succession.

We also argue that analytical attention to how monsters change may provide anthropologists with perceptive insights into crises that occupy the lives and minds of the people they study. As long as monsters play central roles in their humans' struggles in dealing with all kinds of catastrophes—from new infrastructures and species extinction to neo-colonialism, environmental degradation, and climate change—the anthropological study of monsters is likely to grow in the years to come.

Conclusion

Anthropology, more than any other discipline, deals with monsters who are part and parcel of social life: the monsters that anthropologists encounter in their fieldsites do not only appear in myths and rituals but shape people's daily lives. Monsters turn out to live with the people they haunt: they know them, their systems, rules, and orders, their problems and their crises. The lives of local monsters and 'their' people are thus deeply, intricately, and intimately entangled. The fact that, until recently, anthropology did not use the category 'monster' to class all the beings that can be captured by the definition given in this entry is triply significant: it pinpoints something of a turning point, as it goes against the grain of most arguments in anthropology by highlighting that it is not a multitude of local concepts we need at this point, but also perhaps big, universal ones. In the case of monsters, at least, using such a broad category is productive, as it deepens our understandings by comparatively including all sorts of ethnographic material under a general banner of monster studies. Lastly, it seems this new category of monster in anthropology gels well with the times and carries much promise, as monsters abound in this unceasingly globalised world visited by endless strings of crises. The study of past and present monsters promises novel insights not only into them, but into the ways in which different peoples deal differently with what haunts them. Taking seriously the capacities that monsters have—of hybridity, transgression, adaptation, and shape-shifting, among many others—will be instructive also for investigations into human imaginations of and the potential to deal with

change and transformation. This entry has foregrounded global environmental, [colonial](#), and economic crises as examples, and it forecasts that anthropology will never cease to find new monsters. Just consider the rise of [digital](#) monsters (see Asimos), or, the rocketed popularity of *Amabie*, a Japanese *yōkai* that serves as a protector from COVID-19 (Springwood 2020). From there, it is not far to considering that cyborgs, robots, bioengineered beings, androids, ghosts of post-industrial ruins, and nuclear and plague zombies are in the process of leaving science fiction and becoming part and parcel of everyday life. Tackling them and the next wave of monsters that will surely follow will be easier when it is possible to draw on broad comparative material—from across time and comparatively across the planet—as well as bringing together ethnographic expertise with other disciplines studying monsters.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Felix Stein for their wonderful in-depth engagement with the first draft of this entry. Their comments, queries, and reflections have helped immensely in reworking this piece.

References

Arumugam, I. 2020. Gods as monsters: insatiable appetites, exceeding interpretations, and a surfeit of life. In *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 45-58. London: Routledge.

Asimos, V. 2021. *Digital mythology and the internet's monsters: The Slender Man*. London: Bloomsbury.

Asma, S.T. 2009. *On monsters: an unnatural history of our worst fears*. Oxford: University Press.

Blanes, R. & D.E. Santo 2013. *The social life of spirits*. Chicago: University Press.

Boas, F. 1964. *The Central Eskimo*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Bubandt, N. 2008. Ghosts with trauma: global imaginaries and the politics of post-conflict memory. In *Conflict, violence, and displacement in Indonesia* (ed.) E.L. Hedman, 275-302. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

——— 2012. A psychology of ghosts: the regime of the self and the reinvention of spirits in Indonesia and beyond. *Anthropological Forum* **22**(1), 1-23.

——— 2019. Of wildmen and white men: cryptozoology and inappropriate/d monsters at the cusp of the Anthropocene. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **25**(2), 223-40.

Burman, A. 2018. Are anthropologists monsters? An Andean dystopian critique of extractivist ethnography

and Anglophone-centric anthropology. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* **8**(1/2), 48-64.

Canessa, A. 2000. Fear and loathing on the Kharisiri Trail: alterity and identity in the Andes. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **6**(4), 705-20.

Cannon, W.B. 1942. 'Voodoo' death. *American Anthropologist* **44**(2), 169-81.

Clasen, M. 2012. Monsters evolve: a biocultural approach to horror stories. *Review of General Psychology* **16**(2), 222-9.

Cohen, J.J. 1996. Monster culture (seven theses). In *Monster theory: reading culture* (ed.) J.J. Cohen, 3-25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Comaroff, J. & J.L. Comaroff 2002. Alien-nation: zombies, immigrants, and millennial capitalism. *South Atlantic Quarterly* **101**(4), 779-805.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——— 1956. Zande totems. *Man* **56**(Aug), 107-9.

Favret-Saada, J. 1980. *Deadly words: witchcraft in Bocage*. Cambridge: University Press.

Forth, G. 2008. *Images of the wildman in Southeast Asia: an anthropological perspective*. London: Routledge.

Foster, M.D. 2009. *Pandemonium and parade: Japanese monsters and the culture of yōkai.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

——— 2012. Early modern past to postmodern future: changing discourses of Japanese monsters. In *The Ashgate research companion to monsters and the monstrous* (eds.) A.S. Mittman & P.J. Dendle, 133-50. Aldershot: Ashgate.

——— 2015. *The book of yōkai: mysterious creatures of Japanese folklore*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——— 2020. Afterword: scenes from the monsterbiome. In *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 2013-228. London: Routledge.

Frazer, J.G. 1890. *The golden bough: a study in comparative religion. Vol I and II*. London: Macmillan.

Geertz, C. 1974. 'From the native's point of view': on the nature of anthropological understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* **28**(1), 26-45.

Geschiere, P. 2013. *Witchcraft, intimacy, and trust: Africa in comparison*. Chicago: University Press.

Glaskin, K. 2018. Other-than-humans and the remaking of the social. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **24**(2), 313-29.

Gordon, A.F. 2008. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Haraway, D. 1991. *Simians, cyborgs and women: the reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.

Kapferer, B. 1983. *A celebration of demons: exorcism and the aesthetics of healing Sri Lanka*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Lepselter, S. 2016. *The resonance of unseen things: poetics, power, captivity, and UFOs in the American uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Malinowski, B. 1916. Baloma; the spirits of the dead in the Trobriand Islands. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* **46** (Jul-Dec), 353-430.

——— 1922. *Argonauts of the western Pacific: an account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: G. Routledge.

Manning, P. 2005. Jewish ghosts, knackers, tommyknockers, and other sprites of capitalism in the Cornish mines. *Cornish Studies* **13**, 216-55.

Mikkelsen, H.H. 2020. Out of the ordinary: monsters as extreme cases among the Bugkalot and beyond. *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* **4**(2), 1-19.

Mills, M.B. 1995. Attack of the widow ghosts: gender, death, and modernity in Northeast Thailand. In *Bewitching women, pious men: gender and body politics in Southeast Asia* (eds) A. Ong & M.G. Peletz, 200-23. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Moro, P.A. 2017. Witchcraft, sorcery, and magic. In *The international encyclopedia of anthropology* (ed.) H. Callan (available on-line: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1915).

Musharbash, Y. 2014a. Introduction: monsters, anthropology, and monster studies. In *Monster anthropology in Australasia and beyond* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 1-24. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

——— 2014b. Monstrous transformations: a case study from Central Australia. In *Monster anthropology in Australasia and beyond* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 39-55. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

——— 2016. A short essay on monsters, birds, and sounds of the uncanny. *Semiotic Review* **2**, 1-11.

——— & G.H. Presterudstuen 2014. *Monster anthropology in Australasia and beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

——— & G.H. Presterudstuen 2020a. Introduction: monsters and change. In *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 1-27. London: Routledge.

——— & G.H. Presterudstuen 2020b. *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters*. London: Routledge.

——— & I. Gershon (eds) forthcoming. *Living with monsters.* Earth, Milky Way, Santa Barbara, Calif.: punctum books.

Niehaus, I. 2005. Witches and zombies of the South African Lowveld: discourse, accusations and subjective reality. The *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* **11**(2), 191-210.

Patterson, M. 1974. Sorcery and witchcraft in Melanesia. *Oceania* **45**(2), 132-60.

Pool, W.S. 2011. *Monsters in America: our historical obsession with the hideous and the haunting*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press.

Presterudstuen, G.H. 2020. Monsters, place, and murderous winds in Fiji. In *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters.* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 159-72. London: Routledge.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1922. *The Andaman Islanders*. Cambridge: University Press.

Rothstein, M. 2020. Decline and resilience of Eastern Penan monsters. In *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters.* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 75-87. London: Routledge.

Springwood, C.F. 2020. A Japanese sea spirit battles COVID-19 (2 September). *Sapiens* (available on-line: https://www.sapiens.org/culture/amabie-covid-19/).

Stasch, R. 2014. Afterword: strangerhood, pragmatics, and place in the dialectics of monster and norm. In *Monster anthropology in Australasia and beyond* (eds) Y. Musharbash & G.H. Presterudstuen, 195-214. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

——— 2016. Singapore, big village of the dead: cities as figures of desire, domination. and rupture among Korowai of Indonesian Papua. *American Anthropologist* **118**(2), 258-69.

Swanson, H., A. Tsing, N. Bubandt, & E. Gan 2017. Introduction: bodies tumbled into bodies. In *Arts of living on a damaged planet* (eds) A. Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan & N. Bubandt, M1-12. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Taussig, M.T. 1980. *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Tsing, A., H. Swanson, E. Gan & N. Bubandt (eds) 2017. *Arts of living on a damaged planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Turpin, M.A. Ross, V. Dobson & M.K. Turner 2013. The spotted nightjar calls when dingo pups are born: ecological and social indicator events in Central Australia. *Journal of Ethnobiology* **33**(1), 7-32.

Weismantel, M. 2001. *Cholas and pishtacos: stories of race and sex in the Andes*. Chicago: University Press.

Weiss, B. 1998. Electric vampires: Haya rumors of the commodified body. In *Bodies and persons: comparative perspectives from Africa and Melanesia* (eds) M. Lambek & A. Strathern, 172-94. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Wengrow, D. 2014. *The origins of monsters: image and cognition in the first age of mechanical reproduction*. Princeton: University Press.

White, L. 2000. *Speaking with vampires: rumor and history in colonial Africa.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Note on contributor

Yasmine Musharbash is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Archaeology & Anthropology at the Australian National University. Since the 1990s, she has been conducting participant observation-based research with Warlpiri people in Central Australia. She is the author of *Yuendumu everyday* (2008) and of a number of co-edited volumes, including *Monster anthropology in Australasia and beyond* (with G.H. Presterudstuen, 2014), *Monster anthropology: ethnographic explorations of transforming social worlds through monsters* (with G.H. Presterudstuen, 2020), and *Living with monsters* (forthcoming, with Ilana Gershon).

---

[1] **Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996) *Monster culture (seven theses)* is generally accepted as the foundational work.**

[2] **This might be a key reason why anthropologists tend not to talk about monsters in ethnographic contexts where animals and humans are counterparts of each other (parts of Amazonia, for example).**

[3] **The 'fantastic' embodiment is what sets monsters apart from Mary Douglas's (1966) classic taxonomic transgression example of dirt as 'matter out of place'.**

[4] For an eminent critique of the 'Native's point of view', see Clifford Geertz (1974).

[5] The most renowned example in anthropology of all-too-human witches is Jeanne Favret-Saada's (1980) *Deadly words*.

[6] While this separation of ghosts from monsters galvanises the fertile literature on haunting, from Derrida's 'hauntology' to Avery Gordon's (2008) *Ghostly matters*, it does less for theorising monsters themselves.