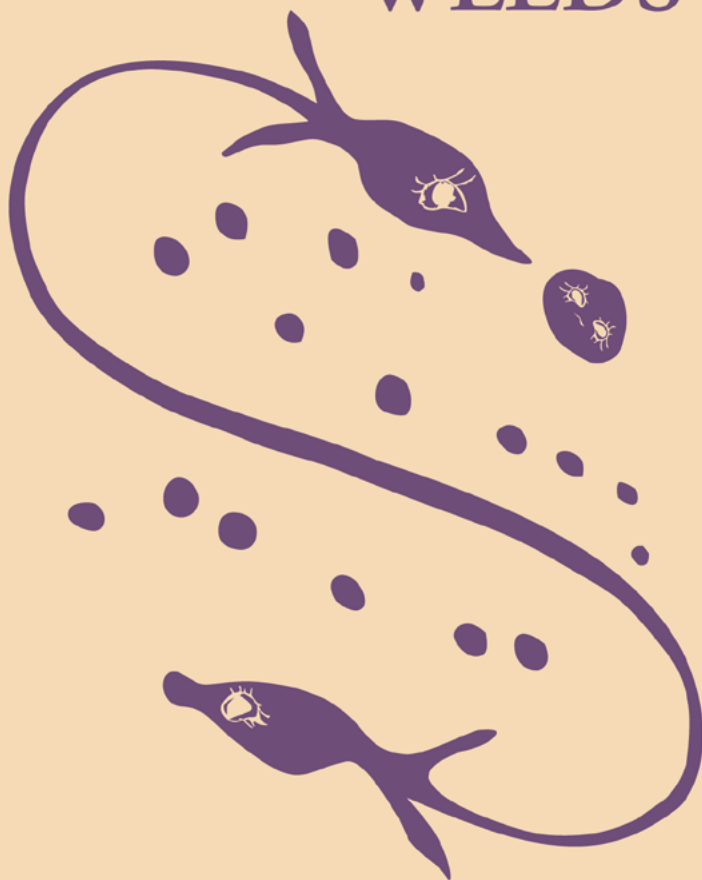


SPLITTING MAMMALIAN WEEDS

Monster for a memory



Shana Bernard de Villiers

*SPLITTING
MAMMALIAN
WEEDS*



Shana Bernard de Villiers

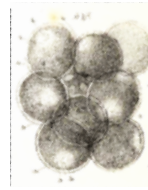
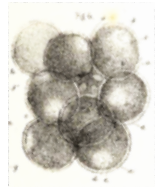


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I try to split myself into bits.

I try to look at bits, bits that are both here

And back there.

(It is circular,
ouroborous)

To monsters and cells

A welcome note of sorts

This is not a thesis of trying to mine a singular understanding, but a collect(ion)(ive) body of research composed into a gesture. Other than my memories, I have only grazed the surface of the topics I will discuss (even then, memories are at the fragile grace of synaptic connections). There are holes here, tears that will take a lifetime to mend. As I will mention later, I am not interested in a singular whole. Holes, on the other hand, are curious places with a warm spot for a happening, so I am okay with the holes.

All patch works are several and my obsession with their cobbled nature does not mean there are no moments of stillness and clarity. This work is an archive of the muddiness of being and I invite you to draw parallels with your own logic as you stumble through this patchy, leaky, weed forest.

Initial Split in the Weeds

~ “*Tremblement*. Firstly, what I call *tremblement* is neither incertitude nor fear. It is not what paralyzes us. Trembling thinking is the instinctual feeling that we must refuse all categories of fixed and imperial thought. *Tremblement* is thinking in which we can lose time, lose time searching, in which we can wander and in which we can counter all the systems of terror, domination, and imperialism with the poetics of trembling – it allows us to be in real contact with the world and with the peoples of the world.

For me, that’s what trembling thinking is. An instinct, an intuition of the world that we can’t achieve with imperial thoughts, with thoughts of domination, thoughts of a systematic path toward a truth that we’ve posited in advance. It’s metaphorical, but it’s also real, concrete.”

Edouard Glissant, in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist (excerpt from the Archipelago Conversations)



◉ fig. 1

Grant yourself time. I whittle this into my bones, sitting on your blue velvet couch on Christmas Eve; alone, save a glass of red wine and Arthur Russell (also) shaving sound away into an aura of prickly moans.

Time to become. Time to not know but search regardless. Time to learn, not to master. Time to observe, not conquer. Time to be this little beast I am, we are.

If time is the gift that keeps on giving, I owe it to Mother Time to use it wisely. Pretend not I have infinity, but slip, serpent-like and anfractuous, through the strands we are woven into. Greet the polycrisis and its related systems of harm through memories: cellular, historical and personal. Not aiming to merely flirt with injustice but disembowel it – beckon multiple metastases and in the foray of infection, release ourselves from the chains of human-as-all.

What if we become more than temporarily acquainted with the fabric of life; inspect it, comb the fur of it, become lovers with it. Become this little beast I am, we are. (We; this body/we; you over there).

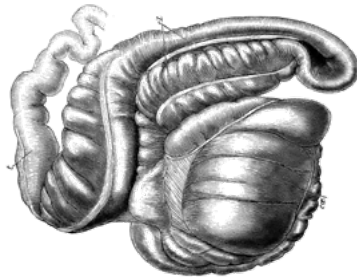
And then be ripped apart. Reconvene at the orifice of becoming, tie ourselves together in composite heaving, collect the intangible threads of memory constellation that have been deprived of its circularity by white supremacist mythologies pretending anthropos-truth for one kind of monster only.

Let's remain

Let's become

Let's come

Be



© fig. 2

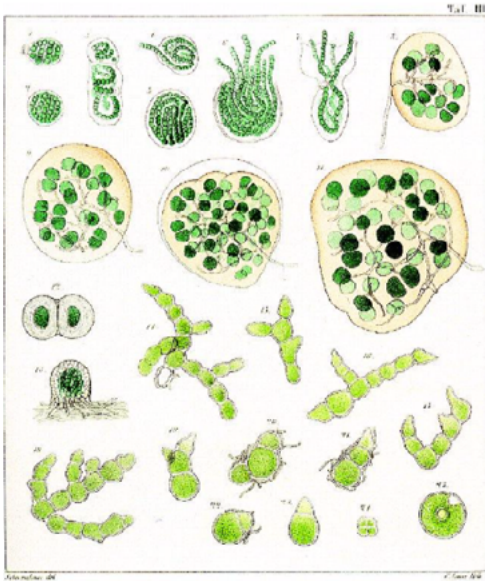
Capacious & Composite

It is uncanny. Is it? Lichen as a monster to science when -ologists of the West could not classify it. Violate categorisation, 'the order of things' and you become monstrous, a highly viscous nuisance to the heteropatriarchal paradigm. *The monster is the one who lives in transition. One whose face, body and behaviours cannot yet be considered true in a premeditated regime of knowledge and power.*¹ ¹ Preciado, Paul B. *Can the Monster Speak*, 2021 (p35)

Simon Schwendener² ² Simon Schwendener, Swiss botanist (1818-1929) desecrated the order of organism-things in 1867 by proposing that lichen were composite beings. That they were multiple, both fungus and algae. That they were an example of symbiosis – greek for *together* and *living*. An organism wed in intramural holy matrimony – until death does them part. You can imagine the monster lichen engendered for itself, resisting common classification like that. Almost all lichenologists at the time rejected his composite theories, “*in part from reasons of common sense, in part because lichenology has always been a somewhat esoteric pursuit*”³. ³ From: *Great Discoveries in Bryology and Lichenology*

‘Esoteric pursuit’ feels sloppy, like a bedsheet held by a single clothes pin, flapping in a gust of wind. Lichen, by virtue of existence, simply did not respect the lichenologist's subjective reality about how organism was supposed to *be* (studied/observed). Julia Kristeva spins the yarn of this monster with the spindle of abjection in *Powers of Horror*: *it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.*⁴ Truth be told, I haven't read much of Kristeva but this blip is rather straightforward (and checks out in arenas outside of the monsterring of the lichen case study).

⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. 1980



◉fig. 3

Lichens, living like pressed flowers on the bodies of others, barely growing for humans to see. Lichens, resisting cultivation through the art of aesthetic nuisance, of socio-botanical hostility. Mocking, defying the scientists desperately seeking reason in the darkness of not-knowing; those that find footing in the dark by normalising competition and individualism as justification for the propagation of monstrification – and other harmful systems.

If I had a lover I would murmur into their ears, late at night, that symbiotic theory thus crept from the capacious crack that lichen served empirical science – although all these unearthings render our species as slow, impish towards our entitlement.

And then, as if it was not enough to monster the para-consciousness of bacteria, plants and fungi, heterosexual white supremacists colonised territories to monster members of their own species. A kind of cannibalistic disembowelment in the name of power and cleanliness.

Right on the frosted tip of the rouged nose. I am not blind (or anosmic) to the fact that all these terms, these unearthings, were excavated with the reserve fuel of the colonial machine – clambering from a trench of European humanist desire to UNDERSTAND NORMATIVELY. Nor am I blind (or anosmic) to the history of my own settler ancestry.

Regardless, I hold the words as I peek into histories. I will use both local and Latin names for species in this text. I will honour the words of indigenous naming and the English ones. As Wittgenstein remarks in a 1917 letter to his friend: “if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered”⁵ ⁵Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. 2009. I will befriend the unutterable *contained* in the uttered in an attempt to unleash the beast of multiplicity. Burn the master’s house and wield the ash as a memory-fertiliser.

(Later, I wonder if I have to burn down my childhood home)

◉fig. 4



☯ The entangled evolution of eukaryotic cellular makeup is the first, primordial memory I encounter in my excavations. A juicy mouthful of scientific terminology that, reduced, just means how multicellular life began. A memory imprinted on the architecture of all terrestrial life like an ancient tattoo. It has been proven by Lynn Margulis⁶ that the mitochondria and

⁶ Lynn Margulis, *American evolutionary biologist and all around symbiotic baller (1939-2011)*

plastids in eukaryotic cells – *basically, multicellular entities* – evolved from (prokaryotic) bacteria by process of endosymbiosis. I am here-now, and eukaryotic cells are what make me/plants/animals/fungi. Whereas prokaryotic cells are unicellular – and simultaneously the evolutionary parent of eukaryotic cells.

In the name of multicellularist care, I tend to my Kaapse Appelliefie (*Physalis Peruviana*) as if she was my child, I cook a pot of soup for my sick friend. I am trying to limit my garlic intake – we puff up and don't like it. 'We' includes me...and the bacteria in my gut that triples my meat. Unicellular? Individual? I stand up now: a sip of lavender tea graces us.

Endosymbiosis: how eukaryotic cells are engendered from 'enemies' that became one for survival (through cooperation, not competition).

There are several filaments of the rollercoaster that I will buy a ticket for, branch off from, adrenaline rushing through my bacterial flesh – like how this is the evolution of the FUCK-ING CELL. The thing that makes worlds. The pixels of pixels, the cum of reality. The quintessential guy that survived because of cooperation, would not have lived if not for it. Blissfully unaware I am (we are), craving something sweet with a dollop of peanut butter, wanting, wanting something – monsterring an(other). But the cell once absorbed its evil twin instead of mutilating the appendage that made it an(other).

Children of symbiogenesis gliding sideways, inwards.
Composite flock of birds.

In an interview with Dick Teresi, Margulis responds to her claim that the primary evolutionary mechanism is not mutation but symbiogenesis:

.... “All visible organisms are products of symbiogenesis, without exception. The bacteria are the unit. The way I think about the whole world is that it's like a pointillist painting. You get far away and it looks like Seurat's famous painting of people in the park.

Look closely: The points are living bodies – different distributions of bacteria.

The living world thrived long before the origin of nucleated organisms [the eukaryotic cells, which have genetic material enclosed in well-defined membranes]. There were no animals, no plants, no fungi. It was an all-bacterial world – bacteria that have become very good at finding specialized niches. Symbiogenesis recognizes that every visible life-form is a combination or community of bacteria.”





© fig. 5



Geo-evocation

I fumed out of the studio today. If I was a cartoon character I'd be teary eyed and weepy with a furrowed brow. I'd been crying under my desk and needed tobacco supplies, so I sauntered down to the kiosk. I bumped into Maddie, who was taking the baby out for a stroll. They gave me a sip of their bubble tea – which I have a deeply verbalised feud with for its unnecessary popularity. I am a snob, sometimes. The tea was good, I liked chewing the tapioca balls. I didn't intend to, but we kept walking, walking, walking in circles through the russet-coloured forest. Witnessing a sundry of mushrooms in the under-shrub – some glistening like pearls on dead tree stumps. A chip packet frumpled into something not-quite-dead. A meet up amongst debris and sprouts of kinship. Togetherness. Me, you, and the baby that isn't either of ours, the baby you love.

Cells dancing to a reverberant tune dissimulated by gossip and money. I can't help but giggle at my problems after – somatically back in tune or something like that.

Fluttering realities of dust
– destroy memory functions in order to survive

And then:

Fleshy animal
nothing is pure, invert yourself

*Excerpts from Its Dissociating Season,
Precious Okoyomon (2017).*



◉ fig. 6

The silt of dust destroying memory functions in order to survive is something I feel resistance towards (perhaps vigorously, perhaps I just don't understand). I trust the words of Okoyomon, I just wonder – memory is essential for the poetics of survival. I've been perusing *Life as a Geological Force: Dynamics of the Earth* by Peter Westbroek on my travels on the train. Whoosh. Green bogs and polders flash by. Whoosh. I found it in a bookstore sandwiched between the brick and murky water of Utrecht. It didn't really beckon to me, or

something magical, I just wanted to keep busy before meeting up with my ex. I wanted to show up smart and winning. I am conditioned for it, after all. The Geological Force seduced me from my nervous pit. Defining aeons of geological history (*pre*-human, too), dusting off the crust of the rock and licking the ancient mold is a geological scientific process much like patchwork making. In retrospect, perhaps it did beckon to me, in a flirtatious way that I did not quite grasp. Westbroek explains, amongst other things, the shifting plates on our Earth. No youthful, botox-filled, skin with a forever shape. No doddering either. Instead, crusty plates shift around, perpetually agitated by inertia. Chickens on a hot plate scattering. *Scat!* These tectonic plates don't simply rest on the shallow crust but quiver from the depths of her mantle, bringing forth constantly-becoming land and ocean.

What is now, is not what once was.
What is now, is because of what once was.
What once was, is now

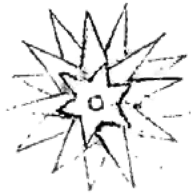
and what of tomorrow?

(a circle)

Java is an island in the Pacific Ocean currently becoming, with great force. Located on the bottom ridge of Indonesia, the Sunda-Java trench sits on the boundary between shifting lithospheric plates. Geologists call this kind of becoming; *subduction*. It is currently busy becoming *so hard* over there that the area is both volcanic and seismic. People make a home here. And yet, the way Java exists today is just a tiny slice in the geological pie. Somewhere on the other side of the walking-circle, the subduction process has transformed Java

into both a continent and a memory. *Mountain belts formed long ago, faint traces of the earth's spasms way back in the past can still be perceived in the rocks. The evidence is distorted and covered with the dust of the ages. We must carefully assemble the bits and pieces until the whole picture emerges.*⁷

⁷ Westbrook, Peter. *Life as Geological Force: Dynamics of the Earth*. 1991. (p53/54)



HISTORY IS SO WITH US
THE ROCKS THAT TELL STORIES
LIKE... THAT IS WHY SCOTLAND HAS MOUNTAINS
THAT WERE ONCE ONE WITH THE APPALACHIAN
MOUNTAIN RANGE
LOVERS NOW RIPPED APART

lets kiss each other's faces lit by the
glow of screens showing promises
from other lovers. livers in our mouth.
like love organs. like limp tongues.
young blood seeps when you bite down

i'm just mad. my mouth is too soft. i
have an irrational logic that despite
the darkness in the people around
me my own darkness isn't warranted.

let's turn into rocks.

i feel wet but my mouth is
dry. i am thirsty

what is our disposition / our agency /
our authority / how do we create or
break down order / on what
boundaries do we lie / do we rule /
do we perform / in what setting / for
whom / let us saturate those around
us / drift with the current / lean on
others / rank ourselves important /
there's no pecking order / we're all
pecked / chickens being everyone /
parade around in our clothes or not /
feel our shape / no one knows how to
move like we do / no one knows the
look of the tops of our feet like we
do / haha listen to me / i'm dead /
i'm serious / i'm addicted to you / i'm
addicted to break ups

i just started crying

i'm like crying in the kitchen

does it feel good to cry

haha yes

girls are all you need real talk

i had a dream there was a horse who
watched a tall stack of animals lose
their flesh, stripped to grey with bits of
meat and then bones and then
bleached by the sun in quicktime/
when it stopped their bones glistened
against a bright blue sky
there is a pan and then a zoom in on
the lower jaw of an animal's skull and
it's sparkling

i've taken all these weeks for granted

my memory has been hazy

my instagram feels like
someone else's night terrors

it feels like the endless silence

it feels like living how to
die forever is possible

let's leave our read receipts on

Let's make one giant sweater
that we all fit into.

Excerpt from Ajobota, Precious Okoyomon, 2016

I look down at my feet. I've never seen your toes like that.

Simulating the dust of the ages and applying that phenomenon, right here, where the evidence of now is being covered in unperceivable increments, *may, like the Earth itself, corpus or organism, be careening, surface seeming, in one dark line, drawn by a fat soft pencil. But upon the surface of time, that is to say, on its protrusions, there are eddies too, things that reverse, or simply start again and again. Smarter, wiser now. Ready for more.*⁸

⁸ Dodge, Harry. *My Meteorite*. 2020. (p1)

Ready to remember, ready to die and feed off each other. Evolving, involving, (not inbred). Haraway puts it so eloquently: *Critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each other, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms and ecological assemblages.*⁹

⁹ Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. 2016 (p58)

I take this to say not only what it says but that critters are both rock and human, several and multiple, together and alone. People, specifically, have become both a biological and geological force to terrestrial ecology. As in people wield great geomorphic power, evident by the palpable witnessing of the Plasticene, for example.

This interpenetration, polyfucking morphology of critters living/dying together blurs the distinguishable qualities of the anthropos vs geos.¹⁰

¹⁰ Bubandt, Nils. 'Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene'. *Ghosts on a Damaged Planet*.

Observations are subjective, veiny engravings that shape perceptions. "*We perceive only that part of nature that our technologies permit and, so too, our theories about nature are highly constrained by what our technologies enable us to observe.*"¹¹

¹¹ Gilbert, Scott F., Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber. "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals." 2012

The paper titled: *We've Never Been Individuals* notes this – and – how we choose to build technologies that enable us to observe, informed by what is important for us to see. A convoluted concoction but

one that has been partially responsible for leaving us with monsters and individuals (two not-so-different phenomena, in dialogue). However, the invention of the microscope, the perverse tool that rummages – inserting, penetrating into the silent humdrum of living, has allowed the human to bear witness to the entangled relationships that reveal themselves so effortlessly in the microscopic sphere. There are two sides to any coin, I guess. If the very essence of it is dripping in the sauce of entangled living, why would the subjective reality of the human be any different? I am saucing, dripping. I eat off brand chocolate in lust and dip my fingers in a mouth.

The bifidobacteria¹² scoffs. Then I can't shit and my pants are tight. I with-

¹² Bifidobacteria are ubiquitous bacterial inhabitants of the gastrointestinal tract, though strains have been isolated from the vagina and mouth of mammals, including humans.

hold the urge to write; 'from within my gut.' It is not simply my gut – *Our gut*.

Yeah. We. We. We. We. Drill it into me, ratatatata, titanium bit scraping against the membrane(s).

I sink back into my own glob, thanking the bacteria for their work to allow me language. When I was a baby, my parents let me eat all sorts of shit in the sand pit – one thing I for certain can say they did right.



◉fig. 7

* “Cyborgs are built for assimilation into households and factories’ Am I boring you? Do you want some coffee? “You adapt to them and they learn how to ask questions, verifying your answers before responding further. In horror films, you can’t always tell if it is a cyborg or if it is a person, whereas monsters are always identifiable as such by their long black hair and multiple arms, retracted into the torso during love-making and hitchhiking, because even monsters fall in love, want to make a go of it. Endless reproduction is boring” The milk’s in the fridge.”¹³ ¹³ Kapil Bhanu, *Incubation: A Space for Monsters*. 2006 (p12)

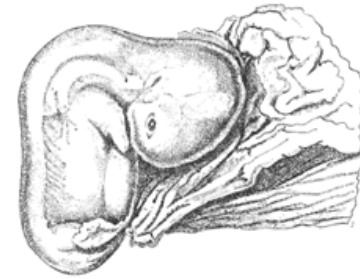


©fig. 8

involution with the backbone of memory. The bee that pollinated the orchid has gone extinct in the North, so she turned to herself, remembering the dead bee through her flower.

* “The practice of the arts of memory enfold all terran critters. That must be part of any possibility for resurgence!”¹⁴

¹⁴ Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. 2016 (p69)



Embryo of Okapi, probably about one month old. × 3.

©fig. 9

Many speak of this art of memory which, to me, is synonymous with the art of noticing. To not forget, is to notice. To not forget; to remember, bit by bit. “The word remember (*re-mem-ber*) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole... Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye”¹⁵

¹⁵ hooks, bell. *Art on my mind: Visual Politics*. 1995 (p64) This paradigmatic colonising-eye that constructs monsters from myth; myth to construct power, holding tightly like baby to mother. Things are made from memories, things are lost by not remembering.



© fig. 10

Today Phillipe called me out of the blue (ocean; thunderbolt from the clear sky). He is spending the winter in [redacted], fishing for calamari on my born-boat. The last time I saw him was in the summer. I came to help in the boat yard, joining in on the yearly yacht maintenance. Early mornings of sweat-on-back-labour and lunch beers. Really hot with no shade. The day after launching the yacht, I had to leave the island, fast, flurried, sad. Catching up on the phone now, he rumbled to me about life on [redacted] and the journey there. Smooth sailing, a stop in [redacted]. Philippe was the kind of guy that was a magnet for those living in the fray. ACCEPTANCE? Now he is telling me about a couple of Russian physicists that live on the island. *They were involved in Chernobyl, before settling in Gavdos*. Really, are they still working on projects? *Yes, now they*

are conducting experiments on immortality. How? He pitter-pattered around my questions, focusing on the homes they built from stone throughout the years. I did not press him. (Perhaps I should just take the ferry for further discussion) Immortality. What a venture. One of many ultimate destructive ideologies our species have concocted – and ancient, appearing first in the oldest etiological myth from Sumerian society. Immortality is just the fear of *inevitable* mortality. Death! Death! Death! Oh, how no-one respects death. Death makes a home in every assemblage, it is *natural*. Like loving or fighting or, *LIVING*. Slowly rotting on this thing. *On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight – fight and are fought – seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.*¹⁶ ¹⁶ A Thousand Plateaus: How do you make yourself a body without organs? Deleuze & Guattari (p150)
On it being both terra and perhaps in microscopic metaphor, the table, communion space where monsters are made.

☞ “The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table...”

Excerpt from Perhaps the World Ends Here by Joy Harjo

In some funky meta-atlantic crossing, my parents left the South African coast aboard Moya, the gaff ketch yacht my father built in the rented hangar on the outskirts of Cape Town in the 90s (the boat Philipe now owns) I was born on these trans-atlantic travels before they decided to return to the African continent, once more. The irony only arrived to me a few years ago. *Privilege.*

Upon our return my parents decided to take their meta-settler narrative a step further and buy a piece of land in the Outeniqua mountains. Nesting in the Cape Dutch style house, roof dark wet green flecked in lesions of rust. The farmhouse dates back to the late 19th century, when the Beneke family lived in the valley. As is customary in the region, we employed Hendrik (a local man of Cape Khoikhoi descent) to help around in the yard (trimming the fruit trees, helping to tend the chickens). Hunchbacked with age, he teetered into the yard once a week, mumbling for a coffee every few hours.

“Mmm...mevrouw, kan ekke...hmmkoffietjie asseblief...”

Half of his body hanging over the stable door with weathered hands proffering the enamel cup.¹⁷ Hendrik morphed into

¹⁷ It is common practice for white (boer) families in South Africa to reserve a special set of crockery for their workers, so as not to 'dirty' the plates from which they ate. Even as a child, to whom this was the norm, this revolted me.

the shape of lore as my mother made fun of his

mumblings. Once, on his work day, a troop of local Chacma baboons crossed the fruit tree fields at the back of the house. Hendrik tried shooining them away, roaring sounds escaping from his fragile, crooked body. The baboons paid him no mind, insulting his attempt at stentorian authority with barks as they ravaged the plum tree for a snack. At the dinner table, abhorrent remarks thrown across the tough pork and potatoes about Hendrik and his supposed baboon-like quality. “The Chacma recognised him as one of their own” and a chipped ceramic plate with orange glaze on the rim. As the

child of a white supremacist settler society, I did not question this. I simply gave Hendrik the enamel cup brimming with instant coffee.

THE MONKEYFOLK OF SOUTH AFRICA

CHAPTER I

STORY OF A VETERAN OF THE BABOONFOLK

I AM a grandfather old and grey. My people are known as Chacma or Cape Baboons. The Dutch people call us Baviaanen. Scientific fellows know us by the classic-sounding name of *Papio porcarius*. We have lived in South Africa for untold ages. There are legends in our family which incline us to believe that our people have lived for hundreds of thousands of years amongst the krantzes and the stony hills of beautiful, sunny South Africa.

What happy times my forefathers must have had when there were only the leopard, the cheetah, the lion, and the python to fear. To-day we live in hourly dread of you humanfolk.

Hundreds of years ago, and perhaps a good many thousands of years, according to baboon legends, my ancestors got a terrible fright. They had begun to look upon the krantzes, the caves, the broad veld, the wild berries, fruits, herbs, roots, honey, and all the other things which are good to eat, as their own particular property, when behold! a horde of curious little people came from somewhere—goodness knows where. Anyway, they came down from the north.

A

2 THE MONKEYFOLK OF SOUTH AFRICA

Scientific men think they first of all came from the caves of Asia, and by degrees were driven farther and farther south by stronger folk, until their advance guard suddenly appeared in our land.

PIGMIES

These interlopers were not of our race. No, they were different in shape, although their habits were the same as ours. Your folk would say they were more intelligent, and belonged to the human family. Well, anyhow they very soon made us acknowledge them our masters. These little fellows were brownish-yellow. Their noses were flat, so that if you put a plank against their faces, it would touch their foreheads, noses, and chins, all at the same time. Their heads were covered with little knobs of wool, curled tightly, and looked like pepper-corns stuck all over their skulls. They had little beady black eyes like ours, and their mouths were as big as ours too, only their lips were thicker. They walked upright, and when it was cold wore the skins of the different kinds of wild creatures sewn together with sinews. These cloaks are called karosses.

A COUNCIL OF WAR WAS HELD

Our people gathered together and held ever so many Councils of War. We first tried to frighten these little people away by barking at them, and pretending to be very fierce, but they didn't seem to fear us much. Then we decided to attack them in great force. We organised our attack, and made a sudden onslaught, making all the noise we possibly could. Our enemies scattered in all directions. Some climbed trees, and others hid behind rocks on the hillside. Thinking we had terrified them, we rushed recklessly forward. Then, from here, there, everywhere, little things

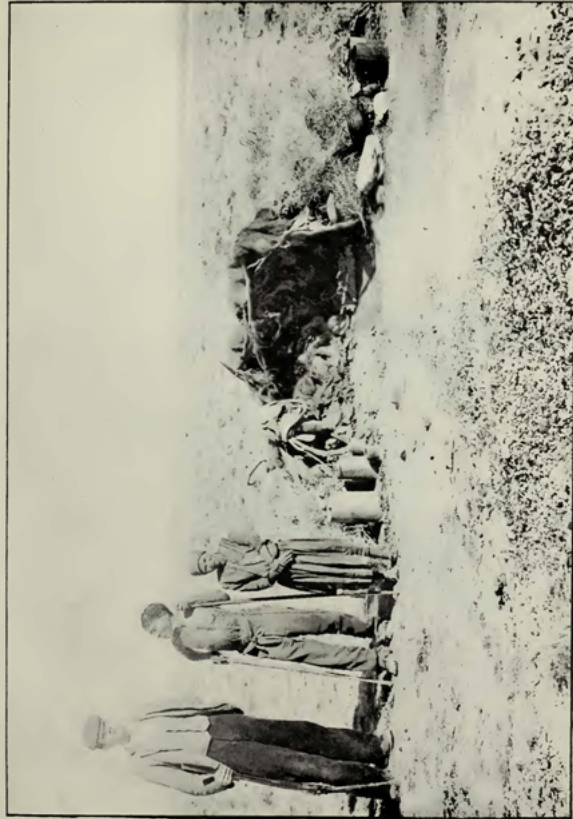


Photo: A. W. Rogers, Esq., M.A., D.Sc., Geological Commission

A very old Bushman and his wife standing beside an ordinary-sized white man. Their palatial dwelling is on the right. It is planted right out on the bleak, dry Karoo of the Cape Colony.

“But Mummy, where are the monkeys?”

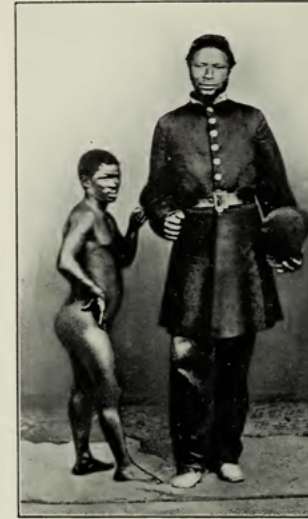


Photo by W. Roe

A pure-bred Bushman of middle age, standing beside a Kafir policeman, 6 ft. in height. The average size of these pigmy Bushmen or Bosjesmannen is—Men, 4 ft. 6 in.; Women, 4 ft. They are built in proportion to their height. The Bushmen are now nearly extinct.

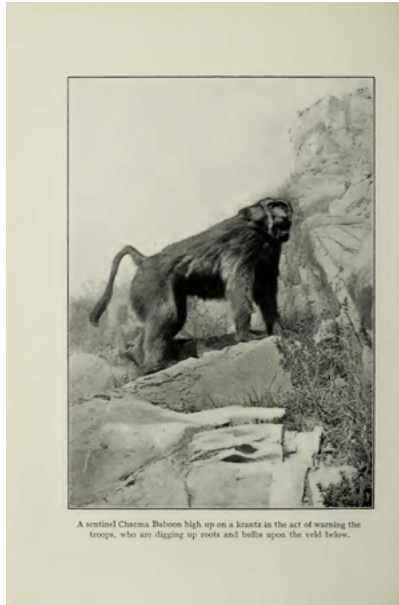
©fig. 11, 12, 13, 14

“Somewhere. Maybe under those bushes. Why don’t you go and look for them?”

[looking for monkeys that did not exist]¹⁸

¹⁸ Kapil Bhanu, *Incubation: A Space for Monsters*, 2006 (p53)

I won't forget. The 'bushmen' (derogatory term) are not extinct. Their people have been in what is now called South Africa for millennia. As evident in this excerpt of *Monkeyfolk of South Africa* (1911), the Cape Khoikhoi is written in metaphor of a baboon, not too different, still animal. I can't forget this injustice, I live on their land. Most of *my* ancestors are the curious little people who came from the North, the big North, the one that makes monsters. Finding books like these. How *can* I forget? and also, simultaneously, with not forgetting comes



◉ fig. 15

Consanguineous Treasure, (like geology)

Traces. Traces; slime tracks; ravelled bits of textile exhumed from the backyard soil through time.

Finding treasure is a past-time of the poor and those living in ruin as much as it is in the spirit of conquest for the pirate. Pirates look for gold, rubies, they don't mind killing for it. Profit. The poor slip into the cracks as they collect metal in the street. Or like the man I once met at a dumpster told me, (both of us searching for our respective trash). *I am looking for electric cables because they are a good source of copper and I strip them, sell them for food.* When I was young, many things were luxurious. Treasure was not defined by gold. On my 10th birthday, I was given a bag of textile scraps from the fabric store in Oudtshoorn.¹⁹ ¹⁹A town about 70km north of the forest, in the Klein Karoo.

It was one of the best days of my life. Before that day, I dug up bits from the collection of musty fabric we kept in the wooden shipping box we used as a bench on the porch. Treasure was going to town for supplies once a month and coming across a button on the pavement (*the thrill! the street is my oyster!*)

My first time back on the farm since moving to Europe. I was taking a stroll down the grondpad.²⁰ ²⁰Afrikaans: Unpaved road

I came across a scrap of frayed, sun bleached paisley fabric the size of a stamp. My grandmother's. *Oh treasure you never fail to disappoint!* This perfect condition we are taught to strive for with such fervour entirely abandoned on the rugged landscape of that weave. In the pocket it goes. I have no interest in preserving the 'perfection' that the state of humanist wholeness promises at any given point, to one specific kind of human. Not in an old scrap of textile or the premise of life itself. Things age, *people age*; movement has no disruption. This is not to say that

time does not leave a scar behind, a lump of tissue trying to heal. Ancient memories and traces of momentary wholeness remain – the slug and its track of slime, the ruin we've dug for ourselves, the very *composition* of genes, the cellular structure of moss. The injustice and violence that the monster carries on her back. I guess I am acutely aware of who was monstered in order for me to hold these nostalgic memories. How I am both connected to the monster as a queer person (now also someone from Africa navigating Europe; *not* African) and simultaneously, a monster by cultural design as a white settler brought up on stolen land.

25 February 2011

'Diere dag! Sien in die
oggend bosbokkies en
miljoene swaeltjies. Ek
wonder of dit broeityd is...
miskien is daar 'n moewiese
slang wat naby is (daai 40m
lank 4.6m breed) en dan
waarsku die voels ons. Dan
vee hy ons huis plat en dan
moet ons weghol.
My milo word koud'

'Animal day! Saw bushbuck
and millions of swallows
this morning. I wonder if it
is breeding season... maybe
there is a massive snake
nearby (those 40m long and
4.6m wide) and then the
birds warned us. Then he
sweeps our home flat and
we have to run away.
My Milo is getting cold'



© fig. 16

I wrote this in a small diary back when I shared my immediate home with quite a fucking selection of beings. The sun-red-dened white farmers, a bushbuck... Some more visible than others, some a daring surprise to encounter. Living in tune, knowing the land and the fruit it bears without gardens – to some extent (not nearly as in tune as the Cape Khoikhoi and their understanding of the land).

Swaths of invasive silver wattle trees competing with ancient fynbos families on land possessed, not my ancestral land. My nostalgic egg of youth and glamorised off-the-grid life cannot be recollected without actively remembering how that soil (that I will inherit) was taken by force and fell into our hands like a not-so-sloppy porridge stolen from the nimble fingers of the Khoikhoi.

In the mountainous Outeniqua valley, the property lines snake through the hills with dilapidated fences as markers. Only farmers and the workers know where the margins of property cut the land like a haphazard quilt in the arms of a distraught grandmother. Before the 1700's, when several Southern San groups (the Attaquas/Outeniquas/Gouriquas) navigated their ancestral soils, these lines were just a fuzzy green cloth, a circular ecology feeding both the Chacma baboons and the people and all other multicellular life. Abundant with buchu, kooigoed, fynbos and yellow-wood trees. (no Silver Wattles, they are indigenous to South-Western Australia and classified as extremely invasive in several countries, South Africa included) I know this because my dad started cutting them down after we arrived in the valley, diligently. Silver Wattles grow shockingly fast and dominate the soil, competing with native species (*winning*). In the years following our arrival in the valley, my dad wilfully and patiently emptied the soil of wattle trees, reintroducing native species and using the fallen timber of the wattle to make chairs, stools, structures and other useful wooden contraptions. Wattles are hardy fuckers though, you can commit all sorts of murderous atrocities on their bodies; *burning of the stems/straight up decapitation* – and what have you, come spring, thousands of babies have propagated themselves into a thin moss over the charred debris. They don't dissipate with ease. Just like us; like moths to wick. Curbing

the fast growth of wattle seedlings cannot be done with another round of fire; their sprouty bodies must be pulled out by their dainty roots and left out to dry in the sun, to be used as kindling in the winter. An ironic set of conditions, the settler ridding so noisily of non-indigenous life. Engendering a pseudo monster from the wattle, willing to notice the harm of its displacement. What of my own colonial-monster, I wonder, wistful for wily wattle and my home in the forest.

✱ 'I am the little girl who walks through a village in Cantabria, climbs cherry trees and scratches her legs. I am the boy who sleeps in the byre with the cows.

I am the cow climbing the mountain slopes that hide from human eyes.

I am Frankenstein's monster, carrying a flower and searching for someone to love while all around flee.

I am the reader who's body becomes a book.

I am the teenage boy kissing a girl behind the church door...' ²¹ ²² *Preciado, Paul B. Can the Monster Speak. 2020 (p39)*



◉fig. 17

On each first Wednesday of the month, the goat-boys would come to visit us for the day. Their mother worked in town and they would make the 2 hour drive from the Klein Karoo and through the mountains to us. Together, we would sit down in my mother's studio for an hour or two, de-puzzling mathematical equations and learning the definitions of verbs (feet trembling below the table in anticipation of OUTSIDE) Before noon struck, we'd be left to the nature of culture/culture of nature. No shoes, bush to become. The trees that were good for climbing were named and became spots of animalistic activity (How we ought to be? How we all just *are*?) On several occasions, we would hang our butts off a branch and shit onto the grasses below. We kept a tally of which leaves proved best for wiping. Wattles proved best.



BLACK WATTLE, GREEN WATTLE, SILVER WATTLE.
(*Acacia decurrens*, Willd.)

©fig. 18

Building temporary, degradable shelter was another, less abject way of becoming. Success was far and few between, which only stoked our beaver-ous endeavour. Once, we built a shack from twigs and leaves of the Khaki bos (*Tagetes minuta*) – also an invasive species, imported by the British during the Anglo-Boer War in the late 20th century. We finished around lunch; tired now. The house was far away and hunger crept in like tick to skin. Knowing the bush, we always carried a Tupperware of rice and a can of oily tuna with us. It's the best lunch for some dirty bush boys. From inside the confines of our labour, a feast awaits! Oily at our beaks, the rain began. No breathing; just observation. Tentatively, we waited for the drops to flake their way through the twig-roof. Nothing. Dryness, all around – us; still grabbing fist fulls of rice with fishy, soiled hands. I don't remember building another structure again, but I do remember never looking at Khaki bos the same. She kept me dry, warm, no whimpering. Thank you.

It is dangerous to assume that the dualisms of human/non-human are universal. These ontological splits of nature/culture are purely '*meta-narratives rooted in Enlightenment thinking and globalised through colonial discursive practices*'.²² As someone whose home is that of settlers, who had ²²Jay Johnson/Brian Murrin (p.99) the experience of *becoming* in a world where these splits were jagged, I note heftily: These fragmentations of who is human, of who is monster, of who is evil in the face of enlightenment is *not* a universal complot by a singular species, but propagated into every grain of common reality by a subset of Homo Sapiens. I think of how Anna Tsing mentions her weariness of the Anthropocene as a singular nomenclature; pronouncing that one of the worst things this term appeals to is *an enlightenment legacy, in which a false universal of man was created as if there was a homogenous man but in fact, white christian*

*heterosexual male persons are often included as the basis for that universal.*²³ I might have spent hours speaking to spiders and

²³ Tsing, Anna in *Reflections on the Plantationocene*, *Edge Effects* Podcast. 2019

protecting their nests, reading about birds and respecting the Khaki bos – but who was monstered out there, in the silence of innocent kinship? The Khoikhoi? The Silver Wattle? Myself? It is the PeRfEcT mAn, men like my father, that decide who to monster. Men who yield the freedom to cross the Atlantic ocean by choice. And their children, writing like this from the wealthy enclave of the North. Arjun Appadurai snuffled out the nettle-esque problem of potential ventriloquism hiding in the multispecies domain – when we speak ‘for’ and ‘of’ others. I see you, an(other) and the set of conditions in which you are monstered, I notice it. I do not assume myself with a mimicked positionality, that would be foolish, but I do wonder what would happen if all would be culturally signified as monster? Organisms do not merely contain several but are composite. An amalgam of interkingdom²⁴ living in what we see as one body. And then multiply it; layers of filthy assemblages.

Don’t forget.

If we accept the philosophy of respect for life with its view that organisms exist in their own right as fellow members with us in the world community of living things, we must be guided constantly by the discipline of ecological observation, otherwise we are danger of being rather silly! Sir Frank Darling²⁵

²⁵ Shepard, Paul. *The Great Interspecies Confusion/The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*. Paul Shepard. 1996 (p653)

Like yes to the above, witness this philosophy of fellow membership but – some organisms hide in the dense folds, live without normative perception. Agree that their bodies exist in the community, even without some subjective observation rooted in sticky paradigms (through the penetrative microscope observing the anomaly).



©fig. 19

Spending life in the bush every waking day, functions as a tuner.

It attunes/infuses you to your environment through the force of proximity. Patterns emerge through observation as you live among the wild; amongst so many others (a constellation of livelihoods) I liked birds because they were more concerned with flying than being found. (not freedom) The treetops were crowded with species and I’d walk around with my field guide during the day, annoying the family with did you know?’s at dinner. I am pondering whether or not the motivation was the practice of naming or the formal recognition of another kin that shared the soil with me. Or if those operated from the same office? The buff-spotted flufftail was an enigma for many years. Sometimes in the evening, a foghorn call floated ghostly through the pit(I)less black night and left me sticky with

desire. Since I could never see it, I didn't know where to start in the bird guide. I could only hear the hours of soft foghorn hooting that, when I closed my eyes, felt like I would have to wake up in the morning as a fisherman. Since the buff-spotted flufftail is one of the most elusive bird species and quietens when approached, I've still never seen one in the feather. Shortly after leaving the forest behind, and upon another after-dinner fog horn hoot, my dad casually informed me that it was a buff-spotted flufftail. He's known that for years, apparently. I wondered if he didn't tell me so I could live in the mystery of the bird-with-no-name or because he forgot to. Or a secret third option, because I didn't need to categorise her with an English name to know she is alive. I could hear her foghorn, after all.

Creeping into this nature as culture/culture as nature disconnect and imagining a circular future holds ample room for the monster. The monster that is engendered through culture is not tethered to the PerfECT man. The PerfECT man is transhuman and not animal-like – only in war, which is justified. The monster is anything but; something *else*. The monster's *body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read... The monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.* Frankenstein did not give birth to himself, Frankensteins do not give birth to themselves.

The monster is flighty, immaterial – the threat of the monster *is its propensity to shift*. The theory behind the monstrous is a patchwork of fragments, a logical representation of a *threatening* work that scurries to escape, to rip the bits apart and use those very bits to signify *the monstrous passing that stands in for the monstrous body itself*.²⁶

²⁶ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture/Seven Theses*. 1996. (p2)

Cohen simultaneously stitches seven theses about the monster together and dissects the cultural significance of the monster. He mentions the danger that lies within the form of the monster that refuses the 'order of things' and question normalities, binaries – I note that the 'order of things' is not like the bacteria in your gut or the rush of blood in flesh, (unless that too, refuses the order of things as they are perceived to be according to the human made systems of understanding, categorising, like lichen) but more akin to the soft indoctrination of hierarchical classification. The 'order of things' shows up in various in between places, grounds where margins are fuzzy. One example of a *physical place* holding this composite beingness and subsequently facing injustice from the very system that needed to create its monstrous placement is a park in Toronto (commonly named The Leslie Street Spit) A 5km piece of land built from the rubble of Toronto's municipal development, the subject of thousands of tons of waste since the 1950s. Much of this waste is toxic and to combat the consequential horror of their anthropocentric extraction, in the 1980's the city dumped more than 6 million cubic metres of sand and silt to create peninsulas reaching into Lake Ontario. Effectively an aesthetic bandaid... In 2003, one of the peninsulas named 'Cell One' was artificially *remodeled as a half-terrestrial, half-aquatic ecosystem, mimicking a nearby bay to approximate lost 'natural' Lake Ontario habitats.*

As flora and fauna began to make this dumpsite-turned-artificial-ecosystem their home, this simulative cultivation of habitat became *feral in the sense of a place in between, or both/and nature and culture, wilderness and domesticity*.²⁷ Several species became feral here. Why wouldn't you make a home on a new island, accidentally pecking, dredging up toxic waste? Falling into the trap modeled to accommodate

²⁷ Sandilands, Carolina. *Some "F" words for the environmental humanities*. 2017. (p445)

your body, to a degree. Most notably, several species of migratory birds, such as the double-crested cormorant (*Phalacrocorax Auritus*) settled in this ruin-turned-saviour. Except, they nested too flamboyantly. Reproducing at an exponential rate, the park managers *had* to start killing the birds, suppressing their human-induced ferality. They could have simply shot the birds but instead they chose nonconsensual abortion, oiling the numerous eggs so the shell receives no oxygen and the embryos rot from the inside out. If I could never find my feet in a storm, I'd know where to look – over there, where cormorants tend to their rotting, oiled eggs. Nesting in a space that is both a dump and a refuge, neither one nor the other – and monstered regardless.



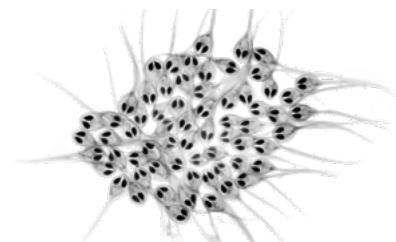
©fig. 20

I remember fondling history books in the corner of the library as a child. I always liked the illustrations – I could imagine strolling ancient buildings, eating rotten potatoes and wielding a weapon. I remember seeing the medieval peasant-to-king pipeline sketched out with rocks on the very bottom, animals one step above, european peasants and so on, climbing up the literal imagery of a ladder until God reached heaven level. What about algae or lichen? What about forests and Indigenous communities? Or the disabled? Are they all heathens basking in the light of the King? If history books could speak they would say yes. (and they can speak because life forms are still bearing the torturous injustice of being monstered by powers from above) Seething. I came back to this image often because it baffled me. It was difficult to see it as a historical social construct, dusty with time. It is *now*, too.

Monsters are both politically and personally at odds. They don't shift between the order of nature as it crosses in passing. Their danger to the norm sits in the folds of the skin that refuses/ resists the stratification of being that is built from hierarchical classification. According to the pErFeCt MaN, the monster is non-human, post-human, anything but homo sapiens (even when they *are*) I commend the monster. Bless the *unutterable*, into each moment. Beastliness, that cultural monstrosity, seeks to make a home of me. Or rather, I am trying to make a home for it. I suppose we all have different strands of monster. The gut ones, the identity ones, the consanguineous ones. How about a *reckoning*.

I pried for a seat at the table throughout childhood; my line of sight barely met the height of the table. Listening. Amongst the chatter, they often said that life couldn't exist outside of Terra because life needs oxygen. SCIENTISTS SAY SO! Ingesting, digesting. Who could possibly deduce that *any* form

of life requires oxygen to exist? It kept me awake at night, staring at the spot of mold on the ceiling. The dragon with a long, craning neck. With my limited scientific knowledge of the conditions for life,



©fig. 21

I could not fathom why if *we* need oxygen to survive, so does any other life in any other place. Who do we think we are?

The monster is always the unknown. *Snicker*. In 2020, a team of researchers led by Dayana Yahalomi of Tel Aviv University uncovered that the *Henneguya salminicola* parasite found in salmon did not need oxygen to survive. In fact, it is the first multicellular life form humans have inspected that has no mitochondria. It also does no harm to the salmon and the *Henneguya* will be there for the salmon's entire lifecycle. An extremophile; ready to face extinction as a permeable reality. Merlin Sheldrake²⁸ ²⁸ Author of *Entangled Life*, 2020 writes about BIOMEX astrobiologists sending extremophiles into space using the EXPOSE facility – incubating these extremophiles in extraterrestrial conditions and, I guess, seeing which monster makes it. Amongst tardigrades (water bears) and bacterial spores, there are only a few species of lichen able to LIVE across the boundary of life and individualism. I think that's kind of hot.

The aesthetic of the monster is equally as viscous to the human mind, sticking like fudge to our memories – which enables their image to spread through cultures at an almost alarming rate. If the monster is engendered by the heteropatriarchal paradigm and its lover of taxonomic categorisation, the susceptible human brain runs a marathon with it. In a simply myth-

ological sense, monsters pique our interest, shaping a meme. Abject, a filament of culture as it spreads through populations without practical purpose. But we loop back to: who mythed the mythology of the socio-cultural monster? The Other? I leave this open, treading the unguent possibilities. It requires more than simply understanding coloniality or humanism. All in all, I'd rather dig – hit my head against the wall, do it for long enough, so it can crumble and fall – than lie down on the cold stone; the granite.

¶ “Huge heavy things come and stand on granite and the granite just stays there and doesn't react and doesn't give way and doesn't adapt and doesn't oblige and when the huge heavy things walk away the granite is there just the same as it was before, just exactly the same, admirably. To change granite you have to blow it up. But when people walk on me you can see exactly where they put their feet, and when huge heavy things come and stand on me I yield and react and respond and give way and adapt and accept. No explosives are called for. No admiration is called for. I have my own nature and am true to it just as much as granite or even diamond is, but it is not a hard nature, or upstanding, or gemlike. You can't chip it. It's deeply impressionable. It's squashy.

Maybe the people who rope themselves together and the huge heavy things resent such adaptable and uncertain footing because it makes them feel insecure. Maybe they fear they might be sucked in and swallowed. But I am not interested in sucking and am not hungry. I am just mud. I yield. I do try to oblige. And so when the people and the huge heavy things walk away they are not changed, except their feet are muddy, but I am changed. I am still here and still mud, but all full of footprints and deep, deep holes and tracks and traces and

changes. I have been changed. You change me. Do not take me for granite”

Excerpt from Being Taken for Granite, Ursula Le Guin



©fig. 21

its a trade off, baby/symbiosis
when make love the world goes
green/symbiosis
its a trade off, maybe/symbiosis
giving life to everything
there'll be

no more deficiencies
sugars
minerals
everything we need
we'll
be
lush, delicious

Symbiosis by Okay Kaya

How romantic, wanting it this badly. I don't imagine a world where symbiosis is luscious and efficient: the shadow of that world already exists. Right *here*, where we eat and some guys in our belly break it down, feed themselves on our leftovers. There is the monster, but there is also the megalomaniac. Power hungry slut. Difference. Interrupted by unruly cells, pecunious in deviance. Sitting, splitting, swirling my father from inside out. Stage 3. I resist resenting the poison cells, trying to make a home in his body. Not monstrous, (yes, tears welling now) just organic mishap. Monsters are made; monsters are cultural, I remind myself, so as not to plan a coup on the accelerated cell division, all the way from the North. The South is far from the North. Poles. One, monster. Other, monstered. Both *MONSTER*.

I made an appointment with Gerda Lamers, head of microscopy at Clausius Laboratory. I want her to teach me how to use the microscope equipment, so that I can collect footage of life at cellular level. Find ways to tell their stories. I did not pretend to be voluble, just the right amount of impish curiosity. She teetered on, 6th floor of the laboratory, a maze of ancient microscope technology. I saw the outline of a mitochondria, dreadfully fuzzy. The soft edges are a flurry of life; conglomerate clouds. When I left her office, pea coat, no cigarette (I forgot them on the table in the kitchen; the meeting was early) I walked along the trees. Who is the mayor of the pluriverse if not the cell, I wonder. Later, at the studio, I escaped writing this (whole thing) for the wonders of nicotine. Some guy; emptying large sacks of bird seed from his backpack out on the canal bank.

Families of mallards, coots, seagulls and city pigeons flocking. He returns each week now, silent theatre for the shrouded citizens. 'We' don't run this city, we all do.

Incubation of the monster waiting in the muck; (squashy)
And when the monster dies, so will I, but we won't, for the
bacteria will play.
Wolbachia and the microbes that need no oxygen
Muddy; muddiness that lives in permeability.

Learn from it. Live on it. Try to become like.
Come.

Be.

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© Prof. Stephen D. Atkinson at Oregon State University

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© Scott O'Neill at the Public Library of Science

Found on: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolbachia>

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Let's remain

Let's become

Let's come

Be