

Reading for Transgression *Queering Genres*

Rebekah Sheldon

“Destroy, destroy.”

(Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1972)

Making Trouble after the End of Transgression

Donna Haraway’s 2016 *Staying with the Trouble* begins with an analysis of the titular term *trouble*. “Trouble is an interesting word,” Haraway writes. “It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning ‘to stir up,’ ‘to make cloudy,’ ‘to disturb.’”¹ Etymologically, trouble is a thing that mixes; troubled times are mixed up times, times of hazy import and unclear consequence. To make trouble is to stir up what has become overly rigid. It is a tactic for undermining stabilities and shaking foundations. Haraway argues that troubled times may need some of this disturbance, but they need something else too. They need small acts of making, building, connecting, and caring. In periods of eroding social and cultural norms, we must stay with the trouble that is already here, leaning into trouble’s labyrinthine paths, mending broken connections, and fixing new structures to hold onto small areas of stability. Troubled times call on us to accept responsibility for the ways we make the world and not for the ways we hope to unmake it. “Staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present . . . as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, and meanings” (1).

Haraway’s ethics of staying with the trouble gives potent expression to a widely felt shift in the practice of queer studies. While it is true that queer theory has always had an interest in the ethics of making, for example in the queer counterpublics articulated by Gayle Rubin, Michael Warner, and Lauren Berlant, such making is nonetheless still imagined as posed *against* stable, hegemonic cultural forms.² Recently, however, the urgency in queer studies has shifted away from positions that seek to disturb the norm,³ and toward positions that advocate for ways to build a better

shared world. That distinction may at first appear slippery since all critique aims to make the world more just by generating analytic frames within which to understand and respond to injustice. What makes staying with the trouble different is its emphasis on understanding damaging knowledge structures in order to repair the damage they have caused. Repair engenders a different style of reading than critique, a point made early on by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her discussion of reparative reading practice: "The reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates."⁴ Sedgwick may have in mind a psychological scene of fragmentation, but her formulation works remarkably well as the basis for the multispecies thriving Haraway conjures in *Staying with the Trouble*. Both writers foreground the extensive damage done by institutions that were once the object of transgressive reading practices. In light of that damage, it is no longer enough to transgress; we must also repair what has been broken and create new institutions and practices for future flourishing.

In this chapter, I propose that to be after queer studies is to be after transgression. Reading for transgression was an important practice in queer studies, one that warranted queer studies' close connection to literary theories centered on the role of language in culture. Roland Barthes's seminal *The Pleasure of the Text* goes some way to demonstrating what it meant to read for transgression. In this slim and aphoristic volume, Barthes compares texts that produce pleasure to those that induce bliss. The text of pleasure, he writes, "is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading," one whose comfort derives from its continuity with the surrounding culture and its norms.⁵ By contrast, the text of bliss is one that "imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to a state of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (14). From the historical vantage given us after queer studies, it may seem counterintuitive at the least to associate a positive feeling like bliss with a negative one like loss. For Barthes, however, the positive affect of pleasure in fact perpetuates the status quo. Pleasure comes from fulfilled expectations and continuity with established modes of meaning making. By contrast, bliss derives from a violent renunciation of those expectations, driving the reader to crisis. Barthes' deconstructive move here is to insist that these are not alternative forms – either pleasure or bliss – but rather that bliss inheres in the pleasurable text. The resistant writer and the transgressive reader can disinter the text of bliss from out

of the work of pleasure by poisoning them against each other and using one to cut into the other.

Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language to be copied is in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. (6)

The death of language comes from the reader's recognition that meaning is always hinged on meaninglessness. Words and the meanings they carry are supported by letters that mean nothing in themselves. Barthes finds the text of bliss operating paradigmatically in fictions of sexual transgression (for example, here he is discussing language in the Marquis de Sade) but its erotic charge does not come from what the work represents but rather from the "the seam . . . the fault, the flaw" (6) that emerges between culture's meaning-making structures and the meaningless materiality of language itself, the mobile, blank edge of language.

Language is the site of the binaries that classify and divide the world into the discrete categories of comfortable everyday usage: man/woman, human/animal, adult/child, straight/gay, speech/writing, meaning/nonsense, normal/pathological. Deconstruction argues that the dominant term in all binary oppositions is in fact reliant on the dominated category to maintain its sense. However, it is also in language that those categories may be destabilized and denaturalized. Cutting into the text of pleasure to expose its reliance on the meaninglessness of language is one way of destabilizing the "obedient, conformist" effect of language. That the effect of this destabilization is eroticism is no mistake. As Judith Butler argues in *The Psychic Life of Power*, under conditions of hegemonic heteronormativity, accomplished heterosexuality relies on "preempting the possibility of homosexual attachment."⁶ The binary pairs man/woman and straight/gay thus limit the range of possible erotic attachments and so the explosion of the binary opens the floodgates of the self to diffuse erotic energies.

Cutting into language, destroying norms, blissing out on discomfort – all were embedded within a context in which the dominant culture took for itself the role of the proper and understood itself as the keeper of normalcy, morality, good taste, and health. Transgressive fictions, in moving to thwart these expectations, sought out their opposites – pathology, criminality, monstrous passions, marginal lives, bad taste, sickness, violence, and decadence.

Reading after the End of Transgression

As we have seen in Barthes' discussion of bliss, transgression often inhabits the logical structures of heteronormative social life in order to expose them to danger. As such it is a practice of inhabitation that moves from inside the things it seeks to dismantle. Its reading practice is faithful and thorough, if ultimately driven by antipathy. By contrast, Sedgwick's reparative reader is paradigmatically choosy. Part of the purchase of reparative reading is in the license it gives readers to ignore or intentionally transform representations that might otherwise feel inimical to one's wellbeing. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway might be understood as performing this kind of reparative reading with etymologies. In a longish footnote to the final sentence I quoted above, Haraway meditates on her choice of the word *critters* from the phrase "mortal critters."

Critters is an American everyday idiom for varmints of all sorts. Scientists talk of their "critters" all the time; and so do ordinary people all over the U.S., but perhaps especially in the South. The taint of "creatures" and "creation" does not stick to "critters"; if you see a semiotic barnacle, scrape it off. In this book, "critters" refers promiscuously to microbes, plants, humans and nonhumans, and sometimes even to machines.

Haraway advises her readers not worry too much about the web of associations that have become affixed to *critters*, especially any that might either constrain or purport to be the truth of its meaning. Critters might be a term of endearment for nonhuman animals (the phrase "what a cute critter!" comes to mind), but that is neither the whole of its sense nor its singular truth. It can mean these things, but it doesn't have to mean them and meaning them in one place and time doesn't limit what it might mean in another place and time. Haraway's point – "If you see a semiotic barnacle, scrape it off" – speaks as much to her readers' own be-barnacled sensibilities as to the encrustations on the word itself. Indeed, the practice of semiotic barnacle scraping is one she demonstrates in the very next paragraph to explain her use of Cthulhu in her subtitle *Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Cthulhu may be the name of the infamous monster of H. P. Lovecraft's "Call of the Cthulhu" and thus of an emblem of his xenophobic worldview, but a small labor of scraping and displacement of the final *h* returns *chthonic* from the Greek *khthonios* meaning "of the earth" and widely used to refer to a range of earth deities.⁷

Thus despite its marginality to the main argument of the book, this footnote is in fact crucial to the forms of staying with the trouble that

Haraway advocates. What these acts of etymological analysis suggest is that the troubles of the present have occasioned for Haraway and for queer theorists more generally a transformed relation to meaning making. Here and now, Haraway tells us, *making* is the order of the day and whatever tools we have to hand will have to be made to work. And yet there is something deeply uncomfortable about semiotic barnacle scraping even when it is aligned with Sedgwick's reparative reading, a discomfort that has everything to do with those opening acts of etymology. In works of criticism, etymologies trace the semiotic barnacles that adhere to and cluster certain words together. The idea is that words tend to conserve even archaic meanings, which may be latently available in the word's contemporary usage. What makes it possible to make it otherwise? What tool strips Cthulhu of the xenophobia that clings to Lovecraft? What guarantees that the new meaning will stay fixed, with no shadow of what had been? And even if the answer is that the labor of barnacle scraping is ongoing, still there is something uncomfortable in the reduction of semiotic agency such scraping requires.

It is notable, then, that Haraway's barnacle scraping happens in the context of monsters, critters, and trouble. Monsters have always shown a marked capacity for meaning production, even for excesses of meaning. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes in his "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," the term *monster* is etymologically related to the Latin *monstrum*, to reveal. "Like the letters on the page," Cohen writes, "the monster signifies something other than itself, it is always a displacement."⁸ Displacements of this kind – upwellings of meaning outside of authorial intentionality – have been the basis for transgressive queer readings that seek to showcase the toxic fascination with same-sex desire that explicitly homophobic discourse both disavows and also can't help but disclose. It is also what a barnacle-scraping, staying-with-the-trouble version of queer reading displaces in favor of making. For better or worse, however, meanings are slipperier than that. Whatever the state of the world and its various hegemonies, transgressive queer practices of reading recognize the fathomless indeterminacy of language.

In what follows, I consider the case of the monster in the history of queer reading practices in order to trace the routes by which queer studies came to be "after queer studies" (in the sense of after transgression) and to show how that history may be read for the barnacles that affix to it despite itself. For monsters press ever more closely. Contemporary media is full of zombies and vampires. Alongside these familiar specters are other eldritch horrors and a new genre to name them: the New Weird with its host

of occult, chthonic, and xenobiotic figures. Alluring as the vampire, but geomantic where the vampire is romantic, these creatures give figure and form to what Hannah Arendt named “the unnatural growth of the natural” in the age of climate change.⁹ Like climate change itself, the monsters of the New Weird are reclusive, disinterested, and gently distressed by the effects they produce. The monsters of the New Weird retain their indifference because they are of another order. Their indifference is a potent reminder that human social organization is just one among many worldly and cosmic forces. Such a salutatory humbling of the human, however, elides the pointed question this chapter seeks to take up: What will we do when the monsters come back?

Queer Monsters

“We have not yet broken our bizarre link with the undead.” So wrote Ellis Hansen in his contribution to the iconic collection *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*.¹⁰ Published in 1991, the collection emerged from the overlay of AIDS and queer theory, a climate Diana Fuss in her “Introduction” characterized as one of “enthusiasm, passion, anguish, fear, fervor, and general fevered commotion” (v). Casting a critical eye across a hundred years of gay male abjection, Ellis Hansen argues that the long-standing figuration of the queer as a kind of infecting vampire merely changes aspects in the era of AIDS. “Sexually exotic, alien, unnatural, oral, anal, compulsive, violent, protean, polymorphic, polyvocal, polysemous, invisible, soulless, transient, superhumanly mobile, infectious, murderous, suicidal, and a threat to wife, children, home, and phallus” (325), the gothic horror of the vampire and the gay man comes from the specter of surplus liveliness in excess of reproduction.

The vampire figures prominently in the annals of queer theory. As a late gothic figuration, the vampire is a part of the same formation in the late nineteenth century that queer theory often takes as its object of criticism. Queer theory is tied to the concerns of the late nineteenth century, which, in Sedgwick’s famous formulation, saw the installation of sexuality as the most centrally important fact of psychic and social life¹¹ and from which the contemporary conditions of misogyny, homophobia, and racism take their modern shape. The familiar Gothic monsters – Dracula, Frankenstein, Mr. Hyde, Dorian Grey – were forged in the crucible of those world-historical forces and their institutionally legitimating discourses. As J. Jack Halberstam has persuasively demonstrated, the vampire condensed specific historical anxieties about sexuality, race, class, and empire into one highly

wrought and overdetermined figure: the monster whose body is transgressive both in its peculiar appetites and in its elastic, boundary-shattering form.¹² As in other Gothic figures of unnatural embodiment, the vampire signals many different conditions to the late Victorian reader. Pervert and seducer, the vampire not only crosses boundaries of nation, class, and species, he inverts them. Ostensibly the foreign element displaced into the domestic interior, the vampire in fact estranges the familiar; ostensibly the lecherous despoiler of purity, he becomes the desired object of female lusts; neither animal nor man, not alive but also not dead, the vampire undoes the fixity of taxonomic distinctions.

Most especially, the vampire turns inside out the pedagogy of reading by collapsing the distance between reader and read. The Gothic monster “creates a public who consumes monstrosity, who revels in it, and who then surveys its individual members for signs of deviance, monstrosity, excess or violence.”¹³ The erotic charge of reading about the vampire comes to adhere transitively to the reader’s own acts of phobic discernment. And since the vampire is the overdetermined site of boundary violations, any number of anxieties might find expression therein. By the same token, however, consumption is inherently a crossing of boundaries, one that opens “fear of and desire for the possibly latent perversity lurking within the reader herself” (13). The figure of the vampire thematizes this perverse consumption as contamination by literalizing it. “The vampire is not lesbian, homosexual, or heterosexual; the vampire represents the productions of sexuality itself. The vampire, after all, creates more vampires by engaging in a sexual relation with his victims and he produces vampires who share his specific sexual predilections” (100). The vampire opens himself to be consumed and in opening himself consumes the consumer. So while the vampire may “produce a disciplinary effect” (13) by displacing the perverse self onto a figure of alterity, that procedure requires taking on some of the poison it hopes to extract. Though ostensibly sterile, the vampire reproduces through every open vein and eye.

The vampire, in other words, not only brings into focus the symptomatic anxieties of his age in a way that makes those symptoms readable, he also disturbs the causal relation between disease and diagnosis. Knowledge of the vampire infects the knower, converting him even as he angles toward extirpation. More to the point, the vampire who exemplifies phobic structures by eliciting horror and disgust also makes those phobic structures available for critical diagnosis. For both lay reader and queer critic, the disciplinary effect of monster stories comes from learning to read the symptoms. Yet there is nothing safe about becoming literate in

monstrosity; the reader of monsters is always potentially suspect as a monstrous reader. As Sedgwick reminds us, this is what is at stake in that bit of common wisdom “it takes one to know one.”¹⁴ The knowing that shows what one is always also redounds on the speaker in a cycle of epistemological contagion. After all, it takes one to know that it takes one to know. Knowing, reading, consuming, transmitting, converting: knowledge work is always dangerously in touch with the other within. While Hanson may rue the “bizarre link to the undead,” such a link is in fact neither especially bizarre nor undesired. The queer critic is the monster insofar as she rejects established categories by diagnosing their incoherencies and instabilities. Her transmission of knowledge poses its own vampiric danger to heteronormativity.

For paradigmatically, the knowledge that converts as it is consumed is knowledge of the unnatural. The vampire is not for nothing composed of transgressed boundaries. The first and most essential kind of dangerous knowledge furnished by the vampire and his monstrous readers is his embodied example that things might be otherwise than they appear to be. Indeed, that they already are. For the distinction between the natural and the unnatural only seems to be a binary like any other. That the natural and its cognates require the supplement of antonyms at all threatens their cogency at every turn. If nature is all that is, then nothing can be outside the order of the natural. Otherwise, the concept collapses in on itself. To speak the condemnation *contra naturum* (against nature) is to inadvertently underscore the provisional status of the natural and thus, ironically, to intimate the existence of another nature. Fearful, fascinating, and powerfully contaminating, the Gothic monster is the paradigmatic figure of this queer nature.

Contra naturum has long served as a legal, moral, and cultural condemnation for nonreproductive desire. To make the case for the inherency of sexual norms, popular and professional discourse has often had recourse to examples from the animal kingdom. In her essay, “Animal Transex,” Myra Hird challenges this meaning-making practice.¹⁵ She does so, however, not by turning away from nature but instead by looking at it more closely. Studying instances of animal queerness from sex-transitioning fish to the reproductive strategy of barnacles (whose females host hundreds of tiny male symbionts), Hird concludes that there is little in nature to support the normative legal, moral, and cultural meanings that have been ascribed to it. On the contrary, she argues, not only is queerness *natural*, it has much to teach us about what queerness could be. Indeed she argues that the ethological evidence makes humans the odd ones out in a natural

world overflowing with apparent perversities of nature. Hird's move to turn our attention to nature does indeed seek to undo the assumed equation of nature with innocent plenitude, itself read as presumptively heteronormative.¹⁶ In this sense, it is still a transgressive reading practice. Instead of seeking to infect – that is, to understand in order to dismantle – the dominant paradigm that keeps nature fixed to heteropatriarchy, Hird brings a new archive to bear on it.

In taking a lesson from nature, Hird reads for instances of transgression in order to show that the unnatural is in fact natural. For that reason, however, her work also unbraids the set of assumptions that make transgression itself understandable. Studying nonhuman animals makes clear that “trans as nontransgressive” is the conclusion to which nature itself leads us. Her essay's turn away from the antinormative makes it part of a broader shift. As opposed to the ambitions of queer theory in its inaugural moments, which sought to demonstrate the historical co-constitution of large-scale social forms in order to denaturalize them, contemporary queer studies reach for examples of natural transgression in order to demobilize the notion of the unnatural and the transgressive. The more monstrous to naive notions of natural law, the better. Rather than seeking to disable norms, Hird works to generate new practices from the lifeworlds and ways of being that are going on all around us – from the barnacle on up. These are our hopeful monsters.

Hopeful Monsters

If the queer practice of reading for transgression was tethered to a critical project of *undoing* – messing up binaries, destabilizing rigid forms – then contemporary queer studies no longer reads to transgress. From the perspective of the present, maintaining organization over time is an accomplishment. Rather than breaching boundaries or showing how they were always already breached, queer theory has turned to practices of doing, making, caring, building, fostering, and speculating. In short, queer studies in its contemporary mode seeks to generate new ways of knowing, feeling, and being, what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. call “the arts of living on a damaged planet.”¹⁷

Recent works in queer theory have conscripted a host of monsters to help with this task. In her *Bodily Natures*, for example, Stacy Alaimo reads with Greg Bear's *Darwin* series, which narrates the effect on American culture of a generation of mutant human children.¹⁸ Bear's children have new physical characteristics: most notably, they communicate through

special pheromones and facial colorations. They inspire disgust and violence, but the hope they offer for social justice is not in what they reveal but instead in what they possess, their bodily natures and the hope for new modes of communication. Nicole Seymour in her *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* takes up the radiation-poisoned conjoined twins in Shelley Jackson's *Half Life* in order to "model ethical approaches to the problem of environmental health and justice in the Atomic Age."¹⁹ In "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," Tavia Nyong'o's subtle and incisive contribution to the *GLQ* issue on Queer Inhumanisms, the wild and the monsters it harbors emerge "out of our drive toward new and more cogent myths for our present, less governed and more anarchic modes of living and creating" in the doom of the Anthropocene.²⁰ Yet the hope they offer "runs the knife edge between affirming . . . resilience and consolidating . . . abandonment" (265).

Indeed, many of the hopeful monsters of recent queer theorizing might as easily be taken as reasons for despair: Heather Davis's dead dolphin, killed by swallowing a pink plastic dildo, might well fall under this heading,²¹ as would the garbage heap of Nigel Clark and Myra Hird's *O-zone* essay "Deep Shit." Taking mass extinction as the exigency for their analysis, Hird and Clark posit what they call "the evil twin" of this late capitalist eco-decadence.²² The dump isn't just a collection of used-up human goods. It is the kind of chemical soup that microbial life has been especially adept at adapting as metabolism. We don't know what kinds of unwilling inhuman proliferation, what sort of monsters of waste, these soups might make, but it is unlikely to be simply dead, inert, or passive. As they write:

But what if there is a flip side to the anonymous eclipse of so many species or strains? Not a lightness to the darkness and occlusion of the unregistered extinction event, but something more in the nature of an evil twin. What if, without trying, without knowing, without even the possibility of our finding out, we humans were increasing the sum total of biological diversity on Earth? (46)

These framings are deeply ambivalent about these chthonic upwellings. Hird and Clark's article is, after all, titled "Deep Shit" for a reason. Their monstrous garbage dump is less a hopeful monster than a simply indifferent one. Indifferent to us, that is. For us, though, getting intimate with shit may simply be the condition of life in the Anthropocene. As they maintain, "what finally becomes of our defecations is up to the swarms of miniscule beings that ultimately engendered our existence" (51).

It's important to note the differences from the earlier discussion of Gothic monsters. Halberstam is clear that Gothic monsters must be treated with ambivalence. In recuperating them, we are always reading against the grain of their disciplinary effects. In all the stories I have discussed in the previous section, catastrophe is an unavoidable condition of everyday life. The blueprints these hopeful monsters offer are therefore tuned to modulation rather than transgression. They teach us how to navigate instability and how to foster precarious survivals and local thriving. If they read against the grain at all, it is only insofar as they refuse to treat environmental calamity as a disgusting impurity, a breach of a prior innocence. Instead, the emphasis is on the possibilities for resilience found in nature's animacy. As in Sedgwick's description of reparative practices they set out "the task of building a common world" from out of the "heterogeneous parts" of the existing order.²³ In this sense, they work through advocacy rather than criticism.

In the conclusion of *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway moves this one step further by folding criticism directly into storytelling. Taking seriously Ursula Le Guin's notion of stories as "carrier bags" in which to collect the stuff of survival, Haraway calls for storytelling as a practice of world making. Set in a speculative near future after the collapse of many life forms and forms of life, Haraway's tales track five generations of symbiont clones, the Camilles. Transgenically linked to the species they are dedicated to protect, the children have features that facilitate communication and understanding with that species. Camille 1, holobiont to the monarch butterfly, was genetically patterned to smell milkweed on the wind and digest it without harm, which allowed her to travel on the monarch's migratory paths and to sense the same dangers in the way that butterflies would. Camille 2 had her forebears' genetic traits and also chose to have butterfly antennae grafted onto her chin. These traits helped the Camilles to become "apt students of their own human-butterfly worldings" alongside their education in many forms of struggle. Camille 2, for example, lived with the Zapatistas to learn their strategies of non-violent struggle, while Camille 3 read works of twentieth-century fantasy and science fiction. In charting these paths, Haraway hopes that the story of the Camilles will inspire the reader to their own acts of "recuperative terraforming before the apocalypse" (213).

There is little ambiguity here. If it is not yet possible to link sympoetically with endangered species, there are still utopian fantasies and revolutionary struggles that might provide "a pilot project, a model, a work and play object, for composing collective projects" (136). But do they return a

reading practice? Bruno Latour has argued that “what performs a critique cannot also compose” (475). What of the converse? Are such compositions themselves acts of criticism? Haraway’s choice to conclude *Staying with the Trouble* with the Camille Stories intimates that myths do something different than readings can do. If we construe our task in this way, and if we see stories as composing the best models for living in the Anthropocene, why pursue the work of criticism at all? To ask a familiar question, what’s queer about this – as a method, an object, or an argument about nature? And what is the status of the story in this paradigm? A carrier bag, after all, sounds suspiciously like a womb, with all the ascriptions of passivity and receptivity that have adhered to feminized metaphors at least since Plato. What does it mean to want stories that mean only one thing? If there is no ambiguity, in other words, perhaps it is because that ambiguity has been scraped off.

It’s worth recalling one of the foundational assertions of queer theory from Sedgwick’s much-cited essay “Queer and Now.” She argues that the privilege of queer reading is in its perverse will to find those places where “the meanings don’t line up tidily with each other.”²⁴ She doesn’t want to judge them or to rectify them but rather to fall in love with their stubbornly profligate polysemy. It is in contemplating the dusty corners and overblown conventions of texts – the startling detail, the odd repetition, the unnecessary flourish, the overdone scene, the apparently meaningless triviality – that Sedgwick built a new paradigm to explain the operations of homophobia. In converting fascination to exposition, her queer reading holds on to the ambivalence of loving the thing that hurts. Reading for transgression is always such a practice of ambivalence. It requires us to recognize the duplicity of stories, which always mean more (or less) than we intend. It reminds us that even the best constructed models may nonetheless disclose the monsters that lurk at their, and our, hearts.

Monsters beyond Our Control

This is the lesson of N. K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth trilogy, which offers a paradigmatic hopeful monster in the person of Alabaster. At the conclusion of the first novel, Syenite realizes that Alabaster has not merely escaped from the earthquake that signaled the start of another destructive season of failed crops and dust-clouded skies; he was its maker. And far from regretting what he has done, he has come instead to ask Syenite for her help in finishing the job.

Syen and Alabaster are Orogenes, biologically capable of sensing kinetic energy in geological strata and redirecting it in accordance with their will. Orogenes are necessary because they quell the myriad instabilities of the Earth, brought about long ago by the failed attempt to fully control the Earth's vitality and redirect it for human purpose. Orogenes are powerful, but in their world's age such skills make their bearers objects of repugnance. They are kept under strict surveillance, guarded, bred, and overseen; their lives and deaths controlled by the Imperial forces that offer protection from mass violence and kill those who refuse it. In the world Jemisin builds, colonial oppression filters through environmental exploitation, resource extraction, and capitalist wealth expropriation to show how all of them find expression in everyday experiences of phobic violence. The Orogenes's geosense serves as both the justification for their domination and the novel's hope for an evolutionary fix to the problem of anthropogenic environmental change, for they alone can restore the Earth's lost stability. But to realize that hope, they must first destroy the existing order.

[Alabaster] reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters had bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection . . .

He reaches deep and takes hold of the humming tapping bustling reverberating rippling vastness of the city . . .

He takes all that, the strata and the magma and the people and the power, in his imaginary hands. Everything. He holds it. He is not alone. The earth is with him.

Then he breaks it.²⁵

The non-Orogene majority of the Stillness will suffer as a result of Alabaster's actions and it is this ability to cause suffering and do harm that makes the Orogenes into monsters in the eyes of the majority. Revenge, however, is not Alabaster's motive. Like a physician resetting a badly healed bone, Alabaster breaks the world in order to restore it. His decision sets in motion the circumstances that just might lead to the restoration of order and prepares the way for a better, truer healing. What the novel first proffers as a profound act of destruction in fact serves the end of reparation. In this, however, Alabaster is opposed to the Earth itself. One of the series most startling revelations is that while the Earth may be a victim of human exploitation, it is not insensate matter, passive except for its useful energies and materials. But neither is it a ready collaborator in the effort to

create multispecies worlding, as in Haraway's Cthuluscene. It is sentient, it is angry, and it has a plan of its own to bring about the end of life on Earth.

By the third volume in the series, Alabaster has died and Syenite has taken up his purpose. Unaware of her mother's plan, Syen's daughter Nassun also quests; her goal is total worldly destruction. Earth, civilization, humanity – all she judges irremediably guilty. During her quest, however, she learns the histories that have brought the Earth to its present state and she begins to understand its rage and violence.

For the world has taken so much from her. She had a brother once. And a father, and a mother whom she also understands but wishes she did not. And a home, and dreams. The people of the Stillness have long since robbed her of childhood and any hope of a real future, and because of this she is so angry that she cannot think beyond THIS MUST STOP and I WILL STOP IT –

– so does she not resonate with the Evil Earth's wrath, herself?²⁶

Identifying with the Earth's wrath, she realizes the intertwining histories that have embittered and deformed everyone she knows might nonetheless be made to bear different futures. And so in her final showdown with her mother, she chooses reparation over sacred violence in the hope that another world is possible. Aligning her will with her mother's, she restores the Earth's balance and saves the world. She proves herself a helpful monster after all.

Cohen concludes "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" with the motto "monsters are our children" (20). By this he means two things: First, that monsters are the product of our cultural imaginaries and thus index back to the cultures that produce them. Monsters are our children in the sense that they come from us and so we may read ourselves in them: "the monster exists only to be read" (4). But there is a second valence to Cohen's analogy of monsters and children. Our child monsters may also be our own monstrous children, like and unlike, self and not-self, arising from somewhere hidden and outside of our control, and so full of eldritch knowledge "and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside" (20). The idea that stories will have only one meaning and the related idea that it is possible to scrape off semiotic barnacles not only makes use of children for the story but makes the stories themselves into children: familiar, innocent, hopeful. In scripting monsters as helpers, *hope* became *help*. Our monsters lost the difference, the agency, and the agenda that made them monstrous to begin with. Nassun's actions in the final

book of Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy are a potent reminder that the future is not wholly under the control of the present; although Nassun redeems her legacy of righteous rage by choosing to repair what she did not break, her rage reminds us that not all of our monstrous children may be so willing to do the work of taking up their parents' tasks.

Conclusion

This chapter began with trouble and ended with hope. That I intended for *trouble* to carry a positive valence and *hope* a negative one speaks most incisively to my own continued commitment to the Gothic terms of a monstrous queer reading practice. If this preference of mine seems counterintuitive, perhaps that speaks to the necessity, in a time of everyday catastrophe, for the hopeful constructions of myth and the sharp-edged tools of barnacle scraping. Perhaps, in other words, ignoring ambivalence and ambiguity serves the strategic purpose of destroying systems of oppression to rebuild toward a more equal distribution of life possibilities. That might be true. In that case, I would urge holding onto the memory of trouble's troublesome tendency to stir up and make cloudy, to awaken forces that disrupt preexisting models and conjure meanings at cross-purposes with the stories from which they arise. These worrisome effects of trouble are indeed my own hopeful monsters.

Notes

- 1 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 2 See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 547–66.
- 3 See Robyn Weigman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, eds., *Queer Theory without Antinormativity*, Special issue of *differences* vol. 26, no. 1 (May 2015).
- 4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 146. Interestingly, Sedgwick anticipates that readers will object to reparative reading based on its preference for the aesthetic and its "frankly ameliorative" politics (144). A critique of "merely reformist" politics (144) only makes sense if the institutions to be reformed appear inexorable. To ameliorate catastrophe, however, an aesthetic judgment may be the best possible heuristic.

- 5 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14 (italics in original). All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 6 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 135.
- 7 H. P. Lovecraft, "Call of the Cthulhu," in *H. P. Lovecraft: Tales* (New York: Library of America, 2005), 167–97.
- 8 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Thesis)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 47.
- 10 Ellis Hanson, "Undead," in *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 324–41. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 11 See in this context Sedgwick's famous dating of the homo/hetero bind to the Oscar Wilde indecency trials in 1895. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 216–17.
- 12 More specifically, Halberstam argues that "multiple otherness is subsumed by the unitary otherness of sexuality" (7–8). Read as sexuality, the vampire's overdetermination nonetheless evokes the many anxieties of class, of race, of foreignness that are also condensed into this figure. My thanks to E. L. McCallum for making this point to me.
- 13 J. Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 12. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 14 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 222, 225.
- 15 Myra Hird, "Animal Trans," *Australian Feminist Studies* vol. 21, no. 49 (2006): 35–48.
- 16 Helen Merrick well expresses this point. She writes, "The (ab)use of the concepts of the 'natural' and 'unnatural' in regulating queer sexualities stems from the fact that 'natural' s invariably associated with 'procreative'" (219). See Helen Merrick, "Queering Nature: Close Encounters with the Alien in Ecofeminist Science Fiction," in *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*, ed. Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 216–32.
- 17 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 18 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

- 19 Nicole Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 151.
- 20 Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanisms in *Beast of the Southern Wild*," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* vol. 21, no. 2 (2015): 265. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 21 Heather Davis, "Toxic Progeny: The Plastisphere and Other Queer Futures," *PhiloSOPHIA* vol. 5, no. 2 (2015): 232–50.
- 22 Myra Hird and Nigel Clark, "Deep Shit," *O-Zone: A Journal of Object-Oriented Studies* vol. 1, no. 1 (2014): 44–52. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 23 Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto," *New Literary History* vol. 41 (2010): 474. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
- 24 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.
- 25 N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York: Orbit, 2015), 7.
- 26 N. K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* (New York: Orbit, 2017), 248.