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A new monster manual, in theory. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, editor. *The Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 560 pp. ISBN 978-1-5179-0525-5. \$35 pbk.

"Focusing on contemporary theorizations of monstrosity with an emphasis on the humanities," writes editor Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock of *The Monster Theory Reader*, "this collection is itself a kind of monster—a Frankenstein's creature assembled out of diverse approaches and perspectives" (2). Like Mary Shelley's patchwork creature, this book may be pieced together but it is marvellously integrated, thanks in part to Weinstock's anchoring of contemporary "monster theory" in the poststructuralist theory of Michel Foucault, "the great theoretician of monstrosity" (27). That's certainly the Foucault I first encountered in senior undergraduate seminars; I think if I'd read a collection like this back then, it would have taken my head clean off—as any good reading in theory should (figuratively speaking of course, à la Bataille's *acéphalité*). Foucault's work exerts a pronounced influence throughout the volume, which Weinstock divides into four sections: first, a "Monster Theory Toolbox" of key concepts, terms, and methods; "Monsterizing Difference," which details how practices of domination exploit various forms of difference; a "Monsters and Culture" section on monsters in specific social, cultural, and political contexts; and lastly "The Promises of Monsters," a coda of critical reflections on how monsters can articulate not just fear and loathing but also hope and liberation. But prior to the first section, Weinstock places one essay as a methodological *monstrance* (a special vessel that displays a sacred substance, to cite one of the few variations on "monster" the volume doesn't): Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 1996 essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." Given pride of place here, Cohen's essay serves as a map or model for many chapters; it's a foundational, "thoroughly Foucauldian analysis of monsters as reflections of culturally specific anxieties and desires, as mechanisms of social control, and also as potential sites of resistance to oppressive paradigms" (Weinstock 29).

Weinstock's summary of Cohen's chapter aptly encapsulates the whole volume. Among these critical theorizations of monstrosity, we find some monsters of critical theory, such as Donna Haraway (with 1992's "The Promises of Monsters"), Jack Halberstam (with the introduction to Gothic monstrosity from *Skin Shows* [1995]), Sigmund Freud's essay on the Uncanny, and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Except for Haraway (whose essay gives the last section its title), these luminaries appear in the first "Toolbox" section: like Cohen's theses, they furnish some key contexts, ideas, and approaches that recur throughout the volume. Other highlights in this first section include Masahiro Mori's widely cited but rarely read 1970 essay "The Uncanny Valley" (in an English translation that's only previously appeared in a 2012 robotics journal), and Robin Wood's 1979 essay "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," which models the powers of Freudian and Marxist theories when combined, and makes plain the stakes of such theorizing as nothing less than "the struggle for liberation" (110). Wood marshals his Marcusean methodology to distinguish between reactionary and radical—or at least

subversive—horror movies. (In the process, his argument unexpectedly interests me in a film he puts in the latter camp, a film I never thought I'd want to see: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.)

Part II, “Monsterizing Difference,” features readings of how different minoritized, subaltern, and racialized persons and groups are represented, constituted, and oppressed through dominant discourses of monstrosity, from the “monstrous races” of classical antiquity (discussed by Alexa Wright) and medieval culture’s demonization of Jews (historicized by Bettina Bildhauer), to more recent discursive constructions of monstrosity in relation to homosexuality (as argued by Harry Benshoff) and bodily anomaly (as theorized by Elizabeth Grosz). This section also includes Barbara Creed’s psychoanalytic, feminist critique of horror monsters as abject feminine figures, and Annalee Newitz’s trenchant, postcolonial reading of “the undead” as a “haunted whiteness” in American culture. Newitz musters a prodigious archive of Americana to show how “the undeath of colonialism in U.S. culture” haunts and torments not only those subjugated by said colonialism but, more interestingly, its white perpetrators and beneficiaries. Like Wood’s (and others in this volume), Newitz’s chapter discusses Val Lewton’s RKO films, especially *I Walked With a Zombie* (1941)—a lost classic justly rewarded here with careful critical attention.

Part III, “Monsters and Culture,” starts with short, pithy meditations on monsters and morality and religion, by Stephen T. Asma and Timothy Beal, respectively, and on monsters and religion, by Timothy Beal. Asma reads monster stories as “encapsulations of the human feeling of vulnerability,” stories “helping us to virtually represent the obstacles that real life will surely send our way” (292-3); Beal, considering monstrosity in a religious context, retrieves ancient understandings of the monster’s revelatory function, as “an envoy of the divine or the sacred as radically other than ‘our’ established order of things” (298). Weinstock contributes his own chapter here, on contemporary pop-culture representations of “invisible” monstrosity, such as serial killers, viral outbreaks, and climate catastrophe. “Monstrosity,” as he says in the introduction, “inheres not in looking different but rather in acting in harmful ways” (28), and I can’t think of a better epitaph than that to sum up 2020. Weinstock’s chapter, like Lioi’s and Haraway’s in the fourth section, tempers the volume’s otherwise prevailing focus on visual and visible registers and apprehensions of monstrosity—a focus on monster as *figure*—to consider, instead, monster as *ground*.

In this section, too, Jon Stratton relates the contemporary proliferation of zombie texts to the global crisis of displaced people and Agamben’s theory of “bare life”; and Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai unfold a masterful, meticulous critique of the USA’s “War on Terrorism”; first published in 2002, their essay remains all too timely and furnishes an engaging, teachable model of Foucauldian, intersectionalist methodology; note all the contexts circulating through just this one variation on their thesis statement: “We have argued that the monster-terrorist-fag”—a pejorative epithet integral to their argument—“is reticulated with discourses and practices of heteronormative patriotism but also in the resistant strategies of feminist groups, queer communities, and communities of color” (393).

So, too, does Haraway’s chapter, in the last section, concatenate a multitude of contexts, discourses, actions, and texts in a restless exploration of possibilities “for changing maps of the world, for building new collectives out of what is not quite a plethora of human and unhuman actors” (506). Initially, I thought this particular Haraway inclusion seems somewhat dated; “The Promises of Monsters” is from 1992, so what about excerpting, instead, her more recent theorizing of “the Chthulucene”—our historical moment itself turned monstrous—from 2016’s *Staying With the Trouble*? But “The Promises of Monsters” stays all too timely for the weird

world of late 2020. Between a raging, novel pandemic and a “post-truth” political climate, this question (among many urgent ones she poses) rings with uncanny currency: “What are the consequences of the *simultaneous* challenges to expert monopoly of knowledge *and* insistence on both the rapid improvement of the biomedical knowledge base and the equitable mass distribution of its fruits?” (501).

“The Promises of Monsters” thus closes the collection on a tentative note of hope; the three other chapters here include Anthony Lioi’s reflection on the emergence of and possible trajectories for eco-criticism (mainly in the USA), Erin Suzuki’s political-economic critique of Hollywood’s turn to Pacific markets, and, lastly, Patricia MacCormack’s essay “Posthuman Teratology,” which reprises some of the volume’s overarching insights (e.g. about monsters’ multiplicity of meanings and category confusion) but does so in turgid, vague prose that makes for a somewhat anticlimactic finish. (Not that a volume like this need be read linearly.)

Suzuki’s and Haraway’s contributions, moreover, responsibly and respectfully acknowledge and address Indigenous knowledge and leadership in mobilizing on critical environmental issues. Haraway discusses different public policy interventions led by Amazonian peoples and the Western Shoshone nation, and Suzuki’s chapter involves a discussion of Native Pacific epistemology. Together, their chapters throw into sharp relief the volume’s critical deficiencies, which aren’t many, but which include both a regrettable absence of Indigenous contributions and an unfortunate preponderance of references to Indigenous peoples phrased in the past tense. In fairness, maybe Weinstock sought Indigenous contributions but sourced none (insofar as no contributor self-identifies as Indigenous); but the lack is conspicuous in a volume that mentions, among its introductory examples of famous monsters, the “wendigos” of some Indigenous North American traditions (17). The problem of past-tense language appears at least partly incidental: older selections (like Wood’s) exhibit outdated vocabulary and assumptions; and some illustrative passages concerning Indigenous peoples refer to specific historical events and moments. But other such passages presumptively locate oppression and stereotyping in the past (as if it is not continuing today in policing, Hollywood, pro sports, etc.), and the cumulative effect of this persistent past-tense use is to reinscribe the “vanishing Indian” stereotype (not that you should take it from me; see Gregory Younging’s 2016 *Elements of Indigenous Style* for an expert explanation of the problem).

This problematic use of past tense extends to other discussions of intercultural issues, tainting the book’s otherwise nuanced and often radical analyses—analyses of practices of exclusion, antagonization, stigmatization, repression, and oppression—with a kind of anthropological hangover the volume can’t quite exorcise. A few chapters reprise the *grand récit* that contrasts an enlightened modernity to a myth-misled pre-modernity. And despite the book’s Foucauldian foundations, some arguments harbour a lingering investment in monstrosity as a transcendent signified: the introduction’s repeated assertion that “the same monster resonates differently in different times and places” (2) presumes a consistency of identity that invites a Foucauldian follow-up: don’t those different contexts and discontinuities mean that said monster, too, is not the same but different?

Notwithstanding these infelicities, the book remains, on balance, generative for research, valuable for pedagogy, and enjoyably fascinating. If the book seems generally preoccupied with US texts and topics, such preoccupation is less parochial than a symptom of the global popularity of US pop culture exports. For a made-in-the-USA anthology, almost half the contributors hail from elsewhere in the world, and some chapters (like Wood’s) offer vital, outside perspectives

from non-US thinkers on US culture and society; while others, ranging farther afield, demonstrate the tentacular reach and implications of critically theorizing the monstrous.

The Monster Theory Reader makes a crucial contribution both to the scholarly study of monstrosity and to the teaching of theory; its arguments and illustrations (in the literal sense, too—the book features many full-page images) are pertinent and timely for a constellation of interrelated subjects informed by critical theory: postcolonial studies (recall that this field has become a bugbear for conservatives in recent years), anti-racism pedagogy, critical media literacy, literary and film criticism, Cultural Studies, political economy, global studies, science fiction and fantasy studies, and critical theory itself, to name a few. Many chapters cross-refer to and complement one another harmoniously, especially the more thoroughly Foucauldian and intersectionalist chapters, offering the reader a variety of angles on these approaches and, thus, an intensive primer on them. In this light, the *Reader* represents a teachable theory sampler, in which complex and densely contextualized critical theories find vivid illustration and clear explanation. A great work of critical theory should confront the reader with the uncanny, with an experience of estrangement, an apprehension that one's mind, or the world (or both), is not what one had assumed it was. This *Reader* promises several such experiences for the reader who braves the swamp of its pages. And for scholars and researchers of all things monstrous, Weinstock's book presents an extensive if not exhaustive single-volume resource for which I cannot easily think of any comparator: it's at once a menagerie of monstrous forms, a compendium of critical methods, an archive of world-famous icons alongside esoteric ephemera, an idea generator, a tome of some vexations and more revelations. *The Monster Theory Reader* is a profoundly *sui generis* work—like any good monster should be.

Mark A. McCutcheon, Athabasca University