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Monsters Today: Investigating the Legendary Other

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Legendary monsters are alive and well in the modern world. They are not relics of the ancient past, nor do they belong solely in the domain of fiction, fantasy, and entertainment. They endure through community, emerge through new media, attach to local landscapes, and adapt to contemporary anxieties, a persistence fully in keeping with folkloristics' long emphasis on tradition as process and performance (Ben-Amos 1971; Bauman 1975; Abrahams 1968). Rather than disappearing, legendary monsters have become more elusive, harder to categorize, and more deeply embedded in the cultural systems that produce and sustain them.

In *North American Monsters: A Contemporary Legend Casebook*, I argued that, through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, legendary monsters remained significant and viable targets for folkloristic analysis (Puglia 2022). That collection sought to prove that legendary monsters were not artifacts of antiquity, but rather an important subgenre of contemporary legend, one sustained through belief, experience, and narrative exchange (Bennett 1987; Ellis 2003; Hufford 1995; Oring 1990). The purpose of the present special issue is not to revisit that claim but to set out from it. Instead of attempting to prove that legendary monsters were and continue to be worthy quarry for folkloristic study in the twenty-first century, this collection asks what their presence reveals about the current state and future directions of legendary monster scholarship and its import for the future of contemporary legend study.

This special issue, then, is best understood as a scholarly safari. Rather than a casebook that looks back historically in an attempt to grasp a diffuse scholarly lineage of legendary monster scholarship within contemporary legend studies, this collection explores the present and the future to see how those diffuse strands continue, converge, and develop in the modern day. It

intentionally unites established and emerging scholars from diverse but affiliated disciplines, not in an attempt to discover some underlying theoretical unity, but rather to track the range of approaches currently animating the study of legendary monsters. The resulting special issue is impressively heterogeneous, and intentionally so. At no point does the volume propose a singular theoretical or methodological framework, nor does it attempt to clean up the historically messy field of legendary monster studies. Instead, it takes a snapshot of the subdiscipline as it currently stands, one that continues to expand methodologically and conceptually.

The first group of essays foregrounds the instability of the monster as a category. Sharon A. Hill's examination of cryptozoology traces the transformation of the field from a quasi-scientific enterprise into a largely cultural and symbolic practice, demonstrating how cryptids have become detached from their original zoological ambitions and reabsorbed into popular discourse. Philip Weinstein's analysis of the thylacine similarly resists classification, positioning the creature simultaneously as animal, cryptid, and ghost, and emphasizing the interpretive frameworks through which such ambiguity is maintained. Scott O. Moore's study of early modern werewolf narratives further destabilizes the category by treating these accounts not as reliable historical records but as textual constructions that reveal the worldview of their authors and audiences. In each case, the monster resists ontological closure, occupying the ambiguous conceptual space that has long defined the monstrous as a category of cultural boundary-making and disorder (Cohen 1996; Douglas 1966; Hufford 1977). Its persistence depends not on definitional clarity, but on its capacity to remain unsettled.

This instability, in turn, enables movement. A second cluster of essays examines how monsters circulate across time, space, and context. Eleanor Hasken's study of the Mothman demonstrates how a locally grounded legend migrates outward, shedding aspects of its original context while acquiring new meanings in distant locations. Quaid Adams's exploration of Kentucky's cave and mining traditions situates monstrous narratives within specific environmental and historical conditions, showing how landscape and labor history contribute to the formation and persistence of legend. These essays emphasize that monsters are not static inhabitants of fixed locations. They are mobile, adapting to new environments and reconstituting themselves in response to

changing contexts, consistent with folklorists' long-standing observations about migratory legends and narrative diffusion (Christiansen 1958; Brunvand 2003; Fine and Ellis 2013).

As monsters circulate, they become available for reinterpretation and ideological work. A third group of essays highlights the ways in which monsters function as instruments through which cultural tensions are expressed and negotiated. Stephen Olbrys Gencarella's analysis of the "Sleeping Giant" legend interrogates the performance of Indigenous narratives by non-Indigenous storytellers, reframing such practices as contemporary iterations of "playing Indian" and "playing ally." Adrielys Calderon Ortiz's examination of the legendary monster universe in *Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows* demonstrates how monsters can serve as vehicles for cultural affirmation and inclusion, particularly within Hispanic and Latinx contexts. Jack Daly's study of the Snallygaster and hex signs reveals the intersection of folklore, commodification, and material culture, illustrating how monsters become entangled in systems of economic and symbolic exchange. In these essays, the monster is less an object of belief than a tool, a medium through which issues of identity, power, and meaning are negotiated, consistent with broader theoretical treatments of monsters as cultural texts and symbolic figures (Cohen 1996; Dendle 2013; Dundes 1985).

The final group of essays shifts attention from interpretation to practice. Here, monsters are not only analyzed but actively used. Vivian Asimos's work on cosplay demonstrates how individuals engage with monsters through performative practices that blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, revealing complex relationships between belief, identity, and embodiment. Stephen Lochetto's investigation of giant catfish legends highlights the pedagogical potential of such narratives, showing how they can facilitate engagement with scientific knowledge and natural history. Camille Acosta's exploration of podcasting and Andrea Kitta's discussion of teaching with monsters both foreground applied contexts, illustrating how monsters function as flexible tools for storytelling, education, and communication. These contributions make clear that monsters are not merely objects of scholarly inquiry; they are resources actively deployed across a range of contemporary practices, particularly within performance-centered approaches to folklore (Bauman 1975; Georges 1969).

Across the essays in this special volume, four interrelated themes or trajectories emerge: a focus on ontological instability,

an emphasis on circulation and migration, an attention to cultural and ideological work, and an increasing interest in practice and application. On the whole, these themes suggest that the study of legendary monsters within contemporary legend scholarship, much like folkloristics as a whole, is transitioning from the analysis of objects or artifacts to the analysis of systems, networks, and communicative processes (e.g., see Blank and McNeill 2018; Ben-Amos 1971; Bronner 2012; Peck 2015). As monsters are not fixed objects, they can move, be reinterpreted, and be actively deployed.

Taken together, the essays hint at a notable methodological expansion for contemporary legend scholars interested in monsters, creatures, and cryptids. The methodological approaches represented in this collection include archival analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, digital ethnography, literary analysis, media analysis, and performance studies. The diversity is not happenstance but rather reflects the nature of monster studies itself. Legendary monsters, as slippery phenomena that slide between domains, demand a plurality of methods, since no single approach can fully account for their complexity.

What this volume seeks to demonstrate is not the nailing down of legendary monster studies, but its continued expansion. Legendary monster studies enlarges and adapts not because it's clearly defined, but because it's adaptable: able to absorb new meanings, enter new contexts, and serve new functions. If earlier legendary scholarship sought to locate and describe monsters, these essays suggest that today's task is to understand how legendary monsters operate within broader systems of culture and communication.

While this collection does not seek to define the field of legendary monster studies, it does map its current trajectories. In doing so, it underscores a central insight: the legendary monster endures not because it can be fixed, but because it can be continually redefined.

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