All the World's a Monster

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The book *Monstrous Ontologies: Politics Ethics Materiality* is the result of a 2019 symposium, organized by The Monster Network, that bore the same title and brought together academics from various disciplines. It is no surprise, then, that the published result of this scholarly event itself demonstrates some monstrosity, being a hybrid product whose multidisciplinary nature makes it hard to categorize despite the fact that all the essays relate to the field of philosophy and are linked to the proposed broad theme of monstrous ontology—a theme that signals a detour from how monsters and monstrosity have been theorized and approached by Cultural Studies, as editors Caterina Nirta and Andrea Pavoni explain in the Introduction.

The opening chapter by Andrea Mubi Brighenti provides a thought-provoking keynote to the collection, since it reflects on the "individual-environment theory" (1), exploring the monster's relation to its environment, which is a focal idea in many of the essays. Stating that the monster is to be found between the abnormal and anomalous and is associated with permutation and the perverse, Brighenti explains how monsters suggest the "sickness of nature" (6) and point to "a *ratio vivendi* . . . irreconcilable with our own" (10), which results in humanity's placing itself above nature (12). This realization, which comes from the combination of environmental theory with social theory, shows an evident connection to Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics, and aims to clarify the process whereby we have come to distrust nature and, I might add, show signs of monstrous behavior, as a result.

The next chapter by Paul Reid-Bowen understands our present era as "Cthulhucene" (to be differentiated from Donna Haraway's chthulucene). Demonstrating a post-anthropocentric approach, Reid-Bowen makes use of posthuman philosophy that considers the world as being inhabited by various entities in which the human is only one and has no special status; however, he also extends our understanding of non-human entities by adding to the list "other-than-human monstrous powers analogous to those of Lovecraft's fiction" (17), powers such as "nation states, multinational corporations, media and information networks, economic and financial markets, religious, political and social institutions, and even our cities and bureaucracies" (18) that have become agential and threatening, as animist cultures have long realized. Comprehending how these powers operate, argues Reid-Bowen convincingly, is imperative to change our relationship to them and demands an animistic approach to our environment now that we have turned Lovecraftian in many ways.

The next two chapters tie in neatly with Reid-Bowen's. Lucile Desblache brings hybridity and translation in focus and argues that a new, post-anthropocentric perception of the world "leads to a desire to understand the meaning of signs and other forms of interaction of . . . [non-human] living organisms, their systems and their environment" (36), which demands discarding an anthropocentric view of human communication as being superior to other ways. Desblache connects the post-structuralist and postcolonial "notion of hybridity as a 'translational' tool" (39) to the concept of monstrosity that may help us to make sense of what seems irrational and incomprehensible. Her essay thus points to a new field in which theorizing monstrosity in the context of post-anthropocentrism may be revelatory, and I would love to see what this theory may result in in practice. Jack Boulton's chapter so closely dialogizes with Reid-Bowen's that it would have been logical to place them right beside each other. Boulton presents a case study in which uranium as a hyperobject features as a monster, which helps one understand as well as extend further Reid-Bowen's cthulhucene. Boulton also connects his

subject matter to Lovecraft's Cthulhu that deprives humankind of its sense of importance in the universe and poses a continuous threat to humankind even when it stays invisible; in addition, he also finds inspiration in animistic cultures', this time Navajo people's, relation to their environment to rethink the implications of living in a monstrous environment.

While the two essays that follow are dissimilar in their foci and approaches, they both utilize the Deleuzian idea of the encounter with the unfamiliar that provokes the act of thinking. Like Boulton, co-authors Ramón Córdova Gonzáles and Signe Pērkone heavily draw on their own field work when they write about a landfill near Tapachula city, Mexico, and argue that perceiving this place as a monster may assist in performing effective architectural work that would be the most beneficial to the community living there. Carl Olsson, in contrast, presents a thoroughly theoretical examination of Deleuze's philosophy concerning monsters, and by connecting it to Antonin Artaud's concept of the "Theatre of Cruelty," he interprets Deleuzian philosophy as a monstrous one.

The process of monsterization is foregrounded in the four chapters that follow, but the related themes are very different within this broad topic. Panos Kompatsiaris's well-composed chapter draws attention to the importance of differentiating between minoritarian and majoritarian monsterization, and examines "the possibilities of purposefully casting monstrosity in majoritarian terms as a figure acting against the poor and the disadvantaged," as well as the dangers of such an endeavor (97–98). The next paper also centers around the political usage of monsterization and the idea of social justice by examining the process of monsterization against the racial Other. Sweta Rajan-Rankin relies on Arun Saldanah's argument that race as a concept should not be discarded, but instead, one needs to "*work with race and phenotypic difference as a way to materialize racial inequality*" (118) that is deeply rooted in the hostility of the environment where the monster resides. The special role of the environment is then investigated by Vivian Asimos, whose research focuses on a unique form

of monsterization: creating the monster via "in character communication" and thereby creating an online community, which, for a change, is not a hostile environment; in fact, it is a virtual community that is made real and kept alive and flourishing exactly by breaking down the "boundaries of play/non play and virtual/physical" (138). The idea of community building via monsterization is what links this study to that of The Monster Network, which explains the theoretical considerations behind the collaboration of its members and emphasizes a new method in academic communication. As the Network argues, the monster method of knowledge production is not only in harmony with their research subject matter of "marginalized voices and bodies [that] are often relegated to the realm of the monstrous" (144), but it is also a way to "explore how the multiplicity inherent in the monstrous may open up academic writing to the contradictions, the divergences, as well as the overlaps, in collective writing, being and doing" (146).

Chapter 11 moves away from academic production to artistic production, but it also connects the monstrous with style. In this essay, Emanuele Prezioso bases his theory about style on archeological findings and proposes that all artefacts (not only those that show monsters in their decorations or forms) are monstrous to the archeologists, and makes the case for taking "*monstrous artefact for what they do* rather than *what they represent*" (179). His central concept is material engagement approach, a title of a section under which he introduces "MET" (180), which should denote the above concept, but the acronym, unfortunately, is never decoded. Finally, Riccardo Baldissone explores the historical relationship between philosophy, science, and literature, noting the various waves of de-legitimizing literature concerning its capacity to reveal the "unbearable monstrosity of being" (193), although it is "acts of literature [that] trace the way out of modern dichotomies and the sphere of representation" (205). In the last section of his essay, Baldissone demonstrates his point by using Kafka's narratives; and while he intends this section as a kind of conclusion, it can barely function as one, and therefore, this

chapter feels somewhat unfinished and not clearly structured.

To an extent, all anthologies are hybrid monsters, but they may be tamed by the editors to be (reader-)friendly. It is not an easy task in this case: as a result of the spectacular hybridity *Monstrous Ontologies* displays, most of its readers will likely be interested in only some of the chapters, and very few readers will read all the essays (as is often the case with such collections). The studies are all well-researched and written with care and professionalism, but they greatly vary in their use of disciplines, focus, level of abstraction, and some demand profound background knowledge to follow them. Therefore, it would be crucial to help orientation concerning what the chapters offer. It would have been more practical to create a list of abstracts instead of placing the abstract at the beginning of each chapter. Most importantly, however, it would have been indispensable to create a functional index, because the current one does not assist the reader's work effectively: it lists too few items, and thus lacks important recurring concepts and names (while listing several items with only one page—even when they appear on several other pages).

Monstrous Ontologies, despite the problems noted above, is a valuable academic contribution to Philosophy and Monster Studies, and does manage to show new paths in the exploration of the monster and the monstrous, directing our attention to how the concept of the monster may be a useful tool to interpret the world that surrounds us.

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