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Embracing Monsters

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This creature and I
Are connected.
I've been stalking it
My entire life, and
I believe that
When I leave this earth
It's coming with me,
Snuffling at my feet,
And patting down the dirt
with its paws.

-Maha Kamal – *The Book of
Big Questions*

We seek to breathe life into the decades old field of monster studies by proposing monsters are documents. Monsters show us, make evident to us, teach us. We assert monsters are documents in a Shannon sense – monsters are coded and decoded messages in a binary system in which meaning is not inherent in the message. Who authors the monster and who decodes the monster yield different meanings, different functions.

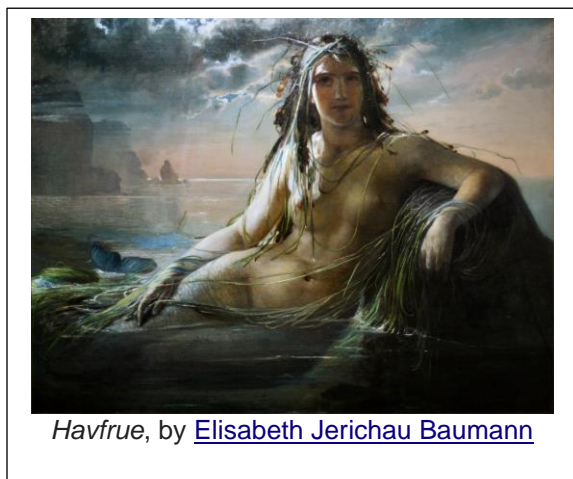


Monsters as documents

Once upon a time, some 3,000 years ago, there was a monster in the land of Crete. King Minos had disrespected the god Poseidon by not sacrificing a bull; so, Poseidon caused the king's wife, Pasiphaë, to become pregnant by the bull. Pasiphaë gave birth to a creature with the head and tail of a bull and the arms and legs of a human – the Minotaur. Every nine years the city of Athens was obliged to send youths to be consumed by the Minotaur who resided within the inescapable labyrinth of Daedalus.

Authorship of the Minotaur monster is shrouded in its origins of more than three thousand year ago. The overt purpose in the myth (message) was Poseidon showing

that he was outraged with King Minos's disobedience by making a horrific creature that required human flesh as food. Current scholarship suggests memories of bull riding and bull jumping competition in Crete gave rise to the creature itself and that the tale of Athenian youths being sacrificed to the monster and Theseus's killing of the creature blends several memories of the change in balance of power between Mycenaeans and Minoans in the Aegean. We have the monster, as images in this kylix painting from c.515 BCE perhaps rendering a memory of bull riding; the monster then stands for a complex geopolitical situation.



Havfrue, by [Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann](#)

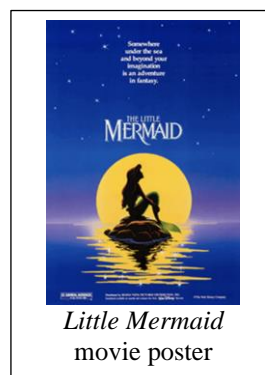
Once upon a time, some 2,000 years ago and again some hundreds of years ago, monsters swam in the seas. At times these creatures beguiled sailors to their doom with the torso of a beautiful human blended with a fish-like tail; at times they guided sailors. These mermaids and sirens were monstrous because of their being beyond the prototypes for humans and for fish. They were also monstrous in the sense of being beautiful while indicating doom.

Authorship of mermaids is nearly as ancient as the Minotaur and is more complex in the sense that the monster has evolved in numerous ways and within different cultures. Fish-tailed humans and winged and



'A most strange and true report of a monstrous fish' 1604

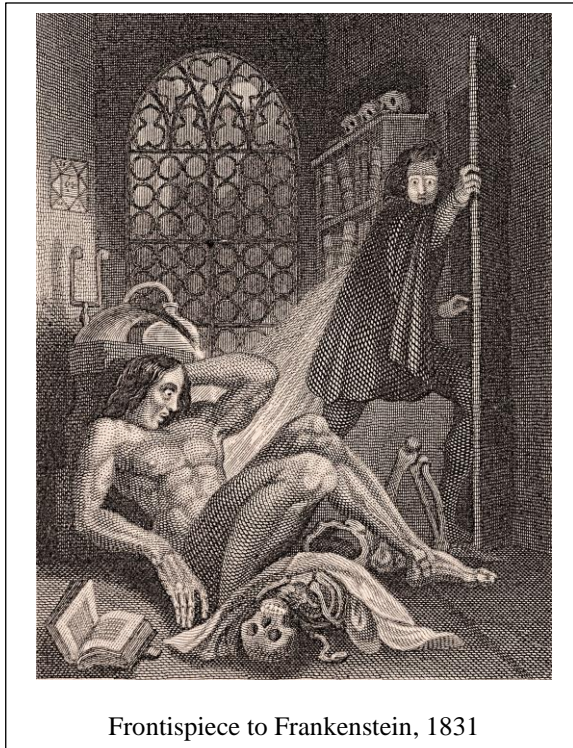
taloned women (Sirens, who tormented Odysseus) who lured sailors to doom morphed and blended into



Little Mermaid movie poster

mermaids attempts to describe manatees and the beloved Little Mermaid of Hans Christian Andersen & Disney fame. In a major portion mermaid monsters some form of alluring "human" beauty is combined with power (often malevolent.) Suggestions abound that the mermaids stand for (or early stood for) hazardous

navigation routes that looked promising; at the same time it cannot be overlooked that alluring (to fatality) female trope has often been deployed. We have a prototype defying creature that has at times been explanatory of unknown (to some) sea creatures, the subject of erotic 19th century paintings, and movies and toys for children – sanitized of doom and erotica.



Once upon a time, some 200 years ago, Mary Shelley produced a monster book, Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. A scientist used new understandings of electricity and biology to fabricate a creature from human parts, then spurned the creature, with horrific results. The creature comes to contemplate himself and his situation and even attempts reasoning with his creator to no avail.

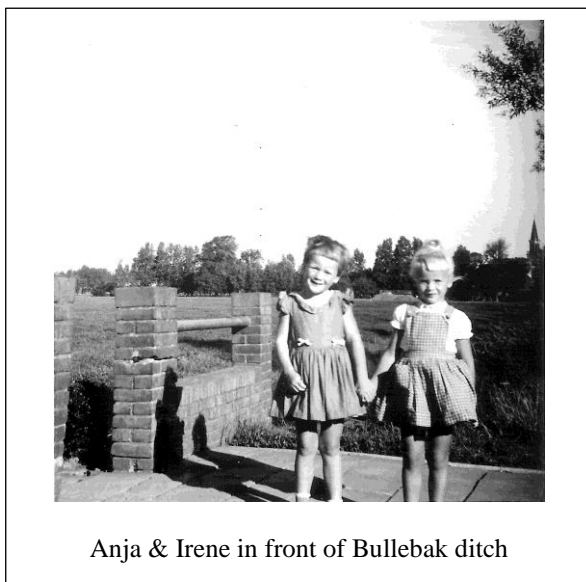
The novel, was followed by stage plays, by movies, and by games depicting the humanoid monster. Some suggest that there was more to Shelley's monster than mere entertainment. Analogies of the monster as a motherless child may

be Shelley's attempt to reconcile her existence without her mother who died in childbirth (Milner, 2005). Vlasopolos (1983) suggests that Frankenstein's monster represents the psycho-politics of oppression. The monster is aware of wealth and poverty through the division of property. Others see Shelley warning of the undesired outcomes of scientific progress. Tropp (1976) proposes that 20th-century versions of Frankenstein promote the "myth of technology," referring to galvanism (Brancho, 2018). At the time, many scientists were convinced that biological muscle material, stimulated by electrical current held the potential to raise the dead (Coghill, 2000).

Authorship of Dr. Frankenstein's creature has been much studied with the recent 200th anniversary of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel. Shelly used the word "monster" 31 times. The creature is made of human parts from different bodies and

brought to life through scientific experimentation. Her radical family, the very early death of her mother, the death of her own child, and discoveries about electricity and biology are antecedents to writing the novel. Diaz (2018) calls the novel itself “a wonderful monstrosity composed of several genres, texts, and voices patched up into one weird creature.” Schuessler (2018) documents how Shelley’s novel “has birthed a seemingly endless stream of adaptations and riffs, including at least 170 screen homages.”

With Shelley’s unnamed creature we have prototype challenging entity devised to tell a story and represent several constructs, arguably “toying with prototypes” in a way that resonated with a large and diverse readership/viewership.



Once upon a time, some 60 years ago, a monster lived in a watery ditch in West Friesland, north of Amsterdam. The monster was an oral construct, so here we have an image of two of the children for whom the monster existed. We have a firsthand account of the monster from the girl on the right.

The Bullebak had big hands and strong arms; he was also part fish, big, with sharp teeth. He was a water monster. If we came too close to his realm, the water, he would grab us and take us with him. Forever.

When I turned four, I joined the motley troupe kids walking to the school in the next village, Hoogwoud. Trees lined the straight country road, and a ditch separated the road from the pasture lands. The art was to walk behind the trees without falling into the ditch. Mom knew our game, our obsession. She knew we would not stay on the road side of the trees, but were drawn to the dark danger of the ditch. “Kijk uit voor de Bullebak!” she emphasized every day when we left for school, trying to instill fear of the water in us: “Beware of the Bullebak!” (Klaver, 2020)

Authorship of the Bullebak is a distinctly local attempt to solve a vexing problem – how do parents in a rural village in the Netherlands keep their children from drowning or being injured or ruining their clothes while walking to school along a

water-filled ditch. Parents in the area made use of a generic term for a nasty person, bully, monster – bullebak and gave it scary characteristics that would fit into a child's "abstract universals." If a child got too close, the Bullebak, could grab them or it might tempt them with treats and they would never see home again. The monster was not frightening to the parents; the thought of their children being hurt was frightening. Parents had to "fabricate a monster of their own" to deal with the frightening situation. Klaver (2020) notes a companion aspect of the creation of the monster: "the water inspired cautionary tales to keep us away; one of the effects was that we were even more intrigued by the ditch." Here we have a local monster authored for a local situation. When children moved to bigger cities, neither they nor their parents were concerned with the Bullebak.



House Mensch

Once upon a time, some months ago, there was a monster spotted on a street by the Google Street View imaging system. This creature, bearing a distinct resemblance to the Minotaur, had the head of a house with the arms and legs of a human. This is "obviously" not "really" a monster, yet it grabs attention because it is obvious that parts of two distinct entities are blended into a whole that looks plausible but "impossible" or far away from our prototypes for a small building and for a human body. We see a building and we see a body and the combination is monstrous. The House Mensch is, "of course," not "real."

Authorship of the House Mensch monster seems straightforward – digital manipulation of two photographs. However, that is not the case. is, "of course," not "real," but it does show us something very real – the Google Street View imaging system is set up with some constraints that render images in a time-based manner that is not consistent with ordinary human vision or with our understanding of standard snapshot images. We have a monster image unlike the others in that it was not authored for any purpose. Knowing that it is not a purposeful manipulation prompted exploration of how it came to be.

What is a monster?

We suggest that monsters have long been with us and are no mere remnants of the past. A monster is a difference that makes a difference, to echo Bateson (1972). To function as a monster something has to “show” or “make evident” – that is, it has to be big enough to be seen, be recognized as something different or out of place yet close enough to something(s) known to function. Microbes are outside our ordinary experience and were responsible for a significant problem, yet we would not have called them monsters before Pasteur – they were not seen even though their actions were. A person who is six feet and nine inches tall may be noticed, but is not a monster because they are not outside the normal distribution of heights. An antelope in a zoo is made a monster – something that shows us something (difference that makes a difference) – we don’t have zoos for cats and dogs.

In an early definition “monster” referenced a "malformed animal or human, creature afflicted with a birth defect," from Old French *monstre*, *mostre* "monster, monstrosity" (12c.), and directly from Latin *monstrum* "divine omen (especially one indicating misfortune), portent, sign; abnormal shape; monster, monstrosity." Here we reflect back on the Minotaur, depicted as a humane-bull grotesque that is fed with sacrificial youths.

The etymology of monster begins with the sense of “to think” and meanders into “remind, admonish, warn, instruct, teach” then through the notion of omens and the creatures by which events, particularly calamitous events, are foretold, to “abnormal shape.” So, it is appropriate that we use monsters to think about our humanity” and that we think of just what collection of attributes we consider when thinking about the class “human.”

Imagination is the mother of invention. Dream-filled sleep serves as adventure occupying our awakening minds with stories that hover somewhere between reality and disbelief. Sometimes we wake in fright, our subconscious minds filled with monsters that at once seem real. We then settle to the fact that they are not real, but rather fictitious creations of our dormitive state. These monsters are involuntary creations of the human psyche.

Yet monsters are often cognitive creations fabricated with intent. From ancient folklore such as Beowulf to modern-day Smaug in the *Hobbit* (Tolkein, 2013), monsters serve to entertain, warn, and inform. Haraway (1991) states, “Monsters share more than the word’s root with the verb ‘to demonstrate’: monsters signify” (226).

In discussing how women have often been depicted as monsters, Langsdale (2020) speaks of monsters as documents:

So often within the Western cultural imagination, women are rendered as monstrous. Observable in much of the history of Western thinking and in myriad visual cultural productions, monstrosity intersects with gender in ways that frame women as monstrous and the monster as dangerously evocative of women/femininity/the female. Of course, the monster is not only made legible through markers of gender. The monster, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen assures us, “dwells at the gates of difference,” and while “any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body ... for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual” (1996, 7). In other words, monsters, as J. Jack Halberstam writes, “are meaning machines.

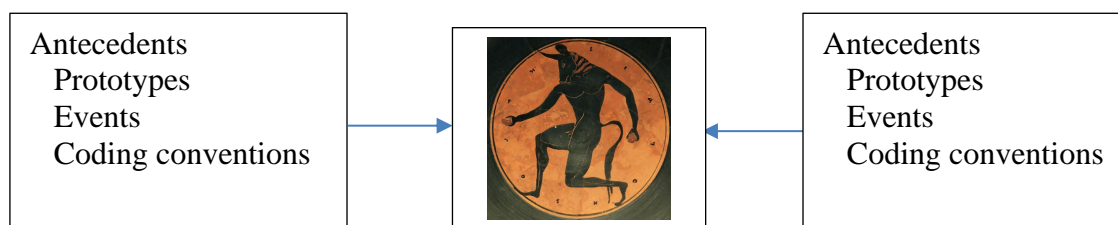
In a similar vein, Klaver (2020) discussing gentrification of once “messy” waterfront property in Amsterdam, re-engages her childhood Bullebak and suggests:

Engaging a monster requires understanding what a monster is; how it comes to be and how it thrives; what intended and unintended consequences arise from its entanglements; what the nature is of its territory; and how we understand ourselves in relation to the monster.

One of the more compelling statements of monstrosity being a matter of recognition that something is different but close enough to the known to provoke a strong reaction is the creature bemoaning his fate to Frankenstein:

Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; **but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance.** [emphasis added]

Coding and Decoding Monster Documents



We can model monsters in the same way we model any document. Sketching Anderson's functional ontology model, we can say that some entity or necessity compels the making of a message – the making of the message being the manipulation of some coding conventions that will stand for the intended meaning. The degree to which recipients of the message perceive the intended meaning or derive some other useful meaning depends on the degree of overlap of coding conventions together with recipient needs.

Early in our thinking about recognizing the potential of monsters we asked ourselves: “If an antelope can be a document, then...can monsters be anecdota?” In other words, can the form of a monster inform us of something other than terror or impending doom? Can a monster provide us with clues to solving a mystery, to understanding events in a different way, to expanding the territory of our internal maps? Sense making and prototypes emerged as focal points.

Prototypes

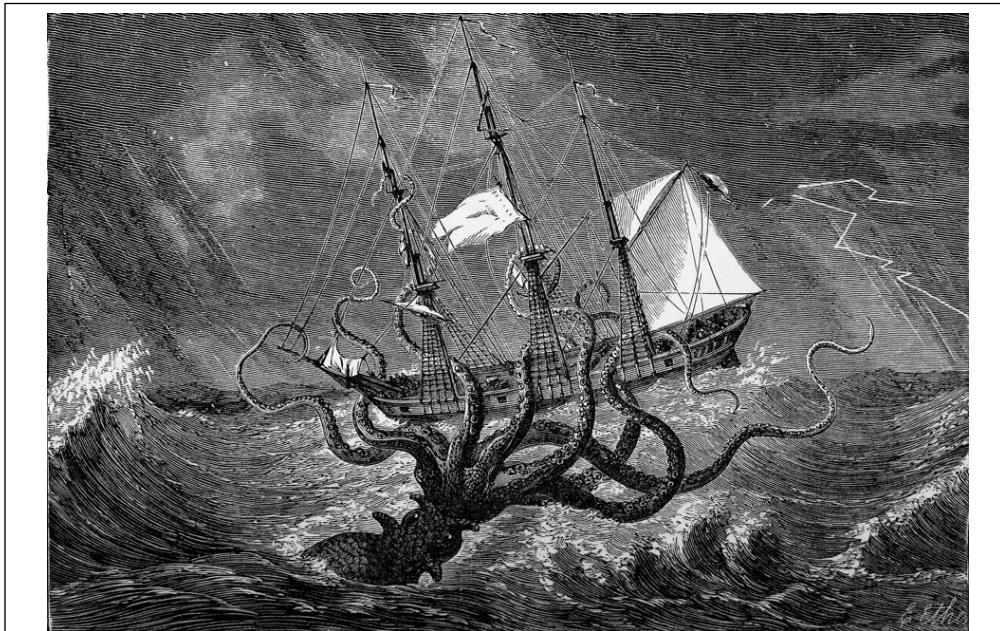
Churchland suggests that prototypes “typically represent far more information than is present in the sensory input that activates them” and that they thus have “substantial predictive power.” So “prototype activation can enable us to recognize something unfamiliar as an example of something already known.” Churchland further asserts that “toying with instances of prototypes is a component of creativity.” (quoted in Currie, 2020)

Looking to prototypes, we re-assert that monsters are monstrous because they stand outside the prototypes and what Churchland terms the “configuration of the abstract universals, the temporal invariants, and the enduring symmetries that structure the objective universe of [the brain's] experience.” p. vii. We also suggest that confronting an entity that seems monstrous, one might ask: “What does the monster show me is missing from my enduring symmetries?” Similarly, one confronted with a problem of description or with a challenging task might ask: “What sorts of prototypes could I magnify or blend to describe the seemingly un-describable or solve the vexing problem. That is, prototypes offer a means of reporting on the monstrous, a first attempt at documenting the undocumented, the undiscovered and beginning an examination; at the same time, they offer a means of authoring monsters, representations for a diverse class of problems. As with any representation, the original antecedents may be forgotten or ignored, the form may morph, the results of any particular engagement with the monster might seem unrecognizable (monstrous) to another recipient of the monster at another time and another place.

Sense making

Our minds are captured with imagery of typically horrific, monstrous beings. Visualization, early on, came from textual description. The monsters in *Beowulf* were typically undefined, with very few detailed descriptions. Grendel and his mother are accounted to be descended from strange beings including giants, elves, and ogres. Words such as bloodthirsty and cannibalistic are devoid of detail leaving our minds to conjure up inhuman and monstrous images of fierce, toothy beings capable of harm.

Other monsters, typically those of maritime lore, are depicted in drawings that stalked seafarers. The most popular among them being the Kraken. Its Norse folkloric origins as hafgufa portray a large octopus capturing sailing ships (Salvador, 2015).



"The Kraken, as seen by the eye of imagination": imaginary view of a gigantic octopus seizing a ship, 1887.

Although horrific in appearance, many of these monsters demonstrate some attributes of humanity. These half human, half animal crypto creatures are depicted as sea-dwelling, aerial-traveling, and land-haunting monsters. The medievalist Jeffrey Cohen (1999) opined that these half-human cryptids raise questions about

our own concepts of identity. How can giants be “considered both human and something other, which is both pre-human and post-human in nature?” (Cohen, p. 11).

Fox (2019) poses “Arguably the most important role of the monster, though, is to be an enemy whose defeat inspires us to be like the heroes of old.” Literarily romantic in suggested function, we assert that the function of a monster resides in the concept of sense-making. As street-level knowledge, rarely do we consider monsters to be clues to new information.

Monsters mark points of significant change in boundaries. The sailor’s lore of the mermaid depicts a sea monster made of both human and fish parts, imparting an image at once both beautiful and horrific. This contradictory, partially real, partially mythic character captures the imagination and mind. The boundary change from upper half human, lower half fish tail marks a boundary between familiar and unfamiliar, belief and disbelief.

Such marking of points of significant change along a boundary, of significant departure from the norm, can be seen as an example of Bateson’s notion of information as a difference that makes a difference. Monsters generally act/exist at a scale larger than squiggles on a page or tones in a song. The mermaid challenges us to examine just what it means to be “human” by being at once not quite human and more than human. The same boundaries can be seen in more common information conditions such as a monster blizzard. Such storm magnitude, beyond the normal, challenges us to examine climate models by being part something that happens ordinarily and part something that almost never happens.

Monsters point to significant differences – differences that make a difference, the unknown – using pieces of the known. Examining monsters involves deconstructing the coding of their parts, circumstances, and how they differ from the norm. The process is a point of potential leading to new knowledge, new functionality. Information retrieval implies the re-gathering or re-engaging something that has been discovered and coded already; monsters help us discover what has not yet been discovered or engaged. Monsters use bits of the known – bits that are familiar, bits that are proximate – to form clues/clews, threads of proximity to the unknown.

Tales of creatures; magical, ferocious, and even deadly fascinate us. Borne of the lore of unique cultures, many people not only believe in these monsters, but swear they have seen them firsthand. It is in these folkloric traditions, and efforts of science to prove or disprove that we revisit the notion of anecdota; an information



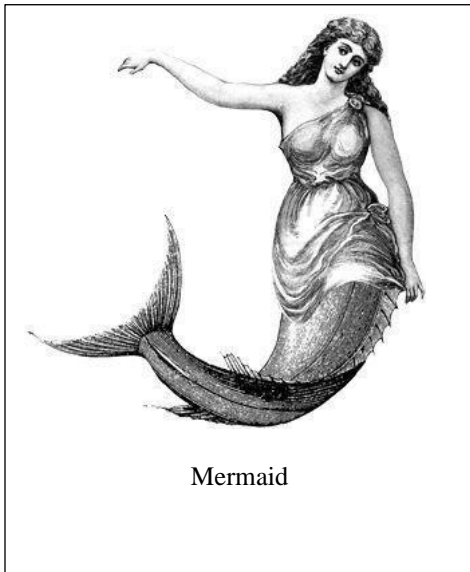
Head of a male Okapi

phenomenon we describe as a bridge connecting people with codified or discoverable information. We posit that anecdotal is little-known knowledge imparted by common people passed through proximal ties – anecdotal. The elusive Atti was a monster said to be dwelling in the Semliki Forest in 1800s Africa. The Wambutti told British explorers of a donkey-like creature that roamed the forest. The Atti remained a mystery until Uganda natives provided British museum scientists with specimens leading to identification of a new species; the okapi.

Turning to the sea, we consider the Kraken. This many tentacled, bug-eyed creature haunted the minds of Scandinavian sailors. Its lore and vulgarity are conveyed etymologically. The Swedish word krake describes an unhealthy animal. German Krake translates to octopus. Perhaps a reference to the biological discovery? Consider a benevolent creature of seamen's lore; the



Illustration from 1870 edition of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea



Mermaid

mermaid. A centaur-like creature reported to have the upper body of a female and lower of a fish, sailors accounted a mythical creature from the sea with long flowing hair. Could this be the Dugong or Manatee glimpsed by lonely sailors?

We might say a crypto creature is, in and of itself, a monstrous document - a document -

at least a mental document and one that can be given form in a painting, sketch, etching in so far as it documents some combination of parts and concepts. If folkloric tales of monsters such as these and others yet elusive such as Bigfoot, Loch Ness Monster, and Yeti are threads of truth that have led scientists to new discoveries then anecdotal may serve as bridges to unexplored yet likely relevant information.

Coda

Noted film director Guillermo del Toro spoke to why we create monsters: “[Mary Shelley] gave voice to the voiceless, and presence to the invisible, and showed me that sometimes to talk about monsters, we need to fabricate monsters of our own.” (quoted in Schuessler, 2018). Much like Kamal’s creature in the *Book of Big Questions*, connections are afforded from the unknown to the known through monstrous clues. Embraced, monsters serve to facilitate discovery leading to new information.

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