COLLECTIVE VOICES: MONSTER AS METHODS

Monster Talks: a Monster Network Podcast

Line Henriksen:
Thank you all for coming. We are the Monster Network.

Ingvil Hellstrand:
Our names are Sara Orning, Line Henriksen, Ingvil Hellstrand, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Donna McCormack.

Sara E. S. Orning:
Our talk today is called C*ollective Voices and the Materialisation of Ideas, Monster as Methods.*

Line:
I love etymology. So, in case there's something to be gained from the etymology of the word idea, here are some of the things that Etymonline has to say about it:

One, from the late 14th century, it is “the archetype, the concept of a thing in the mind of God.” Two, from Greek, the “form or the look of a thing.” Three, from idein to “see”. And four, the meaning, “mental image or picture” is from the 16th century (the Greek word for it was *ennoia*, originally "act of thinking.”) as is the sense "concept of something to be done; concept of what ought to be, differing from what is observed.”

Sara:
This is cool and reminds me of bell hooks' theory as liberatory practice. Ideas and actions are closely interlinked. She writes that theory is a way of imagining what she calls possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently.

Line:
Five, idea as in the sense of “result of thinking” is first recorded in the 1640s.

Ingvil:
Where do ideas come from? How are certain ideas and stories reproduced and maintained, whereas other stories end up marginalised, untold or unheard or even monsterised?

In this talk, we grapple with the monster not as a hideous countenance or embodied pathology; but as a thinking tool in the process towards the materialisation of ideas. The monster requires not only themes or topics but also methods and practices.

Sara:
We work with the monster as a method, a methodology and a practice. We work with the monster as a means of interrupting assumptions about what knowledge is acceptable and not.

Ingvil:
And the opening up to different stories that will perhaps bring about different worlds. The monster is not only a thinking tool but a practice, a lived reality. Our lives are filled with interruptions, good and bad, interruptions by loved ones, colleagues, companion species, the weather, the law and technological riches. Not all liberate, not all interruptions are liberating. Academic careers are interrupted time and again by the precarity of today's work life. And our very lives can be disrupted with disease and loss, the breaking down of bodily boundaries, the leakiness of surfaces.

Concentration camps and refugee centres interrupt and redefine human rights and humanity itself. Some interruptions must be fought against, yet some interruptions must be fought for. In academic life, interruptions in thinking may lead to some ideas that would never have surfaced without the interruption.

So the monstrous parts of thinking and living that interruptions bring forth is the key to this story.

Line:
This talk is an experiment with collective voices.

Ingvil:
We capture how we speak as one without wiping out the differences in our voices and trajectories. What do we risk by inviting the monster into our talking midst?

Line:
In this talk, there is something about the monster in our very doing and speaking, the practice of speaking as an “I” that is also a “we.”

Ingvil:
Can we capture it? The monster comes out in interruption and trying the incoherent.

Line:
The practice of making ideas, worlds and stories materialise can be understood as magic. As such, this talk is a conjuration, a summoning of an idea that is always multiple like our voices. Since it is multiple, it is shot through with bad ideas as well as good ones. It is impossible to know in advance what will heat our core and whether it will be destructive for some or wonderful for others.

Sara:
So what are we doing?

Line:
In order to bring out our distinct voices as well as their convergences, we address the materialisation of ideas through storytelling.

Sara:
But what kind of stories?

Ingvil:
Some of the stories we tell here are our own origin stories. Our seeds of ideas planted and relations formed with ways of thinking that set us out on various paths that intersect and intertwine tentacularly in this Monster Network.

Line:
But what about proven knowledge and definitive truth?

Sara:
Origin stories matter here not as fixed trajectories of proven knowledge and definitive truth; but rather as points of interruption or monstrous reminders of the impossibility of establishing a set-in-stone beginning of any idea since they are always relational.

Ingvil:
Storytelling, especially through speculative fiction as Donna Haraway tells us, is a good way of making visible how worlding practices work and how they are instrumental for rethinking or reimagining the world otherwise.

Stories, however, are not innocent. Certain stories and imaginaries haunt us or intrude in our thinking as unpredictable agents. The monster may interrupt the politics of knowledge, but the outcome of that interruption is not given. This is potentially a move in the direction of the monster as a reparatory idea or practice or method with the possibility and promise of different materialisations of potentially more just worlds.

At the same time, ideas and the materialisations can also be painful and harmful. That's the double-edged nature of the undomesticated monster, that one can aim for a given materialisation, but it might be something completely different that takes shape. Not least, since ideas are not pure but filled with the traces of previous ideas and those yet to come. In this way, they can be intrusive, they can be obsessive, they can be impossible to shake.

Line:
Yet we see this failure, this gap between the promise and what remains is precisely what the monster offers to our thinking. That is, the monster highlights the supposed divisions between the acceptable and conventional and their assumed opposites, drawing attention to the production of knowledge, including how knowledge comes to be embodied. While striving for coherence across our collective voices, we want to underscore how collectives are easily rendered invisible.

Sara:
Are easily rendered invisible

Ingvil:

Are easily rendered invisible

Line:

Almost as if we are one, but even while we are at the very least, five.

Ingvil:

Even when we are at least five

Sara:

Even when we are at least five

Line:

Indeed. Monstrous analysis aims to bring forth what may often be ignored, particularly the more than one in the one. The way the human is inhabited by and made possible through other beings on whom it is dependent on for ongoing liveliness. In other words, the human is haunted, possessed, speaking in voices not its own. This talk is an example of how such haunting voices sometimes make their presence known through their silence, through the absence of the speaker, as we are indeed, at the very least, five.

Sara:

In this timely Frankenstein text, we seek to make visible the patchworks and the sutures between our thinking, experiences, passions and embodied knowledges. In practice, we want to show that academic productions are labour, and in doing so, we aim to use our disparate and convergent voices to capture this labour, showing how ideas may start with one person, but are always more than that person.

Line:

Showing how ideas may start with one person, but are always more than that person.

Ingvil:

Showing how ideas may start with one person but are always more than one person

Sara:
In origins, and what remains here. As collective voices, we seek out the monster because in many ways it offers the promise that what we think, live, feel, know and experience is not certain; and that the direction in which we think we are headed is not inevitable.

On the contrary, the monster shows the unpredictability of categories, bodies, narratives and lives. It does not simply disrupt, undermine and shift, but also reveals its own constitutive role in embodiments, where bodily integrity means living with others in the self, as well as with others in what we might call outside the self.

Line:
This is an excerpt from the poem, *Declaration*, by Jacob Polley.

And as borders were closed
and streets were blocked,
our black kettles sang on our blue gas hops.
And if names were listed
and names ticked off,
there was no cause for alarm,
no hiding in lofts.
Couples strolled,
waiters snapped white tablecloths,
and neither cries for help
nor the pistol shots lifted the starlings from our rooftops.

Ingvil:
I love this poem. To me, it makes visible how very different realities exist at the same time, and how easy it is to forget about the madness and the violence that somehow always is placed elsewhere until it's not, and then it's somehow shockingly near.

This poem is one I have returned to for over a decade but I've never made use of it in an academic text. Somehow the idea of how ideas materialise, instantly made me think of this poem. A lot of my thinking comes from here, but I have never acknowledged it as part of that genealogy. To me, it presents a kind of elsewhere, in a way, speaking the elsewhere. And one way of dealing with this elsewhere, and the significance of it, is speculative fiction.

This is a genre that presents us with alternative realities. In doing so, it brings about new or different perspectives on the reality that we know and surround ourselves by. Speculating about other futures, other societies, bodies, technologies, can serve as a political and ethical arena for negotiating contemporary issues at stake in our times such as, for example, climate change, technology use, and the marginalisation and discrimination of certain groups, to mention a few but important trends in contemporary speculative fiction.

And on elsewheres: What does it mean to speak in another's voice? How to speak with someone, but not for someone? Speaking as Donna:

I love this idea of never speaking of our, I dare say, origins, as in where our ideas originate from. I think that it's a beautiful thing to share, as it says so much, and in a way, says so little, because you then have to explain where it has taken you, and why, which would be fascinating to know.

Sara:
Yes!

Line:
I think the question of where our ideas come from, and difficulty speaking with any certainty of our origins, except as hauntings and sudden reminders and traces within new ideas, such as here, is really great.

Sara:
In keeping with this thread of where ideas originate, Donna wanted to quote Jewelle Gomez, reflecting on why she wrote *The Gilda Stories*. I quote,

“The archetype of the vampire story is so deeply embedded in culture, it was difficult for a new vision to replace it, or so we thought. Re-reading Octavia Butler's work convinced me there was a place for women of colour in speculative fiction. I knew that lesbian feminism was a legitimate lens through which to develop an adventure story. Women's stories, long considered to reign only in the realm of the domestic, had been stepping out into the larger world for years. Yet few were grounded in such a traditional horror genre as vampires because that would require a complete reframing of mythology itself.”

I, or is it we? love this idea that what seems impossible can emerge and that the lenses through which we want to frame narratives can require questioning whole mythologies and traditions, even if on some level it is the desire to tell a simple story about a Black lesbian vampire.

Line:
I like this too. The idea that undoing just one thread can have vast and unpredicted consequences, as the doing and undoing of ideas make new ones possible and others impossible. I guess there's a graveyard somewhere with all the ideas whose materialisation were possible for a sliver of a moment, and then that window closed for good.

Ingvil:
Another quote from *The Gilda Storie*s:

“Either in each other's company, as we are now, or separate and in each other's world. One takes on others as family and continually reshapes that meaning — family— but you do not break blood ties. We may not wish to live together at all times, but we will always be with each other.”

Line:
What is family? and what does it mean to support each other in academic families during difficult or pleasurable times?

We are in each other's worlds and we make space for reimagining and remaking what could be possible. We are entangled through not only blood but also our thoughts.

Sara:
So true, and well put. I, although I'm speaking through someone else's thoughts, am amazed by how Gomez allows a narrative about a lesbian woman of colour to queer family ties, and shows how blood ties may be reimagined, as well as how she tries to imagine a different type of life, where people focus on living and practice it as it takes so much energy and thought just to live.

I think this brings us back to supporting each other, and how other types of narratives may imagine communal existence as supportive and non-normative, and in its non-normativity, open up spaces where people are not subjected to violence because of their difference.

And talking of ties and relations, Aino-Kaisa wants to speak.

Aino-Kaisa: (via recording, spoken in Finnish)

Kyyhkyset oppivat tunnistamaan Picasson
Monet'sta, pommitettavat maisemassa,
mutta ihmisessä näkymä suodattuu läpi samentumien
lasiaisnesteessä

Keksii kytkeä kyyhkysen kuolemaan, kerro sitten
lajienvälisestä etiikasta näille,
meille

Joulukuussa äiti sairastuu rintasyöpään.
Pieni musta koira nukkuu kainalossa kuukausia
läähättää lämpöä lähelle
missä rinnan tilalla rikkoutunut
halu

Kesäkuussa koiralla todetaan kasvain
ylimmässä vasemmanpuoleisessa nisässä.
Tytär ei kestä tätä ironiaa, että on katsottava
äitiä ja koiraa samoin silmin.
Silti vain toinen haistaa haavoittuvuuden
sotakyyhkyn sydämenlyönnit
heittäytyy
peilisolujensa täyteydellä

[A version of this poem is published in Aino-Kaisa Koistinen's poetry collection Uhanlaiset ja silmälläpidettävät, Palladium Kirjat 2021]

Ingvil:
Whereas illness evokes ideas of loss and end of life, *The Gilda Stories* show how life continues in death. For example, as the advice given to Gilda by one of the oldest living vampires: “I think the most important thing for you to do in the meantime is live. It is a very involving job, which takes much concentration and practice.”

Line:
This reminds me of Derrida's first part of *Specters of Marx*, where he talks about learning to live finally, and how it is only the ghosts who can teach us how to live. Ghosts are many things, but also I think of them as partly materialised ideas, or maybe ideas of separations. They are there and then they are gone, sometimes taking physical form, sometimes remaining traces within other ideas and other forms, voices within voices, as already mentioned.

There are no pure ideas and no voices that are not also ghosts. That to me is at the core of learning to live finally. It is learning how to speak to and with ghosts.

Sara:
I love where this text is going. Writing our own origin stories in terms of thought is an important part of making visible the winding paths of our thinking and how it comes to materialise in certain shapes and forms. Storytelling is about the stories we analyse, the stories we tell, and the stories we live.

Ingvil:
As a case in point, Nalo Hopkinson says the following:

“Arguably, one of the most familiar memes of science fiction is that of going to foreign countries and colonising the natives[…] For many of us, that is not a thrilling adventure story, it is non-fiction, and we are on the wrong side of the strange-looking ship that appears out of nowhere. To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalised one's colonisation. I knew I had to fight this battle at some point in my career. Because if you can't imagine it, you can't make it.”

Line:
I really like this point.

Ingvil:
Yes, it's actually from the podcast *Imagine a Better Future,* where Minister Faust says, “Once you can't imagine it, like Dr. Mae Jemison, who saw Nichelle Nichols playing Lieutenant Uhura on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. Well, she was a little girl at the time. She went on to become an MD and then she became an astronaut. It starts with the imagination.”

Both Hopkinson and Minister Faust speak to issues of race and indigeneity in science fiction or speculative fiction and how supposed exciting narratives of other worlds sound different in contexts where lands and peoples have been colonised. It also brings to the fore the role of rewriting and of imagining in creating worlds, possible worlds, how we need to imagine for something to happen, how *Star Trek*, in this case, opened up possibilities for black women or, at least, is credited with this role; and therefore why it's important that the genre not only be cis-gendered white and male.

Also, how stories from people of colour and indigenous populations create new or alternative imaginaries or use old narratives to create new forms of speculations. We think one of the most amazing changes in science fiction is writings by queer women of colour and the worlds that are imagined.

Sara:
Agreed. And this is what Nnedi Okorafor addresses when she emphasises how her work is what she calls “shifting the default,” changing the point around which the world evolves, complete with acceptable values, knowledge and faiths, bodies and practices. It opens up for really exciting, life-saving, necessary new worlds.

I think we all have texts, images, moments and some times in our lives that have been formative in terms of how we think and imagine our worlds. For me, the boundary between the academic and the personal can get very blurry in these instances. That's also what I see in Ingvil's poem and in Donna's point about the crucial importance of many voices and many narratives.

Risking for a moment to become too personal, in my experience, we rarely reveal those intimate moments when our bodyminds awaken to or become hooked on certain ideas and veer onto the path that we find ourselves on now, as academics writing and talking about particular subjects. So there are three thinkers who particularly shaped my thinking about the world and myself. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Donna Haraway.

They gave me tools to address the issue of objectivity and in unmasking power relations in assigning that label. First and foremost, I found it immensely freeing and sometimes painful, too – because privilege – to be robbed of the seeming naturalness of categories such as the body and authority and to recognise that the world and the stories within our world come from particular situated places and bodies. Being aware of what we take for granted may lead to the possibility to do things otherwise.

Line:
Hmm, yes.

Sara:
Hopkinson's reflections on the positioning of people of colour and the strangeness of SF worlds are important in that respect. It speaks to the dynamics of making whole experiences strange from particular viewpoints and others well-known and taking for granted the starting points for explorations of the strange, and that quickly leads to monsterising.

Ingvil:
How we imagine our elsewheres is not innocent.

Line:
Speaking of origin ideas, I loved horror from an early age but the price of admission into the canon was reading very problematic stories in which not least women's fates were terrible, if mentioned at all. And this has shaped my own abilities and inabilities of thinking and rethinking horror and the monster. These ideas still haunt me, they still intrude on my general understanding of the world and they shape for better or worse my abilities to come up with ideas of my own and accepting the ideas of others as true whether logically or poetically.

In this way questions of method can never be separated from questions of ethics. If methods create worlds, these become our creations, our creatures, our monsters which we release

to roam free, possibly doing damage to some while inspiring others. Monsters are impossible to control, that is what makes them monstrous. And perhaps the ethical urgency is not to attempt such control but to apply storytelling, in a way, in which we may follow the monster into the unknown in the hopes of pushing the horizons of possibility, knowing that we may fail and that what materialises is something we did neither expect nor plan for, a bad idea.

However, according to feminist philosopher Margrit Shildrick, the ethical imperative is to stay open to the monstrous, that is to welcome the arrival of the unknown, the undecidable that which holds promises of a future so different that we cannot possibly imagine it in advance even as we try to tell it into being. She says, “Openness should not be interpreted as weakness nor as indecision but rather as the courage to refuse the comforting refuge of broad categories and fixed unidirectional vision.”

We want to end this talk with the risks and hopes of opening up towards the arrival of the unknown that is with an invitation to you to write down an idea and a story of your own to create a monster from the premise of “I am Collective.”

Ingvil:
Monstrous methods explore the “I” in the collective.

Sara:
Monstrous ethics risks the “I” in multiplicity.

Line:
I Am Collective

Ingvil:
I Am Collective

Sara:
I Am Collective

Ingvil:
We now invite you to find a pen and a paper or a computer and we would like to invite you to join us in a writing exercise on “I Am Collective.” After that five minutes, we'd like to discuss

in pairs and then open up for a general discussion on this very idea of the “I” in the collective, and the monstrous, and ideas and ontologies and materialisations.

Does that sound okay? You look skeptical. People always do when we bring out the writing exercise.

Sara:

Being sprung on you.

Line:

So if you just have something in front of you, something you can write with and we suggest doing it in what we typically call “automatic writing” which is where you keep writing even as you run out of things to write. This is simply just to trick oneself into actually keep writing and maybe also write something you have not predicted.