HORROR AND GOTHIC MEDIA CULTURES

Edited by Jessica Balanzategui
and Allison Craven

Monstrous Beings and Media Cultures

Folk Monsters, Im/materiality, Regionality

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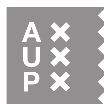
Monstrous Beings and Media Cultures



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Horror and Gothic Media Cultures

The *Horror and Gothic Media Cultures* series focuses on the influence of technological, industrial, and socio-historical contexts on the style, form, and aesthetics of horror and Gothic genres across different modalities and media. Interested in visual, sonic, and other sensory dimensions, the series publishes theoretically engaged, transhistorical, and transcultural analyses of the shifting terrain of horror and the Gothic across media including, but not limited to, films, television, videogames, music, photography, virtual and augmented reality, and online storytelling.

To foster this focus, the series aims to publish monographs and edited collections that feature deep considerations of horror and the Gothic from the perspectives of audio/visual cultures and art and media history, as well as screen and cultural studies. In addition, the series encourages approaches that consider the intersections between the Gothic and horror, rather than separating these two closely intertwined generic modes.

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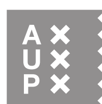

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Edited by
Jessica Balanzategui and
Allison Craven

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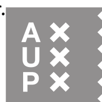

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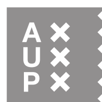

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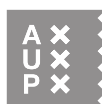

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Introduction: Folk Monsters and Monstrous Media

The Im/materialties, Modalities, and Regionalities of Being(s) Monstrous

Allison Craven and Jessica Balanzategui

Abstract

The introduction outlines this collection's focus on the affordances of the media environments in which monsters are made and how they are generated by media-specific creative practices as much as the epistemologies or cultures in which they originate. In examining monstrous beings across a diverse range of contexts, this collection illustrates how monsters travel and lurk between vernacular – or what we polemically term "folk" – and formal media cultures. As this chapter and the collection as a whole elucidate, monsters travel through time as well as space, yet their composition and the anxieties that they project are materially inflected by specific cultural, historical, regional, and geographic conditions.

Keywords: monstrosity, materiality, regionality, media cultures, horror

"Monster theory" (Cohen 1996; Weinstock 2020) is often attentive to the media forms in which monsters and monstrousness emerge (for instance, Botting and Spooner 2015; Manning 2018; Weinstock 2020; Davidel 2020). A key premise of this collection concerns the affordances of the media environments in which monsters are made and how the "fantastic bodies" of monsters (Musharbash 2014) – their uncanny corporeality or incorporeality – are the effect of the media and creative practices that generate them as much as the epistemologies or cultures in which they originate. The chapters engage with screen adaptations of monsters from folk and fairy tales, as well as urban legends and a range of popular narratives that

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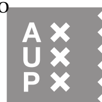

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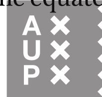
circulate in cinematic, televisual, and online modes of horror storytelling. In the spectral semiotics of the digital gothic, monsters embody "a mode of being without 'materiality'" (Hopps 2013, 2) or forms of "virtual corporeality" (Blank 2013, 106). The powers and horrors of these digital monsters are underpinned by the cultural and poetic operations of networked sociality, highlighting how, even in the case of these ephemeral beasts, monstrosity and the fears it incites are "historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal" (Halberstam 1995, 6). Via diverse media forms, signals, and ecologies, monsters travel and are trafficked through time as well as space, their forms mutating as they transit through various informational systems. As Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski illuminate, the "content and form of contemporary media … are shaped in relation to the properties and locations" of the media infrastructures that underpin them (2015, 1), and monsters are one of the most revealing and evocative examples of such configurations. The aesthetic compositions of monsters and the desires and anxieties that they project and provoke are thus materially inflected by specific techno-cultural contexts, as well as by unique regional geographies, communities, and histories.

The chapters in this collection therefore contend with how the affordances and cultural dynamics of different media environments shape monsters, and, in tandem, how monstrosity lurks in different media environments, contributing new understandings of the intersections between monsters, culture, and media. The chapters are concerned with the monsters and sinister creatures that spawn from media forms as diverse as digital folklore, folk horror films, cinematic fairy tales, and traditional and biocultural knowledge. The focus is not on formalist studies of folk narrative or ethnographies of belief, but rather on how different cultural, creative, and technological practices shape and influence the form, aesthetic features, and power of monstrous beings. As the collection illuminates, these monstrous beings tend not to emerge simply as products of professionally produced entertainment media. Instead, they form at, and are sustained by, the interface between vernacular and professional creative processes. In examining monstrous beings across a diverse range of media cultures, this collection illustrates how, in line with Noël Carroll's (1987) influential definition of monstrosity, monsters embody violations and transgressions of categories, not just in their form, image, or narrative function but also as they prowl between vernacular, or what we polemically term "folk," and formal media cultures. This objective, of course, raises questions about the terms of reference, in particular, about "monsters," "folk," "folklore," and "media," which we address below.

Before we move on to this discussion, we draw the reader's attention to the monstrous being on the cover of this book. This creature is our book's "mascot," a singular monstrosity that embodies fusions of and disruptions between regional specificity and unfixity, stable materiality and immaterial ephemera, and the crossroads of professional media and vernacular or "folk" creativity. The image was created by Wombo Dream, an app that harnesses artificial intelligence (AI) to create an image out of a combination of search terms. AI art generators such as these are trained using large datasets of tagged images, so the program can discern key visual patterns from this vast library of images in relation to search terms and then combine these patterns to create an artwork fused from these patterns. Our mascot was generated out of each of the monsters analysed in this book: a search term associated with each chapter's monster was included (such as "Slenderman," "changeling," "bunyip," and so on), and the AI spawned from them a single monster. In accordance with the focus and spirit of this book, while at first glance this beast looks like a solid, physical creature depicted via a material work of art (a "painting"), its amorphous corporeality also points to its constitution as a transcultural and temporally indistinct assemblage: an ephemeral digital creation born in a matter of seconds from a collaboration between an AI program and a non-professional artist (one of this book's editors) typing key terms into a search bar. This talismanic monster thus came to being from a particular media culture, one uniquely configured through a bricolage of regional and formal influences, im/material presences, and intentional and arbitrary practices of professional and "folk" cultures.

(Digital) Folklore, (Vernacular) Creativity

The term "folklore" was originally a "nineteenth-century neologism" coined by William Thoms in 1846 (Darnton 1999, 286; Rudy 2018, 7). It named Victorian practices of antiquarianism or the collecting of "oral traditions" or "popular antiquities" – indeed, the term folklore was coined to replace these terms (Ben-Amos 1971, 4). These activities incorporated "archaeology, toponymy, landscape, local history and legend" (Cowdell 2019, 297–98) and had antecedents in British Gothic antiquarianism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Sweet 2014). The impetus underpinning this constellation of interests to preserve disappearing practices is exemplified in historical works such as Eleanor Hull's *Folklore of the British Isles*, in which Hull claims to document the survival of the "sympathetic magic" of pre-industrial people that she equates with the "science of [their] time" (Hull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1977/1928, 7). This colonialist model of folklore that privileges distinctions between the "civilised" and the folk is largely distanced and rejected by contemporary academic folklorists (Koven 2007; Cowdell 2019).

Contemporary folklorists investigate forms of expression "that involve tradition and groups, the lore and the folk" (Rudy 2018, 3). In Dan Ben-Amos's influential description of folklore as "'artistic communication in small groups,'" "creativity" is at the "centre of folkloristic inquiry" (1971, 12–13). Group dynamics and size, and the exigencies of the presumed "face-to-face" participation in Ben Amos's description, position the human body as folklore's "primary medium of expression" (Rudy 2018, 3). While elements of these folk practices are extended and adapted in contemporary digital cultures, the networked socialities of online communities have necessarily introduced new models of folk communication and creativity (Blank 2009, 6; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). If tradition evokes a "community's *naturally* authentic customs" (Bronner 2009, 21, emphasis in original; Blank 2009, 6–7), it converges or collides with a rival impulse of "innovation" in online cultures, communities, and communications (Seta 2019). As Blank points out, "the very nature of folklore is predicated on the amalgamation of traditional knowledge through imitation, vibration, and innovation; as folklore disseminates it is repeated, revised, and reinterpreted before shifting into new contexts where it obtains new meaning among new actors" (Blank 2013, 107–8). Furthermore, folklore and professionally produced media have always interacted in complex ways, and yet modes of vernacular creativity online can be conceived as "a new amalgamation between top-down mass-mediated genres and bottom-up mundane types of rhetorical actions" (Shifman 2014, 342). The creative products generated by these convergences and networked communities parallel the interests of folklorists and, as Gabriel de Seta points out, relate to a range of interdisciplinary interests (2019, 181), including, but not limited to, those represented throughout this book, which bring together interests across screen, media, cultural, and literary studies; creative writing; as well as fairy-tale studies and folkloristics.[1]

1 The interdisciplinary approach in the book is driven by a range of contributors from different disciplinary backgrounds yet with common interests, some of which have formed in localised groupings, such as the constellation of Horror and Gothic Media Cultures scholars based across Swinburne University and RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. The contributions from this group are in part reflective of a series of conversations that took place throughout 2020–21 about transcultural flows of monstrosity in an international discussion group run by this book's co-editor, Jessica Balanzategui. Regional alliances are also represented in this book by literary and creative writing investigations of monstrousness generated from co-editor Allison Craven's project on Australian Gothic (as Roderick Scholar in Comparative Literatures 2019–2021 at James

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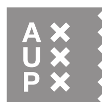
This range of interests – emergent from combinations of localised/globalised exchanges and foci – suggests how "folklore" is a concept still undergoing regeneration, and what constitutes "lore," "folk," and "folklore" in the chapters of this collection evidence how these terms continue to be contested or appropriated as media forms develop and change. The chapters in the first section concern vernacular creativity and digital folklore, or "the folklore of the Internet," as Gabriel de Seta terms: "a vernacular … and a folk art created by users for users, coalescing into repertoires of jokes, memes, and other genres of digital content" (2019, 180). An exemplary species of online co-creativity is the Slenderman – the most notorious digital native bogeyman of the twenty-first century – which was developed across various internet fora, message boards, video sharing, and other related social media websites. His features refract the pseudonymous and/or anonymous, collaborative, and vernacular creative mechanics facilitated by such platforms. In turn, the character's online virality helped to sediment in the popular cultural consciousness the generic form of "Creepypasta" (online scary stories), which is the source of other well-known digital monsters like "Jeff the Killer" and "Smile Dog." All these monstrous entities are products of the digital media ecologies in which they are produced and consumed. They are undergirded by the kinds of "ordinary" and "popular" modes of discourse that Jean Burgess (2006) associates with digital "vernacular creativity."

Burgess's concept of "vernacular creativity" describes "creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts" that utilise both the "material" resources of cultural "content" and "immaterial resources" of "genre conventions" and "shared knowledges" (206). These resources are "recombined in novel ways" as a "productive articulation of consumer practices … with older popular traditions and communicative practices" such as storytelling (206–7). They flourish in the contemporary context of networked communications "on logics of open-endedness and emergence" (Seta 175). Vernacular creativity derives, as Burgess notes, from "segments" of the British cultural studies tradition (206) and their long debate about mass, popular, and ordinary culture. Raymond Williams, for instance, distinguished "urban" mass popular culture from the "relatively traditional" "preindustrial popular, or 'folk' culture" (1983, 137), a distinction that now aligns with the outdated colonial model of folklore. Burgess

Cook University, North Queensland, Australia), and via transnational networks of fairy-tale film scholarship and folkloristics-focused film scholarship from leading researchers based in Hawai'i, Canada, and Malaysia.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emphasises that vernacular creativity is not "the reinvigoration of some notion of … 'pure' or authentic folk culture placed in opposition to mass media" but rather forms "*part* of the … experience of commercial popular culture" (2006, 206–7). Furthermore, Matt Hills's influential work on fan cultures cautions that online fan communities "cannot be viewed simply as an escape from commodification" (2002, 143) because such networked modes of vernacular cultural production are also "increasingly caught up in" the processes of commodification (135).

In this regard, Seta notes Burgess's additional debt to that other influential descendent of the culture debates, Henry Jenkins, and his studies of fandom and "networked creativity," which build on Michel de Certeau's theories of consumer tactics and user practices (Seta 174). Jenkins (2006; and Jenkins et al. 2013) has contributed to remobilising theoretical notions of the "folk" and "grassroots," particularly through his articulations of how nineteenth-century "folk" practices – generally deemed to be curtailed by "modern mass media" – are reactivated in new, convergent forms by such "vernacular culture" that "encourages broad participation, and grassroots creativity" (132). But the interests and relations of power between grassroots creatives and corporate interests do not necessarily align. Seta suggests that seeing digital folklore from the perspective of vernacular creativity "gives precedence to practices over objects" and to the complexities of users over the "generalized identity of 'the folk'" (176). Thus, in studies of online vernacular creativity and folklore, the traditional interests of folklore studies are aligned along new axes. However, despite Seta's contention about the focus on practices in this discourse, studies of digital vernacular creativity have also considered how these practices result in a constellation of aesthetic, narrative, and generic features (Shifman 2014; Balanzategui 2019), which the authors in this collection address from different angles in their examinations of the monstrous beings of digital cultures.

In the first chapter, "The Momo Challenge as Urban Legend: Child and Adult Digital Cultures and the Global Mediated Unconscious," Jessica Balanzategui examines how the aesthetics of digital monsters are appropriated and narrativised in different ways for and by child and adult internet users. Balanzategui examines how a monstrous digital character called Momo became the centre of a viral urban legend between late 2018 and early 2019. "Momo" began as a photograph shared on social media of a sculpture called "Mother Bird" created by Japanese artist Keisuke Aiso. However, the character transformed into an internet ghoul when, through digital vernacular creative practices, she was de-territorialised from this materially rooted cultural context and associated with the name "Momo." In

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the process, Balanzategui argues, Momo came to operate as an embodiment of transnational anxieties about the participatory web that resonated in different ways across youth and adult digital cultures. She also shows how the monster extends and amplifies earlier stories about haunted (analogue) media, and resonates with folk practices, aesthetics, and themes that have long circulated in popular culture.

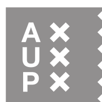
Karen Horsley takes consideration of the intersections between digital cultures, professionally produced media, and folklore in new directions in her chapter "'Every Imaginable Invention of the Devil': Summoning the Monstrous in Eurocentric Conceptions of Voodoo." In this chapter, Horsley addresses how European conceptualisations of the devil interact with the Afrocentric creature Papa Legba to illustrate the complex regional circuits of the syncretic religion popularly known as Voodoo. Horsley highlights how the idea of the crossroads as an intermediate space is implicated in this culturally layered mythology and how Papa Legba and his association with the crossroads have informed popular cultural constructs of the United States' Gothic South. With reference to blues music, literature, film, television series, and online vernacular communications, Horsley demonstrates "the portability of the Papa Legba mythology across multiple digital media contexts" and illuminates how this portability – which regularly involves or gestures to the folkloric practice of ostension – serves to continue popular perceptions of Voodoo as a type of black magic or devil worship. Horsley's chapter thus articulates how Voodoo has been repeatedly "recontextualised in the space between horror and folklore" to become a "key trope in the construction of the Gothic South," with Papa Legba being one of the most influential embodiments of this horror/folklore interface.

The digital folklore of the Slenderman, the digital-native bogeyman who first appeared online in 2009, is the focus of Naja Later's chapter, "The Forest and the Trees: The Woods as Intersection between Documentary, Fairy Tale, and Internet Legend in *Beware the Slenderman*." In continuing the exploration of how monsters lurk at the interface between folk/vernacular cultures and formal media production, Later focuses on a documentary feature film, *Beware the Slenderman* (Brodsky 2018), which presents an account of how the Slenderman was implicated in the attempted murder in 2014 of a twelve-year-old girl by her two friends, also aged twelve. Later argues that the documentary attempts but struggles to construct a coherent narrative around this "folkloresque" (Tolbert 2018) online monster, as the film draws on the generic conventions of found footage horror as well as the vernacular online mockumentary series on YouTube, *Marble Hornets* (Wagner 2009–14). The film both sensationalises the Slenderman mythos

and attempts to present a sober, rational analysis of it. As Later articulates, the result is a film "at odds with itself" in its attempts to construct closure around a troubling case and "an intrinsically boundary-defying monster": Later contends that the film draws on the motif of the fairy-tale woods, particularly in its linking of the internet to the woodlands in which the crime occurred. With detailed analysis of the aesthetic of hypermediacy in both Slenderman folklore and the documentary, and following Vivian Sobchack's (1987) theory of American horror, Later illustrates how the film threads allusions to fairy tale to narrativise the monster's threats to the hegemony of suburban American family life.

Horseley's and Later's chapters each touch on modes of vernacular creativity that self-reflexively evoke what Michael Dylan Foster (2015) has called the "folkloresque," a content type that has a "fuzzy" relationship to traditional, "authentic" folklore. Jeffrey A. Tolbert (2018) describes the folkloresque as a "manipulation of folkloric forms and conventions" with particular discursive effects that always involves an "appeal … through vague resemblance or direct imitation" to "familiar, pre-existing folklore" (39). Later, in her discussion of *Beware the Slenderman,* suggests the methods by which this folkloresque effect is created and reproduced in simulating or forging the appearance of an aged folkloric monster in the images of Slenderman. Horsley also raises the folkloresque when describing how netizens navigate Papa Legba lore online.

Folkloresque "digital folklore" of this kind, however, is not directly comparable with wider varieties of mass media products. Foster is careful in navigating the "emerging" relevance of the "folkloresque," a concept he proposes as a "heuristic tool" to "reenvision" and "constructively problematize" relations between categories of "folklore" and "popular culture" (2015, 4). It "refers to creative, often commercial products or texts … that give the impression to the consumer that they derive from existing folkloric traditions" (5). This might include, for instance, the Walt Disney Studios' adaptations of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales or videogames such as the Grand Theft Auto franchise, which Kiri Miller claims invoke "traditional folkloric genres and engender new traditions" (Miller 2008, 255–59). These modes of digital folklore do not align comfortably with the range of "cinematic folklore" ("films incorporating traditional culture" in a "fictional narrative") or the "vernacular" practices that Pauline Greenhill argues links folklore and narrative film (2012, 483–84). The following two chapters therefore focus on how films operate in wider media ecologies and relate to the folkloresque and folkloric via their featured monsters – both of them serial killers.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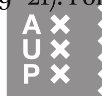
Ecologies of Vernacular Filmmaking and Cinematic Folklore

Greenhill's account of folklore and narrative film includes "vernacular" films (home movies) produced by amateurs, and professional narrative fiction and non-fiction ethnographic and documentary films that record traditional practices, including by Indigenous groups or individuals for their own groups and outsiders (Greenhill 2012, 483–84). As Andrew Lynch explains in his chapter in this collection, variations on these practices also emerge in the indie filmmaking mode known as "mumblecore" and in found footage horror films, of which *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez 1999–) and the *Paranormal Activity* franchise (Peli 2007–) series are twenty-first century prototypes (Heller Nicholas 2014).

Lynch's chapter, "Mark Duplass as Mumbelgore Serial Killer: Fictional Vernacular Filmmaking in the *Creep* series," continues this book's exploration of manifestations of monstrosity at the interface between vernacular and mass media. Lynch focuses on a series of US found footage horror films directed by Patrick Brice, *Creep* (2014) and *Creep 2* (2017), that simulate "folk" filmmaking aesthetics in parodic ways in order to spark both fear and mirth in response to the monster referenced in the films' titles. As Lynch argues, these fictional feature films "are not truly vernacular film, but instead *feature* and comment on vernacular film practices" and thus can be understood as existing at "the cusp of folklore and film" (to adapt Greenhill 2012, 484). Like other authors in the collection, Lynch engages with the concept of the "folkloresque," in this case to articulate how these films position their "everyday" monster – a serial killer obsessed with capturing home movies of his victims – in ways that engage with the "cautionary tale" dynamics of both folk and fairy tales. Lynch presents one of the first sustained academic analyses of the "mumblegore" subgenre, a group of films that makes horrific the indie comedy stylings of the related "mumblecore" subgenre. The chapter connects the *Creep* films' deployment of the mumblegore subgenre to the public persona of the films' star, Mark Duplass, an indie comedy cult icon who cultivates "networked intimacy" with his fans to further his celebrity brand. As Lynch demonstrates, the *Creep* films subvert Duplass's warm and authentic persona in ways that engage with vernacular online discourse about the "red flags" and "warning signs" women need to be wary of when interacting with seemingly friendly but dangerous men.

If Lynch is concerned with the "cusp of folklore and film," the next chapter moves to the more specific form of "cinematic folklore" in a fairy-tale film. The relationship between folktales and fairy tales is widely debated (see, for instance, Greenhill 2020, 19–21). Folklorists separate folktales from myths



and legends and see fairy tales as one of various forms in which folktales are transmitted (Magnus-Johnston et al. 2016, xiii). As Kendra Magnus-Johnston, Pauline Greenhill, and Lauren Bosc explain, "[h]istorically, scholars of folklore understood fairy tales as traditional narratives of wonder and magic" which may be transmitted in a range of ways, including "orally, but also informally, locally, and face-to-face within communities and social groups" (xiii). Thus, fairy tales "can be oral (told by people in different geographical locations and at various historical times up to the present) and/or literary (written by known authors)" (xiii). However, the literary status of fairy tales is more contentious. Marina Warner sees all fairy tales, irrespective of the media in which they appear, as belonging "organically" in the "general realm of folklore" and attributes them to an oral tradition which is "anonymous and popular" (2014, xvi–xviii). A competing view aligns fairy tales with literary traditions and elite cultures (Bottigheimer 2009). Or, as in Jennifer Shacker's view, "bourgeois subjectivity turns upon the oral tradition made literary" because, as Molly Clarke Hillard explains, without the written form, the fairy tale was seen as "immaterial" or "ineffable and intangible" (Hillard 2014, 3).

Some of these debates reside in scholarship on fairy-tale films and media (see, notably, Greenhill and Matrix 2010; Zipes 2011; Bacchilega 2013; Greenhill 2020). Jack Zipes defines a fairy-tale film as a "cinematic representation recorded on film, on videotape, or in digital form that employs motifs, characters, and plots generally found in the oral and literary genre of the fairy tale, to re-create a known tale or to create and realize cinematically an original screenplay with recognizable features of a fairy tale" (Zipes 2011, 9). Greenhill has also described "cinematic folklore" in fiction films that incorporate traditional culture, including fairy-tale film adaptations (2012, 484). Magnus-Johnston et al. emphasise that fairy-tale films do not simply retell or repeat traditional tales; they are intertextual "adaptations that create new versions" (2016, xiv).

Cristina Bacchilega and Greenhill's chapter in this collection, "Monsters in the Forest: 'Little Red Riding Hood' Crimes and Ecologies of the Real and Fantastic," builds on their influential work in this domain via an analysis of *Pokot* (Holland 2017). This Polish fairy-tale film appropriates elements of the Grimm Brothers' "Little Red Riding Hood," a fairy tale derived from northern and central European folklore. As Bacchilega and Greenhill demonstrate, *Pokot* (which means "spoor" in English) does not simply retell this well-known fairy tale but engages with its iconic elements to narrativise the monstrous propensities of its middle-aged heroine and her ecofeminist animal rights activism as she takes revenge on the male-dominated culture

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of legalised hunting. Furthermore, Bacchilega and Greenhill situate *Pokot* and its fairy-tale properties within a crime genre they term "popular green criminology," which engages questions of eco-justice and the status of legalised crimes against animals or the environment, and, vice versa, the justice of illegal responses to defend animals and the environment from such crimes. Bacchilega and Greenhill excavate the folkloric, realist, and magical realist dimensions of *Pokot* to suggest how the monstrousness of its serial-killer heroine raises questions of what it is to be human and of human relations with animals.

The Folk and Folk Horror

Understandings of folk culture and folk tale are also currently affected by the burgeoning interest in "folk horror," which is constituted by a range of literary and cinematic texts which might once have been termed "Gothic" and/or "horror." Horror and Gothic genres have long had complex and often self-reflexive relationships with the monstrous beings of folk cultures, and the discourse around what constitutes "folk horror" continues and complicates these configurations. The next series of chapters interrogate in various implicit and explicit ways the proximity of the "folk horror" subgenre to folk culture, or what constitutes "the folk" in folk horror. As we return to in the final chapter, the cinematic and literary subgenres of folk horror are predominantly, although not exclusively, identified to date in British and American film, television, novels, and short stories (Scovell 2017; Paciorek 2015). Some sources term the British examples in particular as "Folk Horror Revival," or English Folk Horror (Rodgers 2021; Paciorek 2018; Cowdell 2019), while a range of historical fiction, including the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, and other authors of horror fiction, have been retrospectively drawn into its range (see Janisse 2021). This putative horror subgenre has attracted interest not only in academic scholarship (Rodgers; Máiréad 2020; Walton 2018) but also in popular and industry discourse (Hunt 2019; Janisse).

The definition and workings of "folk horror" can be slippery across these discussions, and we offer a new intervention here by proposing that folk horror be considered a "mode" in chapter 10, "The Folk Horror 'Feeling': Monstrous Modalities and the Critical Occult" (Balanzategui and Craven). As the chapters throughout this book which refer to folk horror indicate, precise and consistent definition of folk horror is, as Cowdell notes, "elusive" (2019, 296), yet we conclude the book by seeking to establish new definitional

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scaffolding that extends from the various analyses throughout this book. Cowdell and others draw attention to folk horror's distinct atmospheric elements, such as eeriness or weirdness, or the atmosphere of isolation and rurality (296). Throughout this collection, authors predominantly take up Adam Scovell's (2017) influential description of the "folk-horror chain" based on a cluster of prototype British films, *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973), *Witchfinder General* (Reeves 1968), and *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard 1971) (although numerous films and television from the same period are included in the subgenre by Scovell and others). The elements of the "chain" consist of eerie, agential landscapes, isolation, warped belief systems, and a ritual element or calling on of enchantment often stemming from pagan lore. Cowdell observes how in this cluster of films the "muddy reality" of a "superstitious peasantry" (301) is prominent, and "notions of survival and residual paganism loom large, being especially attributed to rural isolation" (298). However, as we demonstrate in our final chapter, "folk horror" is often used in popular commentary in a much looser way to describe prestige or art-horror films such as *Midsommar* (Aster 2019) and *The Witch* (Eggers 2015) that self-reflexively consider folk cultural formations or the folkloric underpinnings of ghosts, killers, witches, and other monstrous beings.

Furthermore, the relationship to folklore, either in Scovell's chain or in the wider corpus of folk horror, is contested. Cowdell builds on Mikel Koven's (2007) critique of *The Wicker Man* and its "colonially-inflected survivalism, where the old religion persists beneath a more modern veneer" (Cowdell 2019, 317), to argue that the founding cluster of folk horror films has a "subsidiary" relation to antiquarian folkloristics, as these films revive and "wrestle with" questions that "informed the antiquarian antecedents" of today's folkloristics (299). The links between narrative and folklore in folk horror therefore hold the "tensions between the history of belief and practice, on one side, and their adaptive and inventive reuse, on the other" (310). Cowdell argues that folk horror "directly connects" with Foster's discussions of the folkloresque (296) in the "atmosphere," or "feeling" of folk horror that is cognate with Foster's notion of the folkloresque "'odor of folklore'" (296), or the way "'popular cultural producers *integrate* or stitch together folkloric motifs and forms to make'" a text appear to be informed by "'traditions'" (Foster cited in Cowdell 2019, 296–97). In Chapter 10 we offer a new theorisation of folk horror's generic identity by situating it as a mode and consider how the "folk" and folkloric elements are deployed to horror effect in many of these films.

However, while we will return to issues of definition in this final chapter, at this juncture we note that the current cultural fixation with folk horror refracts how monsters are underpinned by ongoing dialogue between

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professionally produced media and "folk" or vernacular creativity. The chapters in this collection address folk horror from a range of angles to highlight how monsters are constructed between these vernacular/folk and professional media spaces. Emma Maguire's chapter, "A Mother's Milk: Motherhood, Trauma, and Monstrous Children in Folk Horror," consists of a short story and exegesis to explore the creative and cultural dynamics of folk horror, with the story drawing on the conventions of recent Irish folk horror films and earlier literary exempla to suggest the potential of this regionalised mode to address women's experience of trauma and grief. In Maguire's exegesis, she suggests how folk horror facilitates exploration of trauma that evades expression in realist or genre horror modes. Maguire outlines how folk horror is deeply influenced by neopaganism in the course of her creative and scholarly examination and situates the persistently popular Celtic folk monster, the changeling, as an agent of taboo topics, including maternal trauma and child abuse. Maguire points to the changeling's ongoing prevalence in Irish screen media as well as addressing its folkloric roots, again articulating monstrosity's agency at the threshold between vernacular and professional media.

In a similar vein, Stephen Gaunson's discussion of Rosie Jones's documentary *The Family* (2016), about a doomsday cult in Australia, expands the folk horror repertoire by addressing its use in documentary film and illuminating its expression in an Australian context where it is little discussed to date. In his chapter, "Documenting the Unheard: Listening and empathy in *The Family*," Gaunson argues that the folk horror aesthetic accompanies the depiction of the cult's hub in Lake Eildon, Victoria, with its lingering views of the lake and surrounding landscape swathed in mist and the arcane image of the cult's co-founder and the film's monster, Anne Hamilton-Byrne. The effect is not simply aesthetic, he asserts, but a strategy for enabling survivors of the cult who appear in interviews to express their experiences in a way that liberates them from the unresolvable quest for legal justice that is now all but impossible since the deaths of the cult's founders. In his analysis Gaunson articulates how this folk-horror-inflected documentary film positions its mysterious monster, Hamilton-Byrne, in ways that interrogate the ethical responsibilities of documentary: in this film, he argues, the characteristic "amorality of folk horror" leads purposefully to an inconclusive ending, as the film refuses to "find any sense of a satisfactory ending" to the plight of the cult's victims.

Andrew Hock Soon Ng also explores how film intersects with folk horror in his chapter, "Reimagining the *Pontianak* Myth in Malaysian Folk Horror: Flexible Tradition, Cinema, and Cultural Memory." Ng addresses cinematic

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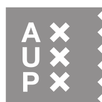
retellings of ancient Southeast Asian beliefs in the *pontianak*, a female ghost associated with the death of women in childbirth, which he situates within the folk horror tradition. Ng explains the several regional variants of the *pontianak* myth in Southeast Asian cultures, and he raises the colonialist interventions involved in the textualisation of the myth in Malaya in the early twentieth century, which have ambiguated traditional animist beliefs in a region that was a former British colony. Ng demonstrates the persistence of cinematic folklore of the *pontianak* since Malaysia's independence was gained in the 1950s, arguing that it figures in the national unconscious of modern multi-racial Malaysia as a reflection of religious and cultural change. In arguing for the myth as a "flexible tradition" that "ensures its continuing relevance in the present," he defines the cinema in which it is adapted as a Malaysian expression of folk horror.

The Monstrous Legacies of Colonialism

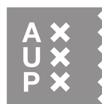
The historical textualization of the *pontianak* can be compared with the interventions of what Sadhana Naithani, in her study of Indian folk tales, terms "colonial folkloristics" whereby, in the service of "empire," colonial researchers textualised and translated oral narratives into the "foreign" language of English (Naithani 2010, 14). In doing so, these practices re-inscribed traditional "emic" narrative genres into the "imported" genres of folk tale and fairy tale (Bacchilega and Naithani 2018, 84). In the case of the *pontianak,* Ng argues that this kind of intervention in Malaya in part retrieved the animist traditions from marginality during the colonial period, although it led to some lasting ambiguities in the myth. The legacy of colonial folkloristics is more contentious when considering the impact on traditional stories about monstrous beings belonging to Indigenous cultures in Australia.

The particular sensitivities arise from the long and destructive history of settler colonialism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their systems of knowledge and beliefs. Even the widely used terminology of the "Dreaming" to name *Tjukurpa*, the body of biocultural knowledge in which ancestral beings reside, bears this colonial legacy. As the linguist Christine Nicholls explains, the "Dreaming" is a colonial English word derived from "dream times" used by the stationmaster and ethnologist Francis Gillen based on his knowledge of the Arrentje people and their system of religious belief (Nicholls 2014b). This system "incorporates



creation and other land-based narratives" and "social processes" including kinship, morality, and ethics, and it informs "people's economic, cognitive, affective and spiritual lives" (Nicholls 2014a). The monsters that reside in *Tjukurpa* are "inextricably connected to specific locations, territorial bases, or 'country' as it is known in Aboriginal English" (Nicholls 2020, 91). For the traditional owners of the narratives, the knowledge is "grounded in the land itself" (Nicholls 2014a) and the "specific nature of the country determines not only the form a monster takes but also its modus operandi" (2020, 91). Among the more frightening beings Nicholls mentions are the Ngayurnangalku, Mamu, the cannibalistic Yapa-ngarnu, and the "huge, hairy, sharp-clawed, neckless baby-killers," the Pangkarlangu (Nicholls 2014c). The purpose of these monsters and their attendant narratives, she argues, is largely to impress on children "the need for obedience to older members of the family, and especially not to wander off into the desert alone" (Nicholls 2014c; and see Clarke 2018). Nicholls argues that of all these beings, the only one that is widely appropriated in anglophone Australia is the *bunyip*, a water spirit. She attributes this limited co-option to the foible of monolingual English speakers' reluctance to pronounce the names of monsters that do not conform to English morphology or phonology (Nicholls 2020, 93).

In her chapter, "An Uncommon Ancestor: Monstrous Emanations and Australian Tales of the Bunyip," Allison Craven examines the extensive appropriation of water spirits into the widespread settler colonial folklore of the "Bunyip," arguing that this appropriation has occurred systematically through colonial regimes of folkloristics and literary cultural production that have contributed to the history of colonial suppression of First Nations knowledge and spirituality. Citing a sustained pattern of appropriation and carnivalisation of the Bunyip in, predominantly, colonial Gothic literature and children's fiction, Craven proposes that this folklore is wholly separate to Aboriginal biocultural knowledge of water spirits, which the settler folklore barely acknowledges. In questioning the implications for contemporary Indigenous Australians, Craven turns to the surge of media and literary production by First Nations creators and authors in which, increasingly, creatures and spirit beings from the Dreaming appear. Specifically, she focuses on the search for water spirits in an episode of the documentary television show *Shadow Trackers* (Curtis 2016). Like similar First Nations productions, *Shadow Trackers* aims to teach bi-cultural audiences about these beings and to restore such monsters to their fearful place in Aboriginal lore.



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Hyper-Real Regions; and the Matter of the Mascot

In addition to addressing how monsters form in the spaces betwixt and between media forms, the various contributors to this collection also address in different ways how "region" operates in relation to the monsters analysed. Region is a concept with potential to be both a material and a phantasmatic construct, unhindered by formal borders like states or nations (Craven 2018). Whereas traditionally, monsters are typically affiliated with specific geographies (Weinstock 2020), often within distinct regional or national spheres, media spreadability (as it is termed by Jenkins et al. 2013) and the transnational networks of creative production and distribution render their geographic range mobile. Furthermore, images of monsters are often tied, as in the case of Slenderman and Momo, to generic settings that travel with them. It is clear from the chapters in this book that canvas monstrous entities across the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Australasia that monstrosity in globalised media culture has ambiguous connections to place and region.

This is particularly apparent with monsters like Momo and the mediated descendants of Little Red Riding Hood, for instance, which operate in accordance with what Adam Lowenstein (2015) has defined as the "global mediated unconscious," in which media technologies "crisscross at such rapid speeds, in such unpredictable directions, that images once consciously relegated to the particular past of a specific nation now materialize as the unconscious visual present of another nation, or between nations" (Lowenstein 2015, 84–85). The complex processes of the global mediated unconscious can be productive, but also tend to co-opt and lead to the transcultural dissemination, deterritorialisation, and distortion of even the most sacred and rarefied entities. Potentially, this can result in culturally problematic or insensitive visions of monstrosity where First Nations traditions are invoked, or to the dislocation of monstrous beings from regionalised traditions. Globalising or transnational rhetorics of "folk"-ness in pop cultural commodities are a particularly striking example of such dislocation. The growing transnational reach of "folk horror," a mode that is premised on notions of regionality or "rurality," highlights such complex and problematic local/global interplays.

Therefore, in Chapter 10 we return to the slippery definitions of folk horror as we draw together the compelling and diverse analytical threads of this collection's consideration of mediated monstrosity. In so doing, we highlight how both "folk" and "horror" are fluid constructions that shapeshift according to their mediated, cultural, and historical contexts. In this final chapter, we contest the status of folk horror as (sub)genre and argue instead that it can be best described as an aesthetic mode that is much invested in

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creation of an affect or feeling that is both related to, and deeply subversive of, nostalgia for rurality.

In summary, across a range of texts – from literary and cinematic narrative fictions, to folk-horror-inflected and realist documentary, reality television, material cultural practices, and digital social networks and formations – all the chapters in this collection interrogate how monsters lurk at the interface between the formal circuits of professionally produced mass media and vernacular, "folk" creativity. Such interstitiality is embodied enigmatically by our cover "mascot," a monstrous being which refracts the plural concerns of this book and im/material conditions that produce the monstrosities of contemporary media cultures. Notably, this anthology was developed during the challenging conditions of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, a period of time which necessitated new im/material encounters, exchanges, and modes of existence to sustain collaboration across locations near and far. This book and our monstrous cover mascot now exist as artefacts of these difficult conditions, and we express sincere gratitude to our contributing authors for their work under such circumstances. Their generous commitment, resilience, and, most of all, their sharp insights in the chapters hereafter materialise the meaning of the mascot: they symbolise the unexpected conjunctions of im/materiality and professional and vernacular practices that generate ways of being for monstrous folk.

Mediagraphy

Beware the Slenderman, dir. Irene Taylor Brodsky. 2016. US.
Cleverman, created by Ryan Griffen. 2016–17. TV Series. Australia.
Creep, dir. Patrick Brice. 2014. US.
Creep 2, dir. Patrick Brice. 2017. US.
Marble Hornets, created by Troy Wagner. 2009–14. YouTube web series. US.
Midsommar, dir. Ari Aster. 2019. US.
Paranormal Activity, dir. Oren Peli. 2007–. US.
Pokot [Spoor], dir. Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik. 2017. Poland/Germany/Czech Republic/Sweden/Slovakia/France.
Shadow Trackers, dir. Dena Curtis. 2016. TV series. Australia.
The Blair Witch Project, dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. 1999–. US.
The Blood on Satan's Claw, dir. Piers Haggard. 1971. UK.
The Wicker Man, dir. Robin Hardy. 1973. UK.
The VVitch, dir. Robert Eggers. 2015. US.
Witchfinder General, dir. Michael Reeves. 1968. UK.

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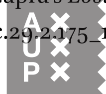
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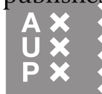

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