All Around Monstrous

Monster Media in Their Historical Contexts

Edited by

Verena Bernardi

Saarland University, Germany

Frank Jacob

Nord University, Norway

Series in Critical Media Studies

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Critical Media Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019940482

ISBN: 978-1-62273-458-0

Cover design by Vernon Press. Cover image designed by Kjpargeter / Freepik.

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Introduction: All Around Monstrous or a Critical Insight into Human-Monster Relations

Frank Jacob and Verena Bernardi

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) defined the monster as the "great model of all small aberrations" and the "principle of recognizability of all forms of anomaly."[1] Therefore, monsters or the monstrous can be found in any anomaly, in every form that does not fit social norms in a specific time-space continuum. And in fact, as Australian historian, Evelleen Richards correctly remarks, "monsters are everywhere."[2] The different monstrous "mass-marketed manifestations, werewolves, vampires, devils, alien horrors, techno-recreated escapee dinosaurs … have provided us with so many variations on the ancient myth of the Beast, the terrible 'something' lurking out there, as to make it one of the defining metaphors of our age,"[3] although every age can claim its own monsters and monstrosities. While monsters seem to be everywhere, the simple narrative that they "are evil, and the hero is good"[4] is rarely enough to explain the whole picture related to modern day monstrosities or their predecessors. They are as complex as those who create the monsters, i.e., the humans in their specific time and place.

Frankenstein's monster was not the only one that was "man-made" or "manufactured from man"[5] and was therefore an "indictment of the technology that created him and of the humans who, repelled by his monstrous appearance, made him an outcast."[6] What animates the monster

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Die Anormalen: Vorlesungen am Collège de France (1974–1975)* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), 77-78.

[2] Evelleen Richards, "(Un)Boxing the Monster," *Social Studies of Science* 26, no. 2, *Special Issue on "The Politics of SSK: Neutrality, Commitment and Beyond"* (1996): 323.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Melissa Bloom Bissonette, "Teaching the Monster: Frankenstein and Critical Thinking," *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (2010): 108.

[5] Richards, "(Un)Boxing the Monster," 324.

[6] Ibid.

might be "something somewhere between science and magic,"[7] but the portrayal as presented by Mary Shelley (1797-1851) is more than just the description of a mad scientist and his creation of a monster; it is also, as American historian Howard L. Malchow highlights, a reflection of "contemporary attitudes towards non-whites, in particular on fears and hopes of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies."[8] It becomes clear rather fast that monsters are multifaceted creations that resemble the problems of the times they were created in. As Frankenstein's monster provides different angles for close readings, vampires have, as American English Professor Frank Grady remarks, "also been assimilated into the current American fascination with identity politics and ethnic self-definition," with Anne Rice's novels and their main characters acting as "the immortal custodians of Western culture."[9]

Next to Frankenstein's monster and vampires, there are plenty of different forms of monsters, all providing their own perspective on or specific narrative related to the existent society. Canadian sociologist John O'Neill, to name just one more example, argues that "the narrative events of Jurassic Park reenact the conflict between apparent omnipotence (the combination of scientific knowledge and evil) and a limited creation whose fuzzy logic guarantees the long-run survival of humanity despite its reckless attraction to omnipotence."[10] Obviously, every monster, no matter if it is hairy, slimy, or simply dangerous for human survival, comes with more than one specific message for interpretation, as the contributions in the present volume will show. These messages depend on the specific time-space continuum in which the monster is created or if something "abnormal" is considered to be a monstrosity.

Very often, monster films document such changes very well, as they "oversee and proclaim cultural change, encoding revised charters of the self and new ideal standards of thought and action,"[11] and *King Kong* (1933) might have been one of the most important monster films so far, as it created some kind of

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[7] Mark Bould, "What Kind of Monster Are You?, Situating the Boom," *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 3, *The British SF Boom* (2003): 398.

[8] Howard L. Malchow, "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Past & Present* 139 (1993): 90-92.

[9] Frank Grady, "Vampire Culture," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 226.

[10] John O'Neill, "Dinosaurs-R-Us: The (Un)Natural History of *Jurassic Park*," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 293.

[11] David H. Stymeist, "Myth and the Monster Cinema," *Anthropologica* 51, no. 2 (2009): 395.

"modern myth"[12] and some essential patterns of the genre by which many other monster films have been inspired. Regardless of its impact, even in the 1930s, the monster as such was not as shocking as some of its acts. Censors, for example, were rather concerned about one scene in which the ape took away the clothes of actress Fay Wray (1907-2004) and another one in which the monster kills indigenous people in one of their villages by trampling them down.[13] The monstrosity was consequently not the creature itself, but its acts.

In the 1970s and 1980s the horror film, instead of classical monsters, focused on a new "surrealist reality effect"[14] and monstrosities were created in so-called splatter films by providing shots of deformed or opened bodies, just like the experiences that early modern freak or horror shows had provided. Newer horror films by Hideo Nakata, Manoj "Night" Shyamalan or Alejandro Amenábar use non-body elements like space to create a fear of an invisible monstrosity.[15] There are obviously continuities in how the monstrous is displayed on the cinema screen, but there is also, as German scholar Arno Meteling highlights, an "asynchronicity of medial, aesthetic, and narrative parallels and diversities"[16] with regard to figures and plots that display the monstrous in horror films. Especially in the medium of film, monsters have appeared on the screen since the first images were shown, and many of these monsters, like King Kong or Godzilla, became international icons.[17] Regardless of the long monster tradition with regard to film, the monsters that were shown, because of their steady appearance, have become rather unspectacular and less monstrous over recent decades.[18] In Hollywood, almost all of these monster classics have been followed by remakes and sequels, especially since money can be made from them.[19] This means that even "today's postmodern teens," who – according to English professors Susan Lee Groenke and Michelle Youngquist – "are disconnected from family

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[12] Ibid., 396.

[13] Lukas Germann, "Die Monstrosität des Realen — Filmische Bilder der Gewalt und ihre Ästhetik," in *Von Monstern und Menschen: Begegnungen der anderen Art in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, eds. Gunther Gebhard, Oliver Geisler, and Steffen Schröter (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 153.

[14] Arno Meteling, *Monster: Zur Körperlichkeit und Medialität im modernen Horrorfilm* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006), 10.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 13.

[17] Germann, Lukas. "Die Monstrosität des Realen," 153.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Christian Knöppler, *The Monster Always Returns: American Horror Films and Their Remakes* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), 9.

and social institutions, live amid constant change and ambiguity, and hang out in such nonplaces as cyberspace,"[20] can experience the same monsters on cinema screens as the generations before them.

Yet monsters, as the present volume will show, are not only present on the cinema screen, but approach us everywhere and in every possible media. There, they "hold some distant but threatening relationship of difference to the norms we construct to order our world"[21] and in a way confront us with a steady discourse about our own role within this world. Architectural historian Terry Kirk highlights that "[m]onsters proliferate in times of crisis" and that it needs "a prevailing apocalyptic mood, usually triggered by political upheaval and threatening loss of control"[22] to bring them alive. They represent, he continues, the "collective anxieties"[23] of a society in a specific time and when the creature is shown or told to be captured or killed, the members of such a society cheer, because at the same time their own anxieties are kept in check. Regardless of their appearance and the media in which they are presented, monsters are cultural products that help us to recognize our own norms, namely through the abstraction with the monstrous Other. That the interpretatory perspective of monstrosity can change is already visible in early modern texts, when medieval representations were mixed with present trends, to create a modernity owned by its people.[24] In the literary texts of early modern Europe, therefore, "monsters not only become an "alien" space for negotiating between historical displacement and continuity, but they also typify the notion of medieval as-other—the embodiment of a past age replete with wonder."[25] Novels, to name just one example, can eventually "support[ ] or undercut[ ] larger socio-political messages"[26] by using monsters or the grotesque as the means to raise timely questions, or, as Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) put it,

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[20] Susan Lee Groenke and Michelle Youngquist, "Are We Postmodern Yet? Reading "Monster" With 21st-century Ninth Graders," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 54, no. 7 (2011): 505.

[21] Terry Kirk, "Monumental Monstrosity, Monstrous Monumentally," *Perspecta* 40, *Monster* (2008): 7.

[22] Ibid., 8.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Serina Patterson, "Reading the Medieval in Early Modern Monster Culture," *Studies in Philology* 111, no. 2 (2014): 284.

[25] Ibid., 286.

[26] Daniel Punday, "Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story," *The Modern Language Review* 97, no. 4 (2002): 804.

> the grotesque body is cosmic and universal. It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air; … It contains the signs of the zodiac. It reflects the cosmic hierarchy. This body can merge with various natural phenomena … It can fill the entire universe.[27]

Of Humans and Monsters

The existence of the monster is dependent on the human being, which needs the former as an antithesis to its own existence. The relationship between human and monster is therefore also always an asymmetric one, as the latter represents everything that is not or should not be human. That the monster steadily appears in all kinds of popular media in a way reflects the human need for the monstrous as well.[28] Although the monster is not capable of existing without human imagination, this existence also challenges the human mind by triggering two usual reaction patterns, namely: 1) abhorrence and fear, and 2) fascination and curiosity.[29] Due to its existence, or better its creation, the monster eventually becomes what American scholars Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown refer to as "a harbinger of change, a signifier of futurity."[30] Nevertheless, monsters run through a steady metamorphosis that is triggered by their uninterrupted re-imagination of readers and audiences in any form of popular media.[31]

For humans the monster is nevertheless not only a significant other, it is also a commodity that is once more particularly interesting since monsters recently began to boom again[32] Consequently, monsters and monstrosities

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[27] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 318 cited in ibid., 804.

[28] Gunther Gebhard, Oliver Geisler, and Steffen Schröter, "Einleitung," in *Von Monstern und Menschen: Begegnungen der anderen Art in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, eds. Gunther Gebhard, Oliver Geisler, and Steffen Schröter (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 9.

[29] Ibid., 10-11.

[30] Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown, "Introduction," in *Monsters and Monstrosity from the Fin de Siècle to the Millennium: New Essays*, eds. Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 1.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.; Iris Mendel and Nora Ruck, "Das Monster als verkörperte Differenz in der Moderne: De-Montrationen feminisitscher Wissenschaftskritik," in *Von Monstern und Menschen: Begegnungen der anderen Art in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, eds. Gunther Gebhard, Oliver Geisler, and Steffen Schröter (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 117.

have gained attention with regard to the academic discourse,[33] in which the figure of the monster is very often used as a category of scientific analysis.[34] While the depiction or presentation of the monster in popular media can help us to better understand subconscious determining forces as sexism, racism, stereotypes, etc.,[35] the monster itself provides numerous approaches to study cultures or societies, especially since the categories determined by it are so broad. As Hutchison and Brown emphasize, "monsters may (simultaneously) represent the Freudian and Jungian repressed, socio-cultural transformations and anxieties as well as commodity culture."[36] It is probably due to this multi-layered monstrosity that humans "remain obsessed by [the monsters'] sometimes destructive, sometimes domesticated, always unpredictable presence, consistently seduced by the possibility of learning from them or about them so as to understand our selves, our societies, our nations, and even our increasing globalization."[37] It is consequently not surprising that each society creates its own monsters and displays them in all forms of popular media, and therefore provides academics with endless case studies of the monstrous.

In all these cases, monsters not only entertain, but also, as Kirk correctly remarks, "mark the boundaries of cultural values," because it is the method of their creation that "is symptomatic of how a culture conceives of collective inquiry to the tolerated limits of its self-awareness."[38] The Other then can simply not be explained, yet is needed to define the self, always waiting in the shadows to be summoned for an identity discourse: that is the monster we created, the monster within us. It is through this reflection that the monster keeps its dual semiotics, above mentioned and highlighted by Kirk, of fear and attraction:

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[33] Some works related to that discourse are: Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Generation at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle, eds. *Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

[34] Mendel, "Monster," 117.

[35] Ibid., 118.

[36] Hutchison and Brown, "Introduction," 2.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Kirk, Terry. "Monumental Monstrosity," 7.

> Monsters are deviant, transgressive, threatening, and therefore horrible, terrifying, and tremendous yet also astonishing, marvelous, and prodigious. The modern scientist orders monsters in terms of relationships to nature's norms. Paré classified them as either prodigious apparitions beyond the course of nature or deviant creations entirely against its course.[39]

Dealing with monstrosities very often also involves a discussion of the body, and initially, monster research was rather uncommon[40] and mainly focused on aspects of the aesthetics of the dysplastic body.[41] A history of the monster, and a special focus on the historical context of monster media, as it is provided by the present volume, will show how monstrosities were perceived through the centuries.[42] What is considered monstrous is also related to the specific time-space continuum of its existence, and very different actions, like rape,[43] or body trends, like female tattoos,[44] were being considered to be monstrous. Whatever the monstrosity, however, it is always in need of a definitory opposition. How it can be defined, perceived, and evaluated was demonstrated by American scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who has provided a "sketch of a new modus legendi: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender" by offering "seven theses toward understanding cultures through the monsters they bear."[45]

Cohen's Seven Theses

Cohen's seven theses, formulated in the mid-1990s, are an essential framework for monster studies and shall therefore be shortly summarized. The theses are:

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past & Present* 91, no. 1 (1981): 20-54 marked an important turning point.

[41] Birgit Stammberger, *Monster und Freaks: Eine Wissensgeschichte außergewöhnlicher Körper im 19. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 11.

[42] Ibid., 13-15.

[43] Garthine Walker, "Everyman or a Monster? The Rapist in Early Modern England, c.1600-1750," *History Workshop Journal* 76 (2013): 5.

[44] Christine Braunberger, "Revolting Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women," *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 2 (2000): 6.

[45] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-4.

Thesis I: The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body

When the monster's body is a resemblance of the society that produced it, it is highly impacted by "a time, a feeling, and a place" and therefore must be understood as a historical product, i.e., something that is 'made' in a specific time-space continuum. Due to this, the "monster's body … incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy," which means that it is "pure culture."[46]

Thesis II: The Monster Always Escapes

Whatever monster is killed in a specific time, it might return in another to be read or displayed in a different way, addressing the current anxieties of its human creators.

Thesis III: The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis

Monsters cannot be understood along human categories or hierarchies, because they display a total otherness, and therefore resist such classifications.[47] Cohen correctly argues, related to this thesis, that "the geography of the monster is an imperiling expanse, and therefore always a contested cultural space."[48]

Thesis IV: The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference

Without the monster, there is no Other, as it "is difference made flesh" and therefore must "function as dialectical Other"[49] which is usually constructed according to "cultural, political, racial, economic [or] sexual"[50] categories. It must therefore be emphasized that every time has its own monsters, and they "are never created ex nihilo, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination in which elements are extracted … and then assembled as the monster."[51]

Thesis V: The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

The monster, although created by human minds, is also acting as a guardian of the unknown, which is probably why it is so fascinating at the same time.

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[46] Ibid., 4.
[47] Ibid., 7.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 11.

An engagement with the monster, due to the curiosity of the human, is, however, very often rather negative for the latter: "To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself."[52]

Thesis VI: Fear of the Monster is really a Kind of Desire

It is obvious that the monster is ambivalent, i.e., as mentioned before, frightening but attractive at the same time. It is the "linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint" and it is therefore not surprising that "simultaneous repulsion and attraction [are] at the core of the monster's composition."[53]

Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold … of Becoming

The pure existence of the monster eventually creates discourse, and no matter how far it is pushed away, it will always find a way back to create a new discussion about this existence.

Monsters will consequently never fully disappear, because they are an essential factor within human discourse about everything that can be considered culture in a specific geographical setting at a specific time. It is therefore clear that monsters will be different in every time, but they are a necessary Other without which the self must remain undefined. The present volume tries to give some answers to the question of how the monstrous is displayed, discussed, and perceived in its different historical contexts and in different popular media.

Contributions

The first section of the present volume discusses monster case studies in popular literature. *Jessica Doble* analyzes the depiction of witches in Jeannette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate* to highlight the ambivalence—the historical good or bad witch—of it. *Simon Bacon* then goes on to address the role of vampires in Young Literature of the 1970s and 80s, before *Svetlana Seibel* provides a discussion of humanist and spiritualist discourses in one of the United States' most famous and popular vampire novels, Anne Rice's *The Vampire Armand.*

[52] Ibid., 12.
[53] Ibid., 17.

The second section deals with popular media, films and TV series. *Stephanie Flint* opens the section with a discussion of the depiction and reception of monstrosity in Tod Browning's film *Freaks* (1932). That monsters might change their appearance in films over the years is discussed by *Almudena Nido*, whose chapter describes the changing form of Grendel on the cinema screen. Another monster, the werewolf, and its different appearances over the decades of 20th-century film history, as well as the subconscious discourses about racial purity, are analyzed by *Octavia Cade*. That zombies could be interested in relationships with human beings that go beyond the eating of the latter's brain is shown by *Tatiana Prorokova* in her chapter that provides a deeper insight into the world of *iZombie* (2015-2019). The series is of specific interest, as it depicts "intellectual zombies" who are quite different from their fellows in other film or series formats.

Kendra Parker shows how racial stereotypes are impacting the monster genre as she provides a close cultural reading of black female vampires in Bill Condon's *Twilight: Breaking Dawn Part 2*. That vampires are not only popular, but also highly related to modern identity discourses in the United States is shown by *Verena Bernardi*, whose chapter deals with *The Originals* (2013-2018), another TV series that creates a specific vampire milieu in the US South. The film and television section is concluded by *Frank Jacob*'s chapter on Godzilla and the representations of this Japanese monster in different films in one of the most successful monster series in cinema history.

The final chapter of the present volume is some kind of excursion, where *Ryan D. Whittington* discusses two different melodramatic productions on the opera stage of the early 19th century, to show how monsters, i.e., vampires in the specific case study, could be presented through music. Overall, the chapters of the volume show the diversity of the monstrous in different popular media and thereby again highlight that monsters have to be understood in their specific historical and geographical contexts. Each generation has its own fears, anxieties, stereotypes, and tastes, and therefore naturally will also have its own monsters.

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Contributors

Simon Bacon is an Independent Scholar based in Poznan, Poland. He has edited books on various subjects including *Undead Memory: Vampires and Human Memory in Popular Culture* (2014), and *Growing Up with Vampires: Essays on the Undead in Children's Media* (2018) both with Katarzyna Bronk, and edited *Gothic: A Reader* (2018), and *Horror: A Companion* (2019). He has published two monographs, *Becoming Vampire: Difference and the Vampire in Popular Culture* (2016), and *Dracula as Absolute Other: The Troubling and Distracting Specter of Stoker's Vampire on Screen* (2019), and is currently working on his third, *Eco-Vampires: The Vampire as Environmentalist and Undead Eco-activist.*

Verena Bernardi is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of English and American Studies at Saarland University, Germany. She holds a PhD in North American Cultural Studies and is the author of *Us versus Them, or We? Post-2000 Vampiric Reflections of Family, Home and Hospitality in* True Blood *and* The Originals. Her research interests lie in Vampire Studies, Television Studies, Cultural Studies (North America), and Southern Regionalism (Louisiana).

Octavia Cade is a New Zealand writer with a PhD in science communication. Her stories have appeared in a number of venues, including *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Cosmos*. Academic work on speculative fiction has appeared in *Horror Studies*, *Scandinavica*, and the *BFS Journal*, and she is the author of the award-winning collection *Food and Horror*, which looks at the use and manipulation of food in aspects of the genre from fairy tales to monster movies.

Jessica Doble is a PhD candidate at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her current project, titled "Reading, Community and the Politics of Authority: Fanfiction of Popular Media," focuses on digital media and the reception of popular texts in the context of community. Her work has been published in a special issue on Jesmyn Ward's work in the *Xavier Review*. She expects to graduate in 2020.

Stephanie M. Flint is a doctoral candidate in comparative studies at Florida Atlantic University, where she teaches courses in English literature and interdisciplinary studies. Her research focuses on representations of

monstrosity in literature, film and popular culture, particularly in relation to gender and disability studies.

Frank Jacob is a professor of Global History (19th and 20th centuries) at Nord Universitet, Norway. Holding a PhD in Japanese Studies from Erlangen University (Germany), he also published, next to several books and articles in history, works on Japanese literature and film.

Almudena Nido is currently working at Isabel I University (Spain), teaching in the Department of Modern Languages and Social Sciences. After completing her PhD thesis at University of Oviedo she has published articles about the Anglo-Saxon epic poem Beowulf and the interactions of power and resistance. Her current research and scholarship reflect an interest in investigating the depictions and interpretations of the female monster.

Kendra R. Parker, author of *She Bites Back: Black Female Vampires in African American Women's Novels, 1977-2011* (Lexington 2018), is an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of Literature at Georgia Southern University-Armstrong.

Tatiana Prorokova is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of English and American Studies, University of Vienna, Austria. Her current project examines representations of the environment and climate change in fiction since the Industrial Revolution. She holds a PhD in American Studies from the University of Marburg, Germany. She was an Ebeling Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society (2018) and a Visiting Scholar at the University of South Alabama, USA (2016). She is the coeditor of *Cultures of War in Graphic Novels: Violence, Trauma, and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2018).

Svetlana Seibel is currently a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the department of North American Literary and Cultural Studies at Saarland University, Germany. Her research interests include Indigenous popular culture in North America, genre fiction, literatures of the Pacific Northwest, TV Studies, and Vampire Studies.

Ryan Whittington is a PhD candidate in historical musicology at Florida State University. His research seeks to understand difference and otherness in cultural history by using music and monsters as the primary artifacts. He

possesses Bachelor of Arts degrees in music and German from Wake Forest University and a Master of Music degree in historical musicology from Florida State University. The research for this book chapter began as his master's thesis. His current research engages with music and monstrosity in composers' adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

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