MONSTER BOOK CLUB: ENGAGING WITH CONTEMPORARY YOUTH POLITICAL KNOWLEDGES THROUGH YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Due to the limits on minors' legal, geographic, and financial agency, many young people face difficulties directly engaging in civic activity or political activism. Researchers must therefore find creative, desire-centered ways of engaging with youth theories in a manner that is accessible to a broad number of young people. This paper explores the methodologies and theoretical findings of a six-month digital ethnographic study in which twelve American teenagers read and analyzed works of young adult speculative fiction that explore political themes through the central metaphor of monstrosity. Over the course of the study, the participants' theories of monstrosity fell into three conceptual categories: invisible monsters (internal forces), the monstrous oppressed, and monstrous oppressors. This paper aims to demonstrate that the methodological approach of engaging with youth political knowledges through young adult literature leads to theoretical bridges across academic disciplines and offers social, emotional, and intellectual benefits to young research participants.

INTRODUCTION

According to historian of American popular culture and politics W. Scott Poole (2011), monsters "do not mean one thing but a thousand" (xiv). Ubiquitous across cultures, monsters uncover what societies prefer to hide and lay bare the consequences of breaking the most fundamental rules of being human. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996), in his seminal "Monster Culture: Seven Theses," argues that every iteration of the monster represents anew the "fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (4) of its specific cultural context. Scholars of psychology, sociology, cultural studies, literature, media studies, and history can all, from their academic perspectives, try to decode monsters' myriad meanings. Indeed, disciplinary boundaries are almost foolish to consider when discussing a concept as multifaceted as monstrosity. Literary historian Franco Moretti (1982), for instance, justifies his unorthodox combination of psychoanalysis and Marxist theory to analyze Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* by explaining that fear, the primary affective result of horror literature, arises from "economic, ideological, psychical, sexual (and others should be added, beginning with religious fear)" (82) sources and dimensions. For this reason, it is "possible, if not obligatory, to use different tools in order to reconstruct the multiform roots of the terrorizing metaphor" (Moretti 1982: 82-83).

Because of this inherent overabundance of meaning, definitions of monstrosity are notoriously difficult. However, I will lay a baseline claim here to read monstrosity as the anti-human. Whether geographically, bodily, or behaviorally, a monster is that which is not just outside but actively antagonistic to what are considered acceptable expressions of humanity within a particular sociocultural context. Key to this definition is that the designation of monstrosity is read as an encultured judgment, not an objective or ontological state. Within the context of speculative fiction, there may be depictions of bodies or abilities that are outside the human range; however, to be *monstrous,* a fictional society must deem these expressions inimical to humanity. Similarly, outside of the speculative, our own societies declare certain behaviors and ways of being as monstrous. This is not to say that all people within a common cultural context will agree on this designation or read monsters the same way. Certainly authors take many approaches to writing them. Sympathetic monsters are nothing new; however, when a literary monster is meant to evoke sympathy or empathy, often that requires a reader to think critically

about what made this figure "monstrous" in the first place. This in turn inspires what Marina Levin and Diem-My T. Bui describe as a "representational approach" to reading and studying monsters, which can "illuminate discursive formations through which … texts shape bodies and subjective – both human and nonhuman" (5).

Many scholars have also turned to Julia Kristeva's (1984) work on abjection to define monstrosity. The abject is that which is undefinable, except by what it is not: it is *not* the subject. It is not an object, either, because an object can be defined in contrast to the subject, while the abject is simultaneously closer and more opposed to the subject: it is waste, violence, death, and rot, the parts of human experience that "if I acknowledge it, annihilate me" (Kristeva 1984: 2). While these aspects of annihilation share certain characteristics across time and space, many are culturally dependent; hence Cohen's (1996) statement that the mediated monster is "pure culture" (4). Scholarship about monstrosity as a subset of cultural studies, according to Simon Asa Mittman (2013), is intended to investigate the ways in which the monster "calls into question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us … to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization" (8). One of the key functions of the anti-human monster is to raise questions about how we define humanity.

Arriving at these definitions is a fundamental quest of humanistic scholarship, but I wish to take Moretti's (1982) intervention of multi-theoretical interpretation a step further by arguing that scholarly discourses, however disparate, are, when taken in academic isolation, still insufficient to understand monstrosity (and by extension humanity). Monsters are, after all, found in oral storytelling, novels, film, theater, political rhetoric, and everyday figurative language. They are not reserved for quote-unquote experts. And monsters certainly know no bounds of age. Indeed, since monstrosity is intimately intertwined with alienation and exclusion, it is vital to engage with the knowledges of people whose theories – their deliberate explanatory interpretations of the phenomena they encounter – are regularly discounted. Given prevailing associations of ignorance so often ascribed to youth, adolescents are among these commonly dismissed populations.

I use the plural "knowledges" for two reasons. First, I wish to call attention to young peoples' interpretations of cultural discourses – here, literary and political analysis – as a legitimate means of knowledge production. This framing

disrupts the prevailing Western notion that children's intellectual output is inherently inferior to adults'. Like children's rights scholar John Wall (2017), I base my work on the assumption that children are "equally important contributors to society" (4). This does not mean – nor should it mean – that young people's epistemological contributions are identical to adults'. Therefore, my second reason for the plural is to acknowledge knowledges as "situated and embodied" (Haraway 1988: 583) and therefore distinct from any illusory objective Truth. The plural calls attention to the important distinctness of what young people can offer to humanistic discourses.

In this paper, I discuss the methodology and some of the theoretical findings from my ethnographic research project entitled "Monster Book Club." In this project, I worked with a dozen participants, ages fourteen through eighteen, to analyze themes of monstrosity and political commentary in contemporary young adult speculative fiction. The participants were based in the United States; as this is my country of origin, on top of my primary familiarity with Anglophone literature and its political commentaries, the road to institutional approval for work with minors within my own nation was much more straightforward than if I were to attempt to work with an international cohort of underage participants. Where I include the insights of the participants of Monster Book Club, I wish for the reader to approach their ideas not as a blanket representation of "how youth think," but as examples of how theorists speaking from the standpoint of youth can offer particular insights into monstrosity, humanity, and related topics of scholarly interest. Standpoint theory within feminist research methodologies posits "that all knowledge is constructed from a specific position and that what a knower can see is shaped by the location from which that knower's inquiry begins" (Sprague 2016: 58). Within this theory, the knowledges produced by the scholars mentioned above – Moretti (1982), Haraway (1988), Kristeva (1984), etc. – are inextricable from their sociocultural positionalities, but do not speak for everyone within similar contexts. Indeed, standpoints are context, not knowledge itself, and the former is not the sole determinant of the latter: "a standpoint is not how people in a particular social location think" (Sprague 2016: 97-98). Therefore, the context of youth pervades the theories that the Monster Book Club participants produce, but the participants themselves remain individual theorists, not a monolith of adolescence.

The context of youth in the production of monster theories is important

to seek out for many reasons, one of which is the popularity of monsters in literature and media intended for young people. In a great deal of contemporary young adult literature, the political dimensions of monstrosity, particularly those relating to marginalized racial, gender, and sexual identities, are of paramount thematic importance. Adults speaking to young people are using monsters to communicate political meaning – but what do the intended young readers themselves do with these metaphorical constructs? To understand more than one side of the textual conversation, as it were, youth theories are invaluable to include when analyzing monstrosity, particularly in youth media. Not only are young people who have not yet engaged in higher education less constrained by the disciplinary boundaries within which older scholars can become siloed, but they can also offer particularly important accounts of their own positionalities and knowledge standpoints that are so frequently overlooked by the adult-centric world of scholarship.

In this study, I implemented principles of desire-centered research to facilitate a participatory environment in which participants' needs and comfort were incorporated into the research design and their ideas were taken seriously as valuable theory. Together, the participants and I developed a tripart taxonomy of the monsters that appear in YA literature: invisible monsters, the monstrous oppressed, and monstrous oppressors. Due to the intellectual and affective fruitfulness of this participatory research project for both myself as a scholar as well as the young participants, I believe that this study serves as a persuasive call for scholars of children's literature – or any other field that intersects with the lives of young people – to find creative ways of engaging youth voices in ongoing scholarly conversations about complex theoretical concepts.

TABLE 1 Monster Book Club Participants

Chosen pseudonym	Age during fieldwork	Pronouns	US Geographic Region
Levy	17	she/they	Midwest
Percy	15-16	he/him	East Coast
Eason	17	she/her	Southeast
Sirius	17-18	she/they/he	Alaska
Kelly	17-18	she/her	Deep South
Bill	15-16	he/him	Midwest
Lotus	17-18	he/him	West Coast
Redamancy	14-15	she/they	Southwest
Lex	17	she/her	Deep South
Lily	16	she/her	West Coast
Pluto	16	they/them	Pacific Northwest
Eliza	17-18	she/her	Pacific Northwest

TABLE 2 Monster Book Club Novels

Title	Author	Publication Year
Six of Crows	Leigh Bardugo	2015
The Taking of Jake Livingston	Ryan Douglass	2021
Pet	Akwaeke Emezi	2019
Lobizona	Romina Garber	2020
The Fever King	Victoria Lee	2019
Sawkill Girls	Claire Legrand	2018
Release	Patrick Ness	2017
The Fell of Dark	Caleb Roehrig	2020
Out of Salem	Hal Schrieve	2019
This Savage Song	V.E. Schwab	2016
Cemetery Boys	Aiden Thomas	2020

DESIRE-CENTERED METHODOLOGY

Parameters of the Fieldwork

At the outset of the fieldwork in January 2022, fifteen young people had signed up to participate, though three discontinued in the early days of the study. All twelve of the remaining participants were high school students; those who either were eighteen at the outset or turned eighteen during the course of the study had not yet had the opportunity to exercise their right to vote. Only three of the participants began the study at the age of fourteen or fifteen; the rest were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Six of the twelve participants were white, two were Black, two were mixed race, and two Latine. If I were to reproduce this study, I would attempt to reach communities of color earlier in the recruitment process to have more racial diversity represented among the participants. Ten of the twelve identified as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. As far as neurodiversity and disability, five participants directly disclosed diagnoses, but of course I cannot know what the participants did not choose to share. It is partly for this reason that I have provided this demographic information unattached to the participants' names. I believe it is significant to note the variety of intersecting social positionalities that inform this cohort of young theorists' standpoints, but I do not wish to simply provide data about these twelve people. Since I constrain the demographic information that I provide about individual adult scholars to the information they themselves choose to include in their work, I endeavor to do the same for the participants. In the examples provided later in this paper, I include the identities that the participants themselves directly connected to their ideas.

Due to the nature of the self-selected participation, all potential participants came into the study with preexisting interests in literature and politics, and almost all of them with a particular fascination with monsters. I advertised the study on Instagram and received a few dozen responses. (I attempted recruitment via other networks, as well, including TikTok and reaching out through educators and librarians within my own networks but Instagram was far and away the most successful venue, and ultimately all of the participants arrived via that channel.) Many of the young people who reached out ceased communication upon receiving consent forms for their parents if they were under the age of eighteen. I do not know their reasons, but I did attempt to receive a parental consent waiver when I applied for approval with my university's Institutional Review Board, on

the grounds that these participants are cognitively and emotionally capable of informed consent to participate in a book club, and that they may not wish to share their intellectual activities with their guardians depending on their relationship with them. Considering the rising rates of book censorship in the United States, guardians and children do not always agree on literary and political matters (Meehan, et al: 2024). My request was denied.

The Monster Book Club fieldwork took place between January and July 2022. During this time, the participants and I read and discussed eleven young adult science fiction, fantasy, and horror novels that included literal monsters (i.e., supernatural beings with bodies and/or abilities that their textual societies deem as dangerously anti-human) alongside overtly political thematic material. With the understanding that apolitical literature is an impossibility, I defined "overtly political" themes as the inclusion of issues of topical social and legal debate, such as immigration and asylum, queer identities, race relations, empire and colonialism, and economic injustice. The texts that we examined were published no earlier than 2015, and the latest of them were published in 2021, the year before the fieldwork. This timeline covers the rise of Donald Trump's candidacy to the earliest days of the aftermath of his first presidential administration. The political context of the Trump presidency accounts for the vast majority of the participants' political awareness, as the oldest participants would have been roughly eleven years old in 2015.

Using these parameters, I created a preliminary list of roughly thirty texts. In the first meeting of the book club, I invited participants to propose novels they thought fit the criteria, as well. This is one example of the ways in which I sought to include participatory elements in the research design. Participatory methods can allow young participants to influence the course of a study in ways that adult researchers could not have anticipated from their own standpoint (Torre et al.: 2012, Campos-Holland: 2017). The participants voted to determine which books from the list to discuss each month. In the first month, all participants read the same novel, *Lobizona* by Romina Garber (2020). Thereafter, each participant voted on two novels for the month and then chose to read one or both of those books. At the midpoint of the study, by which time I had been able to read many of the participants' recommendations, we added some of their choices. Texts included American YA juggernauts like Leigh Bardugo's (2015) *Six of Crows* to independent publications like *Out of Salem,* Hal Schrieve's (2019) alternate queer and monstrous take on the 1990s U.S. Pacific Northwest, which was recommended by one of the participants.

The study was conducted via the social communication platform Discord. On

our private Discord server, Monster Book Club held synchronous audio calls every two weeks and maintained several ongoing asynchronous text chat "channels." The digital design allowed for a great deal of geographical diversity; the club boasted participants from across the United States, spanning five time zones. In addition to participating in the meetings and chat channels, I also conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews at the midpoint and end of the study.

It is worth noting that the market for Instagram recruitment advertisements about monster-based research studies primarily included left-of-center teenagers, so their readings of the texts would not be shared among all young people, who, like adults, span the spectrum of political ideologies. No generalizable claims about the reading habits of teenagers can be made from this cohort of participants, and I was clear throughout our time together that I in no way expected them to be the voice of their generation. These are twelve specific people with a high level of interest in literary and political conversation. Instead, as I communicated to the participants at the outset, I always intended to treat their ideas as real theory by placing their discussions into conversation with the ongoing scholarly discourses to which they are relevant.

Centering Participant Desire

From the outset of this project, it was vital to design a study based in principles of desire-centered research. Eve Tuck (2009), from her perspective as an Indigenous scholar working with Indigenous, youth, and urban communities, argues for researchers to reject the legacy of pain-centered research that limits its focus to points of struggle due to a grounding in "a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (412). Tuck (2009) argues that such research, while it may be well-intentioned, reinforces constructs of the inherent brokenness of marginalized communities, which in turn leads to members of these communities facing negative consequences of this reinforced and internalized identity (409). If we are to understand age as an axis of marginalization, then this is an important concept for youth researchers to incorporate into our projects at the level of research design, especially in studies such as mine in which young participants occupy a variety of intersecting minoritized identities.

Tuck (2009) explains that hyper-focusing on pain or struggle as one's object of analysis does not enable holistic research, as pain provides a fundamentally incomplete view of the lives of research participants (416). Desire, by contrast, "more closely matches the experiences of people who, at different points in a sin-

gle day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures — that is, everybody" (p. 420). In Tuck's later elaboration of these principles through her collaboration with decolonization scholar K. Wayne Yang, the authors explain that "[desire]-centered research does not deny the experience of tragedy, trauma, and pain, but positions the knowing derived from such experiences as wise" (Tuck and Yang 2014: 231). Desire will still articulate pain, due to the desire for freedom from pain. However, centering desire(s) in research also allows for a deeper and broader understanding of lived experiences.

Renata M. Leitão (2020) adds to this discussion from her perspective as a researcher in human-centered design as it pertains to social justice, physical environments, and marginalized communities. She explains that desire is vital for the affective and energetic sustainability of research participation, as opposed to the "drudgery" (5) of a focus on pain. By this logic, desire is necessary for the translation of knowledge into theory, because theorizing is a practice of deliberate critical thinking that one only engages in when one *wants* to form and share understanding. Indeed, nearly all the participants of Monster Book Club explained that their experiences of minoritization were what led them to be interested in monstrosity. These experiences often included pain, but exploring these experiences' effects on the participants' engagement with the monster metaphor incorporated more than that.

One of the participants, Lotus, explained in his final interview, "I was surprised how many very difficult things were being able to be talked about in the books without me feeling like they were getting too uncomfortable where I wanted to stop reading. I really enjoyed all of them." These "very difficult things" that arose in Monster Book Club's chosen novels included topics like mass shootings, sexual assault, familial rejection, and experiences of racist violence. The participants' desire to theorize about identity and politics through literary analysis also often included responses to their own experiences of pain or struggle deriving from marginalization and exclusion. For example, the participant Kelly commented on her appreciation for what she perceived as a high level of verisimilitude in Ryan Douglass's (2021) supernatural horror novel *The Taking of Jake Livingston.* The eponymous protagonist, like Kelly, is a Black student in a predominantly white high school in the American Deep South, and he experiences acts of racism from both his peers and the school faculty, in addition to being haunted by the ghost of a school shooter. Similarly, when discussing Aiden Thomas's (2020) *Cemetery*

Boys, the participant Bill segued from the discussion of the transgender protagonist to his difficult and frustrating search for resonant literary representations of transgender characters while still young and closeted.

On top of the desire to understand and see reflections of their own struggles through literature, the participants' desires for participation in Monster Book Club *also* encompassed their specific personalities and experiences of joy. They traded book recommendations, discussed hobbies – including their own creative writing – and connected with each other through discussions of school, friends, families, and media. Examples of the joyful desires expressed through Monster Book club include Percy's tendency to wax poetic about monstrosity in myth, Pluto's sarcastic jokes that would set the whole club laughing, and the late-night conversations among Sirius, Bill, and Levy that left hundreds of chat comments to greet me in the morning. From the participants' joy and desire came youth theories of monstrosity that add to our collective understandings of metaphor, emotion, oppression, and resistance.

Generative Refusal

One particularly important aspect of desire-centered research is the careful incorporation of participant refusal, or actions that constitute "attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can't be known" (Tuck and Yang 2014: 225). All ethical youth research necessitates special attention to refusal due to the inherent power dynamics between adult researchers and young participants. However, Tuck and Yang (2014) remind us that refusal is not only ethical but generative: "Refusal is not just a 'no,' but a redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned" (239). I discovered this for myself in the discussion of the "news channel" on the study Discord. I had initially envisioned this chat room as a space for participants to post news media articles and videos that they thought had some relationship to the concept of monstrosity. However, this channel on the Discord server remained empty. When I asked the participants about this silence a month into the study, they told me that engaging frequently with news media had proven detrimental to their mental health. That is not to say that they did not want to discuss political issues and conflicts – after all, their desire to analyze political themes in literature is what drove them to join the book club. However, the framing of these discussions as "news" destroyed their

desire for engagement, since they associated news media with overwhelming affective states of anxiety, fear, and even despair.

In my research proposal, the incorporation of news media in the book discussions had been a significant facet of the research that I intended to carry out. However, due to the participants' collective refusal, expressed at first only through silence, I reworked my approach. Therefore, when the group discussed the major global and national events that took place during the six-months of the fieldwork, such as Russia's initial invasion into Ukraine in February 2022, the deadly elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, in May, and the overturn of abortion rights in the United States in June (which the participants collectively interpreted as a harmful judicial move), we did so without referencing specific articles or televised coverage, even though we did discuss news media framing in a broader sense. The participants' refusal to engage with the news channel demonstrates an affective aversion to traditional news media that does not necessarily extend to newsworthy *events*, no matter how dire. The barrier exists in the emotionally heightened rhetoric of news media and communications. This finding is generative indeed: with this understanding of the ways in which the teenage participants navigate the boundaries between their political engagement and the maintenance of their mental health, additional research can be designed to further investigate this area. One can imagine that this would be a particularly important avenue for Media Studies and Journalism scholars. Meanwhile, future studies can be designed with an awareness of these potential participant boundaries. It would also be worthwhile to compare orientations towards news media based on political views; since there were no self-identified conservatives in my study, I cannot speak to how right-leaning young people would respond. These are just some of the future inquiries the participants' generative refusal can prompt. My approach to desire-centered and participant-influenced research design helped to create a more positive, and therefore more fruitful, experience for everyone involved.

Theories of Monstrosity

From Monster Book Club's discussions, three intersecting categories of monstrosity emerged: invisible monsters, the monstrous oppressed, and monstrous oppressors. The participants' theories about different iterations of this narrative cannot be comprehensively unpacked within the space of a single ar-

ticle. Through a brief discussion of some of these theories, however, I hope to demonstrate the depth of the intellectual work that the Monster Book Club participants collaboratively developed. Their theories demonstrate the efficacy of non-academic approaches for uniting related discourses among different scholarly disciplines and breaking down boundaries between theoretical lenses. The participants often independently produced interpretations of monstrosity that mirrored the work of existing scholars in a variety of fields while expanding those conversations by virtue of the ways in which their youth influenced their interpretations. I offer these excerpts of the collective theorizing of Monster Book Club, therefore, to serve as a springboard for scholars to begin engaging with youth theory as scholarship, and to devise ways of furthering research that incorporates youth knowledges. To this end, I will briefly unpack Monster Book Club's three categories of monstrosity.

Invisible Monsters

The participants of Monster Book Club developed their use of the term "invisible monsters" before we had even read a book together, during our very first synchronous audio meeting. At first, the term arose during a conversation about the final type of monstrosity that I discuss in this paper, the monstrous oppressor. The participant Sirius listed "antisemitism, homophobia, and racism" as not monstrous traits, but monsters in and of themselves. Lotus agreed with this categorization and said, "I've heard them referred to as invisible monsters sometimes, which can be really big problems that people try to either ignore, or sometimes problems that people don't see or they think are natural or normal or can't be fixed, when really they're causing a lot of suffering in the world and *can* be fixed." Where Lotus first heard this term, he never said, but Eason appreciated the usefulness of the turn of phrase:

> I really like the idea of invisible monsters, because I think something we're seeing a lot, especially now in like our modern society is the topic of mental illness and how that affects so many people, and, you know, the only kind of real ways you can see it is, of course, in brain scans and different functioning patterns, but also how it affects their lives individually, which you wouldn't know unless you really talked about like with the person, and how it affects everyone who suffers from it individually, which is, to me, really

> interesting. And I think it [i.e, mental illness] definitely could be considered a monster to some people. But that also kind of makes the point of how far do you go to describe if the monster is human or not?

Unknowingly, the participants were already engaging in further developing a branch of monster scholarship elucidated by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2013) in his work "Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture." Weinstock describes modern monstrosity as "a kind of invisible disease that eats away at the body and the body politic, and manifests visibly through symptomatic behavior" (276). He includes examples of literal disease, psychopaths and terrorists who cannot be detected by appearance alone, the drive for revenge, and "the faceless corporation or government agency that finds its impetus in greed and corruption" (Weinstock 2013: 276). Weinstock notes that when understandings or ideas about monstrosity change, "it reflects the fact that we – our understanding of what it means to be human, our relations with one another and to the world around us, our conception of our place in the greater scheme of things – have changed as well" (275). It is therefore serendipitous that the participants of Monster Book Club reproduced some of his theoretical language, as it allows us to look at what young theorists are deeming worthy of classification as the invisible monster, and what that tells us about their views of humanity as influenced by their standpoint of youth.

To the participants, the term "invisible monster" was immediately malleable. It was Eason's conceptualization that took off in the club. From this point on, whenever a participant used this phrase, what they described was internal and intangible forces steeped in an affective experience they classified as monstrous due to the forces' destructive effects on the person experiencing them. Mental illness was an example that the participants were eager to continuously revisit. Other examples that the participants generated include secrets, fear, surveillance, and dishonesty. Through these examples, we can see the continued malleability of the participants' "invisible monsters," as the monster can either be identified as the intangible forces that cause negative emotional states, *or* the emotions themselves. Ultimately, the invisible monster is an antagonist that either traps a human body in an unwanted and unsafe place or propels it forward into one.

To understand how this concept was applied as a means of analyzing young adult literature, we can turn to the participants' discussion of Romina Garber's (2020) *Lobizona*. In this novel, the protagonist Manu is an undocumented Argen-

tine immigrant living in Miami, Florida. After her mother is arrested and slated for deportation, Manu discovers that she is also the offspring of a human and a werewolf, or a lobizón. Werewolves are part of the secret society of Septimus, who live parallel to the human world. However, all Septimus men are werewolves and all women are witches, or brujas. Since Manu is a hybrid, she is the only known female werewolf. Such a being is illegal in the Septimus world, making Manu's undocumented existence unlawful twice over.

The novel opens with a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid on Manu's apartment building. Kelly summarized this scene by identifying the first monster in the text: "So like in the beginning, there's like definitely an emphasis on like fear, like the invisible monster of being scared for like being deported." Indeed, fear pervades the opening pages of the novel and is expressed through highly embodied language from the first two sentences: "The morning takes a deep breath. And holds it" (Garber 2020: 1). As Manu and her family hide, Garber (2020) repeatedly calls attention to their emotional and physical stress. In addition to fear, Percy identified the secrecy that Manu must maintain in both the human and Septimus worlds as something monstrous that her life "revolves around." Some of the participants expressed frustration with the reading experience, in part due to Manu's seeming passivity or even stagnancy as a protagonist. Others found that this facet of her character made sense for her lifelong necessity to hide. The opening scene of *Lobizona*, Kelly and Percy's application of the "invisible monster" concept, and the participants' character analyses are all aspects of the overall concept of invisible monstrosity that developed in the group, in which the invisible monster is a force that negatively affects the mobility of bodies and minds.

The concept of the invisible monster adds to ongoing scholarly conversations around affect theory, emotion and language, and metaphor in general. For instance, affect theorist and feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2014) describes the spatial and embodied dimensions of fear thus: "Fear creates the very effect of 'that which I am not', through *running away from an object*, which nevertheless threatens as it passes by or is displaced. To this extent, fear does not involve the defense of borders that already exist; rather fear makes those borders, by establishing objects from which the subject, in fearing, can flee" (67, emphasis original). Similarly, though working from a different discipline, linguist Zoltán Kövecses (2000) names "EMOTION IS FORCE" as the "master metaphor" (61) used to conceptualize emotion in language. In metaphor after metaphor, emotion

is framed as an antagonist that pushes, fills, or otherwise acts upon the subject's body (Kövecses 2000). The Monster Book Club participants' use of the monster metaphor to frame forceful, embodied dimensions of negative emotion not only brings Ahmed (2014) and Kövecses (2000) into conversation with one another, but also opens new ways of considering how emotion can be conceptualized and understood through a shared cultural narrative like the monster mythology. Their ideas add to the work of scholars like Weinstock (2013) by illuminating how the invisible forces that seem most monstrous may vary across demographics. Instead of psychopathy or viral contagion, two of Weinstock's (2013) examples, the participants instead focused on their experiences with mental illnesses such as depression, OCD, or eating disorders, as well as chronic illnesses and pain. By using the invisible monster framework, these young people make visible the hidden struggles that they find most challenging.

The Monstrous Oppressed

The concept of monsters as metaphors for marginalization is well trod academic ground. Poole's (2011) survey of American monsters explores iterations of monstrosity that include the relationships between cannibal stories and the enslavement of Africans, sexualized vampirism and the women's rights movement, and lynch mobs and the 1931 Hollywood film adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Scholarship about monstrosity as a way of conceptualizing marginalized gender, sexuality, race, and disability abounds (Cohen 1996, Stryker 1994, Oswald 2013, Thomas 2019, Papps 2019). This combination of monstrosity and representations of actual marginalized identities make a frequent appearance in YA literature. Consider Hal Schrieve's (2019) two focalizing characters, a nonbinary zombie and a Turkish-American lesbian werewolf, Garber's (2020) undocumented hybrid Manu, and Douglass's (2021) Black gay medium Jake.

The Monster Book Club participants' discussions of the monstrous oppressed enrich literary and scholarly conversations with valuable grounded accounts of youth experiences of oppression. Many of the participants expressed deep concern about the erosion of rights for marginalized populations in the United States over the course of the study. They had a keen eye for the relationship between fictional narratives and actual events. For instance, the participant Redamancy, a 14-year-old Mexican American, relayed an anecdote about sharing the plot of a mystery novel with their father. When they described a scene of a shooting, their

father told them a story not from a book, but from recent history, in which a mass shooter had targeted Mexicans and Mexican Americans at a shopping mall. Redamancy explained, "You put yourself in that position. Like if I was at that mall and he saw me, I would've been shot. And that's really scary to think about, that like it's not just in books. It's not just in literature. Literature reflects life."

Dehumanizing narratives of monstrosity are not just abstract academic concepts. Consider the opening campaign speech of Donald Trump in 2015, in which he compared Mexican immigrants to rapists. This antagonistic cultural framework allows people to insert themselves into a recognizable monsters-versus-heroes narrative, but only along identity lines. The shooter's ideology can be understood as a play in which he inhabits what he perceives as the role of a hero, transforming his violence into a defense against monstrosity. Redamancy – who, as the youngest in the book club, would have still been a prepubescent child at the time of the shooting their father described – is placed by Trump's narrative in the same ontological, unchangeable category as the allegedly violent immigrants. Therefore, Redamancy can only locate themself in this story as one of the monsters who are feared and fought unto their deaths: "I would've been shot."

So what can young people do when their social contexts place them in positions of oppression via monstrous narratives? One avenue that many young adult fantasy novels explore is the act of reclamation. Monstrosity is positioned as an identity of power, pride, and potential, as long as the "monstrous" young person in question is able to positively reinterpret the aspects of their identity that are socially outcast. For instance, in the climactic scene of *Out of Salem,* the monstrous teen protagonists tap into the powers that their society abhors – such as the werewolf Aysel's magic of change and the zombie Z's merging of life and death – to transform arresting police and police cars, agents of the state that has legally declared them less than human, into a mystical forest landscape (Schrieve 2019). This denouement is a culmination of the novel's themes of forming powerful connections among a found family of Othered people (with magical and real racial, gender, and sexual identities textually intertwined) and using the very things that society fears about them to help themselves and each other.

Quite a few of the Monster Book Club participants found this narrative of reclaiming the monstrosity of the oppressed to be resonant, placing them among the ranks of scholars such as transgender theorist and activist Susan Stryker (1994), who writes of the power she derives from a monstrous understanding of herself, and urges others to do the same: "I call upon you to risk abjection and flourish

as well as have I" (241). As Pluto explained, "I feel like the power of like monstrosity is all about like identifying like an implied threat or like even just like a potential danger, so then like reclaiming it can be like, yeah, this *is* a danger to your ideals. This is because your ideals like are kind of harmful." Lotus agreed: "Yes! Definitely. I can relate to that feeling as a queer teenager." Speaking from his position as a multiracial youth, Lotus also noted that reclamation of fearsome power is a strategy that can have tangible community effects. He related the police intimidation strategies employed by the Black Panther Party during the American Civil Rights movement: "I kind of feel like that was a way of using the very negative stereotype that still exists today of like the angry Black man, threatening Black man with a gun, to get these police officers scared enough that they will stop brutalizing and victimizing these innocent people who want to go about their days." Lily concurred, explaining that reclaiming monstrosity is a way of "restating who we are, like showing who's boss, you know? Like instilling fear into the people, but also showing like decency in a way." Returning to the notion of fear as an "invisible monster," we can understand why Lily sees such potential power in being the one to control fear – and the potential "decency" of using this power to aid one's own marginalized communities.

Crucially, however, the realities that necessitate reclamation should not be forgotten. Levy explained, "Well, you never want people to make you a monster. You want to be celebrated for who you are, not demonized. So personally, I always want to make people see me for who I am and not the preconceived notions of what's been presented to them as a monster." In other words, one can only reclaim the power of the monstrous oppressed if one has already been oppressed in the first place. Authors and scholars who would pay attention to Levy's caveat would be in a strong position to craft or analyze monster narratives in ways that cleave closely to the experiences of multiply marginalized young people. When working with youth, it is especially essential for adult thinkers to remember the many geographical, financial, and legal restrictions that minors face when determining how feasible it is for young people facing oppression to meaningfully "reclaim" power that they might have little access to in the first place.

The Monstrous Oppressor

The third type of monster that the participants discussed flips the most common scholarly script. Eason defined what I name the monstrous oppressor succinctly: "At least in my view, a lot of times, people in the real world that I would kind of consider monstrous tend to be those who try and take power away from others in a cruel way." Economic historian and political scientist David McNally (2011), author of *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires, and Global Capitalism*, calls out what he sees as an often one-sided scholarly approach in the "giddy embrace of monstrosity is underway, as monsters are positioned as heroic outsiders, markers of nonconformity and perversity, representing all those marginalized by dominant discourses and social values" (10). He reminds us that monstrosity is not a metaphor that belongs only to the powerful: "subaltern groups in capitalist society attach images of monstrosity to oppressive powers, not just subversive ones" (McNally 2011: 12). Remembering that by calling someone or something a monster, a person or group designates that entity as anti-human according to their definitions of humanity, we can therefore use subaltern designations of monstrosity to determine how oppressed and marginalized people *define humanity differently* than their oppressors, who deny them access to that category in turn. Here again, engaging with young people's theories can help us understand how the standpoint of youth may influence these definitions.

Explorations of the monstrous oppressor appeared in some of the YA selections for the book club, such as Victoria Lee's (2019) *The Fever King*. In this dystopian novel, Calix Lehrer, the chancellor of the post-nuclear nation of Carolinia, wields magical pandemics and refugee crises for his own political ends, all while crafting a political narrative that tricks the public into seeing his victims, and not him, as the ones who are truly monstrous. This depiction falls in line with Weinstock's (2013) discussion of the monstrous government that "[furthers] its own clandestine and menacing agenda without regard for the health or welfare of the general populace" (284). Lehrer's state-wide manipulations are also reproduced on a smaller scale, as he abuses two orphaned teenagers in his charge, one of whom is the novel's protagonist Noam. Redamancy noted that this pairing of macro and micro abuses was an effective way of telling a story about abusing power for young people, since "definitely younger people are persuaded by like people that they see as like parental figures. Like it's very easy for younger people to be persuaded by those that they see so highly." The "monstrous" portrayal of

Lehrer reflects the way that the participants most frequently used the language of monstrosity to denounce people and systems that they saw as dangerous. To them, "real" monsters are determined not by identity categories or difference, but by the infliction of mental and/or material harm.

If monstrous oppressors are those who use outsize power to harm others, minors make a very easy target. Multiply marginalized young people may feel the need for caution in their expressions of self or belief, even if that means stifling their own values. For instance, Lily discussed being reticent to share her opinions about border control and immigration as a Latina because "you don't know what [other people] could say, as well." Levy, meanwhile, had to exercise caution in the home. When she first expressed interest in joining the study partially based on her nonbinary gender and pansexuality, she implored me not to reveal that information to her mother when requesting her signature on the parental consent form. Then, during a one-on-one interview, I asked about her political views, and she typed "liberal-leaning" in the Zoom chat as opposed to saying it aloud, again because her conservative religious mother was in earshot. Later, when she talked about how her views on immigration differ from her family's, she said, "My mother's looking at me like I did something weird."

Young people with minoritized identities must often protect themselves by concealing their own knowledge from adults who wield power over the material circumstances of their lives. Minors must live under the legal guardianship of adults, and their political knowledge is minimized by the social norms and laws that devalue the autonomy of youth, up to and including age restrictions on voting. Not all youth political engagement can safely look like activism. For researchers to reach youth theorists where they are and bring their ideas into politically-charged conversations – such as more theorization of the monstrosity of oppressors, as McNally (2011) calls for – projects where young people's political ideas are explored through a more oblique approach, such as engagement with media, can help to paint fuller scholarly pictures.

When we engage with young people's political criticisms, we can gain access to invaluable insights. Returning to the question of what constitutes a truly monstrous expression of power, Percy argued, "I think it's ridiculous that we still have wars for anything in the year 2022 when pretty much like we have the resources to meet everyone's basic needs, if we can just wrest it from the hands of the billionaires." Percy's word choice of "ridiculous" conveyed not just frustration but *exasperation*. The implication, which was often shared in this study, was that if

the participants had the power to make a change, it would already be done. On the surface, this framing of geopolitical challenges as "ridiculous" would strike many adults as youthfully idealistic or naive. But during that discussion and others, Percy described his eager self-education on topics such as nuclear energy, economic exploitation, and media propaganda. His declaration that war is a "ridiculous" means of resource acquisition was not an expression of ignorance. To my mind, the derision inherent in "ridiculous" is not just a potential means of diminishing the power of the monstrous oppressor, but also a contribution that young people specifically can offer to political discourse. Topics such as war, resources, and human rights are often presented as thorny, controversial issues by adult politicians and pundits. "Ridiculous" rejects the reliance on complexity as excuse. "Ridiculous" is an accusation, an indictment to those with the power that teenagers lack. Percy's exasperation cannot be separated from his standpoint as a sixteen-year-old with little influence on political outcomes, down to his inability to vote. Minors cannot gain from rhetoric that emphasizes how difficult these problems are to solve, because they are not in the position to solve them. They do not have to cater to opponents, constituents, or stakeholders. Young people's lack of political influence can lend them a sort of freedom in their language that makes their ideas all the more important to seek out and engage with.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Monstrosity is a common language by which all strata of society, for better or worse, distance or disqualify certain actions or ways of being from the category of humanity. Monster Book Club and ethnographic projects like it can interrogate how these fundamental concepts of language and shared narrative are understood beyond academia. This study allowed young people to participate in knowledge production in a manner consistent with their desires for peer connection and narrative pleasure. Exploring inherently cross-disciplinary topics such as monstrosity through ethnographic research only deepens and broadens the contributions that young participants can provide.

If monsters have a thousand meanings (Poole 2011: xiv), then we must recognize that at least one of them is *fun*. The novels that Monster Book Club discussed, as thematically dark as they often were, were intended for the leisure and entertainment of teenage readers. Through discussing these novels, the participants

explored their own racialized, queer, disabled, and/or gendered identities; inequalities across geography and class; and the cultural metaphors of monstrosity that help to define the aforementioned concepts and codify our social norms. The participants did this work not in spite of but because of the fact that these conversations also included zombies, werewolves, mediums, vampires, and illicit magic. Many of the members of this group would not have had the opportunity – or the desire – to hold these discussions if the study had been a current events or activist organization, as opposed to a book club. If I had not provided a free, accessible, enjoyable, and interpersonal research opportunity, I would have missed out on learning from this group of young thinkers.

When adults take young people seriously, there can be benefits for youth participants, as well – and if we take up the call to involve young people in our intellectual endeavors now, those benefits will arrive at a moment when many teenagers sorely need them. Eason complained that she has often heard the criticism that Gen Z has "no motivation." She countered that, in her experience, what adults see as apathy is often an expression of hopelessness when faced with environmental, economic, and political harms that Eason and her peers did not create and yet are forced to spend their lives combatting. Lex noted that the charge of apathy is part of a broader pattern of older generations scapegoating youth for societal problems. Lex theorized that this pattern, which has reoccurred continuously throughout history, is an adult reaction to experiencing the same feelings of helplessness that Eason expressed. It is easier to blame young people with relatively little social power than to oppose the massive systems that Monster Book Club classified as monstrous oppressors – yet this is the work that is necessary for people of all generations. Finding ways to research with and listen to young people can build solidarity between generations. Otherwise, generational blame is only reproduced, sometimes by young people themselves, as Bill explained: "There are even kids right now who are like, this generation sucks, like a lot of them." When a population's knowledge is dismissed, or reduced only to harm or struggle, as Tuck (2009) tells us, people learn to distrust the experiences of their communities, thereby alienating them from their own perspectives.

At the same time, adult scholars need to be wary of tokenizing youth participants and generalizing experiences beyond reasonable conclusions. This, too, would be a form of warping or diminishing youth knowledge. As Pluto explained, the role of "the smart one" can be stifling for a young person to perform, and it is easily revoked:

> … if anyone in my family wants to like prove a point, they'll just be like, Pluto, what do you think? And then the like result is usually either that like I will say something and agree with them and they'll be satisfied and move on with their day, or I'll say something that disagrees with them, and they'll be quite unhappy, and be like, okay, well, you're only sixteen, so what do you even know, really?

To avoid the two common adult pitfalls of engaging with youth theory – dismissal and tokenization – principles of desire-centered research are crucial. Honoring refusal, listening to silences, and allowing participants to express their whole selves, not just whatever seems most relevant to the scholar's lens, are not complete safeguards against the inherent power imbalance between adult researchers and youth participants, but they are a solid and important start.

A major tenet of feminist and decolonizing research methods is that research with other humans should not be primarily extractive (Sprague 2016, Tuck 2009, Tuck and Yang 2014). At the end of Monster Book Club, the participants conveyed their appreciation for the opportunity to take part in the study. Eason expressed gratitude for what she described as a "safe space for everyone." Pluto described Monster Book Club as a "really good and really fun experience." When I attempted to demur from their thanks, as I believed that it was the participants who had made the experience so positive, Kelly replied, "No, but you gave us a chance to like talk about things, issues, and like a space that was safe and comfortable for everybody." Lily followed with, "This has been one of the best experiences I've had, talking with other people and just getting to know everyone and their opinions. It just – it was really amazing." Sirius extended his gratitude to his fellow participants, as well: "Yeah, it was really great to be here, mostly because I get to talk to people who don't get annoyed when I talk about books for an hour." Levy summed up the participants' feelings by describing Monster Book Club as "an aggressively positive experience."

I include these comments not to toot my own horn, but because I am eager to share the benefits that the participants felt this experience granted them. The social and emotional outcomes of a project that provides intellectual stimulation, peer connections, access to desired media, and an adult that takes youth theory seriously are perhaps the most significant reason I can cite for more scholars to undertake studies like Monster Book Club. Participatory, desire-based, *fun* research gives young people a way to reclaim their voices while also providing access to

adult listeners they cannot usually reach. Youth knowledge does not depend on academic disciplines, yet throughout my study, the participants echoed and added to all the humanities and social science fields in which monsters reside – which is to say, nearly all of them. The participants' theories open the door to further exploration of the politics of monstrosity as they are experienced by people who read about, reference, and are often made to feel like monsters.

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Klub čitatelja knjiga o čudovištima: književnost za mlade kao poticaj stjecanju političkog znanja među suvremenom mladom publikom

Sažetak

S obzirom na to da je postupanje maloljetnika ograničeno u pravnom, zemljopisnom i financijskom smislu, mnogi se mladi ljudi suočavaju s poteškoćama kad je posrijedi izravno angažiranje u društvenim aktivnostima ili političkom aktivizmu. Istraživači stoga moraju teoretskim spoznajama o mladima pristupiti kreativno i u fokus postaviti osobnu motivaciju kako bi doprli do što većeg broja mladih. U ovom se radu obrađuju metodologija i teoretski zaključci šestomjesečne digitalne etnografske studije tijekom koje je dvanaestero američkih tinejdžera čitalo i analiziralo beletristička književna djela namijenjena mladima u kojima su političke teme prikazane kroz prizmu metafore čudovišnosti. Tijekom studije sudionici su teorije o čudovišnosti podijelili u tri pojmovne kategorije: nevidljiva čudovišta (unutrašnje sile), potlačena čudovišnost i čudovišni tlačitelji. Cilj je ovoga rada dokazati da metodološko uključivanje književnosti za mlade u poticanje stjecanja političkog znanja među mladima rezultira teoretskim premrežavanjem akademskih disciplina, a mladim sudionicima istraživanja nudi društvene, emocionalne i intelektualne prednosti.

Ključne riječi:
klub čitatelja knjiga o čudovištima, političko znanje, teorije o čudovišnosti, književnost za mlade