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We Are All Monsters: Radical Relationality During Planetary Crisis

Abstract: Earth's climate is ever changing; yet for the first time in our planet's history, *Homo sapiens* are the primary agents of this change. With this realization in mind, some geologists hope to rename our current terrestrial epoch the Anthropocene. Critical theorists have responded with alternate names – such as the Capitalocene or the Plantationocene – that point directly to the kinds of human activity that have led our planet to its current predicament. This paper begins with the premise that we are currently living through what environmental philosopher and multispecies feminist theorist Donna J. Haraway has named the Chthulucene: the age of monsters. If rationalocentric thinking of Enlightened Man helped bring about the Anthropocene, then what kind of worlds can emerge by turning away from Man and towards a radical reimagining of ourselves as monsters? What can chthonic stories teach us about how to live and die well together during a time of mass extinction? Drawing primarily from the emerging interdisciplinary field of art, science, and technology studies (ASTS), this paper offers a creatively narrated analysis of three chthonic narratives: Cold War satirical film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, Octavia E. Butler's post-nuclear-apocalyptic novel *Dawn*, and my own psychotic episodes involving nuclear apocalypse. These narratives, along with the Chthulucene itself, challenge the Western cultural distinction between the real and the imagined in order to make room for radical forms of relationality that can change how we Earthly beings identify, respond to, and care for each other as we collectively move through our planetary crisis and into other possible worlds.

Keywords: speculative fiction; creative nonfiction; environment; ontology; embodiment.

Introduction: Suspended disbelief

*This is it, the apocalypse
I'm waking up, I feel it in my bones
Enough to make my systems blow
Welcome to the new age, to the new age...
I'm radioactive*

—Imagine Dragons¹

¹ Imagine Dragons, "Radioactive," track 1 on *Night Visions*, Interscope Records, 2012, compact disc.

I encourage you, dear reader, to question your unwavering identity as human, as a *Homo sapiens*. In fact, set it aside for the duration of this essay. The enlightened, rationalocentric, and imagined Western conception of the Human has proven to poorly serve those dependent on planet Earth and its life systems—and I believe that includes all of us, regardless of our taxonomy. Instead, I want you to imagine yourself as a monster, living in a world populated with nothing but monsters. What's more, being monstrous, I am in you, and you are in me. It is difficult to tell where I end and you begin.

Western myths, legends, and fairytales have taught us over the centuries that the monster serves as foil to the human. Whether tentacular, fanged, or horned, a monster's grotesque visage is a physical manifestation of its chaotic, destructive, or evil intention. Monsters have terrified humans for ages because they are portrayed as diametrically opposed to the positive qualities of humanity: they lack the capacity to love, empathize, or care for anyone but themselves and their obsessions. Their existence is a threat to the human way of life. They must be vanquished for humans to flourish.

This is a rather simplistic understanding of monstrousness. It is also a dangerous one, especially when hegemonic forces make certain groups of humans (and non-humans) monstrous in this simplistic sense due to their genotypic, phenotypic, or cultural differences.² In this essay, I reclaim the monstrous category. No longer the foil to some ideal notion of the human, the monsters I deal with here are complex: human, nonhuman, and more-than-human amalgamations. They are capable of loving and hating, of caring for some but not others, with varying degrees of selfishness and obsession. They have the power to both destroy and to create worlds, sometimes at once. These are the monsters that environmental philosopher and multispecies feminist Donna J. Haraway calls the “chthonic ones”.

I am of the position that the current planetary crisis we Earthlings face is best understood as what Haraway has described as the Chthulucene, or the age of monsters, in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.³ The Chthulucene is a temporality of the here and now, in which humans and nonhumans are inextricably

² Painful histories of colonization, domination, and genocide around the globe reveal how deadly ‘othering’ practices can be. For detailed tracings of the ways that racialized logics categorized human difference as monstrous (either for being primitive, subhuman, bestial, or demonic), see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980); and Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004). For investigations of how mental health stigmatization connects monstrosity to madness and leads to marginalization and oppression, see Tanya M. Luhrmann and Jocelyn Marrow, eds., *Our Most Troubling Madness: Case Studies in Schizophrenia Across Cultures* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); and Jenell Johnson, *American Lobotomy: A Rhetorical History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014). For studies analyzing how these monstrous themes figure in famous literary works and shape certain Western cultural legacies, see Howard L. Malchow, “Frankenstein’s Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Past & Present* 139 (1993): 90–130; and Mikko Tuhkanen, “Grotesquely Becoming: Tarzan’s ‘Queer Homonization,’” *Diacritics* 44, 1 (2016): 28–58.

³ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

linked. Multispecies survival in this timeplace hence requires imagining ways of relating to each other that are more mutually generative rather than destructive.

Here's the thing about imagination: Despite what I was taught as a child, one does not necessarily grow out of the world of make-believe. After experiencing two weeks of insomnia-induced mania and psychosis in January 2022, and later being diagnosed as bipolar at the age of 31, I have come to realize that my beliefs about the world(s) around me can sometimes become embodied, a felt reality of such veracity that my distinction between the real and the imagined has been irrevocably transformed. Fact and fiction are no longer dichotomies, but rather exist on a continuum of shared embodied experience. I no longer ask myself "is this real?" or "did I imagine that?" but rather "who/what else shared this experience with me?" and "how can I commune with those who shared this experience?"

The latter set of questions help me relate to myself and others in radically different ways. For one, the answers are never "no one/nothing" or "I cannot commune". This is the practice of radical relationality that Haraway calls *sympoiesis* or "making-with"⁴. Sympoiesis challenges the notion that I am ever a singular *I*. Since experiencing manic psychosis – which I would more accurately describe as waking dreams – I have been practicing phenomenologically what it means to be a constant, everchanging *We*.⁵

I use the phenomenological insights from my psychotic episodes and bipolarity to explore two states of monstrousness as theorized by Haraway that I have found in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 Cold War satire *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* and Octavia E. Butler's 1987 science fiction novel *Dawn*.⁶

Haraway plays with many monstrous forms in *Staying with the Trouble*. The two kinds of monsters, and their qualities, that I find more useful to think with than the monsters of lore are what Haraway calls the *godkin* and *oddkin*. The former applies to a markedly Western, rationalocentric, ideal form of *Homo sapiens* known as Modern Man, and those that strive to embody him (regardless of their race, gender, or creed): those who embrace and idolize White, Judeo-Christian, colonialist, neoliberal, heteronormative, ableist, and otherwise xenophobic ways of being.⁷ Godkin, otherwise known as "sky-gazing Homo",⁸ are beings of the sky, full of masculinist universals and human exceptionalism, who look up to God or technology or both to save humanity

⁴ Ibid, 58.

⁵ Activism and scholarship in the emerging field of crip technoscience, which works at the intersections of feminist technoscience and critical disability studies, has inspired me to treat psychosis not as a symptom of disease or sickness but as a way of feeling, sensing, and being that can contribute to disability world-building that embraces embodied difference. See Kelly Fritsch, Aimi Hamraie, Mara Mills, and David Serlin, "Introduction to Special Section on Crip Technoscience," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, 1 (2019): 1–10.

⁶ Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Columbia Pictures, 1964). Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Guild America Books, 1987).

⁷ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30.

⁸ Ibid, 2.

from ecocide and Armageddon.⁹ The monsters in *Strangelove* are godkin. It is rather apt that their war is fought in the sky, their weapons as radiant as a thousand suns.

Oddkin, in contrast, are also known as the chthonic ones, meaning “of the earth”. They are everyone who falls out of the celestial godkin category. These monsters are cyborg, chimera. They are “intra-active entities-in-assemblages”, human and more-than-human, more than a single body, species, or entity.¹⁰ Also known as critters (though they need not be organic or biotic – for example, they can include machines and pieces of furniture), they challenge the notion of stable bodily boundaries:

Critters – human and not – become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tanglings, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding... Critters are in each other’s presence, or better, inside each other’s tubes, folds, crevices, insides and outside, and not quite either.¹¹

Oddkin are hybrid creatures whose bodies-as-assemblages, as well as their ways of sensing and relating to others like and unlike themselves, challenge the aspirations and orchestrations of godkin. Despite their celestial origins, Butler’s Oankali, the extraterrestrial entities introduced in *Dawn*, the first of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, squarely fall into the oddkin category. The humans that survive the nuclear apocalypse instigated by the godkin when the Cold War turned hot must struggle to transition from godkin to oddkin. Some are unable to let go of the old ideals that eventually led to ecocide. They cling tightly to ideas of the nuclear family (kindly note the pun) as well as the godkin’s myth of the Human. Others undergo a more intriguing and promising symbiotic transition.

My own personal encounter with nuclear apocalypse in the form of psychosis helps me make sense of the kinds of monsters I encounter in *Strangelove* and *Dawn*. Thus, these three chthonic narratives have helped me explore what it feels like to be monstrous, to seriously identify as a chthonic one. They help me relate to myself and others as monsters with unstable bodies, always becoming and unbecoming. By learning how to feel and relate in this way, sympoietically, perhaps both you and I, dear reader, can learn to live together amongst the dying, and die together amongst those who will outlive us. These stories offer examples of how to make kin, not enemies, which requires empathy and a recognition of oneself in the other, no matter how foreign or repulsive they may initially seem.

In short, I encourage you, dear reader, to identify with both godkin and oddkin, as I have, with both kinds of monstrosity and every other in between. I ask you not to vanquish the monster like the knight in shining armor, but to love them as you would

⁹ Ibid, 11–12.

¹⁰ Ibid, 97.

¹¹ Ibid, 97–98.

yourself. Because you are them. You are in them, and they are in you. By identifying with monsters, with your own monstrosity, perhaps you will learn to thrive alongside them. This is radical relationality.¹² This is what multi-species – and multi-monstrous – life in the Chthulucene calls for. Welcome.

The Godkin: Learning to Love the Bomb is Strange

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb had its box office release in 1964, a year and three months after the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the film, Cold War maneuverings between the Soviet Union and the United States literally turn explosive when a paranoid US Air Force officer, General Jack Ripper, manages to outwit the complex series of checks and balances meant to keep nuclear warfare a real threat but not an actual reality. Sworn Soviet and American enemies must then work together to recall a team of American bombers who have been fooled into deploying their nuclear arsenal. The attempt to recall the wing fails in a darkly hilarious fashion. The subsequent nuclear attack on the USSR triggers the nuclear apocalypse in the form of a “doomsday machine”, a special nuclear device meant to “destroy all human and animal life on Earth” and is programmed to self-destruct if it senses either a nuclear attack or an attempt to defuse the machine.¹³ The film ends with multiple mushroom clouds blooming over the Earth’s atmosphere.

Being in the Chthulucene, I take the film’s seemingly sarcastic subtitle seriously. I’m not sure if I’ve stopped worrying about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, given the over 12,000 nuclear weapons stockpiled around the world.¹⁴ But as a chthonic story, the film is teaching me to see parts of myself in every character and the monstrous assemblages they make. The nuclear godkin are egoistic, self-serving. They try to protect the boundaries of their bodies and their egos and their interests too tightly, seeing threats everywhere. Yet the generals, soldiers, the bikini-clad secretary, and even the nuclear bombs themselves; they are the godkin inside of me.

One monstrous assemblage of godkin is particularly revelatory. It consists of Air Force General Jack Ripper, his team of B-52 bombers (including the planes, the nuclear warheads, and the “A Toast to Bikinis” issue of *Playboy Magazine* that an

¹² Haraway is far from the first to offer examples of radical relationality. Wisdom from ancient indigenous and contemplative traditions around the world that were historically dismissed or suppressed are being ‘rediscovered’ by contemporary scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and even the natural sciences. For further examples of radical relationality, see Kim TallBear and Angela Willey, “Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature,” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 10, 1 (2019): 5–15; Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minnesota: Milkweed editions, 2013); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Daniel J. Siegel and Chloe Drulis, “An Interpersonal Neurobiology Perspective on the Mind and Mental Health: Personal, Public, and Planetary Well-Being,” *Annals of General Psychiatry* 22, 1 (2023): 5.

¹³ Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*.

¹⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. *SIPRI Yearbook 2022: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 15.

airman keeps for company), and fluoridated water.¹⁵

After General Ripper has issued the attack orders from the Burpelson Air Force Base which he commands, fooling his pilots into believing that the Russians must have launched the first strike, he locks himself into his office with fellow officer Group Captain Lionel Mandrake. Noticing the general's strange behavior, Mandrake becomes suspicious of the general's orders and fears that Ripper has gone insane (after all, only a madman would actually start a nuclear war). The audience learns that Ripper has become so paranoid about the enemy that he believes they are fluoridating American drinking water as a form of mind control. As a precautionary measure, the general now subsists on grain alcohol mixed with rainwater. Stone-faced, and with an even yet resolute tone, he tells the frightened Mandrake that he can "no longer sit back and allow [...] the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids."

This monstrous godkin amalgamation is best described in a transcript of General Ripper's phone call with Strategic Air Command Headquarters. When asked if he meant to launch the first-strike attack, Ripper replies:

Yes, gentlemen, they are on their way and no one can bring them back. For the sake of our country and our way of life I suggest you get the rest of SAC [Strategic Air Command] in after them, otherwise we will be totally destroyed by Red retaliation. My boys will give you the best kind of start: 1,400 megatons worth. And you sure as hell won't stop them now. So let's get going. There's no other choice. God willing, we will prevail in peace and freedom from fear, and in true health through the purity and essence of our natural fluids. God bless you all.

When the US President hears the transcript, he proclaims, "This man is obviously a psychotic." (As though the entire game of nuclear chicken that the world's superpowers had the biosphere engaged in was not.)

The monster-as-assemblage described in the transcript – which includes General Ripper, the men in the War Room, the men in the sky, all their bodily fluids, even the sky and its rainwater – is one blinded by the inability to see themselves in their enemy. The identities of the men in the assemblage, who see themselves as rational, honorable heroes protecting a sacred way of life, prevent them from relating to those that deviate from their ideals and narrow worldview. Ripper's paranoid obsession with the purity of his nation's bodily fluids – along with his eventual suicide – reveals how alienating and ultimately destructive self-preservation becomes; better to destroy

¹⁵ "A Toast to Bikinis" was an actual *Playboy Magazine* issue published in June 1962, which reminded its readers of the connection between the birth of this style of swimsuit and the US nuclear bombing of Bikini Atoll in the 1940s and '50s. Thanks to Michael Colello at Central European University for also pointing out to me the wordplay in the title: how the act of toasting can refer to both 'honoring' and 'scorching'. Moreover, the issue includes an interview with Edward Bernays, a public relations campaigner who worked on convincing the American public that water fluoridation was safe. For further insights into how Kubrick incorporated other Cold War cultural references in the film, see Grant B. Stillman, "Two of the MADdest Scientists: Where Strangelove Meets Dr. No; or, Unexpected Roots for Kubrick's Cold War Classic," *Film History* 20, 4 (2008): 487–500.

oneself than merge with something foreign and seemingly abhorrent. The policing of bodily boundaries becomes self-destructive in the end. The entire Cold War machine (except for perhaps the mushroom clouds, who have the last word) fails to accept the collections of human and non-human others as part of itself.

The film's lesson for me is to not let fear and paranoia surrounding identification with the other lead to the creation of enemies and, ultimately, mutual destruction. Having felt the fear and paranoia of a nuclear attack during a psychotic episode (such feelings are common during psychosis), I especially empathize with the consuming nature of General Ripper's fear. Yet I do not fear impurity as he does. In the Chthulucene, purity is not only impossible, it is unethical. I recognize myself in others, human and beyond-human, living and non-living. I do not seek to make them threats to my identity. I choose to make kin, not enemies, even with the godkin. How do I embrace them with love, compassion, and forgiveness without condoning their actions? How do I see myself in them? Yes, making kin in this way is daunting and at times terrifying. Yet it is how I work through my fear of nuclear apocalypse. This is what learning to love the bomb means to me.



Figure 1 Movie still from *Dr. Strangelove*: General Jack Ripper reflects on the purity of his nation's bodily fluids. By x-ray delta one, licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



Figure 2 Movie still from *Dr. Strangelove*: Major TJ “King” Kong rides the bomb that triggers the nuclear apocalypse. By twm1340, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

The Oddkin: Tentacular Love

If *Strangelove* highlights the destructive results of the godkin’s alienation, Butler’s science fiction novel, *Dawn*, demonstrates the creative potential of the oddkin. *Dawn* was written as the first installment of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy by Octavia E. Butler in 1987, before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It starts where *Strangelove* ends: Planet Earth is destroyed after the Cold War turns hot and a nuclear apocalypse leads to ecocide. A highly advanced alien species called the Oankali, in search of a new home planet, scoop up the surviving humans and other Earthly lifeforms in order to exchange genetic material with them and create new hybrid species of life fit for survival on the irradiated Earth. In order to ensure a symbiotic relationship, the Oankali make genetic modifications on the surviving humans, resulting in the latter being unable to reproduce without also having Oankali mates. The humans must then decide to either hybridize with the Oankali and rebuild Earth together or continue what the nuclear war started and allow *Homo sapiens* to go extinct. In short, the organisms best suited for survival in this post-nuclear-apocalyptic world are those that accept entering symbiotic relations with vastly different life forms.

The Oankali are so phenotypically different from the humans that they seem monstrous in the archaic, fairytale sense. The humans find them “grotesque, repellent beyond mere ugliness”, with wormlike and snakelike sensory tentacles covering most of their bodies.¹⁶ However, there are ways in which the Oankali are even more humane than the humans. They are such empathic and sensitive creatures that they literally feel the pleasure and pain of those around them by “plugging into” their central nervous systems with as little as a touch.¹⁷ Their ability to perceive and effectively interpret human body language, as well as the human genome, is such that they seem to read human minds as they simultaneously cure their bodies of diseases such as cancer. The Oankali do not settle conflicts with violence. They are even vegetarian.

The Oankali highly value diversity. Unlike the humans who reject them for being so utterly foreign, they seek out difference, recognizing it for the evolutionary imperative that it is. Having no home planet of their own, hybridization with species from other planets is how they have been able to survive and evolve into highly advanced beings that can travel across the galaxy.

For the remaining humans, the price of continued survival on Earth requires an incredibly intimate form of interdependence – accepting Oankali mates and giving birth to a new hybrid species, no longer purely human, no longer purely Oankali. If the humans can accept the Oankali as kin, creating and raising families with them, then the Oankali will alter the surviving humans’ genes so that, in their own lifetimes, they will become not only faster, stronger, and smarter, but also more empathetic, more feeling, and much less likely to inflict pain or resort to violence, since they will be able to feel the pleasure and pain of others as though it were their own. Individual experiences are thus superseded by collective felt experiences thanks to vastly improved sensory communication between bodies. In this way, bodily boundaries themselves are constantly contested.

Unfortunately, most of the surviving humans presented in the novel would rather die than “betray” their humanity and engage in such an “unclean” way of life.¹⁸ Like General Ripper and his fellow godkin, by rejecting the oddkin, most humans choose sterility and eventual self-annihilation for the sake of misguided ideals about purity. Only one human, Lilith, ultimately concedes to having a hybrid child. Yet even she struggles to accept the child. When she tells her Oankali mate, Nikanj, that the child will be a monster because it is not human, Nikanj responds, “You shouldn’t begin to lie to yourself. It’s a deadly habit [...] Our children won’t destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they’ll be able to do it.” To which Lilith retorts, “But they won’t be human [...] that’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters.” Nikanj, however, has the final sage word: “The child inside you matters.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Butler, *Dawn*, 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 242.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 243.

This chthonic story shows what kinds of worlds are possible if human beings embrace their oddkin. The humans who believe too adamantly in the myth of singular species purity (to say nothing of the racial or ethnic or ideological purity touted by godkin) fail to recognize that they are *already* multispecies hybrids by virtue of being Earthlings. They fail to see themselves as *already* a part of the other. Like in *Strange-love*, this mistake will prove to be their downfall.

By the end of *Dawn*, readers who want to thrive on this new Earth are compelled to accept a new monstrous way of life as oddkin, one that stands a decent chance at symbiotic thriving. If readers side with multispecies survival, then they will embrace the Oankali's sympoietic offer. Perhaps they will even recognize that by continuing to live on Earth, they have already accepted such an arrangement with the chthonic ones that populate it.



Figure 3 Oankali parent with Oankali-human hybrid child. Courtesy of the artist Christian England.



Figure 4 Akin, Oankali-human hybrid son of Lilith (human female), Joseph (human male), Nikanj (third sex ooloi), Ahajas (Oankali female), and Dichaan (Oankali male). He has inherited genes from all five parents. Courtesy of the artist Christian England.

Waking Dreams

In January 2022, in the back seat of a friend's car, I lived through the nuclear apocalypse. The radio had just announced the start of World War III. I could hear the sirens' wail of warning. I became panic-stricken, waiting for the bombs to fall. I counted down from ten. *When I get to zero, I thought, I will be consumed in a blinding flash of fire and heat. This is how I die. Three, two, one ...*

But when I got to zero, nothing happened. My friend continued to drive me to the hospital to get treated for what was later diagnosed as a psychotic episode. I was

informed that the doomsday announcement I had heard on the radio was an auditory hallucination. Yet the whole thing had felt so *real*.

Psychotic episodes for me feel like being caught in a waking dream. My body is physically awake, but my mind is like that of the dreamer's, experiencing fantastical or terrifying scenarios, not realizing that I have been dreaming until I have "awakened" from the episode. Yet my waking dreams are *real*. I feel them bodily. During that same apocalyptic car ride, I later recalled sharing my consciousness with the car itself. I sensed the car's being in a new way. Somehow, we had merged. Its movements were my movements. Like the Oankali "plugging into" another organism's nervous system, the car and I momentarily became one.

The experience reminds me of something the Oankali Nikanj says to Joseph, Nikanj's other human mate that both Lilith and Nikanj share (before Joseph is murdered by other humans for siding with the Oankali). In an attempt to reassure Joseph that mating with Nikanj and Lilith will not be abhorrent, Nikanj tells Joseph, "I offer a oneness that your people strive for, dream of, but can't truly attain alone." Indeed, a sexual encounter between these three mates later fulfills that promise. Told from Lilith's perspective, the passage reads:

It seemed to her that she had always been with [Joseph] ... He had always been there, part of her, essential. Nikanj focused on the intensity of their attraction, their union. It left Lilith no other sensation.²⁰

In other waking dreams, I have felt what it's like to be the microbiome of my gut and the macrobiome of the biosphere. I have simultaneously felt multiplicity and singularity. I feel like myself and not; it feels sticky and writhing and busy. My escapes into waking dreams have expanded my sensorium by turning my imaginings into felt realities. The result is that my imagination carries more weight now, even when I'm not having an episode. Stories become real. They penetrate me. I feel my monstrosity and embrace it. The bomb. The car. The biosphere. This is what it feels like to take the Chthulucene seriously.

On January 19, 2022, during a moment between episodes when I was manic yet lucid, I wrote the following journal entry:

Hello world. I'm back. I never left. I am just one decimal point shifted from whatever I was before. That's why the world is infinite. Infinite worlds, constantly being created and destroyed. We exist in our current forms for as long as we need to. Until our fear becomes our obsession, kills a piece of us, and the fear releases you out of your prison of your own fear's creation. And then you are in paradise... The fear itself ends you. And that's okay because we always end, a million ways, a million little deaths, shifts in the decimal point. So we are all constantly dying

²⁰ *Ibid*, 160.

a little and being reborn a little into new worlds. And so the universe is a multiverse is infinite and will return to nothing, does so all the time.

The secure sense of self, of individuality, that I had taken as a given before I had my episodes of mania and psychosis is now fragmented. I now interpret ‘my’ bodily sensations more loosely and capaciously, reminding myself that I don’t have to believe the quotidian assumption that this body ends at the skin. The heightened sensations I feel when manic, coupled with my waking dreams, help me embrace my monstrousness, practice embracing the other monstrous godkin and oddkin, even if it means relinquishing my sense of self.



Figure 5 “g/oddkin Amalgamation I” by Lissette Lorenz. Mixed media collage



Figure 6 “g/oddkin Amalgamation II” by Lisette Lorenz. Mixed media collage.

Conclusion: A Powerful Imagination

If you, my dear reader, can accept that the imagined is real, that it can be felt and embodied, then perhaps you can accept that the chthonic stories we have explored here are also real and have real world-building consequences. Reality is what you sense, what you notice, and what you attend to. Its materiality is flexible.

Haraway writes, “Neither One nor Other, that is who we all are and always have been. All of us must become more ontologically inventive and sensible within the bumptious holobiome that earth turns out to be, whether called Gaia or a Thousand Other Names.”²¹ Taking chthonic stories seriously, having them change our ontological positions on what we consider to be real or not, human or not – a serious reading (not dismissing it as pure fantasy and fiction) – helps us answer Haraway’s call to become more ontologically inventive. Accept that godkin and oddkin are two sides of the same monstrous coin. Because after all, “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense.”²² If we can recognize this subatomic and phylogenetic fact, then we may stand a chance at thriving together, regardless of the shape and number of appendages we use to sense each other with.

I hope these chthonic stories have challenged you to identify as more than just yourself, with one body and one mind. I hope they have encouraged you to be more open to experiencing yourself as otherwise. You are not only what you eat, but also what you hear, see, smell, and feel. The water you drink and the air you breathe is ancient and monstrous, too. I encourage you to identify with everything your senses encounter, everything you are able to perceive. You are a composite, a continuum. With the help of your imagination and empathy, may chthonic stories help you embrace your monstrosity so that you may embrace all the other monsters around you.

Our monstrosity teaches us how live with, beside, and inside difference. Whether imagined or materially manifested in consensual reality, telling more nuanced and creative stories about monsters is crucial to relearning how to relate to all the other parts of ourselves that we have abandoned, dismissed, or tried to destroy. Embracing our monstrosity means embracing others as ourselves. Because in the Chthulucene, they are.

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²¹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 98.

²² *Ibid*, 103.

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