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Nonbinary Bodies in Contemporary Fantasy and Sci-fi Comics

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma “Nonbinary Bodies in Contemporary Fantasy and Sci-fi Comics” vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucí práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V dne

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1 Introduction

Gender identities out of the established binary have become a frequent subject of discussion in media and public spaces alike in recent years; while various LGBTQ+ activists and scholars have been working to open up the conversation about the spectrum of gender and the previously ignored realities of many queer individuals, others feel threatened by the very visibility of nonbinary individuals in society and culture, which gives rise to the narrative of gender identity being some sort of fad, a trend-motivated choice, rather than a valid identity. Representing nonbinary individuals in media is, then, crucial not only for the chance to allow the nonbinary reader to relate to the nonbinary characters, to feel affirmed, but also for the reader who is ‘outside’ the nonbinary experience and who may then gain understanding and empathetically connect to the nonbinary characters in question. This thesis will be concerned with the representation of nonbinary characters and their bodies in comics and graphic novels of the fantasy and sci-fi genres. Through close readings of chosen comics, informed by intersectional feminism, queer theory, and monster theory, I will examine the particular cases of nonbinary representation in the image-text format, and describe the frequently emerging connection of the nonbinary character to monsters.

The nonbinary subject is, for the most part, an invisible ghost in scholarship. When centering the gender binary and the hierarchical relations between genders, gender studies and feminist scholars focus most often on women’s position in sociocultural environment, mentioning nonbinary gender only rarely. Queer and transgender studies do include nonbinary identity and individuals under their umbrella by design, but they rarely speak the name, instead discussing binary transgender subjectivities and issues. These statements are not trying to suggest that transgender or women’s issues should be discussed less. On the contrary, it is important that these groups are given space and a voice

in scholarship, especially given contemporary discourse around women's and transgender rights and bodies (eg. access to abortion for people with uteri, rape culture, anti-transgender political campaigns and hate crimes, access to gender affirming care, and so on). However, nonbinary individuals often experience such issues as well, along with others pertaining to nonbinary experience (eg. lack of means to express gender identity in official documents, ignored by census, medical professionals not accepting one's identity and existence, and so on). The lack of academic study focusing on such topics is contributing to the overall invisibility of nonbinary people in society.

I have previously mentioned that in the chosen comics, the nonbinary characters often encounter monstrosity in some shape or form: they kill monsters, befriend monsters, or even become them. The study of monsters in comics often pertains to monstrous representations of illness or disability. Aidan Dubhain Diamond argues in his 2017 paper "‘I pledge you!’: Disability, monstrosity and sacrifice in *Wytches*" that disabled, non-normative bodies are treated as expendable and faulty, while the able-bodied individual is treated as the hero; similarly, Mihaela Precup points out that the established 'villain' in ND Stevenson's *Nimona* is framed as such because of his missing arm, not for inner corruption. Eszter Szép analyzes Ken Dahl's comic *Monsters* in her publication *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability* (2020) where the protagonist's sexually transmitted disease is represented as a formless monster threatening to infect, to corrupt. Tina Helbig's 2017 study of the role of touch in uncanny, abjected scenes in comics, such as zombies, rotting flesh, or missing limbs, shows that the direct physical contact of the reader with the comic heightens the feelings of eeriness and disgust, the fear of being infected by the abjected. Concerning the gender monster in comics, the same issue emerges as with the discussion of the 'gender other' in general: it is most often women who are understood as other, not nonbinary individuals. I have outlined at this stage that there is a considerable gap in scholarship

concerning nonbinary people, nonbinary identity in comics, and the connection of nonbinary characters to monstrosity. This thesis, therefore, aims to partially fill this gap: to examine said connection, as well as the figurations of nonbinary gender in fantastical and (near) future worlds, and ultimately strengthen the visibility and presence of the nonbinary subject in scholarship.

This text is rooted in the question of how nonbinary characters and their bodies are represented in comics, and after further searching, two possible routes became available in regards to the genre of source material. Many transgender- or nonbinary-identified characters could be found in memoirs, autobiographies, and ‘diary’ comics focused on the author’s gender identity, such as Maia Kobabe’s acclaimed *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (2019); the webcomic *Gender Slices* (2016 – ongoing) by Jey Pawlik; or a similar webcomic *GQutie! A Webcomic* (2014 – 2017) by Ronnie Ritchie. Various fantasy and sci-fi narratives also focused on (or featured) nonbinary-identified characters, such as *Mooncakes* (2019); *On a Sunbeam* (2018); or the webcomic *Never Satisfied* (2015 – ongoing), to name a few. According to Sean Kleefeld, graphic memoirs and autobiographical material are more frequently the subject of academic study, as non-fiction is perceived as more ‘serious’ and worthy of discussion.¹ I have, therefore, elected to analyze fantasy and sci-fi figuration of nonbinary gender instead, as the ‘make-believe’ narrative worlds of these genres may provide a metaphorical window into more abstract and complex perceptions and representations of queer gender identity, as well as contain reflections of the existing contemporary sociocultural environment.

The works I have chosen to analyze will appear in three separate case studies. The first will examine four short comics from the nonbinary anthology *Heartwood: Non-Binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy* (2019) edited by Joamette Gil, namely “Expand” by Raven White, “The Lungs of Jeju” by Sunmi, “Shepherd” by Cori Walters, and “This Far” by Lee Lai.

¹ Sean Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, Bloomsbury Comics Studies (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 197.

The second case study will pertain to the webcomic turned graphic novel *Mooncakes* (2019) by Suzanne Walker and Wendy Xu; and the last study will juxtapose two works, the graphic novel *On a Sunbeam* (2018) by Tillie Walden and the series *Bitch Planet* (2014 – 2017) by Valentine De Landro and Kelly Sue DeConnick. I argue that the connection or conflation of nonbinary characters with monsters is not problematic, but rather affirming, as the two are related on the basis of being pushed to the margins of discourse, complicating established categories, and threatening norms. Furthermore, I show that in the chosen comics, the monstrous body is often a viable alternative to the gendered body. Nonbinary individuals are continually overlooked – in political systems, in language, in healthcare, in the most common conceptualizations of personal identity as tied to performing binary gender. In conducting this research and describing how nonbinary bodies and subjectivities are represented in the comics medium, I hope to render the nonbinary individual more present and recognized in their lived humanity.

2 Literature review

This chapter will, in three parts, cover the concepts and studies relevant to this thesis. First, it will cover comics studies and webcomics, then feminism and gender studies, following onto queer theory and, end with monstrosity and monster theory. As the analysis of primary sources will be concerned with the interaction and possible connecting points of nonbinary-identified individuals and monstrous entities (or monstrosity in general), it is inevitable that certain scholars, works, and concepts will be inter-related and referenced in multiple sections of the literature review.

2.1 Comics studies and webcomics

Kate Polak begins her introduction to *Ethics in the Gutter: Empathy and Historical Fiction in Comics* (2017) by stating that for much of the format's existence, "comics were popularly understood as a form that promoted moral decay."² Sean Kleefeld, the author of *Webcomics* (2020), notes that while early academic papers discussing comics emerged in the 1940s,³ the acceptance of comics studies as a scholarly pursuit was slow, partially because of their interdisciplinary nature, and partially because comics were not taken seriously enough.⁴ To this day, some genres and works of comics are privileged by critics and scholars: Polak notes that often, the term "graphic novel" is "awarded" to works that are seen as more serious, more worthy of discussion, while comics are "just comics."⁵ According to Kleefeld, memoirs and non-fiction are seen as 'serious' publications (eg. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, or Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*), and superhero comics

² Kate Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter: Empathy and Historical Fiction in Comics* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 1.

³ Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 195.

⁴ Kleefeld, 196–97.

⁵ Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 3.

gain critical traction from their fandom, which is why these genres remain widely discussed. As of the time of this text being written, there is a general scarcity of research focusing on webcomics.⁶

It may be useful to highlight that comics are not a genre, but rather a mode.⁷ Comics may come in as many genres as traditional literature would. Kleefeld describes that webcomics “share a delivery mechanism” specific to them and as “the interaction a reader has with a webcomic is inherently different than a printed one,”⁸ therefore categorial separation from other types of comics is not entirely nonsensical; however, this distinction should not be on the basis of genre, as webcomics, too, come in a plethora of genres. Kleefeld also claims that the genres and topics that appear often in printed comics are seldom found in webcomics, and vice versa (eg. cartoonists moving from publishing in newspapers to posting their content online).⁹ Lastly, the embodied experience of reading webcomics differs: the printed page reflects light, whereas the screen emits its own; the device one reads the webcomic on also sends many signals that paper does not, such as battery level, incoming messages, or pop-up ads and notifications.¹⁰ Unlike the in-print comic, the reader cannot hold it, smell it, physically turn pages, thus the sensory experience is marginally different. Kleefeld suggests this could influence the process of reading, but unfortunately does not specify how.

One of the unique features of webcomics is that there are very few ‘gatekeepers’ of their content: that is, the content is produced without publishers or editors, and mostly without concern whether the comic is sellable or whether there would be a readership ready to receive it.¹¹ I propose that webcomics are a productive avenue for queer narratives to be shared. Queer stories and themes are still proving to be controversial, as may be observed

⁶ Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 195.

⁷ Kleefeld, 198.

⁸ Kleefeld, 199.

⁹ Kleefeld, 202.

¹⁰ Kleefeld, 200.

¹¹ Kleefeld, 200.

in the case of *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (2019) by Maia Kobabe which became the most banned book in the U.S. in the year 2021.¹² Many contemporary queer in-print comics began its existence online in webcomic form, before they were crowd-funded or picked up by a publisher, such as *Gender Queer* itself or Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* (2016–ongoing) which began publishing on a Tumblr blog, and after successfully crowdfunding its first physical volume, it was picked up for publishing by HarperCollins.¹³ The two graphic novels analyzed in this work, *Mooncakes* and *On a Sunbeam*, were originally webcomics as well. Kleefeld finds that due to their online presence, webcomic offer interaction within the fandom and directly with the creator within the same context (comment section, forums, messages) – this directness of interaction may help build community and make readers more invested.¹⁴ I propose that if a queer reader seeks to read a comic that would be relatable and affirming to their identity, but they do not live in an accepting environment, it is marginally safer to read webcomics rather than to buy physical, printed comics with queer themes (and potentially risk being outed or abused for it).

Kate Polak's *Ethics in the Gutter* focuses on representations of history in comics mode, especially the representation of atrocity. Where text describes a concept or an event, the image-text shows and represents, and Polak's inquiry is into how traumatic, atrocious events are represented, as well as “which events are memorialized and (...) which events (and people) are resituated as marginalia.”¹⁵ This text, centered around fantasy and science fiction narratives, does not share the primary focus on fictional representation of historical events of Polak's work. The question of representation in comics is, however, pressing in the case of representing marginalized identities and bodies. Scott McCloud,

¹² Alexandra Alter, ‘How a Debut Graphic Memoir Became the Most Banned Book in the Country’, New York Times, 1 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/01/books/maia-kobabe-gender-queer-book-ban.html>.

¹³ Alice Oseman, ‘Heartstopper – About’, HEARTSTOPPER, 2016, <https://heartstoppercomic.tumblr.com/about>.

¹⁴ Kleefeld, *Webcomics*, 209.

¹⁵ Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 16.

while discussing the icon in his publication *Understanding Comics* (1994), argues that due to the reader seeing a realistically rendered face as somebody else (Other) but understanding the iconic cartoon, a circle with two dots for eyes and a line for a mouth, as a stand-in for their own self.¹⁶ He states that for this reason, he “decided to draw [him]self in such a simple style.”¹⁷ The comics and graphic novels which are considered in this work are not autobiographical – what decisions, then, did the author(s) make in representing the nonbinary body, since there is no one norm or standard for nonbinary embodiment? How are monsters visually represented, and how could these representations change the framing of them as moral or immoral, or possibly change the readers’ relationship to the monster? These questions informed my close readings of the chosen comics.

Regardless of the difference in genre of the analyzed comics, this text was informed by Polak’s use of terminology. Polak explains the use of the term ‘focalizer’ instead of ‘narrator’, as narration in text boxes might be different from narration of the character in thought bubbles, for example.¹⁸ She claims that “(...) graphic narratives generally do not have traditional narrators but are rather focalized through one or more characters, with whom the reader may (or may not) occasionally share perspective.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Polak proposes the differentiation between morals, ethics, and empathy as follows: morals signify a set of inner values, while she understands ethics as “actions in the world”²⁰ (as opposed to the traditional Aristotelian notions of ethics as good habits of mind²¹). Polak cites Peter Goldie and his definition of empathy as a “process or procedure in which a person centrally imagines the narrative (the thoughts, feelings, and emotions)

¹⁶ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Kitchen Sink Press for HarperPerennial, 1994), 36.

¹⁷ McCloud, 36.

¹⁸ Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 19.

¹⁹ Polak, 19.

²⁰ Polak, 17.

²¹ Polak, 16.

of another person.”²² This is rendered relevant because of the ingrained understanding of monsters as manifesting immorality, as well as in the ethical encounter the human character has with the monster, where both parties may choose to harm or to empathize.

Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability (2020) by Eszter Szép centers vulnerability of the experience of reading comics, saying that “comics are made by expressive lines that mark the unison of movement and thinking [which are] interpreted (...) by and via the reader’s body.”²³ Szép sees vulnerability not as a lack or “a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm”²⁴ but as a state accompanying embodiment, arguing that “vulnerability is a condition we share because we inhabit bodies” and that it is “(...) always experienced in a dialogue, because it always elicits a response.”²⁵ She describes that the interaction of Self with Other influences the Other’s vulnerability, and vice versa, that the interaction of the Other with Self has an effect on the Self’s vulnerability; the “receiving and giving of wounding or caring responses”²⁶ is mutual and transformative, much like the encounter with the monstrous, which Margrit Shildrick, the author of *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002), understands to be transformative for both parties.²⁷ It ought to be said that Szép focuses on the analysis on non-fiction comics and embodied interaction with the comic via the drawn line. This work is, contrastingly, focused on fiction, and as per Kleefeld’s discussion, the embodied experience of the line may be complicated by the fact that most of the works were read in digital/webcomic form and were experienced not through tactile interaction

²² Peter Goldie in Polak, 17.

²³ Eszter Szép, *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability*, Studies in Comics and Cartoons (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020), 2.

²⁴ Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, Theory, Culture & Society (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 1.

²⁵ Szép, *Comics and the Body*, 3.

²⁶ Szép, 14.

²⁷ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 1.

with paper, but on screen. Nevertheless, I have chosen to utilize Szép's conceptualization of vulnerable interaction of Self and Other in the analysis of monstrosity.

2.2 Feminism and Gender Studies

When discussing gender, one must first establish the status of individual genders in the normative gender binary. Through history, the female had been understood as faulty and, as Margrit Shildrick states in *Embodying the Monster*: “Monsterring the (M)Other”, situated within “a framework of degraded qualities.”²⁸ Regarding Ancient Greek notions of gender, she notes that Aristotle considered the birth of female babies as the most common birth defect.²⁹ Judith Butler discusses Plato's understanding of the female body, stating that in platonic discourse, the female is a “shapeless non-thing which cannot be named” and thus the female body is not a “human form” within this framework.³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, the author of “Mothers, Monsters, Machines” (1997), further notes that according to Aristotle, women were not “endowed with a rational soul.”³¹ The fathers of western thought situated the feminine as formless, irrational, and ultimately lesser than the masculine. Female bodies have troubled (male) philosophers for centuries to come, as it was perceived to be “out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky.”³² The capability to carry and deliver offspring was particularly troublesome, as the changes to the body undergone during pregnancy created new ‘excesses’ to the default human form, which was indubitably understood to be the male body. This led to many a notorious theory about the workings and ‘dangers’ of the female body, such as the floating/wandering uterus, hysteria (again, related to the uterus

²⁸ Shildrick, 20.

²⁹ Shildrick, 31.

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 1993), 25.

³¹ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Mothers, Monsters, Machines’, in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (Columbia University Press, 1997), 63.

³² Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 31.

as the name suggests), and the vagina being a “dark and mysterious region,”³³ at times producing fears of ‘vagina dentata’, a vagina with teeth.³⁴ While these notions may seem misguided and almost anecdotal to contemporary readership, many generations of women suffered greatly for the mythical, fearsome notions of the powers that female bodies possess.

Shildrick discusses the phenomenon of ‘female imagination’ or ‘maternal impression’, widespread in 18th century, in which “over-indulgence in fear or pleasure [is] at the root of subsequent problems” with the child’s physicality.³⁵ In other words, these imaginations or impressions refer to the assumed ability of the woman, perhaps unwittingly, to materialize her thoughts onto the child in her womb, identifying women as the root of the problem. The solution, Shildrick continues, was in most cases not to understand women or fulfill their desires, but to keep them under control.³⁶ Braidotti provides concrete examples of the ‘dangers’ of female imagination: if a woman thought about something unseemly during intercourse, dreamt intensely about something during pregnancy, or looked at animals or “evil-looking creatures” with “a certain look in her eyes,” for example, she could then give birth to a ‘monstrous’ child, often with animal features.³⁷ The power of the female gaze in such instances is labeled the “Xerox machine complex”³⁸ which is a ‘transmission’ of an intensely perceived image or creature onto the unborn child. The paradox of the woman becomes apparent: a non-person, lesser and other to man, but at the same time possessing incredible powers of molding human body in her uterus by the means of gaze or thought. These notions of maternal imagination and monstrous birth will, of course, be further discussed in the following

³³ Braidotti, ‘Mothers, Monsters, Machines’, 66.

³⁴ Cristina Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins* (Maryland, US: Lexington Books, 2016), xvii.

³⁵ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 42.

³⁶ Shildrick, 42–43.

³⁷ Braidotti, ‘Mothers, Monsters, Machines’, 69.

³⁸ Braidotti, 69.

sub-chapter. To sum up, in the hierarchy of the gender binary, the woman is shown to be disadvantaged, unprivileged, and ultimately degraded.

The base for the study of gender was the conceptual separation of gender as a set of sociocultural norms from biological sex. Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 publication *The Second Sex (Le deuxième sexe)* famously stated that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”³⁹ meaning female gender is ‘constructed’ and not something one is born with, conflated with sex. She also discusses the default/divergent relation of the gender binary: “women are the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself.”⁴⁰ Her contributions to the study of gender were foundational, introducing gender as a social construct and highlighting the central role of patriarchy in defining womanhood itself. Judith Butler references de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble* (1990), concerned with the nature of the ‘agent’ who constructs the subject’s gender in de Beauvoir’s theory, and suggests that rather than a singular act of assigning gender onto an individual done by a mysterious agentive force, the norms of gender are continually upheld through discourse, as construction is “a temporal process which operates through reiteration of norms.”⁴¹ Any non-conformity regarding the matrix, such as same-sex attraction or non-cisgender identity, then threatens the system in place:

Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain.⁴²

Troubling the seemingly clear-cut difference between the physical sex and sociocultural gender, Butler stresses that the ‘sexing’ of body, too, happens through

³⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), 273.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 13.

⁴¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xix.

⁴² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.

discourse. If sex is prior to gender, thought to be ‘of nature’, then sex precedes language as well⁴³ – then, biological sex becomes inaccessible, because we do not have the means to describe (signify) in other ways than language.⁴⁴ Butler argues that discursive performativity operates in the materialization of sex, that sex, too, only exists in and through discourse.⁴⁵ She describes the “nam[ing] into being” of phenomena through invoking Jacques Derrida’s ‘citation.’ Only the concepts that are ‘citable’ (nameable, utterable) in the model of language can be cited – in other terms, the system pre-determines what (or who) would be possible to name and recognize.⁴⁶ Individual people come into being, into their sense of Self, “through the citing of power,”⁴⁷ and once one is capable of critically approaching the power structure of the gender binary, one had already been cited within said system, embedded and named through its norms. Butler does not suggest that personal agency regarding one’s identity and Self is impossible to attain, only that such agency comes by reworking the system from the inside, as an external opposition to the power of discourse would be impossible.

This conceptualization of (assumed physical, biological) sex as “materializ[ing] through discourse” was challenged (among others) by Stacy Alaimo, author of the eco-critical publication *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010). Alaimo states that “despite the tremendous outpouring of feminist theory and cultural studies of ‘the body,’” the studies often focus on “how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter.”⁴⁸ She suggests this is one of the many instances of western thought strictly dividing the self from the world, as well as nature from culture⁴⁹ – and indeed, ‘the body’ in the work of Butler (as well as other contemporaries) is not perceived

⁴³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.

⁴⁴ Butler, xv.

⁴⁵ Butler, xx.

⁴⁶ Butler, xxii–xxiii.

⁴⁷ Butler, xxiii.

⁴⁸ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 3.

⁴⁹ Alaimo, 4.

as a body-organism, but rather a blank page, a physically rather unaffected “abiological” thing.⁵⁰ The separation of concepts of gender and sex only enhances the divide between cultural and natural, which Alaimo considers an artificial binary that is not sustainable. She views the body (or body-organism) through a lens of ‘trans-corporeality’, in which the human is inseparable from the environment they are in, transformed and transforming, and “enmeshed” together with the non-human.⁵¹ Stacy Alaimo’s contributions will be further discussed in the subchapter 2.4, specifically when inquiring about which bodies or entities are ‘natural’ and which are ‘unnatural.’

As for other ‘responses’ to Judith Butler’s theory of gender, Toby Finlay, a nonbinary, transgender author of the 2017 paper “Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory,” builds on Butler’s work by determining its relevance and political utility to non-cisgender individuals. They address the problems of being (mis)recognized by the system: in order to participate in society, one must uphold certain norms or categories by possessing a ‘recognizable’ (citable) identity marker, but such markers present limits on their “unique queer subjectivity” and may leave the individual “not feeling entirely represented by these terms.”⁵² Finlay further stresses the importance of recognition in queer realities, for it “allows access to self-identity and the rights-based privileges of liberal democracy.”⁵³ This is particularly salient in the case of transgender and nonbinary people, as not being recognized (e.g. individuals outside the two categories of gender and sex) or being mis-recognized (e.g. a transgender woman being cited as male in interactions or in official documents) often cross the boundaries of “symbolic violence” and manifest as “forms of oppression against marginalized communities.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Alaimo, 3.

⁵¹ Alaimo, 2.

⁵² Toby Finlay, ‘Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory’, *Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts* 4 (2017): 59–60.

⁵³ Finlay, 62.

⁵⁴ Finlay, 62.

To reiterate, as the nonbinary subject is not recognized within the systems of knowledge and power, and furthermore mis-recognized as the gender and sex they were determined upon birth, their identity is being erased, rendered invisible – after all, the “normative forces” of binary gender and sex “construct only through erasing” that which is not suitable for the norm.⁵⁵

There are two major points of discussion where Finlay is in disagreement with Butler’s contribution to queer theory. The first is interpellation, or as the phenomenon had been termed thus far, Derrida’s ‘citation’, which continues to signify the ‘naming into being’ principle. Finlay proposes that understanding interpellation as an all-powerful creative force that determines identity gives excessive power to the “authority” who had, for example, misgendered a transgender individual.⁵⁶ Misgendering thus becomes an instant invalidation of identity of the non-cisgender person, and in this way, Butler’s theories clash with the strife for nonbinary and transgender self-determination. The second diverging opinion would be Finlay’s and Butler’s different treatment of agency: while Butler, as previously discussed, suggests only the option to ‘reiterate’ discourse from the inside, Finlay argues that it is the way one diverges from the heterosexual matrix that disrupts the norms and creates agency.⁵⁷ The two approaches do not directly oppose each other. Butler in *Bodies That Matter* highlights the process of reclaiming queer as a term, from being a slur (enacting symbolic violence, pushing the ‘abjected’ to the margin) to an ambiguous descriptor of self-identification. The reclamation is done not through attempting to step outside the system, but by “radical resignification of the symbolic domain,”⁵⁸ taking a term that would ‘other’ individuals which disrupted the heterosexual matrix and changing its meaning ‘from the inside’. The system at large indubitably erases and mis-recognizes nonbinary subjects (in official paperwork,

⁵⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xx.

⁵⁶ Finlay, ‘Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory’, 64.

⁵⁷ Finlay, 62.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xxix.

in census, in language and so on). One may identify as nonbinary, but in contemporary sociocultural climate, they may largely be socialized as the gender they were assigned at birth unless they elect to physically transition: a nonbinary individual assigned female would often still be documented, perceived, and treated as a woman, which is a factor of praxis that should not be overlooked in theory. Finlay is not, however, the only voice calling for a positive rendering of one's place 'outside' the norm, whether that is the gender binary or an entirely different framework – for example, Bell Hooks, an African American feminist scholar, suggested that “marginality [be a] place of resistance, not despair.”⁵⁹ Finlay thus offers a more hopeful alternative for queer individuals whose identity remains mis-recognized in that, just by their existence and visibility, in their self-identification, they disrupt the heterosexual matrix and create their own agency.

Having discussed the past conceptualizations of female bodies and contemporary discourse around sex and gender, the paper “Mothers, Monsters, Machines” by Rosi Braidotti predicts a possible concern of the post-human future. In analyzing historical trends of phallogocentric thought, she suggests that the role of women in procreation may one day be usurped by technology. Braidotti discusses the positioning of the female as an ‘anomaly’ since the times of Aristotle, as has been discussed, and the effects of the female gaze. As the woman was unpredictable and dangerous to the male rationale, alchemists sought to create a male child from a man alone.⁶⁰ These alchemists hoped to create a “philosopher’s son,” a tiny man created using sperm, and Braidotti understands these “self-inseminating, masturbatory practices” to be a manifestation of what she calls “womb envy.”⁶¹ Rosi Braidotti continues to predict that with the development of technology and embryology, there will be further attempts at eliminating the woman from the equation of procreation.

⁵⁹ Meg-John Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History* (Duxford, England: Icon Books, 2016), 43.

⁶⁰ Braidotti, ‘Mothers, Monsters, Machines’, 70.

⁶¹ Braidotti, 71.

She warns that “once reproduction becomes the pure result of mental efforts, the appropriation of the feminine is complete.”⁶² Insistence on pregnancy being an all-female feat certainly lacks scope – there are non-female people, whether binary transgender men or individuals on the nonbinary spectrum, that are capable of pregnancy. However, the taking control of peoples’ uteri (as can be seen, for example, in modern discourse on abortion) or ‘eliminating errors’ may prove increasingly problematic in the future, as the business of correcting ‘errors’ edges dangerously close to the territory of eugenics. It is crucial to question the bodily norms in place and what we as a society consider an ‘error’.

The conceptual separation of gender from sex has been thoroughly discussed in this section, but one must acknowledge that contemporary scholarship questions whether such distinctions are helpful at all. Karen Cuthbert conducted research into perception of (a)sexuality and (a)gender in participants’ lived realities: in many cases, the participants expressed that their gender identity and their asexuality are strongly tied together. One participant, Heather, expressed that since they do not feel sexually attracted to anybody, “gender is not a meaningful way for them to organize their relationships or orient themselves in the world”⁶³; another person, Blair, said that “while [they] don’t feel strongly like a woman, [they] do feel strongly not-a-man.”⁶⁴ Cuthbert observes that many participants who were assigned female at birth felt that avoiding unwanted male sexual attention “almost requires gender-neutrality.”⁶⁵ Ultimately, for many of these agender asexual people, gender and sexuality were heavily interconnected, and Cuthbert suggests that there should be space in scholarship to “explore (...) how gender might be sexuality (and vice versa) in some contexts.”⁶⁶

⁶² Braidotti, 71.

⁶³ Karen Cuthbert, “‘When We Talk about Gender We Talk about Sex’: (A)Sexuality and (A)Gendered Subjectivities”, *Gender and Society* 33, no. 6 (2019): 851.

⁶⁴ Cuthbert, 854.

⁶⁵ Cuthbert, 855.

⁶⁶ Cuthbert, 860.

2.3 Queerness and Queer Theory

Meg-John Barker claims in their 2016 publication *Queer: A Graphic History* that the earliest recorded use of the term ‘queer’ as an insult against a non-heterosexual person (instead of simply meaning ‘odd’ and ‘suspicious’⁶⁷) can be found in a letter by John Douglas to Oscar Wilde, Douglas’ son Alfred being Wilde’s lover.⁶⁸ During the 1980s, however, the term was reclaimed by gay and lesbian activists,⁶⁹ eventually coming to be accepted widely (but of course, not unanimously) as meaning ‘a non-normative gender or sexuality.’ Though the term has historically had negative connotations, queer will be used in this text as an umbrella term in its contemporary non-heterosexual, non-cisgender meaning.

As the term ‘queer’ has been discussed as un-specific and un-defined on purpose, one could find a similarity with the term ‘nonbinary’ in this ambiguity. ‘Nonbinary’ is identified not in terms of what it is, but rather what it is not: it is an umbrella term on its own, encompassing all that are somewhat out of the gender binary, but not speaking further to the specific subjectivity of the individual. There are, of course, many micro-labels further specifying whether the individual’s gender fluctuates regularly, whether they feel an absence of gender altogether, or find an abstract concept to describe their personal self-identity the best. I have chosen the term nonbinary in writing this text precisely because of its ambiguity and its potential to encompass the ‘outside’ of the two defined categories of the gender binary.

Queer theory emerged during the 1990s with the reclamation of the term ‘queer’ in the preceding decade (as per Judith Butler’s discussion of queer agency in discourse). Informed by feminism and extending from gay and lesbian studies, the queer theoretical approach mainly questions the categories, binaries and assumptions. Annamarie Jagose,

⁶⁷ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 8.

⁶⁸ Barker, 9.

⁶⁹ Barker, 10.

a feminist and queer studies scholar, specifies in her *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1997) that her efforts will not be focused on defining queerness or queer studies, but rather in mapping its “(...) mobility and situat[ing] it within a history of sexual categories which have evolved over the last hundred years or so.”⁷⁰ The “liquidity” of queer refuses definition, Jagose explains, not only semantically, but from a political standpoint as well; it is its purpose to be ambiguous and “indeterminate.”⁷¹ She also describes that, at the time of publication of the text, the ‘choice’ between lesbian/gay studies or queer studies inspired debate – while some thought this ‘queering’ is a much welcome step in the direction of destabilizing the notions of ‘natural’ (hetero)sexuality, others criticized it for erasing specific, politically significant identities and being overly “pan-sexual” or “unfeminist.”⁷² Understanding the gay and lesbian studies, however, as being in equilibrium would not be historically accurate, since the figurations of (homo)sexuality were different for men and women: for example, most laws against homosexuality was focused on same-sex-oriented men (with female sexuality concerning and confounding men, which is to be further developed in the discussion of female monstrosity), but access to employment and a sufficient income would be harder for a same-sex female couple than for a male one.⁷³ The queer umbrella, as we now understand it, is simply an inclusive symbolic space, not only for individuals whose sex, gender, or sexual desire is not in line with the norm in society, but in a wider sense, includes anyone situated “outside mainstream.”⁷⁴ Through intersectional approaches, queer theory is also able to address issues like gender inequality, disability, class, and race.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which is considered to be one of the key texts of queer theory, introduces the phenomenon of ‘the closet’ as its title

⁷⁰ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Interpretations (Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 2.

⁷¹ Jagose, 1.

⁷² Jagose, 2–3.

⁷³ Jagose, 44–45.

⁷⁴ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 12.

suggests. The notion of letting one's sexuality or gender identity be known through 'coming out' is not as simple as one revelation, Sedgwick shows: every time one meets a new person or finds themselves in a new environment, the closet is re-erected and one is to come out against as other than the expected norm, and thus, the closet "is still a fundamental feature of social life" to many queer people.⁷⁵ She continues to show, however, that the closet is not only a matter of queer sexuality or gender identity, and one can come out as many things, such as fat, Black, or Jewish. Sedgwick illustrates this with the Bible story about Esther, who had to come out as Jewish to her husband the king⁷⁶; similarly, one could come out as disabled if their disability is not immediately, corporeally visible. The norms and 'defaults' of contemporary society often force the people that do not fit into them to make themselves known by coming out of their respective closets over and over, lest they are automatically assumed to fall under the default and, therefore, misrecognized.

Alyosxa Tudor, the author of the 2019 Feminist Theory Essay Prize winning paper "Im/possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender," demonstrates that queer identity is often difficult or impossible to classify in a simple and permanent manner. They understand the experiences of people that label themselves lesbian, femme, butch, dyke, transgender or otherwise, as overlapping in many aspects, and they note that many people 'travel' through multiple labels on this spectrum during their life.⁷⁷ Meg-John Barker shows this phenomenon in their publication *Queer: A Graphic History* (2016) by depicting a feminine figure labelled "assumed straight girl," then turning into "butch lesbian", and at the end of the scheme a transformed individual labelled "trans man in a [male/female] relationship."⁷⁸ Alyosxa Tudor's paper centers an identity that not only challenges the gender binary, but a multiplicity of categories: a non-female lesbian. They seek to highlight the contributions of Monique Wittig,

⁷⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 68.

⁷⁶ Sedgwick, 75–76.

⁷⁷ Alyosxa Tudor, 'Im/Possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender', *Feminist Theory* 20, no. 4 (2019): 370.

⁷⁸ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 28.

who in her feminist theoretical work (published in the 1970s) argues that the category of woman is governed through compulsory heterosexuality and the heterosexual matrix: for example, a woman would be expected to please men, appear attractive to men, raise children, and be a good wife and mother.⁷⁹ Lesbians, through refusing this labor of misogyny, may thus not be ‘allowed’ to be women – and, as Tudor shows, they may not want to be women either, thus embodying a lesbian ‘they’ who is shaped not through the violence of discursive assigning and maintaining of gender, but by their desire.⁸⁰

Alyosxa Tudor demonstrates that the position of non-female lesbian ‘they’ has a political significance as well. Through exiting the category ‘woman’, one may address the exclusion of lesbians from feminist circles: “(...) radical lesbianism has a history of fighting against the exclusions, certainties, and fixed identities of the category woman.”⁸¹ Although they declare themselves to be a non-female lesbian in the paper, Tudor does acknowledge that Wittig’s lesbian is indubitably white. To be able to refuse womanhood is partially to think of womanhood as being a status of privilege: black bodies, as the effect of colonization and slavery, historically not gendered, but ‘fleshed.’⁸² The author cites Hortense Spillers in saying that slavery “ungenders” and undoes any possible categories that existed in African sociocultural contexts prior to colonization⁸³ – the Black body must first be un-fleshed and gendered to, then, be eligible for ‘refusing’ gender. Similarly, Audre Lorde, a Black lesbian feminist, spoke about the fact that in feminist circles, “‘women’ is taken to mean ‘white women’ and black women [are] defined as being ‘other.’”⁸⁴ Tudor, while acknowledging Monique Wittig’s theories’ shortcomings and declaring the importance of intersectionality in feminism, is convinced that there is yet space for the reclaiming of Wittig’s lesbian.

⁷⁹ Tudor, ‘Im/Possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender’, 365.

⁸⁰ Tudor, 375.

⁸¹ Tudor, 365.

⁸² Tudor, 367.

⁸³ Spillers, Hortense in Tudor, 366.

⁸⁴ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 43.

Staying on the topic of intersectionality, Tudor also discusses the attitudes toward transgender individuals and the following implications about the nature of sex and the body. Negative, exclusionary attitudes to transgender people are quite prominent in contemporary social discourse, both outside and inside the queer community. Tudor shows how trans-exclusionary radical ‘feminists’ (most commonly shortened as TERF) misrepresent key feminist texts, such as Judith Butler’s theories, to aid their argument that transgender people threaten various groups of people (lesbians, children) by their mere existence. Janice Raymond, one of such TERF individuals, argues that “[trans women] rape womens’ bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact.”⁸⁵ Sheila Jeffreys adds that the category of gender itself hurts women, and renders biological sex is “universal and eternal,” making gender/sex into an unaffected monolith.⁸⁶ More troublingly, Jeffreys and Raymond impose moral values or ethical action on certain types of bodies, making the person with a penis an “eternal perpetrator” and one with a vagina an “eternal victim” in sexual assault.⁸⁷ Surely the penis-perpetrator, vagina-victim model is simple and alliterative enough to be equipped in accusing transgender women of (potential, future) rape, but Tudor points out that this manner of thought sets up rape culture as something “immune to resistance.”⁸⁸ This is curious, as TERFs claim to stand against rape culture, and yet their own theories aid in upholding it. All in all, assigning violence or victimhood to specific types of body is nonsensical, and contemporary ‘transgender panic’ sets feminism decades back. Modern feminism is, most importantly, intersectional and trans-exclusionary ‘feminists’ are no feminists at all.

The debate of whether or not labels (and identity politics) are useful in some ways, or if they should be abandoned completely, is ongoing in contemporary queer theory. Labels for identities may exist in order for the binary counterpart to identify against it:

⁸⁵ Raymond, Janice in Tudor, ‘Im/Possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender’, 363.

⁸⁶ Tudor, 363.

⁸⁷ Tudor, 363.

⁸⁸ Tudor, 364.

this could be the case, as Sedgwick argues, with homosexuality and heterosexuality, since ‘homosexuals’ as a group are identifiable because of the group’s “indispensableness to those that define themselves against it.”⁸⁹ Toby Finlay, while understanding that one may adopt a recognizable identity in order to find community, urges the reader to “consider what is lost” by narrativizing queer subjectivities.⁹⁰ Meg-John Barker describes that there are certain ‘levels’ to queer theory and its stances: some queer theorists may criticize queer rights movements for only focusing on normative concerns “like marriage, consumer culture, and serving in the military.”⁹¹ Others are against the very usage of queer as a term of personal identity⁹² or seek to transcend binaries altogether, including the binary between the ‘queer umbrella’ and identities outside of it.⁹³ Barker does, however, suggest queer theorists should keep in mind “lived realities,” in that labels, despite their downfalls, help the marginalized individual find a support system.⁹⁴ The author of this text wishes to emphasize this dimension of identity politics, as being able to identify a community of other individuals with similar lived experiences is often done via labeling oneself with a term that most closely describes one’s self-identity. This can, of course, become problematic if the pressure to perform a static, stable identity is too large to allow any discrepancies, excesses, or transformations of one’s understanding of self. The normative power of the dominant ‘default’ categories (be it man, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, or other categories) forces the ‘divergent’, ‘queer’ individual to come out within the bounds of what is recognizable or ‘citable’ within the system, and queer activism and lives should certainly not revolve around approximating the norm, but I argue the complete untethering from self-identity terms would lose us the opportunity to find affirming connection to people of similar experience.

⁸⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 83.

⁹⁰ Finlay, ‘Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory’, 63.

⁹¹ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 12.

⁹² Barker, 11.

⁹³ Barker, 13.

⁹⁴ Barker, 148.

The nonbinary subject, unfortunately, is mostly missing from feminist and queer scholarship as of the writing of this text: it is understood to be included in queer studies, and the more specific transgender studies are sometimes inclusive of nonbinary identities as well. The majority of gender studies pertain to the subject of binary genders. This illustrates Butler's discussion of intelligibility within discourse perfectly well – as the non-conforming individual is pushed to the margins of society, the nonbinary subject stays at the margins of scholarly debate. Alyosxa Tudor acknowledges the “unhabitability” of gender nonbinary, “not being able to read and make oneself readable in terms that are either male or female, masculine or feminine, migrant or ‘at-home.’”⁹⁵ Toby Finlay quotes Gressgaard in saying that, within the heterosexual matrix, “improper gender tends to be allied with inhumanity”⁹⁶ which would account for the contemporary social anxieties concerning the mere existence of genders out of the cisgender binary. In its marginal position, improper and uninhabitable, it becomes increasingly apparent that the nonbinary subject is conceptually related to the figure of the monster.

2.4 Study of Monsters: From Teratology to Post-Human Futures

The monster is traditionally hard to contain in a definition. Among the attributes that Margrit Shildrick lists in her publication *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (2002) are “unnatural, inhuman, abnormal, impure, racially other,”⁹⁷ but a crucial characteristic in her understanding of the monster is its liminality.⁹⁸ Carmen-Veronica Borbély, the author of *Genealogies of Monstrosity: Constructions of Monstrous Corporeal Otherness in Contemporary British Fiction* (2015), describes this liminality as evading the binary of the center and the periphery in a “dynamic crossing

⁹⁵ Tudor, ‘Im/Possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender’, 373.

⁹⁶ Finlay, ‘Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory’, 67.

⁹⁷ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 28.

⁹⁸ Shildrick, 3.

of boundaries.”⁹⁹ She succinctly describes monsters as “[the] harbingers of the peril of non-differentiation.”¹⁰⁰ Through the history of western thought, however, there is an apparent “impulse to contain, to explain and textualize anomalous corporeal manifestations.”¹⁰¹ Such physical anomalies were often disabilities or birth defects, but the monstrous body was often understood as a signal of moral failure where the disorder of morals would manifest as the disorder of flesh.¹⁰² In this work, I will not conceptualize the monster as inherently immoral or evil, rather describing it through its affinity to transgress and transcend categorial boundaries.

The etymology of the term ‘monster’ itself suggests its role in society. Margrit Shildrick states that the early Latin term can be traced to two verbs: “monstrare – to show, and monere – to warn.”¹⁰³ Indeed, monsters and ‘monstrous’ bodies were understood as signs, omens, or warnings, often manifesting some inner corruption, whether in the monster itself or others.¹⁰⁴ Consider the tale of the Minotaur, who was born as a punishment from the gods to king Minos upon him not offering a beautiful white bull as a sacrifice. Thus, the queen fell in love with the bull and bore Minos a bull-headed monstrous son, who was later banished into isolation in the great labyrinth. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the editor of *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996) gives the later example of Renaissance “monster ballads” that assigned meanings to bodily malformations, such as “(...) cleft palate cautioned against lewd talk; missing fingers warned against idleness.”¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Grosz within the same publication argues that monstrous births were seen as “omens or predictions

⁹⁹ Carmen-Veronica Borbély, *Genealogies of Monstrosity: Constructions of Monstrous Corporeal Otherness in Contemporary British Fiction* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitara Clujeana, 2015), 60.

¹⁰⁰ Borbély, 60.

¹⁰¹ Borbély, 21.

¹⁰² Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 17.

¹⁰³ Shildrick, 12.

¹⁰⁴ Shildrick, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York University Press, 1996), 2.

of the future.”¹⁰⁶ Monsters were framed as iterations of divine will, omens of the future, or bodily manifestations of immoral thought or action. Such was the case with maternal impression, which was discussed previously along with the ‘Xerox machine complex’ and the power of the ‘female gaze.’ All in all, the monster and its body, whether understood as a mythical/fictional creature, or a corporeally non-normative human, are not permitted to simply exist: they must carry meaning.

The emergence of teratology as a discipline marks the first semi-scientific efforts to study monstrous bodies. In the introduction to *The Monster Theory Reader*, its editor Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock cites Ambroise Paré as the father of teratology: the French scholar and surgeon compiled a taxonomy of monsters in the year 1573, drawing both from medical experience and superstition.¹⁰⁷ It was previously demonstrated that in the case of monstrous births, the mother is often the one that is blamed for any bodily malformation. Paré produced a list of possible causes of monstrous birth, which included both God’s blessing and God’s wrath, “Demons or Devils,” the quantity or rotting of semen, small size of the womb, and whether the woman sits with her legs crossed or pressed against the stomach during the pregnancy.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Paré proposed five teratological theories pertaining to the creation of a monster: “supernatural intervention, hybridization, maternal impression, accident, and [in contemporary terms] genetics.”¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Grosz provides further categorization of monstrous bodies, stating that Paré worked within the categories of excess, default, and duplicity.¹¹⁰ She assesses teratology as pseudoscientific and relying heavily on taxonomizing difference, thus rendering it more ‘normal’; in the eighteenth century,

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York University Press, 1996), 57.

¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 4.

¹⁰⁸ Weinstock, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Weinstock, 5.

¹¹⁰ Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, 57.

however, it was “augmented with medical descriptions” and “reached its pinnacle toward the end of the nineteenth century.”¹¹¹ Rosi Braidotti notes George Saint-Hilaire, who taxonomized bodies in terms of excess, lack, or displacement of organs (in the nineteenth century); according to Braidotti, this illustrates that the monster is “the bodily incarnation of difference.”¹¹² While many early teratological notions may seem comical to the contemporary reader, teratology constitutes one of the steps towards the medicalization of bodily difference.

In tandem with teratology peaking, the sociocultural phenomenon of freak shows appeared. Robert Bogdan dates the popularity of Freak Shows in the U.S. between 1840s and 1940s, explaining that in Victorian America, “(...) the exhibition of freaks exploded into a public ritual [based on] the collective art of looking.”¹¹³ Bogdan defines the freak show as “the formally organized exhibition of people with alleged physical, mental, or behavioral difference at circuses, fairs, carnivals, and other amusement venues.”¹¹⁴ The shows often toured in summer and performed at static venues in winter.¹¹⁵ Garland Thomson lists the various acts that one could encounter in a freak show:

[From] wild men of Borneo to fat ladies, living skeletons, Fiji princes, albinos, bearded women, Siamese twins, tattooed Circassians, armless and legless wonders, Chinese giants, cannibals, midget triplets, hermaphrodites, spotted boys (...) ventriloquists, performing geese, mesmerists, beauty contestants, contortionists, sharpshooters, trained goats, frog eaters, sword-swallowers, tumbling monkeys, boa constrictors, [to] canaries whistling Yankee Doodle (...) ¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Grosz, 57.

¹¹² Braidotti, ‘Mothers, Monsters, Machines’, 62.

¹¹³ Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Robert Bogdan, ‘The Social Construction of Freaks’, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York University Press, 1996), 23.

¹¹⁵ Bogdan, 24.

¹¹⁶ Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 5.

At a glance, one can identify many an aspects of such performance that would be problematic by contemporary standards, but the freak shows at the time strived to be “morally uplifting and educational.”¹¹⁷ The act often involved the role of a scientist or professor who would narrate the experience and relay the (often fabricated) stories of the ‘freaks’ to the audience.¹¹⁸ The ‘packaging’ of the act was of high importance; the audience could purchase postcards, pictures and souvenirs with the performer’s supposed origin, life story, or information on their family status.¹¹⁹ Garland Thomson analyzes this promotional material, pointing to the tendency to “juxtapose stark physical differences.”¹²⁰ They would often boast “(...) about the normalcy of the freak’s spouse,”¹²¹ such as showing pictures of freak and family in middle class sitting- or drawing-rooms, affirming the norm by placing the ‘normal’ body next to the ‘abnormal’ one. Garland Thomson adds that this was, most of all, affirming the audience’s normalcy: whichever lacks or excesses they would have regarding sociocultural norms and binaries, they could identify against the Other, and thus be “rendered comfortably common and safely standard.”¹²²

Freak shows are a certainly a complex phenomenon that invites analysis; the following paragraphs will cover the medicalization of bodily divergence, the problematic racist, ableist, and imperialist connotations of the freak show, and the treatment of (what we now understand as) disability. Garland Thomson argues that at the time, extraordinary bodies were seen as marvelous, awe-inspiring, “dangerous and alluring”¹²³ but through the evolution of western medicine, as well as rapid industrialization, the pressure on normalcy, uniformity and conformity rose. Garland Thomson describes how modernization and production

¹¹⁷ Bogdan, ‘The Social Construction of Freaks’, 27.

¹¹⁸ Bogdan, 29.

¹¹⁹ Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 8.

¹²⁰ Garland Thomson, 8.

¹²¹ Bogdan, ‘The Social Construction of Freaks’, 30.

¹²² Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 4.

¹²³ Garland Thomson, 5.

of products in factories, assisted by machines, promoted the idea of “sameness of form,” and mass-production and consumerism “fortified [the] impulse toward conformity.”¹²⁴ Bogdan adds that in the twentieth century, people with physical and mental anomalies became patients and “came under the control of professionals.”¹²⁵ The expectation of the body, in Rosi Braidotti’s terms, is to have zero difference from the norm and be ‘zero monstrous.’¹²⁶ Shildrick argues that monstrous bodies engender a “gross failure to approximate to corporeal norms” for which they are “radically excluded.”¹²⁷ The shift in the understanding of bodily difference lead to wonders becoming errors, which the medical system sought to fix if possible, and if not possible, these individuals were put in specialized facilities in order to both care for them and to protect the norm from being challenged.

Grosz illustrates the tendency to ‘correct’ the bodily ‘errors’ on the particular example of conjoined twins, more specifically the system’s effort to separate them even at risk of health complications or death. She analyzes the case of Eng and Chang, the original ‘Siamese’ twins; the two gained quite the acclaim in their time, therefore their case is well-documented. The boys, joined at the abdomen, were born in Siam and ‘lent’ to an American man by the parents and the emperor.¹²⁸ They toured the U.S. until adulthood and took the last name Bunker in their forties – the men were said to have a bond “stronger than marriage,”¹²⁹ and Grosz noted that “(...) Chang and Eng were so dispirited by the idea of separation that, at least in the first forty years of their lives, they would weep if it was even mentioned.”¹³⁰ Margrit Shildrick, too, discusses conjoined twins, Irish girls Katie and Eilish who were a subject to a documentary in the late 1990s: Shildrick relays that their parents and doctors, regardless

¹²⁴ Garland Thomson, 11–12.

¹²⁵ Bogdan, ‘The Social Construction of Freaks’, 34.

¹²⁶ Braidotti, ‘Mothers, Monsters, Machines’, 62.

¹²⁷ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 2.

¹²⁸ Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, 62.

¹²⁹ Grosz, 63.

¹³⁰ Grosz, 62.

of the girls' contentment as they were, scheduled a procedure after which Katie passed away.¹³¹

Shildrick remarks that the reason for their separation was not entirely medical:

What is finally unacceptable about the twins is not the degree of their disability – and indeed it is uncertain that a successful outcome would have increased function – but the ambiguity of their concorporation.¹³²

The cultural imperative was to separate the twins: non-conjoined individuals assumed (and continue to assume) that the lives of conjoined twins are miserable because they do not approximate our embodied experience.¹³³ There are, however, few accounts of the twins' perception: is separation truly desirable enough in their own eyes that they would personally wish to separate, regardless of the risk?

Another instance of medical 'corrections' are surgeries on intersex people upon birth. Intersex bodies are understood as such bodies that cannot be classified as either 'male' or 'female' on a physical level, whether due to chromosomal difference, hormonal or gonadal imbalance combine primary and secondary sexual characteristics.¹³⁴ The male-and-female freaks, often called John-Janes or Victor-Victorias, represent an idea of a person (freak) that does not fall into the binary of sex or gender, being split neatly down the middle in clothing, the presence of breasts and facial hair, and so on.¹³⁵ Grosz contrasts the marvelous role in the freak show, which resorted to clothing and gender expression, with the real practice of 'correcting' the anatomy of intersex individuals shortly after birth so that the body resembles one of the binary sexes. To sum up, western medical practice seeks to approximate the bodily norm through procedures that the 'patients' themselves may not desire, and it is imperative

¹³¹ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 61–62.

¹³² Shildrick, 62.

¹³³ Grosz, 'Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit', 62–63.

¹³⁴ Grosz, 59.

¹³⁵ Grosz, 61.

that such non-normative individuals have a voice and their bodily autonomy (including the right to choose and refuse any operations) is respected.

Besides showing how discourse around extraordinary bodies has been diachronically reframed, the authors in *Freakery* acknowledge the decidedly racist aspects of freak shows. In his taxonomy of freak show acts, Bogdan notes that “freak was only the extreme of fakery”—he notes the mentally disabled ‘Davis brothers’ (in truth not related) were presented as “Wild men of Borneo” – similarly, the “Australian Albino” was really born in New Jersey.¹³⁶ The ‘exotic’ freak had usually fabricated non-western origins: natives from Borneo, Africa, Aztec Kingdom, members of a Turkish Harem, but sometimes Native American peoples. These locations of origin often coincided with the latest colonization pursuits to make the show more attractive to the audiences.¹³⁷ Bogdan argues that the acts often fed into the white savior complex: a recurring theme appeared in the fabricated origin stories of a white man saving albinos from being sacrificed¹³⁸ or the natives of Borneo being “captured and domesticated.”¹³⁹ He introduces the case of Krao Farini, a hirsute woman from Laos, who was rather disturbingly presented as “Darwin’s missing link” – half human, half monkey – until she learned to speak multiple languages and her act was changed to an accomplished “lady who spoke five languages.”¹⁴⁰ Similarly to Chang and Eng throughout their life, Krao Farini’s exotic mode changed into an aggrandized one, highlighting her assimilation to American culture and her accomplishments.¹⁴¹ Bogdan criticizes the medicalization of bodily difference which occurred in the first half on the twentieth century and marked the passing of the freak show

¹³⁶ Bogdan, ‘The Social Construction of Freaks’, 25.

¹³⁷ Bogdan, 29.

¹³⁸ Bogdan, 27.

¹³⁹ Bogdan, 25.

¹⁴⁰ Bogdan, 33.

¹⁴¹ Bogdan, 33.

into the category of “low culture,”¹⁴² but he acknowledges that in many aspects, the freak show was not a better alternative for its “racist, imperialist, ableist” stereotypes and acts.¹⁴³

On the other hand, freak shows represented a space where people with bodily differences could find refuge and community. Bogdan claims that between the show-people in the industry, there was a great sense of camaraderie,¹⁴⁴ and that despite the term ‘freak’ having offensive connotations now, it was preferred by the performers themselves until about the 1930s.¹⁴⁵ He argues that freak shows were a refuge for non-normative people who were otherwise ostracized and gave the chance to find acceptance, more personal freedom¹⁴⁶ – for example, an armless person thus found a job performing mundane tasks that able-bodied spectators assumed impossible. One must, however, inquire to which extent the extraordinary individuals’ involvement was voluntary, or ethical. Referring back to the mentally disabled ‘Davis brothers’ who were presented as men of Borneo, was it possibly their choice to join, or were they taken advantage of by their respective caretakers and, subsequently, the show-runners? Elizabeth Grosz notes that some bodies were not extraordinary upon birth, but rather they were “freaked” on purpose by external forces later in life (parents amputating limbs of children to be more profitable in begging, for example¹⁴⁷). The freak show, despite its capacity to provide a community and a somewhat safe space to non-normative individuals and performers, also easily invites exploitation of extraordinary bodies and people for monetary gain.

As for the emergence of academic study of monstrosity, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock notes that “although newly named, monster theory is in fact a very old endeavor.”¹⁴⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s 1996 essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” is credited with the coinage of the term

¹⁴² Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 13.

¹⁴³ Bogdan, ‘The Social Construction of Freaks’, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Bogdan, 25.

¹⁴⁵ Bogdan, 30.

¹⁴⁶ Bogdan, 30.

¹⁴⁷ Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, 58.

¹⁴⁸ Weinstock, *The Monster Theory Reader*, 2.

‘monster theory,’ where Cohen argues that “(...) monstrous body is pure culture,”¹⁴⁹ being a product of the generative matrix of social, cultural, and literary-historical relations of its time.¹⁵⁰ Weinstock claims that contemporary monster theory sees “(...) monstrosity [as] a socially constructed category reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires.”¹⁵¹ In other words, Weinstock claims that the general focus of monster theory is to analyze what the monster signifies or represents.

Noël Carrol, author of “The Nature of Horror” (1987), focuses on the origin of fear and anxieties felt when encountering a monster; along with discussion pertaining specifically to the genre of horror and its affective power, he also argues that the monster is the source of fear and anxiety because it is ‘culturally impure’. He cites Mary Douglas in that, for example, a lobster is a culturally impure creature because of its crawling movement (expected of creatures on land) in the sea (expectation of swimming as a mode of movement).¹⁵² Carrol argues that “object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless”¹⁵³ – here, we may draw a parallel to Cohen, who understood monster as “a harbinger of category crisis.”¹⁵⁴ This text will not work with such conceptualization of ‘cultural impurity.’ Western logos is, indubitably, built on categorization, taxonomies and binaries, as discussed previously concerning the heterosexual matrix and legibility in discourse, but Carrol’s (and Douglas’s) treatment of difference as ‘impure’ only helps set up existing arbitrary norms as stable and immovable items to refer to, which they are truly not. As Meg-John Barker stated regarding heterosexuality: “If [the norm] was just natural, it wouldn’t have to work so hard to hold itself up.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

¹⁵⁰ Cohen, 39.

¹⁵¹ Weinstock, *The Monster Theory Reader*, 25.

¹⁵² Noël Carrol, ‘The Nature of Horror’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 1 (1987): 55.

¹⁵³ Carrol, 55.

¹⁵⁴ Weinstock, *The Monster Theory Reader*, 9.

¹⁵⁵ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 45.

Since monsters have carried meanings from the creation of the term, they have been subject to much psychoanalysis. Braidotti mentions Sigmund Freud's essay on Medusa's head, for example, in which he argued the head expresses the attraction and horror of female genitalia.¹⁵⁶ Robin Wood, in his "An Introduction to The American Horror Film," (1979) argues that the monster stands in place of repressed sexuality – for example, the titular alien in *The Alien* embodies "the monstrous phallus combined with *vagina dentata*" (italics in original).¹⁵⁷ Lastly, one ought to note Julia Kristeva's paper "Approaching Abjection" (1982), in which she proposes the concept of abjection. Abjection may be understood as an attitude in which the subject refuses to consider something (the abjected) to be an object at all, rejects it fully and utterly: Kristeva speaks of "(...) one of those violent, dark revolts of being [which] beseeches, worries, fascinates desire," but desire turns away and refuses it.¹⁵⁸ Monster is often the abjected, erased, the 'Outside' that threatens to return, become very close. As Cohen promptly remarks when discussing psychoanalytical approaches to monsters: "The repressed, however, like Freud himself, always seems to return."¹⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, however, proposes in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) that sexuality itself is not being repressed, but regulated and constructed by discourses in society,¹⁶⁰ which is an approach this text will continue to adhere to.

While not utilizing the concepts of Carrol's cultural impurity or Kristeva's abjection, this thesis was informed by queer theory, as previously stated. Harry Benshoff, the author of the paper "The Monster and The Homosexual", argues that in media centering monsters, "(...) queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion questioning of the status

¹⁵⁶ Braidotti, 'Mothers, Monsters, Machines', 66.

¹⁵⁷ Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 134.

¹⁵⁸ Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 95.

¹⁵⁹ Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', 49.

¹⁶⁰ Foucault, Michel in Harry Benshoff, 'The Monster and the Homosexual', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 228.

quo.”¹⁶¹ Due to the monster’s disruptive, liminal nature, the queer ‘Other’ is “displaced” onto the monster,¹⁶² and often, the monster can be seen blocking normative heterosexual romance¹⁶³ (eg. Count Dracula changing Lucy into a vampire, therefore she would not marry her fiancé). Benshoff discusses vampires particularly, noting the movie adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire*, which may on one hand include scenes of homoerotic neck-biting, but on the other, it may push the stereotype of “monstrous predatory homosexuals.”¹⁶⁴ The figure of the vampire (in many cases subtextually queer, eg. the lesbian vampire Carmilla in the novel of the same name, or the more contemporary Jennifer in *Jennifer’s Body* (2009), a man-murdering teenage vampire) reinforces the stereotype of queer people as “unnatural, predatory, plague-carrying killers”¹⁶⁵ – on the other hand, Benshoff explains that it is not inherently wrong to relate to the monster: “Queer viewers are [likely] to experience the monster’s plight in more personal, individualized terms.”¹⁶⁶ The author, lastly, points out the tendency of using homosexual subtext for queerbaiting, that is, “(…) for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it [the queer representation].”¹⁶⁷ It was previously stated that the queer/nonbinary subject and the monster are conceptually related, and Benshoff’s analysis of subtextually queer monsters only affirms this argument.

Despite initial expectation of the inquiry into gendered monstrosity yielding studies of androgynous, uncertain monsters, most scholarship concerning the ‘gender Other’ pertains to women. In earlier discussion on feminism and gender, it was determined that in the gender binary, woman is ‘less’ compared to man; according to Diana Fuss, in binaries, there is always one side that is underprivileged.¹⁶⁸ Margrit Shildrick argues that patriarchy seeks to contain

¹⁶¹ Benshoff, 227.

¹⁶² Benshoff, 228.

¹⁶³ Benshoff, 226.

¹⁶⁴ Benshoff, 230.

¹⁶⁵ Benshoff, 231.

¹⁶⁶ Benshoff, 230.

¹⁶⁷ Benshoff, 232.

¹⁶⁸ Barker, *Queer: A Graphic History*, 91.

the various aspects of the woman that is considered chaotic, irrational, emotional, and ultimately dangerous to the power systems in society at large.¹⁶⁹ The publication *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins* (2016) by Christina Santos shows that women are made monsters quite easily: the author structures her arguments based on the historical roles (archetypes) available to women, such as the virgin, the whore, the mother, the witch, the crone, and even the vampire. She examines through (largely Latin American) literature the different aspects of the feminine monstrous, first focusing on the monstrous virgin. Within western canon, heavily influenced by Christianity, female virginity is a virtue, sometimes even a power – one could refer to Virgin Mary, the Latin American Virgin of Guadalupe, or Roman vestal virgins, who had a specified social role but quickly became the scapegoat in negative socio-political environment.¹⁷⁰ The virgin becomes monstrous if she is a virgin on her own volition, and especially if the span of her virginity exceeds some “natural” limit and she, thus, denies men the opportunity to make her “become a woman” through penetration.¹⁷¹ Santos argues that this mythical notion of virginity renders the woman an “object to be conquered”¹⁷² – and that while men safeguard female virginity, they also appropriate it for themselves.¹⁷³

Female sexuality becomes threatening once it is not under the control of a man or centering one. Margrit Shildrick says that in masculine imagination, sex may be a kind of cannibalism “where the male is devoured post-coitally.”¹⁷⁴ There are a number of monsters who appear as attractive women who seduce (and often kill) men: sirens who lure them to death with their voice, succubi who extract their life force through intercourse, female vampires drinking their blood, or many Slavic figures, such as the ‘rusalka’ who drowns men in bodies

¹⁶⁹ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 30.

¹⁷⁰ Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, 1.

¹⁷¹ Santos, 2.

¹⁷² Santos, 3.

¹⁷³ Santos, 5.

¹⁷⁴ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 30.

of water, or the 'divoženka' who dances with them until they die of exhaustion. The sexual woman disturbs the patriarchy which seeks to control her; as was the case with the virgin, the woman must be "sexy but not sexual."¹⁷⁵ According to Santos, in order for the woman to remain respectable and under male control, it is expected that soon after the act of losing her virginity, she becomes a wife and mother.

Often, the debate about the feminine monster concerns motherhood and pregnancy. Shildrick explains that masculine anxieties center pregnancy, be it the aforementioned maternal imagination or impression, or the very ability of the woman to create a human being and carry it inside her body. Besides the (previously discussed) fear of monstrous births or Braidotti's 'womb envy', born of desire to exclude the faulty feminine from procreation altogether, Shildrick argues that part of this fear stems from the woman's ability to create rivaling God: "(...) the unacceptable prospect of a female capacity so powerful that it could undermine the purpose of the divine creator himself."¹⁷⁶ Santos focuses more on the phenomenon of the 'bad mother.' She analyzes on the monstrous la Llorona in Spanish and Latin culture, who is traditionally a woman abused, left, or cheated on by her husband, who then drowns herself and her children, either to save them or as revenge.¹⁷⁷ Instead of holding the man accountable in this scenario, the woman has trespassed by not being nurturing, self-sacrificial, and thus she is cast aside as a 'bad mother,' roaming the body of water that became her grave, crying. Santos then introduces the feminist reinterpretation of this figure in the short story "Woman Hollering Creek" by Sandra Cisneros: the protagonist, Cléofilas, who emigrated to the U.S. with her new husband, only to find that she has nobody to keep her company and that her husband eventually becomes abusive. Instead of fulfilling the fate of la Llorona, she takes her son and escapes back

¹⁷⁵ Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, 4.

¹⁷⁶ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 40.

¹⁷⁷ Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, 62.

to Mexico, hollering wildly in the get-away car, contrasting the passive, tragic weeping of la Llorona.¹⁷⁸ To sum up, mothers are made monsters on two levels: the embodied act of carrying a child, and their role in society (whether or not it is fulfilled).

Post-human monsters and bodies are subject to much debate. Rosi Braidotti's claim that the role of the mother as one that carries and births the child is being appropriated by technology, as well as embryology and related disciplines, may not be inclusive of all bodies with wombs capable of bearing a child, but her warning of technology changing how we understand the 'normal' body, the 'correct' form, could be rather timely. It has been described how industrialization, factory mass-production, and consumerism created the expectation of "sameness of form",¹⁷⁹ of unity in conformity, and therefore made freaks and marvels into pathological cases, sick people. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson "discourses of the anomalous body comprise a series of successive reframings within a variety of registers" diachronically¹⁸⁰ – the anomalous bodies simply appear, exist through history, but our understanding, framing of them changes. Is it, then, too unbelievable that in the future with further technological development, humanity will opt out of embodied pregnancy, informed by historical masculine fears of the excesses and powers of the pregnant body, and leave procreation to machines which will correct any (perceived) errors? Donna Haraway claims that "the cyborg is a creature in a postgender world"¹⁸¹ and that, at present, we are already fundamentally connected to technology: "The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (italics in original).¹⁸² Masahiro Mori focuses on artificial limbs and robots as well in his essay "The Uncanny Valley" (1970). While this is a rather early

¹⁷⁸ Santos, 80.

¹⁷⁹ Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 11–12.

¹⁸⁰ Garland Thomson, 2.

¹⁸¹ Donna Haraway, *The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 8.

¹⁸² Haraway, 65.

publication, Mori describes an effect of artificial limbs which are constructed to look realistic: at first, one has affinity to a robotic creation that looks similar to our form, but “(...) once we realize [the limb] is actually artificial, we experience an eerie sensation” and the object in question “becomes uncanny.”¹⁸³ Mori says that the objective of robotics is to “creat[e] an artificial human,”¹⁸⁴ but that attempts at approximating human appearance too closely often land the robot in the uncanny valley, such as a robot presented in Osaka that had enough ‘muscles’ to smile, but the movement was too slow, labored, mechanical for comfort, and therefore uncanny.¹⁸⁵ He suggests that this feeling of eeriness is “[an] integral part of our instinct for self-preservation.”¹⁸⁶ While the merging of human corpora and machines is not at the level of dystopian science-fiction futures, the inquiry into our connection to technology certainly invites further research into post-human monstrous bodies.

With technology being involved, an inquiry into the monstrous arises – should we describe the monster as inherently unnatural? Stacy Alaimo argues that this is not the case: in her eco-critical publication *Bodily Natures*, she states that nature has been “(...) a cultural repository of norms and moralism against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes.”¹⁸⁷ In other words, nature has been used to oppress those that did not belong in the default, privileged category, in whichever relevant sense that is. Alaimo stresses that the divide between culture and nature is anything but sustainable¹⁸⁸ and that the embodied subject is ‘enmeshed’ with its environment, influencing it and influenced by it.¹⁸⁹ Where Cohen claims the monster is “pure culture,”¹⁹⁰ Alaimo stands in opposition of the artificial separation. She argues in favor of a ‘queer’ view of biology, citing examples

¹⁸³ Masahiro Mori, ‘The Uncanny Valley’, in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 90.

¹⁸⁴ Mori, 90.

¹⁸⁵ Mori, 93.

¹⁸⁶ Mori, 93.

¹⁸⁷ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Alaimo, 4.

¹⁸⁹ Alaimo, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, 38.

such as cells being intersex, or that “most of the organisms in four out of the five kingdoms do not require sex for reproduction.”¹⁹¹ It is imperative that we contest “(...) normative heterobiology” that claims its “objectivity and neutrality”¹⁹² but, in its attempts to separate nature from culture, the rational from the emotional, fails to realize that scientific disciplines do not exist in a vacuum and are informed by culture. On the other hand, Alaimo notes the humanitarian studies of ‘the body’ fleeing from its corporeality, focusing only on discourse and cultural effects rendering the body a non-biological tabula rasa. To refer back to the original question concerning the monster being (un)natural, I argue that monsters indeed are natural, once they exist and because they exist. Western sociocultural notions of what is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ are arbitrary norms that are often subject to change through time, and even more frequently, they are simply a tool to ostracize a group of people that, upon receiving the label ‘unnatural’, become lesser and scrutinized. That which occurs in nature is of nature as well; the crime of the monster is that it reminds us of the permeability of the categories we live by, and once the monster exists and it is beyond categorization, it endangers our very systems of knowledge.

The embodied reality of bodies is closely tied to vulnerability. Eszter Szép refers to vulnerability when analyzing non-fiction comics and graphic novels in her publication *Comics and the Body*: she specifies that while vulnerability in contemporary discourse is often “associated with weakness, disadvantage, and failure,”¹⁹³ she does not share this negative view. Rather, she understands it to be a means to interact and connect in new ways: “vulnerability is a condition we share because we inhabit bodies (...) always experienced in a dialogue, because it always elicits a response.”¹⁹⁴ This conceptualization of vulnerability

¹⁹¹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 5–6.

¹⁹² Alaimo, 6.

¹⁹³ Szép, *Comics and the Body*, 8.

¹⁹⁴ Szép, 3.

has proven suitable for the discussion of monstrosity and encounters with the monstrous in fantasy and sci-fi comics, offering a more embodied, physical view of monstrous encounters.

It may have become apparent that concerning the gendered monster, most studies in this specific field are dedicated to the othering of women, but studies dedicated to the othering of nonbinary or androgynous individuals are rather scarce. Agnieszka Gerwatowska presents an analysis of the novel *The Passion* and suggests that the figure of the siren Villanelle, who is transgressive in both gender and sexuality, represents a certain new androgynous monster. She is read as female in society, but she was born with webbed feet, a feature of male sailors,¹⁹⁵ she has sexual relationships with both men and women,¹⁹⁶ and a muscular body which intimidates the male narrator.¹⁹⁷ Gerwatowska argues that the siren changed “locus” and now inhabits the space between binary genders, a desirable figure whose presence brings insanity and death.¹⁹⁸ Concerning comics, Ken Lipenga Junior in his paper “The New Normal: Enfreakment in *Saga*” (2017) focuses on processes of enfreakment (framing certain bodies and identities as freaky through discourse) and avenues of disenfreakment (a challenging attitude, the un-making of freaks) in *Saga* comics (2012–ongoing).¹⁹⁹ The child protagonist Hazel is the only known offspring of two races at war, and her very existence endangers the systems of power to the extent that assassins follow her and her family across the universe to erase her entirely. The narrative invites queer reading, as the two races are clearly physically differentiated: her mother has wings, her father has horns, and Hazel is born with both.²⁰⁰ Through her childhood, she is forced to bind her wings to hide her identity, and she tends to perceive other queer, enfreaked outsiders (such as the transgender woman

¹⁹⁵ Agnieszka Gerwatowska, ‘Gender Monster – Who Is Afraid of the Siren?’, *ACTA PHILOLOGICA* 37, no. 37 (2010): 119.

¹⁹⁶ Gerwatowska, 121.

¹⁹⁷ Gerwatowska, 121.

¹⁹⁸ Gerwatowska, 124.

¹⁹⁹ Ken Junior Lipenga, ‘The New Normal: Enfreakment in *Saga*’, *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 9, no. 1 (2019): 4.

²⁰⁰ Lipenga, 14.

Petrichor at a women's prison) as "future friend material."²⁰¹ Lipenga argues that in *Saga*, however, the avenue for disenfranchising is mostly sex.²⁰² Mihaela Precup's "To 'all the monster girls': violence and non-normativity in Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona*" (2017) describes the shapeshifting protagonist, Nimona, as complicating categories, being "human-animal, vulnerable-immortal, girl-monster."²⁰³ Precup makes note of Nimona's queerness, mostly indicated by "linguistic markers" as well as choices in fashion, dyed hair, piercings, and a "combination of girlish and tomboy-ish features."²⁰⁴ Nimona's identity or sexuality is not specified in the narrative, but through the narrative of the graphic novel, it is shown that monsters and villains are not born, but rather created by institutions of power (in this case, rather clearly named The Institution²⁰⁵). Furthermore, it is stated that whenever Nimona shape-shifts, the previous body disintegrates, as if it died, and a new one appears in its place. Can we, then, argue that Nimona's original body is that of a young girl, and not of an animal, monster, or something ambiguous and abstract? Is there even an 'original body' of Nimona? While the works analyzed by Gerwatowska, Lipenga, and Precup may be interpreted as queer, they do not feature explicitly nonbinary-identified characters. This only highlights the lack in scholarship regarding the analysis of nonbinary characters and their bodies, whether specifically in comics, or in fiction and media over-all.

²⁰¹ Lipenga, 6.

²⁰² Lipenga, 13.

²⁰³ Mihaela Precup, "To 'All the Monster Girls': Violence and Non-Normativity in Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona*", *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8, no. 6 (2017): 2.

²⁰⁴ Precup, 7.

²⁰⁵ Precup, 8.

3 Method

The analysis, divided into three separate case studies, is conducted using close reading informed by intersectional feminism and queer theory. Due to a lack of established theory and method pertaining to analyzing nonbinary characters and bodies in comics, especially in relation to monstrosity, multiple theoretical texts were consulted.

Regarding gender and queer theory, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) proved useful as they discussed the assigning of gender and sex through discourse, as well as the performative nature of gender within the grid of intelligibility (the heterosexual matrix). Alyosxa Tudor's paper "Im/possibilities of refusing and choosing gender" (2019) was relevant for its treatment of non-conforming gender identities and forms of desire which were understood as a continuum, with the seemingly separate identities interconnected on the base of shared experience. Tudor also provides analysis and criticism of anti-transgender rhetoric, especially in academia.

As for monster theory, I consulted mainly Margrit Shildrick's *Embodying the Monster* (2002) and *Unbecoming Female Monsters: Witches, Vampires, and Virgins* (2016) for their focus on the gendered monster and female monstrosity. Shildrick describes the history of masculine anxieties surrounding the pregnant body and 'monstrous' births, while Santos structures her discussion around the cycle of female maturation and gives a transnational, transhistorical account of how female sexuality, procreative ability, knowledge and power are enfreaked and feared within the patriarchy. For accounts of 'abnormal' bodies and the medicalization of bodily difference, I have referred mainly to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996).

Finally, I have found Eszter Szép's *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability* (2020) immensely helpful in its treatment of vulnerability as a condition

that accompanies embodiment and that may open new avenues of connection between the Self and the Other. Despite the publication's focus on non-fiction comics and the embodiment of reading and drawing the line, I have transferred this conceptualization of vulnerability onto analyzing encounters between the human and the monstrous.

4 Analysis

4.1 Transformation and Liberating Disembodiment in *Heartwood: Non-binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*

Published by Power and Magic Press in 2019, the comics anthology *Heartwood: Non-binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy* compiles twenty two short comics by nonbinary-identified authors, featuring nonbinary characters.²⁰⁶ The variety of narratives set in and around the woods center a wide scope of topics, such as romantic love, familial affection, strained relationships with parents, grief, magical quests, ethnic identity, and acceptance of difference – simply put, their featuring at least one nonbinary character does not entail that said narrative centers nonbinary identity. This case study will consider four chosen comics that center around nonbinary identity and the body: “Expand” by Raven ‘raveyrai’ White; “The Lungs of Jeju” by Sunmi; “Shepherd” by Cori Walters; and “This Far” by Lee Lai. The analysis will examine how nonbinary identity, the body, and monstrosity meet and interact in the comics. I argue that the forest provides an avenue for nonbinary characters to achieve a type of liberating disembodiment and that, furthermore, their connection to monstrosity is affirming rather than dehumanizing or problematic.

At this initial point of the analysis, it is important to mention the various strategies that the comics employ to mark the characters as nonbinary. The comics mode allows the characters to be described not only through text, but through their visual characteristics as well, and none of the characters in question explicitly label themselves, their non-conforming identity is communicated through other means. For example, the protagonist of “Expand”

²⁰⁶ Joamette Gil, ‘Heartwood: Non-Binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy (Hardcover)’, Power and Magic Press, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://powerandmagicpress.com/products/heartwood-non-binary-tales-of-sylvan-fantasy>.

is on the phone with their mother when she asks them: “Is it Andi or Dilé day?”²⁰⁷ The child answers that “Andile is fine,”²⁰⁸ hinting at a nonbinary gender identity that is in flux. Similarly, the android character in “The Lungs of Jeju” tells their story of being created as a beautiful mechanical woman, noting that “any human concept of gender”²⁰⁹ does not mean much to an android like them. The protagonist of “Shepherd” then represents the case of visual marking of non-conformity: as they rest under a tree in the jungle in the final frames of the comic, their bare chest is visible through their unbuttoned shirt, and they have top surgery scars (that is, scars from the removal of breast tissue).²¹⁰ It would certainly be possible to interpret a number of these non-conforming characters as transgender. This text will, however, refer to the characters in question as ‘nonbinary’ and use the neutral personal pronoun ‘they,’ because of the official description of the collection as a whole, and because the text has not specified otherwise.

“Expand” opens with a child of color, Andile, calling their mother to pick them up from school because they do not feel good. As per previous mention, their mother asks whether to call them Andi or Dilé which marks their gender non-conformity. Andile insists they feel a “different kind of different”²¹¹ and they are shown to be clutching at their chest, possibly experiencing chest pains. Andile is dressed all in white, as are the other children playing on the grass outside. Moreover, all the spaces, whether indoors or outdoors, are rendered in light colors as well, which altogether evokes hospital environment. The child protagonist only squats in the corner of the playground while the other children run around and laugh. There is not much to go on regarding Andile’s condition, since they only describe

²⁰⁷ Raven White, ‘Expand’, in *Heartwood: Non-Binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*, ed. Joamette Gil (Portland, Oregon: Power & Magic Press, 2019), 41.

²⁰⁸ White, 41.

²⁰⁹ Sunmi, ‘The Lungs of Jeju’, in *Heartwood: Non-Binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*, ed. Joamette Gil (Portland, Oregon: Power & Magic Press, 2019), 257.

²¹⁰ Cori Walters, ‘Shepherd’, in *Heartwood: Non-Binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*, ed. Joamette Gil (Portland, Oregon: Power & Magic Press, 2019), 169.

²¹¹ White, ‘Expand’, 41.

what they are feeling as “it’s – like – in my heart or something”²¹² but given the mother’s concern, this may be interpreted as Andile having heart problems.

As Andile waits for their mother at the edge of the playground, the focus is on the forest behind them as the shadows gradually darken. The reader perceives from Andile’s point of view as a tall humanoid spirit appears in the tree line: the creature is vaguely humanoid with long limbs, a body made of darkness in which little lights float like stars. On its head, there is an ornate mask with branch-like antlers.²¹³ It does not exit the forest – on the contrary, it seems to pull the trees closer together to disappear from view. Margrit Shildrick in her *Embodying the Monster* notes that “the monster haunts the margin [of discourse]”²¹⁴ – in this case, the monster is physically on the margins. Andile is shown in shock at the sight, their eyes wide, drops of sweat appearing on their face, but then they run after the spirit into the dim forest, the “excitement for the forbidden”²¹⁵ having won.

More spirits run past the main character when in the woods. This stampede is framed from a distance to emphasize their great size difference: small Andile in light clothes struggling through the undergrowth, while the dark shadows run with ease into the increasingly dark forest. This difference in scale hints at the child’s vulnerability, as Marshall and Gilmore point out in their analysis in “Girlhood in the Gutter: Feminist Graphic Knowledge and the Visualization of Sexual Precarity” (2015),²¹⁶ despite the monsters mostly ignoring Andile’s presence. Andile soon has to stop – perhaps due to their health condition, perhaps because of the spirits being that much faster – and they clutch at their chest, face obscured by hair.²¹⁷ Only then they find that all the monsters waited for them in a small clearing.

²¹² White, 41.

²¹³ White, 45.

²¹⁴ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 4.

²¹⁵ Shildrick, 8.

²¹⁶ Elizabeth Marshall and Leigh Gilmore, ‘Girlhood in the Gutter: Feminist Graphic Knowledge and the Visualization of Sexual Precarity’, *WSQ Women s Studies Quarterly* 43(1-2): 43, no. 1–2 (2015): 99.

²¹⁷ White, ‘Expand’, 47.

The frames show wide-eyed Andile, asking in awe: “How do I run like y’all?”²¹⁸ The largest spirit speaks to them; their speech is not contained in speech bubbles, they tell Andile to “RELEASE ACCEPT EXPAND” (capitalization in the original).²¹⁹ The reader is situated in the position of the spirit as it touches Andile in the spot indicated to be their heart, and they explode out into a dark shape with glowing eyes. Andile darts around the forest with the other spirits, wildly smiling for the first time²²⁰ as though leaving their body behind freed them.

The transformation proves to be impermanent, and Andile falls out of the bushes after their run, human again. Their mother approaches across the grass, scolds them, and takes them away for a doctor’s appointment, despite the child saying they feel better now.²²¹ The difference in color between the town and the woods is even more stark toward the end of the comic: the human world, as the center, is extremely bright, with the only exception being characters’ skin color, while the forest, as the periphery, was shadowy and dark. In the context of the western world, white is often associated with positive attributes, goodness, purity, while black is the color of negativity, mourning, evil. Darkness often inspires fear, yet Andile was shown happier in the woods, among the galloping monsters. The forest along with the monsters inhabiting it provided an avenue for Andile to be momentarily relieved of the body that held them back.

It is certain that Andile complicates binaries: first the implied gender binary between Andi and Dilé, and now they trespassed over the visual boundaries between darkness and light, between human and monster. It is uncertain whether anybody (or any body) could transform into a forest spirit, or whether Andile is special in some way, but their transformation only seemed possible in the forest. Are they entirely human, partially monster? Why not both,

²¹⁸ White, 48.

²¹⁹ White, 49.

²²⁰ White, 51.

²²¹ White, 52.

or something entirely out of this binary relation? As Elizabeth Grosz writes in her chapter on androgynous and corporeal enfreakment, a freak “imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life.”²²² Similarly, Shildrick notes that monstrous bodies “radically disrupt”²²³ by their very existence. Andile is thus non-conforming in more ways than one, having been transformed by their encounter with the monstrous.

The following comic in the selection, “The Lungs of Jeju,” shows the two main characters laying on the forest ground in the leaves, their bodies mirroring each other while they have a conversation. One of the bodies, however, appears more overgrown than the other, and as they share their stories with each other, the reader learns that the figure is a sentient android that had been grown through by vegetation over an uncertain period of time. This mechanical creature was constructed to be an attractive female android, a model called LEA-03, but in their narration, they ask: “But what is beauty to a robot? Or any human concept of gender?”²²⁴ This exemplifies even more clearly how the assigning of gender can be a “symbolic violence,”²²⁵ as discussed by Toby Finlay – the mechanical body had no inherent gender in itself, it was (quite literally) constructed by systems of power.²²⁶ The android’s experience draws a parallel to the human character, Seungwa, who was in their memories of their deceased parents addressed as a daughter,²²⁷ but now they have a flat chest and visible facial hair,²²⁸ suggesting a degree of physical transition. Whether machine or body-organism, they both have the experience of not identifying with the gender their body had been assigned.

²²² Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, 57.

²²³ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 2.

²²⁴ Sunmi, ‘The Lungs of Jeju’, 259.

²²⁵ Finlay, ‘Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory’, 59.

²²⁶ Finlay, 59.

²²⁷ Sunmi, ‘The Lungs of Jeju’, 254.

²²⁸ Sunmi, 256.

The android recalls that they had been sold to a rich Korean heir with no regard for their own wishes. They describe their escape during a vacation at Jeju: how they ripped out their chip and ran into the woods where they laid down and remained there for an uncertain length of time.²²⁹ As previously mentioned, the forest entered their metal body, growing inside and through it, and stripping the creature of their gendered characteristics. This breach of bodily boundaries may seem a painful process, but the changed creature claims: “I’ve never felt so whole.”²³⁰ Their body transcends not only human gender, but also the distinction between organic and mechanical, natural and man-made. They started out as a perceived female droid, but escaped the control of humans – or rather the control of men? – to be accepted by the forest and become something post-human and new.

It becomes certain that the titular lungs of the island are those of the former android, having a “deep forest slumber” fill their chest with plant life.²³¹ The attention to detail in the comic aids the effect of fullness: in the scenes from the characters’ presence in the forest, the pages are filled to the brim with individual leaves, grasses, ferns, and dense trees; on the other hand, the spaces from memories that are created by humans (city-scapes, interiors of buildings) are quite simple, light, and minimalistic. The reader can stand witness to the main character’s feeling of wholeness that the forest has brought them. The changed creature and the human part ways at the end of the story: the creature asks the human to remember them, after which they dissolve into air, leaves and other ephemera,²³² transcending physicality entirely. In this narrative, the forest proved to be not only a place, but a force that allowed the nonbinary-identified character to escape their gendered body, become something uncertain and un-nameable, and perhaps find ultimate freedom.

²²⁹ Sunmi, 258–59.

²³⁰ Sunmi, 260.

²³¹ Sunmi, 259.

²³² Sunmi, 262.

The nameless protagonist of “Shepherd” presents an interesting perspective on the interaction between the physical body and the forest. This character is shown caring for their sheep, saying that “one day, they will be consumed, but until that day I will cherish and protect them.”²³³ The monstrous is not entirely exempt from the comic, as the sheep have bird feet.²³⁴ The greater narrative, however, has potentially more eerie implications than the taxonomically ‘incorrect’ animals’ bodies.

During the narrator’s trek through the jungle, they ponder their own connection to the forest. As they weave through the trees, they note the abundance of the jungle, its water and fruit and greenery, but also its capacity to be hurt – a number of cans and bottles thrown into a pond suggest pollution as a threat.²³⁵ The character recognizes themselves in the jungle, even: “This life is sentient. The jungle is as much a *they* as I am” (emphasis in original).²³⁶ Similarly, Stacy Alaimo in her publication *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) discusses that “environment is teeming with life that is corporeal, has its own needs (...)”²³⁷ and that humans are inextricably interconnected with nature, their environment. It can be said about the protagonist of “Shepherd” that they understand their connection to the jungle that surrounds their home.

Not only does the character perceive the forest as vulnerable, they are quite aware of their own vulnerability. Coming back to the topic of mortality, they state: “I’m no different than my sheep. One day, the jungle will consume me. My flesh will become roots and vines and blossoms.”²³⁸ They do not seem troubled by the notion, as they calmly rest under a great tree, depicted as if viewed from above – as if the tree could perceive them. They almost blend

²³³ Walters, ‘Shepherd’, 166.

²³⁴ Walters, 165.

²³⁵ Walters, 168.

²³⁶ Walters, 168.

²³⁷ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 2.

²³⁸ Walters, ‘Shepherd’, 169.

in with the tree-roots while they express gratitude for being “so well cared for.”²³⁹ It becomes apparent that, perhaps, the sheep were not to be consumed by people, but by nature, and that the titular shepherd might have referred not solely to the human, but to the jungle as well.

This comic not only establishes the forest as a potential character, but presents a different type of disembodiment: death. It is a transition, a transformation, as implied by the main character saying “my flesh will become roots and vines and blossoms.”²⁴⁰ This transformation is not exclusive to non-cisgender identified people, however, it pertains to all organisms. Perhaps the character’s awareness of this transitional dimension of death is aided by the fact they have gone through at least one greater transition before: their bare chest shows two crescent-shaped top surgery scars.²⁴¹ The protagonist does not show any signs of desiring death, but their musings bring to light one’s bodily bond to their environment, as well as the transitional nature, the impermanence, of bodies.

The last comic of the selection, “This Far”, also depicts quite a unique connection with one’s environment. The narrative shows a mother and her adult child in their home; the young person is asking their mother to come walk with them, but the mother is hesitant. The child insists on showing their mother something, as she asks: “What if I don’t want to see?”²⁴² As they walk through the forest, the reader learns about the child essentially through the mother: she mentions a change of pronouns and helping buy new clothes for the child,²⁴³ marking them as non-cisgender in all likelihood. Only later, she reveals to the reader her real source of discomfort: the child will soon transition into a tree.

²³⁹ Walters, 169.

²⁴⁰ Walters, 169.

²⁴¹ Walters, 169.

²⁴² Lee Lai, ‘This Far’, in *Heartwood: Non-Binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*, ed. Joamette Gil (Portland, Oregon: Power & Magic Press, 2019), 179.

²⁴³ Lai, 175.

The comic follows the pair's journey through the forest to the clearing where the child chose to grow, as well as their emotional journey to try and understand each other. The concept of physical transition into a tree is a useful metaphorical depiction to express how alien an idea the regular gender-affirming transition may seem to cisgender parents that never experienced misalignment between their assigned gender and their inner self. The mother says that she would like to see the child's reaction "if [their] flesh and blood told you they wanted to leave home and become a tree"²⁴⁴ – the metaphor 'flesh and blood' contrasts strongly with the concept of flora, highlighting again that she considers this transition as 'going too far.'

Besides the aforementioned remark, however, the mother asks many of the typical questions a transitioning individual may hear from their loved ones. For example, she wonders if the child would not regret the change, and attempts to bargain with them so they would "change a little less."²⁴⁵ While asking why the child would "go this far, change this much,"²⁴⁶ she stands a step behind the child, showing the gap between their understanding. The child does not allow for their identity or the transition to be negotiated. Later, they are shown to help their mother get over an obstruction in their road, just as they are trying to do through their conversation.

The fantastical transition into a non-human body, into flora, raises a number of intriguing questions about the nature of a body and how we understand it. Finlay, for example, quotes Gressgard's argument that "improper gender tends to be allied with inhumanity"²⁴⁷ which is often problematic to nonbinary and otherwise non-conforming individuals, and Shildrick proposes that "gross failure to approximate to corporeal norms"²⁴⁸ leads to the labeling of a body as monstrous. It is indisputable that a tree is far from said humanoid

²⁴⁴ Lai, 176.

²⁴⁵ Lai, 179.

²⁴⁶ Lai, 175.

²⁴⁷ Finlay, 'Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory', 67.

²⁴⁸ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 2.

norms. If it were possible to ‘transplant’ the human consciousness into a tree, however, would its bodily autonomy be respected? Would acts of violence against the tree-body – such as cutting it down, scratching symbols into its bark, or simply breaking a branch – be illegal or in any way penalized? Would any additional rights apply to all tree-bodies, or only such that have former humans ‘inside’ of them? Such questions are, of course, only hypothetical, but “This Far” suggests a scenario that would endanger the arbitrary bodily norms and standards we as humans uphold. Considering Alaimo’s observations on the obsessive manner in which we distance ourselves from nature,²⁴⁹ the possibility of embodying flora would certainly shake our conceptualization of bodies.

In conclusion, this text examined the connections between monsters and nonbinary characters in the four selected comics in *Heartwood*. It has been demonstrated that the monstrous in these narratives is non-threatening to the human characters. Rather, the nonbinary humans find ways to relate to the monsters, to see aspects of themselves in the monster, perhaps even vice versa, aspects of monsters in themselves. The protagonist of “Expand” temporarily becomes one of the forest spirits; the genderless post-human creature and the nonbinary individual in “The Lungs of Jeju” discuss their life experiences and discover that they are similar in many aspects; “Shepherd” portrays a character accepting of the non-static nature of bodies and deeply connected to the living, and perhaps sentient, jungle; and lastly, “This Far” features an individual who identifies the closest with being flora and who works toward a mutual understanding with their mother. The forests are not simply a passive setting of the narratives, they are the periphery of society where monstrous creatures reside, as well as the grounds for liberating disembodiment of nonbinary characters whose bodies did not resemble their inner self.

²⁴⁹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 4.

4.2 Good Wolf, Bad Wolf: Vulnerable Demonic Possession in *Mooncakes*

The charming yet troubled nonbinary werewolf Tam is one of two protagonists of the graphic novel *Mooncakes* (2019). The narrative focalizes either them, or their childhood friend, romantic interest and main character counterpart, a young witch named Nova. As characters, both Nova and Tam are quite similar: in age, in being Chinese-American, in growing up in the same New England town, and in being privy to the local magical community. Nova lives with her two grandmothers and has not ever left her hometown; Tam, with strained family background, had been shuffled from place to place and never quite at home anywhere in the world. The graphic novel maps the (magical) challenges of their young adult lives.

Originally published as a webcomic, *Mooncakes* appeared on the artist's Wendy Xu's personal art website, Art of Wendy Xu, since 2015. Her and her creative partner, Suzanne Walker, have partially relied on Patreon support before the comic went on hiatus and was announced for publishing in October 2019 as a single-issue graphic novel. The online version is available to this day on the website,²⁵⁰ but for the purposes of this text, I have elected to analyze the version published in the year 2019 (in e-book form).

In my analysis, I will first cover the markers of the two main characters' gender identity and disability, continuing onto the first encounter with the monster (wolf demon) and the grounds upon which it is prescribed its role as an 'evil' force in the narrative. Then, I will discuss the role of families, support systems, and heritage in the narrative, followed by the setting up and the unfolding of a vulnerable encounter between Tam and the demon. I argue that the wolf demon in the graphic novel reflects Tam's familial trauma, and that their choice to vulnerably connect with the wolf spirit created a transformative encounter for them both, allowing Tam and the spirit to heal.

²⁵⁰ Wendy Xu, 'Mooncakes – 2015', Art of Wendy Xu, 2015, <http://www.artofwendyxu.com/mooncakes>.

Tam Lang never labels their own gender identity in the graphic novel. In the thank you note to the readers, the authors call them “nonbinary,”²⁵¹ and in flashbacks from their childhood, they are shown to have a feminine build and long, braided hair.²⁵² When Nova brings them to her house and one of her grandmothers refers to Tam as “she”, Tam corrects her: “I use ‘they’ pronouns now.”²⁵³ The grandmother apologizes and Tam’s identity is never discussed or challenged in the narrative. In a close circle of Nova’s Chinese-American family where all the women are queer witches, where Nova is hard of hearing and Tam suffers from lycanthropy since birth, their nonbinary identity is hardly a shocking fact of life.

Nova’s disability and Tam’s ‘condition’ are quite central to the comic. Nova is shown to be hard-of-hearing, wearing hearing aids daily. Her auditory issues are illustrated, for example, when a customer in the family bookshop mumbles an answer to Nova’s question.²⁵⁴ The text in the customer’s speech bubble becomes jumbled, hard to make out even on close inspection. Nova also has to take off her aids to answer the phone²⁵⁵ and she even misses important information and action (such as her friend getting abducted) since she had to take off her aids for the night.²⁵⁶ Nobody in her circle, however, uses sign language with her in any way – they apparently depend on her always wearing hearing aids. Tam, on the other hand, is shown to struggle with their transformations: they tell Nova transforming hurts “as much as when [they were] a kid.”²⁵⁷ They also say that once they use up too much of their ‘wolf magic,’ they might not be strong enough to turn back into a human after the full moon passes, and that they “got stuck as a wolf for a whole month” before.²⁵⁸ Tam, knowing their large animal form would attract attention, would wait the month out deep

²⁵¹ Suzanne Walker and Wendy Xu, *Mooncakes* (Portland, Oregon: Oni Press, 2019), i.

²⁵² Walker and Xu, 13.

²⁵³ Walker and Xu, 22.

²⁵⁴ Walker and Xu, 7.

²⁵⁵ Walker and Xu, 9.

²⁵⁶ Walker and Xu, 171–72.

²⁵⁷ Walker and Xu, 103.

²⁵⁸ Walker and Xu, 27.

in the woods; in a similar vein to *Heartwood*, the forest remains to be the darkened periphery where monsters dwell.

When the young witch follows the rumors of a large white wolf into the woods, correctly suspecting it to be Tam, and finds them battling a horse monster. This creature is as tall as the trees, its flesh is torn open in places, it has six legs and one large eye on its stomach. On a base corporeal level, this creature easily qualifies as “culturally impure”²⁵⁹ in Noël Carrol’s framework – that is, it violates the taxonomic categories established in the specific culture – but in a context where witchcraft and werewolves exist, cultural categories and expectations are easily subverted. Tam and Nova label the creature a demon, on occasion “archdemon.”²⁶⁰ Tam reveals they have been singled out as a future host for the demon, due to their ‘wolf magic,’ and they attempted to harness that power to destroy the demon. They found they did not have the skill to do so, however, and had to team up with Nova to make the creature flee into the deep forest.

The narrative promptly sets up the demon as Tam’s primary nemesis. Nova’s grandmothers, shown to be powerful witches with ties to the local forest spirits, investigate the issue further, while Tam, Nova and their former classmate Tatyana search for magical scholarship on ‘wolf magic’. The spirits seem to be a welcome occurrence, whether they resemble rocks with faces, slugs overgrown with fungi, or Chinese dragons, and they communicate only in images with the witches.²⁶¹ The demon, on the other hand, does not communicate at all. One could ask why the ‘demon’ gets labeled as such, besides its unpleasant appearance at first glance: as Ken Lipenga jr. noted in their investigation into enfreakment in *Saga*, the corporeal is often the first basis for situating someone as a ‘freak.’²⁶² The answer would be simple: this particular spirit seeks to breach the boundaries

²⁵⁹ Carrol, ‘The Nature of Horror’, 55.

²⁶⁰ Walker and Xu, *Mooncakes*, 33.

²⁶¹ Walker and Xu, 49–50.

²⁶² Lipenga, ‘The New Normal: Enfreakment in *Saga*’, 2.

of bodies that don't 'belong' to it. Neither the horse nor Tam Lang consented to such union. The grandmothers join their power to rip the spirit out of the stolen body; the reader then beholds the large, six-legged demon, grimacing as it stands over the dead animal.²⁶³ The creature now looks more canine, drawing a visual parallel to Tam. The witches only manage to bind it in a magical cage, not destroy it, and they later confirm that Tam's magic is the only one capable of destroying the demon.²⁶⁴ Thus the main struggle becomes solidified: the Good Wolf against the Bad Wolf.

While Tam admits to be inexperienced in wielding their powers, they keep central aspects of their situation to themselves. The grandmothers note that "Tam's got a lot of hurt"²⁶⁵ but give them space until they are ready to talk about it. Tam is also shown to be independent to a fault; when asked why they had not contacted Nova earlier, they say they did not want to "impose" on Nova and her family, and that they were going to see them only after they destroyed the demon without asking for help.²⁶⁶ Despite being welcomed and supported by all the women, their narration shows they blame themselves: "This was your mess to fix..."²⁶⁷ On the day of the full moon, the date set for destroying the demon, they are shown pacing the kitchen, their face shadowed by the window-panes in a way that suggests them being caged, feeling stuck in their role as 'demon slayer.'²⁶⁸ In general, they are quick to get upset at their shortcomings, real or perceived, and their self-hating tendencies only intensify, no matter how much support Nova, her friend Tatyana, or the grandmothers provide.

Nova and Tam's familial situations are a point of contrast in *Mooncakes*. Nova's family, while being anything but normative, is large and loving. As the Chinese Mid-Autumn festival comes around, Nova and her queer grandmothers are joined by the wider family: her deceased

²⁶³ Walker and Xu, *Mooncakes*, 60.

²⁶⁴ Walker and Xu, 67.

²⁶⁵ Walker and Xu, 51.

²⁶⁶ Walker and Xu, 20.

²⁶⁷ Walker and Xu, 31.

²⁶⁸ Walker and Xu, 98.

parents return for the night as ghosts, her aunt and uncle join them, and her cousin Terry inexplicably has a pigeon head and feathery tail. Nova, of course, must cope with the death of her parents, and expresses to Tam in confidence that she stayed with her ‘nanas’ for so long because she “didn’t want to lose the family [she] had left.”²⁶⁹ Tam carries a different brand of familial trauma: their parents got divorced when they were young, which troubled them greatly, and their white step-father then became insufferable at best, abusive at worst. In their memory, Tam is shown shouting back and forth with their step-father²⁷⁰ and on the evening of the festival, they say how they missed making and eating mooncakes.²⁷¹ Their step-father had held them back from their heritage by refusing to celebrate Chinese holidays and festivals, and by relocating the family and severing Tam’s contact with Nova for years to come.

As the moon grows full, the whole range of the stepfather’s abuse is revealed. Nova finds their fellow witch and former school councilor, Mrs. Crawford, attempting to unbind the demon from its cage.²⁷² Tam is shaken by the news, having confided in Mrs. Crawford as a child from a broken family, and they finally share the whole truth: they are being targeted by a cult which seeks to put demons into werewolves’ bodies, a cult that their stepfather is a member of.²⁷³ Tam recalls watching on as they had bound another werewolf and channeled a demon to possess them, the act reflecting in their eyes wide with terror.²⁷⁴ They share that they had to escape and were, essentially, homeless and on the run for months before meeting Nova. The betrayal of Mrs. Crawford triggers Tam’s ‘lone wolf’ default mindset, as they remark to Nova: “I should know better than to trust anyone by now...”²⁷⁵

²⁶⁹ Walker and Xu, 94.

²⁷⁰ Walker and Xu, 95.

²⁷¹ Walker and Xu, 72.

²⁷² Walker and Xu, 140.

²⁷³ Walker and Xu, 154.

²⁷⁴ Walker and Xu, 153.

²⁷⁵ Walker and Xu, 159.

Nova, however, cannot hear them because she removed the hearing aids for sleep, and she therefore cannot intervene with Tam sneaking out to deal with the demon alone. Unsurprisingly, Tam is then kidnapped by Mrs. Crawford and taken to the cult's cave system for a ritual.

The graphic novel employs an interesting magical technique that later facilitates Tam's final encounter with the demon. At the stage of researching 'wolf magic,' Nova suggests what I will term 'the empathy spell': a meditative state witches can use to "enter each other's minds [to] strengthen connections, get new perspectives."²⁷⁶ Tam, likely aware of the intimacy of the act and already romantically involved with Nova, jokes: "Are you sure it's not just a sex metaphor?"²⁷⁷ The empathy spell then allows them to communicate with each other through thoughts and, supposedly, memories, although I ought to note that when Nova, for example, shows Tam her memory of her grandmother Nechama teaching her how to cast non-verbal magic as a small child, the framing of the memory is not from the point of view of Nova herself, but from a third party perspective. At any rate, the empathetic meditative state allows for a special vulnerable encounter, as per Eszter Szép's understanding of vulnerability in her *Comics and the Body: vulnerable encounters with others* (or perhaps, the Other) "[enable] discourse, interaction, and affective transaction."²⁷⁸ Tam and Nova, childhood friends with a new romantic connection, are quick to be vulnerable and share mental images of little Nova crying after receiving hearing aids; of upset Tam, cutting off their long hair in the bathroom; of Tam as a wolf resting in the forest.²⁷⁹ They agree that their respective conditions may be painful or distressing, but it is often because people do not "handle things better in the real world."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Walker and Xu, 114.

²⁷⁷ Walker and Xu, 114.

²⁷⁸ Szép, *Comics and the Body*, 9.

²⁷⁹ Walker and Xu, *Mooncakes*, 124.

²⁸⁰ Walker and Xu, 123.

In the final altercation between the cult and Tam’s friends, including the mobilized forest spirits, the released demon succeeds in possessing Tam’s body. Tam and the spirit both appear in the werewolf’s consciousness, but the aggressive spirit has all control over the physical body; the space works on the same basis as the empathy spell, allowing the parties to communicate, share emotions, images, and memories (although represented from a third-party point of view). Tam, instead of fighting the wolf, seems to surrender: “There’s nothing more you can do to me. You’ve already taken over my mind.”²⁸¹ This statement is not entirely true, as it is only the wolf-body that is possessed, yet Tam’s spirit retains its voice. The supposed demon looks different in the mind-space, a wolf with budding horns and two tails – when Tam sees the spirit’s memories, they find they are “not so different after all” as the cult had abused the creature until it was only a shadow of its former self, made scared and lonely.²⁸² The images of the wolf spirit being tortured and Tam running away from home are juxtaposed, as Tam explains the cult did similar things to them. The spirit lays its head on Tam’s lap, looking sorrowful but kind. The young werewolf then alludes to Nova, telling the spirit they found out somebody who cares for them, and encourages them: “(...) maybe you can find something to believe in, too?”²⁸³ After this recognition of shared trauma, the wolf lets go and Tam returns to ‘the driver’s seat’ of their own body.

Shildrick’s claim that the monstrous encounter is transformative for both parties²⁸⁴ is indisputable in the case of Tam Lang and the wolf spirit. When Tam transforms back into their human form, they release the spirit from their palms, and having gained a connection with the wolf, they reach into its chest to pull out a swirling bundle of darkened energy, likely representing the trauma inflicted by the evil cult.²⁸⁵ The spirit then blooms with flowers

²⁸¹ Walker and Xu, 216.

²⁸² Walker and Xu, 216–17.

²⁸³ Walker and Xu, 218.

²⁸⁴ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 1.

²⁸⁵ Walker and Xu, *Mooncakes*, 221.

and sprouts branches, now identifiable as one of the forest spirits Qiuli and Nechama keep in contact with. They snuggle up to Tam to say goodbye, and then disappear along with the other creatures.²⁸⁶ When Nova embraces Tam, asking if they are okay, Tam truthfully answers: “I am now.”²⁸⁷ In the epilogue, Tam is shown to be more secure, ready to join Nova on her adventure of moving out and starting a magic apprenticeship.²⁸⁸ Through the feared, but much needed direct contact with the demon, they came to terms with their hardship and now seem ready to move forward.

Mooncakes focuses strongly on a journey to face and accept one’s painful past. The ‘demon’ is many things in this particular narrative: it is itself a victim of abuse, a monster created directly by a powerful group of individuals; it is a tool that the cult uses to extend its power over Tam’s extraordinary body; and it is a reflection of Tam’s own pain and struggle for control. They tried to outrun it, they tried to destroy it, but could not do either. Only a direct and vulnerable encounter within one body allowed them both to empathize with the Other and heal. Nova had been through a transformation herself, albeit not as drastic and embodied as Tam: her helping Tam combat the powerful ‘demon’ and the imminent danger of losing another loved one sparked an interest in broadening her horizons and deciding to leave home to learn new avenues of magic. The graphic novel shows that being vulnerable and facing one’s demons is often the only viable way to overcome one’s internal struggle and move forward into a new chapter of life.

4.3 Man-less or Man-centric Space(s) in *On a Sunbeam* and *Bitch Planet*

After having discussed the magical, transformative forest grounds of *Heartwood* and the small New England town full of witchcraft, this case study will move into possible

²⁸⁶ Walker and Xu, 222.

²⁸⁷ Walker and Xu, 223.

²⁸⁸ Walker and Xu, 240–41.

futures in outer space, juxtaposing two works in the science fiction genre which, in very differing ways, center experiences of women and queer individuals. The first work titled *On a Sunbeam* (2018) is a webcomic turned graphic novel, first released online through the years 2016 and 2017. The author, Tillie Walden, had published her award-winning in-print autobiographical graphic novel *Spinning* in 2017, it is therefore no surprise that towards the end of 2018, *On a Sunbeam* too was published in a self-contained graphic novel.²⁸⁹ Walden keeps the online version available for free as of writing this text. *On a Sunbeam*'s counterpart in this analysis will be the only primary source that was published as a 'traditional' in-print comic: *Bitch Planet* by Valentine De Landro and Kelly Sue DeConnick. The comic produced a total of ten issues in three separate volumes, published from the year 2014 until 2017.²⁹⁰

On a Sunbeam falls under the sub-genre of a space odyssey, as the reader follows the freshly graduated protagonist Mia on her first job, preserving or rebuilding historical sites in space. Unbeknownst to her crew, she also searches for a girl she once loved and was suddenly separated from. *Bitch Planet* shows the reader a dystopian patriarchal regime which punishes all non-compliant women by sending them into a prison on an off-earth facility, known by the general public as Bitch Planet. The main character Kamau is on a search of her own – to reunite with her sister that had been imprisoned first. The discussion will not only center the nonbinary crew-member of *On a Sunbeam*, Elliot, and Kamau's transgender sister, Morowa; the focus will also be on how the constructions of gender in these contrasting future environments influence the lives of characters, the attitudes and pressures toward women's bodies, as well as encounters with the monstrous and enfreaking attitudes. I argue that while

²⁸⁹ Josh Kramer, 'On a Sunbeam', *The Comics Journal*, 10 October 2018, <https://www.tcj.com/reviews/on-a-sunbeam/>.

²⁹⁰ 'Bitch Planet I Image Comics', *Image Comics*, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://imagecomics.com/comics/series/bitch-planet>.

Bitch Planet presents a dystopia where the male gaze controls and enfreaks female bodies, *On a Sunbeam* represents a gender utopia regarding one's embodied subjectivities.

One of the five crew members of the space-ship Aktis, and therefore one of the five major characters, is a nonbinary individual named Elliot. The art style of Tillie Walden is rather simple, using muted colors and narrow, minimal line-art, therefore Elliot does not look much more different than the other characters within the graphic novel. They have light skin, short blonde hair, slim build, and a rather flat chest. Elliot is also non-verbal, and therefore do not introduce themselves or label their identity. Their close friend Jules is the one to explain to the main character that “(...) Ell doesn't talk. No one told me that when I got here and I felt like an idiot. And they're nonbinary.”²⁹¹ Further in the story, Elliot is repeatedly misgendered by a newly assigned captain of their small crew as “she”²⁹² – due to the nature of the narrative, however, it is not clear whether the captain has information about the gender Elliot was assigned at birth, or whether being female is the default in this universe.

On a Sunbeam is a unique comic in that in its entire (narrative) universe, there seem to be no men. The comic shows two separate timelines, one of the present, with the protagonist Mia embarking on a journey to find repair jobs in the most odd corners of space, and the other of Mia's childhood at a boarding school where she meets her first love. In neither of these narratives could one find a male character, not even mentioned in passing, and Elliot is the only person who is confirmed to be nonbinary (although many of the anonymous pupils' presentation is quite androgynous, so it is possible they are not the only one). The story is set in a world – or a number of worlds – populated by queer women, or queer nonbinary individuals, and this status quo is never brought to the readers' attention as something unusual.

Bitch Planet, on the other hand, sets up a universe where men have absolute power. The patriarchs addressed as Fathers (and often having surnames that end in -son,

²⁹¹ Tillie Walden, *On a Sunbeam* (New York, N.Y: First Second, 2018), 6.

²⁹² Walden, 164.

such as Josephson or Johnson,²⁹³ to make the masculine lineage more salient) control all of society's resources and, by extension, all the people that are other than cisgender and male. The name of the series refers to a women's prison set up outside Earth on a separate planet; the convicts' crimes range from acts of violence or murder to "aesthetic offenses"²⁹⁴ or "seduction and disappointment."²⁹⁵ In the later issues of the comic, it is revealed that Bitch Planet has a completely separate sector for transgender women – the main character, Kamau, is implied to have gotten imprisoned on purpose so that she could find her transgender sister, Morowa. There are no characters labeled nonbinary in the comic, but the treatment of transgender individuals by the system offers plentiful material to analyze. As Morowa remarks, not adhering to the cisgender 'normal' was the original crime to be detained for: "We were the first to be sent away [to Bitch Planet]. We are always the first."²⁹⁶

Elliot does not have many a chance to speak on their life or identity: as per previous mention, they are non-verbal. They communicate mostly through facial expressions, they give thumbs-up, or they write short notes. Similarly to Nova in *Mooncakes*, Elliot and their friends are also never shown to use any kind of sign language, but the notes and reading Elliot's facial expressions seem to function just fine. In cases of conflict or mistreatment, their young friend Jules steps in to defend Elliot, for example at the time that the crew is given a new captain who misgenders Elliot. When the captain asks Elliot to brief her about their work progress and then complains: "Why won't she speak to me?" Jules passionately jumps in: "THEY. Not 'she'" (capitals in original).²⁹⁷ She then refuses to cooperate, claiming she forgot what her work progress was just as the captain 'forgot' Elliot's pronouns. Elliot is shown to shoot a soft, grateful look to Jules, emphasizing the importance of a support system.

²⁹³ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #10*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2017), 1.

²⁹⁴ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #3*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2015), 3.

²⁹⁵ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #5*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2015), 5.

²⁹⁶ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #8*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2016), 2.

²⁹⁷ Walden, *On a Sunbeam*, 164.

Despite the bond Jules and Elliot share, she admits to Mia that some aspects of her friend are a mystery to her. When Mia asks about Elliot’s work, Jules cannot give a specific answer. The crew considers them a “mechanical genius”²⁹⁸; later, they are shown in a tight vent-space full of wires and miscellaneous mechanical components, back-lit with yellow, giving them an almost mythical appearance.²⁹⁹ Elliot’s past is one of the greater mysteries of the graphic novel – Jules can relay that they had been rescued somewhere from ‘deep space,’ but nobody would give her any specifics. When Elliot shows the girls their martial arts prowess as well, Jules exclaims: “What ARE you?!”³⁰⁰ All in all, Elliot is set up as a mysterious, non-verbal individual from the furthest known depths of space, who happens to have an unexpectedly broad set of skills and spends most of their time crawling in the walls of abandoned historical buildings.

While Elliot is loved and respected in the otherwise all-female (cisgender) crew, the same cannot be said about Morowa or the other transgender prisoners. In the final issues of *Bitch Planet*, riots break out in the prison system following a power outage, and the cisgender inmates run into the transgender ones for the first time. Morowa ends up needing to defend herself and her girlfriend, Rose, not only from the male guards but from the other women as well. The cisgender women perceive them as men, remarking: “Looks like they sent in the fucking freak brigade.”³⁰¹ Such attitudes are, unfortunately, based in contemporary social discourse, as Alyosxa Tudor covers in her “Impossibility of refusing or choosing gender” in regard to trans-exclusionary radical ‘feminism.’ Even in queer spaces, one can find the rhetoric that transgender women’s existence endangers lesbian women³⁰² or that if one is born with a penis, they are perpetually a predator.³⁰³ In the comic, the cisgender inmates,

²⁹⁸ Walden, 5.

²⁹⁹ Walden, 107.

³⁰⁰ Walden, 323.

³⁰¹ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #9*, *Bitch Planet* (Image Comics, 2016), 16.

³⁰² Tudor, ‘Im/Possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender’, 362.

³⁰³ Tudor, 363.

despite suffering under the patriarchy themselves, uncritically approach Morowa and Rose as enemies instead of uniting their forces against their true oppressors.

Both the comics and graphic novel feature a number of queer relationships between women – *On a Sunbeam* renders them incredibly common, and despite *Bitch Planet* featuring a heteronormative society, the all-female prison is a space where intimacy between women is not entirely unexpected. Mia is shown to have two mothers³⁰⁴; two of Aktis’ crew members, Char and Alma, have been in a relationship since they were teenagers³⁰⁵; and a large portion of the novel follows the process of Mia falling in love with her classmate, Grace, who she then tries to find again as a young adult. In fact, when Grace’s three older sisters come to the boarding school and meet Mia for the first time, they are shown to lose their stern attitude immediately and they exclaim: “What a great pair [...] We’re so proud of you [...] I’m glad Grace has someone strong looking out for her.”³⁰⁶ *Bitch Planet*, on the other hand, depicts the male gaze invading sapphic relationships: as Kamau navigates the complicated power relations at Bitch Planet while searching for information on her sister, she sets up a meeting with two other inmates (in the shower, away from the security cameras) to discuss sensitive information. The women, Renelle and Fanny, are a couple, and Kamau learns they had to buy a guard’s silence by allowing him to watch them have sex in the showers. The following frame shows a singular bulging, eager eye that appears in a hole in the tiled wall.³⁰⁷ This illustrates not only male entitlement over female sexuality, but also the wide-spread idea that women who love women do it only to perform for the male gaze.

The comics also show how the male gaze influences the conceptualization of ‘correct’ womanhood. *Bitch Planet*, while featuring a wide range of female body types, sizes, and ethnicities – whose nakedness is not sexualized in itself – it also shows the enormous

³⁰⁴ Walden, *On a Sunbeam*, 300.

³⁰⁵ Walden, 167–68.

³⁰⁶ Walden, 255.

³⁰⁷ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #4*, *Bitch Planet* (Image Comics, 2015).

pressures on women's appearance. To contrast the bodies of the real women, there are holograms of an over-sexualized blonde woman with a large chest, but nearly non-existent waist, plump lips, long lashes and sunken cheeks.³⁰⁸ The women allowed to appear on television are often of a similar build. Even one of the faux newspaper advertisements included in the comics offers a vaginal perfume, stating: "Your vagina is disgusting."³⁰⁹ The phallogocentric system informs all women that unless they conform to an unattainable standard of femininity, they are 'wrong'. In contrast, the world of *On a Sunbeam* seemingly does not produce such pressures: many of the women sport short haircuts and present in a more traditionally masculine or 'butch' way, others are more traditionally feminine, and yet others quite androgynous, none of which is challenged in any manner. In many aspects, *On a Sunbeam* is a utopia, free from the male gaze; *Bitch Planet* then brings to light the power patriarchy holds over what is considered a 'correct' or 'incorrect' female body, and how easily women are rendered monstrous.

Mia's desire to reunite with 'the one that got away' leads the crew to the very edges of known space and to encounters with monsters. The hollow, dangerous planet that Grace was from, called The Staircase, is home to strange animals whose scope of abilities is never specified. Some look like cats, some like foxes or wolves, ranging in size from an average dog to a football field – the locals call these creatures Tessian Foxes.³¹⁰ They live in spaces that are dangerous for humans and where the air is toxic to breathe; they have the ability to speak, although they rarely need to³¹¹; they have an ability to teleport, and they are known to kill humans, but are protected by the authorities of the planet as Ancient Beings "from a world beyond our own."³¹² Jules gets lost and is led by one of the smaller

³⁰⁸ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #1*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2014), 1.

³⁰⁹ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #4*, 28.

³¹⁰ Walden, *On a Sunbeam*, 442.

³¹¹ Walden, 415.

³¹² Walden, 410.

creatures to a sleeping giant of a Tessian Fox. The creature informs her that the air she had been breathing was toxic for humans: “You have come too far, and you will not last long.”³¹³ When the smaller spirit brings her unconscious back to her friends, the locals are so astounded by her forming a bond with the ancient beings³¹⁴ – and while she was able to form a fleeting connection with the Foxes, she has to be put on an oxygen machine and only barely survives this encounter.

Elliot, too, is revealed to have encountered one of the beasts before. They had been born at The Staircase, and when they split up from Mia and Jules on their expedition, they go visit an old acquaintance. They speak for the first time to the woman, and their traumatic past is revealed: Elliot had worked with their guardian, Sid, on mapping the constantly moving and changing topos of the planet. One day, the pair had ventured too far into the wilderness, and came across a Tessian Fox that killed Sid on sight. In their pain and rage, Elliot responded to violence with violence, ran at the spirit’s heart with a spike and stabbed it through.³¹⁵ They are shown on their knees, crying, clothes torn and bloodied, with the outline of Sid’s lifeless body rendered in black.³¹⁶ The incident had made them the mysterious, nonverbal fugitive they presently are. One could say this monstrous encounter was mutually transformative, too: the Tessian Fox seized to exist, and Elliot was traumatized, stopped speaking, and had to flee their home to save their own life. Despite Jules and Elliot being depicted as quite close and similar to one another, their meeting the monster yielded dramatically different results.

Searching for the monster in *Bitch Planet* is not as straight-forward. As noted before, the phallogentric system renders female bodies monstrous, but the women’s character is described through othering language as well. The narrator at the beginning of the first issue

³¹³ Walden, 417.

³¹⁴ Walden, 446.

³¹⁵ Walden, 451.

³¹⁶ Walden, 411.

calls the ‘deviant’ women a “cancer” that must be kept from spreading, using gendered metaphors to explain their expulsion: “Space is the mother who receives you (...) Earth is the father. And your father has cast you out. For your trespasses, your gluttony, your pride, your weakness and your wickedness.”³¹⁷ Not only is the language of infection or illness being used, the women are also being placed from the centre of culture and society (Earth) to its margins (outer space, Bitch Planet) – and as mentioned before, the margins are the dwelling of monsters.³¹⁸

There are many ways female bodies and sexuality are made monstrous in western sociocultural contexts. The following paragraphs will demonstrate the enfreakment of two female inmates whose backstory is covered in special issues: Penny and Meiko. Penny, a large Black woman with no patience for sexist guards, offends the patriarchy by virtue of her looks. In the third issue of Bitch Planet, she is put through a simulation where men on screens perceive her and chastise her for “wanton obesity,”³¹⁹ aiming to push her to change by undermining her self-esteem. Through her childhood, she is instructed to learn to view herself through the patriarchs’ eyes.³²⁰ Her chapter centers racism as well as diet culture: her fatness is treated as an expression of moral failure, of the sin of gluttony. Shildrick, in her chapter regarding monstrous motherhood, emphasized that historically, non-normative bodies were understood as thoughts made flesh: for example, any disabled child or ‘monstrous birth’ was blamed on “maternal imagination” of the woman,³²¹ a presumed power that would allow the corruptive “hidden desires and passions of women” be embodied in the child.³²² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in the introduction into *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* speaks on the western tendency to assign ‘meanings’

³¹⁷ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #1*, 2.

³¹⁸ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 4.

³¹⁹ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #3*, 3.

³²⁰ DeConnick and De Landro, 15.

³²¹ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 32.

³²² Shildrick, 37.

onto the divergent body, such as missing fingers being a “warning against idleness.”³²³ She also highlights that the fat person is the contemporary “physical freak” that is exempt from sympathy.³²⁴ Indeed, Penny’s large body is treated as though it shows some ‘corruption’ within her psyche. The aforementioned simulation eventually leads to the prison system accessing her mind, searching for Penny’s ideal image of self which they could use to create a dieting plan. To their shock, Penny’s ideal self looks as she does now, and she smiles a content smile, as Penny remembers her grandmother’s words: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”³²⁵

Meiko represents a different crime against the patriarchy. She may be understood as what Cristina Santos terms a ‘monstrous virgin’ in her publication *Unbecoming Female Monsters*. Despite the western sociocultural environment framing female virginity as a virtue, a young woman may be viewed as a monstrous virgin if she refuses to be “initiated” into womanhood via sexual intercourse (essentially, through a penis).³²⁶ Santos elaborates: men often feel entitled to “conquering” the female body, to control over female sexuality.³²⁷ Meiko is shown as a young, gifted girl who secretly aids her father, Maki, with designing spaceships for the patriarchs’ use. She notices that there are major faults in the design, but her father refuses to discuss them; he intentionally manufactures the errors in order to sabotage the system.³²⁸ Unfortunately, his white colleague Doug notices the mistakes, and understands they were made deliberately. Doug invites himself for dinner, exhibiting tendencies to appropriate Japanese culture; he then blackmails Maki with potentially revealing his sabotage, and demands one of the (underage) daughters to be given to him.³²⁹ This harkens back to Santos’ argument about female virginity – she highlights that, historically,

³²³ Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 2.

³²⁴ Grosz, ‘Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit’, 15.

³²⁵ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #3*, 25.

³²⁶ Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, 2.

³²⁷ Santos, 3.

³²⁸ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #6*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2016), 10.

³²⁹ DeConnick and De Landro, 15.

female virginity is a commodity,³³⁰ something for a father to protect or a suitor to try and steal. Here, too, the bodies of Meiko and her sister were treated as a commodity. Meiko goes against this troubling tradition, however, and she goes to Doug on her own, acting shy and compliant. She offers to play the violin for him, then she strangles him with the violin string.³³¹ Meiko was not detained for murder on its own, she also became deviant by declaring her body her own. This is only solidified when a prison guard attempts to rape her: she fights the man off instead of yielding to him, which causes her to be sent off-world to Bitch Planet.³³²

Despite the system of power framing Penny, Meiko, as well as the other inmates as monstrous and corrupted women, I propose there is a different monster in the comics: the holograms used at Bitch Planet. As new inmates enter Bitch Planet in the first issue, the hologram greets them and one of the women snarls: “I hate that bitch.” Another one replies: “We all do, that’s why they use her.”³³³ The hologram runs on a number of scripts chosen by male prison guards – at times, it appears as a sexualized nun, turning an inmate’s confession against her³³⁴; other times, she is dressed as a dominatrix, or a scantily clad assistant³³⁵; and finally, it impersonates deceased Meiko in front of her father, wearing an ornate kimono and playing the violin.³³⁶ The hologram is a post-human shape-shifter: it was created by the patriarchy to extend control over women and it may look like whatever they find useful at the time. This hologram is a representation of how, in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s words, “those who control the social discourse (...) recruit the seeming truth of the body to claim the center for themselves and banish others to the margins,”³³⁷ in other words, how the powerful control what is a ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ body, what is ‘human’ and ‘monstrous’. The men

³³⁰ Santos, *Unbecoming Female Monsters*, 5.

³³¹ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #6*, 24.

³³² DeConnick and De Landro, 25.

³³³ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #1*, 4.

³³⁴ DeConnick and De Landro, 11.

³³⁵ Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro, *Bitch Planet #7*, Bitch Planet (Image Comics, 2016), 6.

³³⁶ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #8*, 10–11.

³³⁷ Garland Thomson, *Freakery*, 62–63.

in power in *Bitch Planet* comics seek to not only assign monstrosity to certain types of bodies, they manufacture a monster – the hologram – to aid them in these efforts.

To sum up, Elliot and the women of *On a Sunbeam* live in a type of gender utopia where nobody is defined by the male gaze, while *Bitch Planet* introduces a deeply patriarchal, phallogocentric dystopia. As for monsters, Elliot and Jules meet ancient, violent spirits. Jules lives through a near-death experience (which, at least, makes her kinder towards her aunt Alma), but Elliot's life is forever changed by the mysterious creature, the killing of which makes Elliot themselves a mysterious creature. The post-human monster of *Bitch Planet*, unfortunately, cannot itself be slain – the hologram is merely a visual representation of the oppressive patriarchy, an extension of it. The women would not accomplish anything by attacking the hologram, they must attack the system that is behind it, which is exactly what they do in the final issues of the comic. The narrative remains open-ended, having seized publication as the women were in the middle of a struggle for freedom, both on Earth and on *Bitch Planet*. The incomplete revolution leaves the reader with the sense that it must be seen through in the real world, instead. After all, the writer of the comic claimed that “the striking thing about *Bitch Planet* is that we're already on it.”³³⁸

³³⁸ DeConnick and De Landro, *Bitch Planet #1*, 22.

5 Discussion

This section will position the analyses in recent scholarly debate in the fields of gender and queer studies, comics studies, and studies of monstrosity. I will reference Toby Finlay's paper "Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory" (2017) which centers transgender and nonbinary lived reality in regards to Butler's work; Jacob Muriel's chapter "Gender Identity in Transgender Comics" (2021) focused on transgender autobiographical comics; Mihaela Precup's 2017 paper "To 'all the monster girls': violence and non-normativity in Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona*" which examines violence, monstrosity, queerness, and disability in the aforementioned graphic novel; and finally, Eszter Szép's publication *Comics and the Body: Reading, Drawing, and Vulnerability* (2020) for its positive framing of vulnerable encounters.

The nature of gender and especially the gender binary is rarely discussed without the mention of Judith Butler's post-structuralist, constructivist views. Transgender studies often oppose her argument that identity is entirely constructed by language: Toby Finlay points out the limitation of describing one's queerness and identity to others, of narrativizing one's subjective experience and labeling one's identity.³³⁹ They argue that this is possibly limiting to queer subjectivities, which queer theory is often reluctant to accept.³⁴⁰ Furthermore, Finlay presents criticism of Butler in that she ascribes too much power to the power of interpellation³⁴¹ (name-calling, naming): this makes the transgender or nonbinary individual helpless in the making of their own self, which in Butler's eyes would be entirely up to the processes of using language to name, to gender, and even to misgender. I certainly agree that interpellative action should not be given the status of absolute power;

³³⁹ Finlay, 'Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory', 59–60.

³⁴⁰ Finlay, 60.

³⁴¹ Finlay, 64.

it is a factor in queer lives, being mis-named and mis-gendered by society, but it should not be framed as the ultimate deciding force. For example, Elliot in *On a Sunbeam* is misgendered consistently by the new captain assigned to the ship,³⁴² and while it is definitely an expression of symbolic violence, it certainly does not undo their identity. Similarly, the women of *Bitch Planet* are called a great many things by those in power, but I argue such interpellation does not define the subject entirely.

Finlay's main argument lies in the 'location' of agency of the nonbinary/transgender subject. While they discuss Butler's key theories in depth, it was surprising not to find a mention of Butler's view of queer agency in discourse. As per previous mention, Butler argues there is no way in which one could perceive gender, sex or any other category from outside discourse, but she specifically names the reiteration, reframing of the term 'queer' itself.³⁴³ Finlay certainly thinks of agency differently: in their eyes, agency comes from the very disruption of the heterosexual matrix.³⁴⁴ I believe both are viable options, but Finlay's discussion lacked this contrast with Butler's conceptualization.

Interpellative force may be observed in other areas than gender identity. In the sub-chapter 4.2, a paragraph had been dedicated to the analysis of why the fearsome wolf demon was described as a 'demon' while the other magical creatures were described as 'spirits.' This may seem as needless labeling, but being aware of the power of interpellation, one should examine and challenge which entities are labeled wrong, evil, or monstrous/freaky, and on what grounds are such judgements being passed. While language is not the only way in which we understand the world, the most apt example being the visual aspects of comics, we communicate largely through language, and it is crucial to stay critical of the terms that are used to label certain bodies or individuals.

³⁴² Walden, *On a Sunbeam*, 164.

³⁴³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xxix.

³⁴⁴ Finlay, 'Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory', 62.

Moving into comics studies, Jacob Muriel analyzes autobiographical or semi-autobiographical comics centered on transgender life experience. Despite the chapter appearing in a publication titled *Beyond Binaries*, Muriel's text contains little to no mention of nonbinary experience or identity. An exception may be his once noting a short comic in which the protagonist had "girl days" and "boy days" (however he does not use any terms suggesting nonbinary identity).³⁴⁵ While the nonbinary subject might have been understood as automatically included in transgender studies, not saying the name only contributes to the invisibility of gender non-normative people.

Muriel positions himself against Butler's construction of gender identity. He argues that his analysis shows the protagonists having an "ineffable sense of gender at odds with language and social norms,"³⁴⁶ as exemplified by their struggle to make themselves recognizable as the gender they know themselves to be (i.e. to 'pass' as their gender identity).³⁴⁷ I believe it is not productive to insist that gender is not constructed – even our personal feelings, insecurities as nonbinary (or binary transgender) people are influenced by the recurring establishing of prevalent norms. The construction of binary gender in society influences political systems, which influence our lives as citizens within said systems. This does not have to mean, however, that identity is entirely constructed through language: gender is a complex phenomenon, neither only constructed nor only a "lived internal reality."³⁴⁸

The author is largely focused on the fact that the non-cisgender characters in the analyzed materials put value in their appearance, their ability to 'pass' as their gender identity, and the duality of the subject perceiving themselves and the external world perceiving

³⁴⁵ Jacob Muriel, 'Gender Identity in Transgender Comics', in *Beyond Binaries: Trans Identities in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Mike Perez, Rachel Friedman, and John C. Lamothe (Lexington Books, 2021), 199–200.

³⁴⁶ Muriel, 212.

³⁴⁷ Muriel, 195.

³⁴⁸ Muriel, 201.

the subject.³⁴⁹ What I found to be missing was a deeper dive into why that is the case. Perhaps, as Finlay suggests, one must be recognized by the grid of intelligibility to take part in society, and “non-recognition or misrecognition are understood as forms of oppression against marginalized communities”³⁵⁰ – and as many othering, enfreaking attitudes are based around physical attributes (e.g. TERFs insisting that people born with a penis are predators regardless of their self-identity³⁵¹), one strives to be recognized physically as the category they know themselves to be. Identity and self-perception do not exist in a vacuum, they are informed by outside influences – not entirely constructed of them, but constantly influenced. This deeper analysis was missing from Muriel.

Another voice that Muriel disagrees with is Alison Bechdel, specifically in her statement that the visual aspects of comics give more freedom in representing transgender people pre-transition, providing a chance to show without use of pronouns and gendered terms.³⁵² Muriel contradicts that the freedom is not so limitless: there is a certain visual ‘language,’ a set of signs and symbols that represent masculinity and femininity (e.g. toilet signs, Mars and Venus symbols).³⁵³ Without disputing the existence of such signs, this limitation does not constitute an entire incapability of more liberated expression. In “Expand,” the nonbinary child Andile was changed into a dark silhouette, shooting through the forest like an arrow, uncertain, liminal, and happy³⁵⁴; protagonist of “This Far” was to undergo a transformation into flora, completely outside a human persona³⁵⁵; and Elliot’s character and presence were almost entirely visual, since they are portrayed in a comic but are non-verbal. They are spoken about and sometimes spoken for (by Jules, for example, when she is defending

³⁴⁹ Muriel, 195–96.

³⁵⁰ Finlay, ‘Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler’s Queer Theory’, 62.

³⁵¹ Tudor, ‘Im/Possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender’, 363.

³⁵² Muriel, ‘Gender Identity in Transgender Comics’, 193.

³⁵³ Muriel, 193.

³⁵⁴ White, ‘Expand’, 50.

³⁵⁵ Lai, ‘This Far’, 176.

their gender identity³⁵⁶), so their representation is heavily based on its visual aspects, and Tillie Walden represents them as not too different from everybody else: many characters (female) have short hair, many have a rather slim build and are rendered in a simple, minimal manner. Elliot is, thus, represented as just another person, not too physically different from everybody else, which is meaningful since the ‘other’ (in whichever sense, gender, body, ethnicity, sexuality) is often not allowed to simply exist and belong. The analyses provided in the previous chapter contribute to the debate in focusing on the non-autobiographical, fictional nonbinary characters. The chosen comics of *Heartwood*, *Mooncakes*, *Bitch Planet*, and *On a Sunbeam* can describe the more fantastical or futuristic conceptualizations of gender, nonbinary identity and body. Muriel argues in favor of the transgender characters ineffable sense of gender, the “truth” being inside; I have demonstrated that fantasy and sci-fi comics constitute a ‘sandbox’ for representing complex imaginings and understanding of the inner self, of the gender nonbinary or the lack of gender. In accordance with Bechdel and in disagreement with Muriel, the analyzed comics in chapter 4 show a plethora of bodily transformations and monstrous encounters that are, in our world, impossible, but in the respective narrative worlds, they aided in an expression of the ‘ineffable’ core of non-gendered self that we may not have language for.

When highlighting the few texts that deal with gender non-conforming monsters or freaks, I have noted the paper “To ‘all the monster girls’: violence and non-normativity in Noelle Stevenson’s *Nimona*” (2017) by Mihaela Precup, who analyzes *Nimona*’s brand of monstrosity in an “intersection of violence, cuteness, and queerness.”³⁵⁷ Precup sees *Nimona*’s queerness mostly in “linguistic markers,” but also indicated by choices in fashion, dyed hair, piercings, and a “combination of girlish and tomboy-ish features”³⁵⁸ – therefore,

³⁵⁶ Walden, *On a Sunbeam*, 286.

³⁵⁷ Precup, ‘To “All the Monster Girls”: Violence and Non-Normativity in Noelle Stevenson’s *Nimona*’, 2.

³⁵⁸ Precup, 7.

not only is there a level of androgyny and non-conformity to her human body she ‘wears’ most often, but she is also capable of marvelous bodily transformations into animals (whether a rat or a rhino), various types of people, and monsters (such as an orc or a dragon). Transformations are a common theme in comics with gender non-conforming characters, as exemplified in *Heartwood* or in Tam’s lycanthropy; this is likely a reflection of the process of gender-affirming transition, as was the case in “This Far,” or an exploration of embodiment and its correspondence to the individual’s identity.

In the chosen *Heartwood* comics, I have identified the theme of ‘freeing disembodiment’: a transformation in which the character leaves their human and/or material body behind to experience a sense of freedom and joy. The term is only applicable if the lack of the body is experienced as positive; for example, Tam Lang losing control of their body against their will in *Mooncakes* does not qualify. As previously argued when discussing the ‘visual language’ of western media, comics present an avenue to experiment with representations of nonbinary gender that could even be impossible in our lived reality. I propose that the leaving of the body behind to become something monstrous and abstract illustrates the divide between the nonbinary gender identity and the gendered/sexed body one lives in. Mihaela Precup argues that Nimona’s shape-shifting, often monstrous body represents an alternative to the heroic body.³⁵⁹ In agreement with this statement, I would like to add that based on my analysis, the monstrous body is in many ways an alternative to the gendered one.

Once the divide between culture and nature is seen as arbitrarily upheld and unsustainable, it becomes uncertain whether freeing disembodiment, a further separation of sociocultural identity from the physical body, is truly something to strive for. I offer that it may be understood as a manifestation of the desire to leave the body that is gendered behind, or transform it somehow so that it is more aligned with the individual’s

³⁵⁹ Precup, 2.

subjective identity. I have partially agreed with Stacy Alaimo's criticism regarding mainstream studies on the body in discourse (see 2.2). Alaimo highlights how passive this 'body' in such studies is, while she rather understands the body-organism as connected to its surrounding environment.³⁶⁰ The body is often inherently connected to identity, in that our physical attributes inevitably inform our identity: whether it is skin color, primary and secondary sex characteristics, disability, or any other attribute, society categorizes body-organisms and, in some cases, renders the body 'abnormal' or 'freaky'. Certain bodies cannot simply exist in the world, as for example, the extraordinary (disabled) body has historically been taken to be an omen, given meaning (see 2.4). The nonbinary subject is not to be blamed for their flight from physicality, as it is not the physicality itself, but the attitudes (discourse) surrounding it that renders it troubling, untrue, and to be escaped from. Yearning for 'freeing disembodiment' is a reaction to the heterosexual matrix which does not allow space for nonconforming identities to exist.

The conversation with Precup may continue regarding the treatment of disability in analyzed comics and its (possible) enfreakment. She describes the attitudes toward disability in *Nimona*, where Ballister Blackheart is assigned villainy upon losing an arm in a joust: Precup shows that Ballister "turns out to be the moral centre of the book,"³⁶¹ and that it is the dictatorial Institution who labeled him a villain, and Nimona a monster. The Institution seeks to imprison and control anybody who is anomalous, or rather interpellated as anomalous, and Nimona had previously been given up for experiments, an experience which was highly traumatic for her.³⁶² A parallel could be drawn to Tam, who had apparently been a werewolf since their early childhood,³⁶³ and the attempts of the evil cult to extend power over their extraordinary, monstrous body. Similarly to Nimona, Tam had been traumatized

³⁶⁰ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 3.

³⁶¹ Precup, 'To "All the Monster Girls": Violence and Non-Normativity in Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona*', 3.

³⁶² Precup, 5.

³⁶³ Walker and Xu, *Mooncakes*, 13.

by the cult's attempts to seize them and force a 'demon' in their body, driven from their home into hiding, and it was the cult whose cruelty and violence created the demon in the first place (by abusing a forest spirit³⁶⁴). Both works show that monsters and freaks are not made, but created by powerful groups and institutions.

In *Mooncakes*, however, the disabled character does not merely live with their disability, but rather utilize it into a special power. Ballister, despite living in a world which combines magic and technology, does not use magic himself – instead, he relies on science. Nova, on the other hand, is shown to use her hearing aid as a weapon when fighting her malicious neighbor, producing a sonic wave which sends the woman flying.³⁶⁵ In fact, Tam's lycanthropy is framed as a 'condition' as well, something along the lines of chronic pain, as they undergo a painful transformation into a wolf every full moon. If they exert themselves too much during their time as a wolf, they might not have enough strength to change back into their human form.³⁶⁶ Despite these setbacks, the graphic novel shows them learn to understand their own wolf magic, shifting their werewolf condition from a type of disability to a special kind of ability.

On the other hand, it is rather surprising that Nova and Elliot do not use any type of sign language. Of course, representing signing in comics sequence may prove to be a challenge, but it is astounding to which extent the people around them rely on technology. Nova does wear a hearing aid, but she is depicted in Tam's memory crying, clutching her new aids in her hands,³⁶⁷ showing that getting used to them was hard, even painful. She has issues speaking on the phone, and hardly understands people if they mumble. Yet at no point in the many memories shown in the graphic novel is anyone communicating with her via signing. Elliot's case is similar: their own crew is very accepting of their lack

³⁶⁴ Walker and Xu, 217.

³⁶⁵ Walker and Xu, 142.

³⁶⁶ Walker and Xu, 103.

³⁶⁷ Walker and Xu, 124.

of speaking, and they communicate mostly through facial expressions and handing out notes. The only place they do speak is at their home planet, the place where they tragically lost their caretaker.³⁶⁸ Similarly to Nova, they do not use sign language: even their closest community expects them to assimilate to their needs, not the other way around. The assessment of representation of disability in the analyzed comics becomes troubled by the contrast between Nova's unique type of spellcasting given by her disability, and Elliot's deep bonds with their friends and crewmates built without needing words, when at the end of the day, the person who is 'different' must attempt to assimilate to the people embodying the norm. At the very least, it is commendable that the narrative does not include any magical or advanced scientific 'fixing' of their difference: Nova continues to learn magic just as before, and Elliot continues not to speak, despite the protagonist Mia knowing they are physically capable of it.

In her 2020 publication *Comics and the Body*, Eszter Szép argues that vulnerability is a key term in the analysis of non-fiction comics through affect theory. She describes the ethical encounter of reader/artist bodies and the body of comics as an "affective transaction" which "can transform the participants taking part in the encounter," as they are "experiencing the vulnerability of the self and of the Other."³⁶⁹ Despite this text focusing entirely on fiction comics, Szép's conceptualization of vulnerability could be translated onto encountering the monster: the human character, faced with the Other, could either exhibit a "wounding" response to the likes of Elliot and hurt or kill the Other, or a "caring" response to the likes of Jules, who established a connection with the Other, however fleeting.³⁷⁰ Margrit Shildrick, too, focuses on vulnerability to the monster, but unlike Szép, she only ever references the vulnerable capacity to be hurt, not the capacity to care or connect. I believe Tam Lang's struggle with vulnerability to the 'demon' to be a suitable example: Tam rejects the demon

³⁶⁸ Walden, *On a Sunbeam*, 400.

³⁶⁹ Szép, *Comics and the Body*, 8.

³⁷⁰ Szép, 14.

at first, aims to destroy it, because its capacity to break through their bodily boundaries and take control reminds the young werewolf of their own vulnerability. Eventually the two are forced together and enclosed within one body, but through this very vulnerable contact, Tam is able to recognize the spirit's vulnerability as well, empathizing with the wolf, showing kindness. In turn, the wolf spirit shows care toward Tam as it allows them to return to their own body.³⁷¹ This recognition of Self in the Other and vice versa leads to the framing of the 'monster' as less threatening than it originally had been.

When characters encountered monsters in the comics, mysterious, dangerous, or liminal, they were often reminded of their own corporeality and vulnerability, the capacity to hurt or be hurt, but also to experience new modes of connection. Seungwa in "The Lungs of Jeju," upon finding a former android filled by plants, became emotionally vulnerable, discussing the death of their parents and their panic attacks³⁷²; the post-human monster in turn offered their story, and they were able to relate to one another, body-organism or body-machine. When Tam Lang's body was usurped by the 'demon' possessing them, Tam vulnerably approached the creature in the mind-space, seeing themselves in the pain and traumatic experience of the Other, and they both walked away from the experience changed and healed. Both Jules and Elliot from *On a Sunbeam* realized their vulnerability, as well as the vulnerability of their loved ones, in coming close to monstrous Tessian Foxes and their personal confrontations with mortality. Through the lens of vulnerability, one may perceive the nature of encounters with the monstrous, whether any connection was established between the subject and the monster, and what transformation could be perceived after the fact.

Considering transformation done via outside forces, *Heartwood's* "The Lungs of Jeju" and "Shepherd" provided interesting data regarding the nonbinary characters' relationship to (and involvement with) nature. The former android in "The Lungs of Jeju" does not only get

³⁷¹ Walker and Xu, *Mooncakes*, 217–18.

³⁷² Sunmi, 'The Lungs of Jeju', 254.

personal and vulnerable with the human Seungwa – the forest physically enters their body in their long slumber, changing and filling it in the process.³⁷³ Such a thing seems unpleasant or painful to the human reader, but the crossing of bodily limits was viewed as positive by the mechanical creature, which highlights the great difference between the body-organism and the sentient body-machine. The forest stripped the creature of all imposed gendered characteristics in the process, un-gendering the body before the creature became entirely dematerialized and abstract. One could approach the discussion of death and decay in “Shepherd” in a similar manner: the body becomes un-gendered when it is no longer living and consumed by its environment. The narrator of the comic understood themselves not as ‘above’ nature, but very much a part of it, recognizing the jungle as one and many at once, perceiving its abundance and vulnerability, for example to pollution.³⁷⁴ They seemed at peace with their eventual becoming soil, changing into the land and flora – death, in this framing, seemed to be just another transformation.

In my findings, I have shown that the nonbinary characters were related to monsters on a conceptual level, representing non-normativity, complicating boundaries and binaries. In *Heartwood*, the monstrous body with uncertain or breached bodily boundaries were a desirable alternative to the physical gendered body of the nonbinary character. The nonbinary characters were also frequently shown to desire disembodiment, to become flora or something abstract, uncertain, and therefore liberated from categories. I have also utilized the concept of vulnerability in describing the monstrous encounter, in which vulnerability is not a weakness or a fault, but rather a natural condition that allows for a new, deeper mode of connection then renders the monster less ‘other’ – for it often, too, lives within a physical body, and therefore may be hurt or inflict hurt, just like its human counterpart in the narrative. I have shown that monsters may be threatening precisely because they remind the character or

³⁷³ Sunmi, 260.

³⁷⁴ Walters, ‘Shepherd’, 168.

the reader of their own vulnerability. I argued against the perception of a biological body-organism as a passive blank page that is molded solely by discourse, and for the understanding of the body as interconnected with its environment, changing, changeable, and as previously stressed, vulnerable.

My objective was not to categorize monsters, create any type of taxonomy, or define some type of 'nonbinary monster'. This would go against the very nature of queerness, of nonbinary identity, and of monstrosity in their evasion of categories and description. Both monsters and nonbinary individuals are the embodied proof that existing categories are not absolute, and that there are concepts outside the limits of western logos and arbitrary taxonomies, which is a reality unnerving to some. Regarding non-conforming gender, I have recognized a need to shift the prerogative from accepting interpellative power in discourse as unaffected, unchangeable, and focus more on the individual's self-determination. The naming of self should not be subjugated to the naming done by outside entities and processes, and that is whether one is being misgendered, or whether they are being called a monster or a freak.

6 Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to examine the representation of nonbinary bodies in comics and graphic novels in the genres of fantasy and sci-fi, particularly the connection of the nonbinary character(s) to the monstrous in the narrative. The nonbinary characters were situated on the intersection between gender, queerness, monstrosity, and at times disability as well. The study aimed to describe the trends in representing the nonbinary subject and their body in comics, as well as concretize the conceptual relations between nonbinary identity, monstrosity, and disability. I have shown the affirming nature of the connection between nonbinary identity and monstrosity, proposed the monstrous body as an alternative to the gendered body, and shown the power that the male gaze holds over the expression and understanding of one's identity in patriarchy.

The literature review summarized the basic concepts and discourse of the fields of comics studies, feminism/gender studies, queer studies, and studies of monstrosity. The works of comics theory by Kleefeld, McCloud, Polak, and Szép were referenced, describing their aims and their aspects that informed this thesis. It has been established that gender is not based on corporeality, but rather assigned and performed in discourse and within the scope of the heterosexual matrix. The devaluation of womanhood in reference to manhood was discussed, followed by discussion of the contributions by Simone de Beauvoir and, most importantly, Judith Butler. Criticism of Butler's theories by Alaimo and Finlay were provided as well. The term queer was explained, along and the aims of queer theory, the phenomenon of the closet, the value and shortcomings of Wittig's lesbian, anti-transgender rhetoric, the interconnections of queer identities, and issues of identity politics. Concerning monsters, I have given an overview of western perceptions of monstrosity, discussing the medicalization of bodies, the notion of 'normal' and 'enfreaked' body, and the problematic aspects of freak shows. Then, I continued onto the establishing of monster theory

as an academic pursuit, the study of monsters in horror and psychoanalysis, the homoeroticism and homosexual subtext of monsters in media (particularly vampires through history), and later the post-human monstrous, the uncanny, and eco-critical approaches to whether the monster is 'natural'. Feminine monstrosity was discussed in depth: degradation of women, monstrous births, the fear of female sexuality, monstrous mothers and virgins, as well as the rare cases of analyses of androgynous or gender-nonconforming monsters were described. In both sections, I have highlighted the low amount of scholarship concerned with the nonbinary subject, their body, or nonbinary/androgynous monstrosity.

The method section declared that close reading informed by intersectional feminism and queer theory was used, and a list of theoretical works was provided, stating their contribution.

The case study "Transformation and Liberating Disembodiment in *Heartwood: Non-binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy*" was concerned with four short comics chosen from the collection: "Expand"; "The Lungs of Jeju"; "Shepherd"; and "This Far." I argued that the forest provides an avenue for nonbinary characters to achieve a type of liberating disembodiment and that, furthermore, their connection to monstrosity is affirming rather than dehumanizing or problematic. I have interpreted Andile in "Expand" as possibly disabled, described their temporary transformation into a forest spirit through a monstrous encounter, and analyzed the distinction between the center and periphery signaled by the use of darker and lighter tones of gray. Then, I described the connection nonbinary Seungwa established with a former android they had found ingrown into the forest greenery in "The Lungs of Jeju", highlighting the arbitrary, symbolic violence of assigning gender onto a mechanical body. The comic "Shepherd" followed, the titular character's train of thought framing death as another type of corporeal transformation, noting the vulnerability of the forest and their enmeshment into their environment. Last but not least, I have shown

that in “This Far,” the main character’s transition into a tree and their mother’s struggle to understand works as a metaphor for gender-affirming transition and, at the same time, raises questions about what we consider to be a body.

“Good Wolf, Bad Wolf: Vulnerable Demonic Possession in *Mooncakes*” examined nonbinary werewolf Tam Lang and their struggle against the threat of a wolf-demon. I have analyzed the monstrous encounter and the subsequent struggle for control over the demon, proposing that the creature is seen as demonic because it breaches boundaries of the body and, furthermore, that the creature reflects Tam’s familial trauma. I have shown that the central problem of the narrative was solved through Tam and the wolf spirit being vulnerable with each other in the space of Tam’s mind and recognizing themselves in each other, their experience in the Other’s experience, which transformed them both and allowed them to move into another chapter of their lives.

In the third case study, “Man-less or Man-centric Space(s) in *On a Sunbeam* and *Bitch Planet*,” the two works were juxtaposed in their treatment of non-conforming gender, but also of women. I argued that while *Bitch Planet* presents a dystopia where the male gaze controls and enfreaks female bodies, *On a Sunbeam* represents a gender utopia regarding one’s embodied subjectivities. I have contrasted the narrative universe of *On a Sunbeam*, without men, with the one of *Bitch Planet* where men have excessive power over women; the acceptance of nonbinary Elliot by their female colleagues with the transphobic aggression the transgender inmates Morowa and Rose experience from the cisgender female prisoners; and the freedom of queer self-expression and normalcy of sapphic relationships in *On a Sunbeam* with the male gaze invading lesbian intimacy in *Bitch Planet*, to name a few examples. I have also described the monstrous encounters of Jules and Elliot, one of violence and retaliation, one of peaceful connection – both, however, were close encounters with death.

In *Bitch Planet*, I have identified the post-human monster of the hologram as a construction of patriarchy and extension of power over women and their bodies.

The discussion noted the paper by Toby Finlay regarding a transgender/nonbinary-centered reading of Butler's theories, commenting on their criticisms of Butler and their understanding of agency of the nonbinary subject. Jacob Muriel's observations and arguments about transgender comics were discussed in depth, arguing in favor of the visual aspect of comics providing a space for exploring complex gendered subjectivities. Mihaela Precup's analysis of *Nimona* was then compared with the analyses provided in this text, commenting on institutional power to enfreak, the treatment of disability in the analyzed comics and graphic novels, and proposing the monstrous body be an alternative to the gendered body. Finally, I have reiterated the relevance of Eszter Szép's understanding of vulnerability to my analysis of monstrous encounters, arguing that monsters remind us of our vulnerability, and recognizing their vulnerability in return renders them less fearsome or repulsive.

This work's aim was to help unmake the silence and invisibility that surround the nonbinary identity in scholarship. There is still much room for further research, concerning a model of nonbinary/androgynous monstrosity, situating the nonbinary subject as the 'gender Other,' or the representation of nonbinary individuals in comics. For example, the aforementioned autobiographical 'diary' comics by gender non-conforming authors, often in the form of webcomics, also remain largely undiscussed. I believe that analyzing and discussing these works may aid nonbinary and 'binary' readership alike, in opening up the conversation about various iterations of personal, gendered identity and expression, and subverting the erasing force of the heterosexual matrix in our lives. There is to hoping that, as the number of (comic) narratives with nonbinary characters continues to grow, academic literature will follow suit by filling the empty spaces in the study of gender others and gender monsters.

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8 Annotation and Abstract

8.1 Annotation

Name: Věra Ocisková

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: Nonbinary Bodies in Contemporary Fantasy and Sci-fi Comics

Supervisor: Mgr. Elizabeth Allyn Woock, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 99

Keywords: comics, nonbinary, queer, monster, vulnerability, intersectional feminism, LGBTQ+

8.2 Abstract

This diploma thesis examines the representation of nonbinary characters and their bodies in comics in the fantasy and sci-fi genres, mainly published during the 2010s. It is largely concerned with the connection between nonbinary characters and monsters in the chosen narratives, whether on a level of conceptual similarity or the process(es) of the monstrous encounter. Drawing on intersectional feminism, queer theory, and monstrosity studies, this work argues that the connection of nonbinary characters to monsters are not problematic and dehumanizing, but rather affirming, often presenting the monstrous body as an alternative to the gendered/sexed body. Further discussion pertains to webcomics as an avenue for introducing LGBTQ+ stories, the historical attitudes devaluing and enfreaking women and their bodies (making them ‘gender Other’ and ‘gender monsters’), approaches to disability and the ‘normal,’ healthy body, and vulnerability as an embodied condition that allows for new modes of connection and understanding between the Self and the Other.

9 Anotace a Abstrakt

9.1 Anotace

Jméno a příjmení: Věra Ocisková

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky (KAA)

Název práce: Nebinární těla v současných fantasy a sci-fi komiksech

Vecoucí práce: Mgr. Elizabeth Allyn Woock, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 99

Klíčové pojmy: komiks, nebinární, queer, monstrum, zranitelnost, intersekcionalní feminismus, LGBTQ+

9.2 Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá zobrazováním nebinárních postav a jejich těl v komiksech žánrů fantasy a sci-fi, které byly vydány po roce 2010. Tato práce se z velké části soustředí na spojení mezi nebinárními postavami a monstry ve vybraných dílech, ať už na úrovni konceptuální podobnosti, nebo procesů setkání s monstrem. Na základě intersekcionalního feminismu, queer teorie a *monstrosity studies* (tj. studium fenoménu příšer) tato práce ukazuje, že daná spojení nebinárních postav s monstry nejsou problematická a dehumanizující, ale spíše pozitivní. V těchto komiksech často představuje monstrózní tělo alternativu oproti tělu, kterému byl připsán gender. Další diskuse se týká online komiksů (webkomiksů) ve věci distribuce LGBTQ+ narativů; historických postojů, které ženy a ženská těla situují jako podivná a méněcenná (což z nich dělá „genderová monstra“); přístupů k postižení a „normálnímu“ zdravému tělu; a zranitelnosti jakožto ztělesněného stavu, který umožňuje nové způsoby kontaktu (nejen) mezi člověkem a monstrem.

10 Resumé

Záměrem této diplomové práce bylo prozkoumat reprezentaci nebinárních těl v komiksech a grafických románech žánrů fantasy a sci-fi, zejména pak spojení nebinárních postav a monster v daných narativech. Práce popisuje trendy v zobrazení nebinárního subjektu a jejich těla v komiksu a konkretizuje vztah mezi koncepty nebinární identity, monstróznosti a tělesného postižení. Ukazuje pozitivní povahu spojení mezi queer/nebinární identitou a monstry v daných narativech, stejně jako vliv heterosexuálního matrixu a mužského pohledu (*male gaze*) na vyjádření a samotné chápání vlastní identity v kontextu patriarchátu.

V přehledu relevantní literatury jsem shrnula základní pojmy a diskurz oborů komiksových studií, genderových studií, queer studií a studií monstróznosti. Co se komiksů týče, seznámila jsem čtenáře s hlavními aspekty teoretických prací Seana Kleefeldy, Scotta McClouda, Kate Polak a Eszter Szép; v rámci feminismu se jednalo o Simone de Beauvoir, ale především Judith Butler a její koncepty heterosexuálního matrixu a genderové performance. Dále byl vysvětlen pojem queer a základní principy queer teorie na základě publikace autorství Meg-John Barker, stejně jako fenomén coming outu, výhody a nevýhody koncepce lesbické identity podle Monique Wittig, anti-transgender rétorika a identitární politika. V sekci zabývající se monstry byla vysvětlena stručná historie chápání zrůdnosti v západní společnosti, stejně jako medikalizace těla a pohled na „normální“ a „zrůdná“ těla z hlediska tzv. *freak show* (obludária). Poté jsem popsala vývoj studia monster jako akademické disciplíny, což zahrnovalo studium monster v hororu a v psychoanalýze, homoerotický podtext příšer v médiích (převážně zobrazení upírů v průběhu dějin), eko-kritický přístup k „přirozenosti“ monstra a později i konceptualizací kyborgů či tzv. *uncanny valley* (tísňivého údolí). Hluběji jsem se soustředila na ženskou obludnost: na degradaci žen, porody obludných dětí, ženskou sexualitu, monstrózní matky i monstrózní panny. Popsala jsem i vzácné případy analýzy androgynních či genderově

nevymezených monster a upozornila na nízké množství vědeckých prací zabývajících se nebinárním subjektem, jeho tělem či nebinární/androgynní monstrózností.

Použitá metodologie byla forma *close reading* informovaná intersekcionalním feminismem a queer teorií, a byl shrnut seznam teoretických prací s uvedením jejich přínosu pro metodu analýzy primárních zdrojů. Analýza samotná byla rozdělena do tří případových studií, z nichž první se soustředila na vybrané krátké komiksy z kolekce *Heartwood: Non-binary Tales of Sylvan Fantasy* (2019), konkrétně „Expand“ (nebinárního) autorstva Raven White, „The Lungs of Jeju,“ autorstva Sunmi, „Shepherd,“ autorstva Cori Walters a „This Far“ autorstva Lee Lai. V těchto narativech prostředí (či entita) lesa poskytuje nebinárním jedincům možnost dosáhnout tzv. osvobozujícího odtělesnění, tedy pozbytí fyzického těla a transformaci v jinou formu existence, například v monstrum, v kombinaci živoucího kovu a rostlin, či ve strom. V druhé případové studii, jež se soustředila na grafickou novelu *Mooncakes* (2019), jsem analyzovala nebinárního vlkodlaka Tam*a Lang*a a jejich snahu zbavit se jednou provždy vlčího démona vytvořeného, aby posedl jejich tělo. Zde jsem analyzovala prvotní setkání s monstrem a následný boj o získání kontroly skrze koncept zranitelnosti, ne jako negativního aspektu, ale jako součásti existence ve fyzickém těle a možnosti navázat hlubší empatické spojení s jinými entitami. Demonstrovala jsem, že démon je vnímán negativně, jelikož reprezentuje hrozbu narušení hranic Tamova těla, stejně jako Tamovo trauma z minulosti. Zápletka vyústila v setkání Tama a vlčího démona/ducha v prostoru Tamova těla a mysli, kde oba zúčastnění byli zranitelní a projevíli empatii tomu druhému, čímž se mohli emocionálně i fyzicky transformovat a začít novou kapitolu svých životů. V třetí a finální případové studii jsem porovnávala sci-fi grafickou novelu *On a Sunbeam* (2018) s komiksovou sérií *Bitch Planet* (2014 – 2017) z hlediska reprezentace nebinarity a nekonformního genderu v narativních vesmírech obou děl. Zatímco *Bitch Planet* je dystopií, kde patriarchát kontroluje a znehodnocuje ženská těla, *On a Sunbeam* představuje genderovou utopii, kde muži nejsou

přítomni a lidé mají větší svobodu sebevyjádření. Zatímco v *On a Sunbeam* nebinární*ho Elliot*a jejich kolegyně a kamarádky přijímají a podporují, v *Bitch Planet* transgender vězeňkyně Morowa a Rose zažívají násilí nejen od mužů v hierarchicky nadřazených pozicích, ale i od svých cisgender spoluvězeňkyň. V grafické novele *On a Sunbeam* jsou queer vztahy poměrně přirozené, zatímco lesbická intimita v *Bitch Planet* existuje taktéž v rámci *male gaze* strážného. Popsala jsem taktéž setkání s monstry na příkladu Elliota a jejich kamarádky Jules: zatímco v prvním případě zvolil*a Elliot násilnou odplatu, Jules navázala citové pouto s monstry planety Staircase. Pro oba to však bylo blízké setkání nejen s příšerou, ale i se smrtí. V *Bitch Planet* jsem identifikovala opakovaně se objevující hologram extrémně sexualizované ženy jako *post-human* monstrum, které bylo vytvořeno za cílem kontroly nad ženskou populací. Následná diskuze se zabývala článkem Toby*ho Finlay*e týkající se transgender/nebinární reinterpretace teorií Butlerové. Finlay komentoval*a kritiku Butlerové a její chápání schopnosti sebedefinice subjektu; Finlay vidí tuto možnost v samotné divergenci oproti heterosexuálnímu matrixu, kdežto Butler apeluje na předefinování pojmů vně diskurzu. Podrobně byly diskutovány postřehy a argumenty Jacoba Muriela týkající se transgender komiksu, přičemž jsem argumentovala ve prospěch vizuálního aspektu komiksu, který poskytuje prostor pro zkoumání komplexních genderových subjektivit. Analýza grafické novely *Nimona* (2017) Mihaely Precup pak byla porovnána s analýzami uvedenými v tomto textu, zvláště co se týče institucionální moci a askripce zrůdnosti, stejně jako zacházení s fyzickým postižením v analyzovaných komiksech a grafických románech. Závěrem jsem zopakovala relevanci chápání zranitelnosti Eszter Szép pro mou analýzu setkání s monstry, přičemž jsem tvrdila, že monstra nám připomínají naši zranitelnost a uznání jejich zranitelnosti je na oplátku činí méně děsivými či odpudivými.