Become the Monster: Identity, Perception, and What it Means to be Inhuman

Juniper Amundson

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Become the Monster: Identity, Perception, and What it Means to be Inhuman

A collection of crocheted pieces by Juniper Amundson, he/she/they

Advised by Dr. Anika Tilland-Stafford

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Monsters are defined in opposition to humanity: they're the quintessential other, we know what a monster is because a monster isn't like us. They aren't allowed to define themselves, instead being informed by others of their difference. Humans become monsters when other humans decide they are. Monsters don't get to explain themselves either. They’re often voiceless, their stories are told through the lens of human interpretation of their actions. they hide in the shadows, people think of them as scary sometimes without ever having encountered a monster, only hearing stories. A lot of times, stories about monsters end with something like “in some ways, they’re just like us.” This is usually intended to create some sort of kinship between human and monster, but in reality superficial similarities are used to cover the inherent differences monsters are implied to have. Differences that are ultimately constructed by humans to begin with.
One way to start to unpack how we got to this definition of monsterhood is to start by examining how we treat visible difference. Disability theory recognizes how our communal understanding of what it is to be disabled colors our perception of disabled individuals. Disability is most commonly understood through the medical model, which views an individual's disability as a personal failing to be treated and ideally cured. The social model of disability asks how, instead of expecting change on the behalf of the individual, we might shift to expecting change on the behalf of the structures that present barriers to the individual.

To place myself in all of this, I came into my undergrad at Western with an understanding of disability in terms of the medical model. I was an anxious and depressed guy, but I thought of disability and my mental health as two separate arenas. I was a student, I was good at school, I didn’t feel like I had much cause to claim disabled as a label. I had been out as non-binary since I was 15, but beyond not being a man or a woman I didn’t really know what that meant for me. I was curious about physically transitioning, but stopped by the idea that it could be a mistake to become more visibly GNC (gender nonconforming).

So I had the beginnings of an understanding of myself (like you often do when you start college), but I really didn’t know what I didn’t know. Not having the words to speak my own sense of self into existence was isolating. It can be difficult to locate yourself in a world that says "if you aren't this way, you don't fit,” especially at a time in your life wherein you’re supposed to be finding yourself. Not having the language to define monsterhood was key to my journey. Some of the texts that shaped this project offered me that language, and offered me a sense of place right in the middle of the placelessness I was feeling.

The first is from Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues, which is an incredible and devastating story that I recommend to anyone who has ever felt that sense of placelessness. Zie
asks: “who was I now - woman or man? That question could never be answered as long as those were the only choices. It could never be answered if it had to be asked” (2014). The piece of this that really speaks to me is “if it had to be asked”. There really isn't a way to say no thank you to gender, when you're perceived by others most people will decide for themself which side of the binary they think you fall on and treat you with the codes they know how to use.

The next quote comes from Paul Preciado’s Testo Junkie, which takes this idea of compulsory gendering and connects it to the histories of medicine and taxonomy, and recognizes "None of the sexes that I embody possess any ontological density, and yet there is no other way of being a body” (2008). Which is to say, the person he is doesn’t have any purchase in the westernized concept of sex and gender, but that doesn’t just end the kind of person he is.

Finally, my lack of language for myself was reflected in Exile and Pride by Eli Clare, whose work documents how disconnection and reconnection with his body has changed over time as a queer and trans person with Cerebral Palsy. He writes, "...How do I write about my body reclaimed, full of pride and pleasure?... How do I mark this place where my body is no longer an empty house, desire whistling lonely through the cracks, but not yet a house fully lived in" (2015). The need I felt to name myself was reflected in the works of these genius people, who were doing something I couldn't: taking the thoughts and feelings and frustrations and confusions of being a square peg in a round hole and putting them to words.

The sense of feeling something bigger but not being able to name it is central to my first piece, these wire cuffs. The flare on the cuffs emphasizes the way that my hands shake, which happens every time I present or need to communicate complex ideas in front of an audience. They’re connected to restrict freedom of movement and demonstrate what it is to feel that unnamed separation from your peers but not know what it means.
We’ve established that monsters are constructed externally, they’re not self-defined but named Monster by others. The way this manifests is through social surveillance. Social surveillance refers to the idea that social norms are quietly enforced by the coercive nature of surveillance. Intentionally or otherwise, people watch each other and make note of what falls outside their perception of normality.

Michel Foucault writes about the docile body: a good student/employee/trans person/whatever is one that operates within established social norms, and is shaped by social surveillance. For gendered bodies, this means being easily readable as either cis man or cis woman. Those that don’t fit into either category are notable because of their failure to meet these standards. They’re watched more, and this can result in anything from feeling alienated to experiencing violence. I’m sure we’ve all heard innumerable stories of trans women being
attacked in bathrooms for not appearing cis enough. Monsters are made from these interactions, they’re made because other people decide their monsterhood for them.

But Juni, I hear you asking, doesn’t that make you feel situationally shamed and isolated from the rest of your peer group? And the answer is sometimes. But then I remember the magic of Kimberle Crenshaw, who in 1989 coined intersectionality as a term. People use intersectionality as a term for more or less whatever they want these days, but the root of intersectionality as a concept lies not within an individual and the identities they hold, but within institutions. I’m not inherently at higher risk for social surveillance by being trans and having ADHD. I’m at higher risk for social surveillance because systemic transphobia and ableism have failed to account for my particular brand of monster. The intersections of identity are exploited by these systems that don’t account for people having any sort of dimension. To exemplify; a trans person of color doesn’t have the experiences of a white trans person plus a cis person of color. Their experiences are multiplicative.

While I was reading about Kimberle Crenshaw and being socially surveilled, COVID happened. And suddenly I was inside all day, being socially surveilled by No One, and I became cognizant of how much effort I had previously been putting into masking my more visible symptoms and performing the role of Good Student and Good Queer. I was diagnosed with ADHD, and recognized that the skills in procrastination I’d built up in primary school were less about my work ethic and more about my brain’s capacity for masking for 9 hours a day. I felt like I was solving a puzzle, and putting together the pieces of my monstrous self.

My second piece, this hood, is emblematic of this period of introspection and self-discovery. I have a tendency toward getting overstimulated, and on days that I can tell will be more of a sensory challenge, I make sure to wear something hooded that I can retreat into if
need be. I wanted this piece to be a comfortable place to retreat, so I used soft yarn in a dark color and hung fringe over the face. The eyes on the fringe, aside from being cool and monstery, are there to represent the way I was watching myself and others, noticing where I existed in relation. The stitching on the side, that’s my ADHD brain. My attention moves quickly and unpredictably, and where the dashed horizontal lines represent a linear train of thought, the bright yellow line of my focus has seemingly no regard at all for what might be considered a linear progression of ideas. This piece is really about seeing monsterhood for the first time, and the introspection that comes with self-recognition.
One aspect of monsters that I’ve yet to touch on is that a lot of the time, monsters inspire fear and awe because of their power. And don’t worry, the monsters in my metaphor also get to have kick-ass powers. One of these powers is the fullness that comes simply from being able to put a name to who you are. Audre Lorde puts words to this in her essay *Uses of the Erotic*, in which she talks about eroticism not as something inherently pornographic, but as the liberatory power of recognizing the care we deserve to offer ourselves and each other. She writes "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (2000). The depth of feeling she describes is what has carried me through this project, carried me into the ethic of care that I want to extend to myself and to others.

The applications of this depth of feeling are seen in work like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha’s, a non-binary and disabled activist, demonstrating what a future could
look like were the care needs of disabled people met with joy rather than with shame. They say: "I want everyone to be able to create wildly intimate, healing relationships where your care needs are present in the room, not crammed in the garbage. I want everyone to have access to this joyful, dangerous, wide-open pleasure, because it's the vulnerable strength we all deserve." (Pleasure Activism, 2019).

These ideas came with me as I resumed in-person classes. I was beginning to understand disability as it pertained to me, and nothing made that clearer than coming back to school after two and a half years of being inside. I was no longer good at school. The years of heavily masking my symptoms followed by the years of no masking at all made it much harder to perform the role that I used to be able to. I knew this institution wasn’t designed for people whose brains work like mine, and I didn’t know how to reconcile that with the last few quarters of the most important coursework in my majors. I was embodying the monster, sure, but I felt trapped. In the fall of 2022, I worked as a notetaker for WWU’s UnConference with the department of Critical Disability Studies, and I was able to be part of a discussion on disability in a Zoom room full of non-binary disabled people from across the country. Again, I was touched by the words that others found to speak into existence what I could not, and their words shaped my perceptions of myself and my positionality.

"We’re not interested in being a stealthy, cis-appearing community and we’re not interested in “fixing” our disabilities." This first quote solidified the idea that normalcy, offered so frequently as a solution to the social and cultural issues around disability and queerness, was not something to aspire to. The future I want is not one of silence or assimilation, it's one full of monsters.
"[To "queer" is to] delve into unclear borders, take hold of the looseness of definitions and explore them and live them and breathe them. I may not be able to define disability, but I know it when I see it."

"My work is often pitted against my mind and body. There’s a standard that must be met if you’re marginalized at all for people outside the community to accept that you’re part of it." These two quotes in conjunction shut down the voice in my head that was still asking me if I was disabled enough, queer enough, non-binary enough. I don't need to reach for a place in these communities, it's enough for me to feel the belonging. The only people who have ever asked me to justify my disability or my transness are neurotypical and cisgendered people. I was done justifying myself, done justifying my identities, done justifying my space in the world. I had become the monster.

Which brings me to my final piece; the self-made monster. This little shirt that I’ve made reads “I’M A MONSTER!!” across the front, which is a phrase that had been repeating in my brain this entire quarter (and also a nod to Arrested Development, for those familiar with the show). The branches and flowers embroidered on it lie where my top surgery scars sit on my chest, and hanging from them are a few of my emptied vials of testosterone from the last year.
I’ve presented these pieces in a linear way, but all of them are still relevant to me. I’m still discovering, still naming, still processing and observing. As much as these pieces represent the ways I’ve felt like I don’t fit into the institutions under which I’ve lived for the past several years, they also celebrate that. The hood is comfy and serves its purpose well as a little place to hide when I feel overstimulated. The cuffs decorate my shaky presentation hands with delicate wire that catches the light. The shirt adorns my top surgery scars with thorns and flowers, and connects aspects of my physical transition. If there’s one thing I would like you all to take away from this, it’s my belief in building communities of empathetic, compassionate monsters. One of the books that has guided me as much spiritually as it has theoretically is Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which is a book that is all about gratitude and reciprocity. In this book, she says whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world” (2022). I was given the gift of language and embodiment and liberation, and I’m in turn
offering to you all the gift of my bizarre and deeply meaningful creations. I challenge you to ask yourself: how can you become a monster today?
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