



Embodied Queer Epistemologies: A New Approach to (a Monstrous) Citizenship

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Historically monsters have been represented as those who do not fit, whose bodies, practices or experiences constitute powerful reminders of inadequacy, unsuitability or wrongness. However, both history and culture have demonstrated that monsters are also admired and popular. Monsters can even become heroes. Indeed, many of the heroes in mainstream literature could fit into dominant representations of monstrosity.

The central argument in this chapter stems from the ambiguity conjured up by the notion of the monster. It is a twofold argument, producing different but related results: that monsters are misfits (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Santos & Santos, 2018) and that monsters

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(i.e. monstrous misfits) trigger reactions of both fear and desire. These and other affects attached to monstrosity will be explored in light of queer critiques of the concept of citizenship. The first part of the chapter explores the notion of the monster, with a particular interest in queer readings of monstrosity. In that section, monsters will be unpacked against the backdrop of the archetype of the hero. The second part of the chapter focuses on the notion of citizenship and aims at recuperating its potential in the light of both contemporary queer critiques and evidence-based needs to strengthen formal recognition in times of anti-LGBTQI+ backlash. Finally, the notion of monstrous citizenship will be advanced as part of what I am suggesting be interpreted as an embodied turn in (queer) epistemologies.

When discussing monstrosity through a queer lens, it is crucial to consider the impact of heteronormativity defined as a range of “multitudinous (social, legal, political, cultural) ways in which heterosexuality is normalized, naturalized and privileged as an institution, and to the ways in which homosexual practices and relationships are excluded, stigmatized, marginalized, and minoritized” (Roseneil et al., 2013, p. 166). In parallel to this naturalized privileging of heterosexuality, cisnormativity—understood as the default assumption that a person’s gender identity matches their biological sex—plays a crucial role in disciplining and domesticizing bodily diversity.

To reiterate, cis-heteronormativity fosters the conditions under which certain identities, practices and experiences are bound to remain monstrous, whereas others retain their moral, social and political aura, often conflated with heroism. The next section focuses on an artifice: the socially constructed opposition between monsters and heroes.

ON DIRTY MONSTERS AND WORTHY HEROES¹

In April 2017, the broadsheet newspaper *Expresso* published the very first long piece on Portuguese media about non-binary people. The headline read, “O nome dela é Pedro e ela é um monstro” [Her name is Pedro and she is a monster] (Martins, 2017). The piece further elaborated on that content, purposively playing with gendered names and pronouns and offering more details on what had been labelled as monster:

¹In this section, I will partially draw on my previous work on trans people as heroes (Santos, 2021).

They are on the cover of *Time* magazine, but are censored on YouTube. Fluid, disruptive, unyielding. They are beyond definitions. Neither LGBTQ nor anything that has labels. Something new. Pedro is one of them. How many feel like monsters as children, while they are just one of us?

To be. Male, female, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer. Human. Or not to be. None of this, nor anything else in opposition to any of these definitions. This is no longer the question. A genre that goes beyond pre-defined rules and begins to make itself felt before it makes good use of society, still in its idealized and asexual childhood. Genres that go on being. Gerund, much more than defined. Infinite. Because her name is Pedro but that's not enough for her.

Based on this piece, the reader of this Portuguese newspaper understands that disobeying gender-based norms such as the gender binary is highly disruptive and risky, eventually leading to dispossession of humanity and a consequential transformation into something else, something new, odd and wild. This disruption triggers fear, but at the same time familiarity. There are daily and multiple encounters with that which is beyond the human as we know it. As Stockton (2009) reminds us, we speak of children as both wild and monstrous. In addition, more recently, Halberstam (2020) elaborated on the multiple connections between the human and the wild that emerge from popular culture regarding monstrous figures.

The strangeness attached to the non-binary body and experience is enough to yield the label of monster. In Pedro's case, monster appears as a self-chosen category that may offer a symbolic place to feel at home in the world (Ahmed, 2017), at last. Later on in this chapter, I will return to this idea of being and/or feeling at home as monsters, but for now I would like to focus on the dominant, shared imaginary that the category "monster" conjures up.

A simple search for synonyms and definitions of monster leads to the idea of big, massive, enormous, gigantic and colossal. Other words associated with monsters share a strange interconnection, as if an invisible thread drew a line separating "us" from "them": misfit, odd, eccentric, unusual, peculiar, atypical, dissident, nonconforming, wrong, mistake and error. Some of these words—perhaps most of them—are loaded with pejorative connotations. An obvious example, very close to the focus of this chapter, is the word mistake, often used in popular media to viciously describe trans bodies as evidence of nature's wrongdoings.

The image of the monster has been historically used to epitomize sin, danger, pain and illness. Even before angels, monsters were already portrayed as messengers who anticipated catastrophes, such as storms and other dramatic events simply too strong to be undone by the average human being. Monsters can only be avoided through good behaviour or fought through faith in something that is, in itself, larger than human and not explained through scientific reasoning—hence, through magic, witchcraft or religion. Overall, monsters can only be fought by other equally powerful entities, such as other monsters. Arguably, the monster is always already attached to the idea of the hero. This hero can either be the other of the monster, often a human being who faces and defeats the monster (David facing Goliath, the beauty facing the beast, etc.), or the monster itself (McGunnigle, 2018). Indeed, if you extract from monsters' material bodies the qualities they display, features such as bravery, fearlessness, strength and being immortal could easily describe the qualities of heroes, including the complex and rich cultural construction of any national hero.

To reiterate, the strong connection between monsters and heroes is constitutive of the very notion of both monster and hero, and the acknowledgement of this interconnectedness is, in itself, a powerful reminder of the frailty of the (artificially constructed) binary that places unworthy monsters in opposition to worthy heroes. The final part of this section focuses on national heroes as part of the dominant narrative that undermines the significance of monstrosity in daily life.

National heroes are part of the discourse that constructs the modern nation as a coherent fantasy. But who are they? National heroes are predominantly represented as (cisgender) men who display features that are inherent to the construction of mainstream (toxic) masculinity: they are brave, strong, unstoppable, determined, resilient, resistant and fearless. National heroes not only know what the right thing is, but—most importantly—they are able to deliver it. The imagery of “the nation” would not be complete without these figures, because they play an active part in the making of “us”, a chosen collective that is portrayed as better than any of its counterparts. The heroic-like qualities of the imagined nation are displayed in most patriotic symbols, including the flag, the national anthem, national memorials and statues (Martins & Cardina, 2019; Rao, 2021).

In Portugal, this discourse has ancient roots that travel back to the “discoveries” (better described as invasions) and all the alleged bravery of men who faced sea monsters, unknown dangers, merciless indigenous communities, and others—and survived. As the first lines of the national anthem establish, the Portuguese are “Heroes of the seas, noble people, a

brave and immortal nation". Post-colonial studies have demonstrated that this heroic acritical narrative is still constitutive of the way Portuguese children study their history and learn about how to become part of this collective us-against-them, or at least us-as-opposite-to-them (Araújo & Maeso, 2012).

One of the most puzzling aspects of the representation of national heroes is the fact that despite allegedly representing such a large entity as "the nation", they are surprisingly homogenous and linear. Thinking mostly (but not exclusively) about the context of Southern Europe, the hero is, by default, a cisgender, heterosexual, White, young, fit and able-bodied man. This homogenous representation of the heroic figure implies that, in fact, heroes lack the possibility of diversity. Consequently, diversity belongs to the realm of monsters, which are much more unlike each other and have dissimilarities amongst them. As such, it seems only fair to argue that monsters are unique, whereas heroes are average.

In light of this argumentation, what is our problem with monsters? Why are they given little value when compared to other collective imagined categories, namely, that of heroes? The linearity in narratives around heroes forces us to question how great a community can aspire to become when the official tales it authorizes to be representative of itself are so linear and reductionist. Perhaps one would be much better off being represented by an untamed monster.²

There are few exceptions in literature and in popular culture that ascribe positive value to monstrosity. Exceptions would include the *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *Pete's Dragon*, for instance. But even those tales of exception teach us that even kind-hearted creatures do not seem able to escape the abject impact of their misfit bodies. Monsters are to be avoided and feared precisely because they have the appearance of a monster and that appearance has been culturally constructed to provoke fear and rejection. They look like that which escapes categorization. Therefore, the problem with the monster, which is used to trigger terror and abjection, is the monster's visible body, the way the monster looks and the way it looks at us. The monster's gaze is frightening, because it is simply too strong to be disciplined, interpreted

²For this category of untamed monster, I am clearly drawing on Audre Lorde (1988) who spoke about writing as an untamed force: "I am going to write fire until it comes out of my ears, my eyes, my noseholes—everywhere. Until it's every breath I breathe. I am going to go out like a fucking meteor!" (pp. 76–77).

or read. Furthermore, by looking at the monster (or being looked at by the monster), we are confronted with an image most of us refuse to accept—the image of our own vulnerability.³ If we stare at the monster and are the object of the monster’s gaze, our own bodily fragility betrays us. If we look at Medusa, our humanity vanishes as we turn into stone. When angels stayed too close to Lucifer, they lost their wings and became devils. Therefore, the story proceeds in only one of two possible directions: the proximity to the monster will either kill us or turn us into monsters.

The rejection of the monstrous body is condoned by a variety of social agents, some of them with strong symbolic leverage. In an insightful talk during the “2018 CES Monsters Summer School”, Zowie Davy offered the following reflection:

The monstrous archetypes in social theory (...) have been shown to breach binary notions of the human in medicine, law, biology and so on. How much though have these archetypes impacted on the binary ideal beyond the academic debates? What countermeasures develop in restricting the monstrous becoming mainstream through a politics of difference? (Davy, 2018a)

The politics of difference alluded to by Davy has always been in dialogue with the politics of appearance, as defined by Garland-Thomson within the fundamental theoretical framework of feminist disability studies (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Both perspectives share the belief that there is a political dimension associated with embodiment and the way beauty is socially constructed to serve certain purposes. A tacit ally of a certain way of beauty, as opposed to misfit (monstrous) bodies, is biomedical power and its cis-heteronormative apparatuses that, by eliminating difference, aim at bounding beauty and (re)production. The example of surgeries on non-consenting intersex newborns is an example of such alliance that serves no other purpose than disciplining the body.

This leads us to the fundamental claim of self-determination advanced by trans and intersex movements worldwide against pathologization. To summarize what is a very rich field of collective action and knowledge production, these movements position gender as an ongoing script that is

³On the topic of vulnerability in relation to sexuality and sexual diversity, see Pieri (2019, 2021, 2023).

socially and culturally constructed through subjectivity and multiple nuances (Davy, 2011, 2018b, 2021). As such, gender is ultimately personal and political, hence the urgency of unbinding gender from the biomedical power (Davy et al., 2017; Preciado, 2021). This means, amongst many other measures, stopping conversion torture, unnecessary surgeries on intersex babies and the language of dysphoria.

Before moving to the next section, we give a final remark about the link between bodies and moral systems of value. From a sociological point of view, it is intriguing that, despite the monster's material body being that which is in sharp contrast with dominant standards and, thus, is subject to various attempts of 'correction' and domestication, the monster remains associated with qualities that belong to realm of morality, customs and behaviour. We previously suggested that the proximity to the monster either kills (Medusa) or transmutes mortals into monsters (Lucifer). According to Portuguese traditional folklore, some women are converted into headless female donkeys because they had a sexual encounter with a priest. The headless female donkey is still used in popular culture and daily conversations, hence embodying the connection between monstrosity and defiance against sexual moral norms.

Other examples come to mind when we focus more closely on queer monstrosity as a sphere where monstrosity is defined not through features related to material embodiment but precisely because of morals, customs and behaviours. Who could be described today as monstrous intimate citizens? Based on their intimate biographies, which figure would fit best into a category well-known for its connotation with the misfit, odd, unusual, dissident, nonconforming, wrong and like features? Perhaps the surrogate woman and polyamorous parents who defy repronormativity (Klesse, 2018; Pérez Navarro, 2018); the non-monogamous partner who challenges mononormativity (Santos, 2019) and the couple norm (Roseneil et al., 2020); the trans, inter and the non-binary body who exposes cis-heteronormativity (Preciado, 2021); or the older lover who confronts ageism (King, 2016; Traies, 2016). These are only a few examples of identities and experiences that have been devalued, described in derogatory terms and constructed as (queer) monsters because they remain misfits under the dominant cis-heteronormative system.

That said, let us return briefly to how this section started—the piece published in a mainstream newspaper reading “O nome dela é Pedro e ela é um monstro” [Her name is Pedro and she is a monster] (Martins, 2017). Based on the arguments offered in this section, it seems safe to argue that,

under a dominant paradigm that fears monstrosity, calling a non-binary person a monster because of their gender diversity may well contribute to an already onerous connection between queer and evil. That is one reason why the concept of monster has faced historical difficulties in being appropriated and politicized, as it happened with other insulting categories in the past.

Moreover, some juridical frameworks view sexual or gender diversity as both sinful and contrary to natural laws—unnatural or *contra natura*. Interestingly enough, the chosen word to describe someone who is allegedly detached from nature—monster—is also used to describe a variety of expressions from the natural world, from animals to weather-related phenomenon (Halberstam, 2020). This only adds to the ambiguous nature of the category of monster, as previously advanced in the chapter. The next section will explore the potential within the notion of monster in light of the framework of citizenship.

A PLACE TO CALL MY OWN: FROM LOATHED TO DESIRED CITIZENSHIP

Historically created as a framework of exclusion fraught with power asymmetries, the notion of citizenship has been at the core of rich theoretical contributions and intense political debates and under fierce critique, especially from feminist and queer scholars (Lister, 1997).

The construction of citizens as those who participate publicly in decisions that affect their lives brought to light new layers of exclusion, as well as new opportunities to frame citizenship beyond a narrow understanding of formal rights (Hines & Santos, 2018). The notions of intimate, sexual and reproductive citizenship were crucial in shifting the original focus of citizenship on participation and rights to spheres previously excluded from the relation between individuals and the state, highlighting how political the personal was (Roseneil et al., 2016). The decision to revisit the notion of citizenship, instead of replacing it with something radically different, was a strategic move. Much of what the word citizenship entailed was already culturally established, which made it convenient to retain the word while expanding its meaning and practice.

Today it is argued that citizenship can be understood both as “an academic and political concept and as lived experience” (Lister et al., 2007, p. 1). In LGBTQI+ politics, the relation to citizenship remains

ambiguous, permeated with expectations and disappointment. The consolidation of notions such as sexual, intimate or reproductive citizenship has not solved the conundrum yet (and will never?). How can one claim the right to sit at a table that is politically flawed? Despite remaining a loaded notion, the potential it triggers regarding recognition and equality offers a platform for negotiation that would otherwise quickly dismiss LGBTI+ people. In such context, it seems important to consider the mutual implications of intimacy and citizenship, exploring the extent to which issues such as partnering, parenting and friendship are important aspects of being/becoming recognized as citizens, against all (cis-heteronormative) odds.

Changes in family life and intimacy in recent decades illustrate significant sociocultural transformations. Literature on the sociology of the family examines the decline of marriage and fertility rates, together with the increase in divorce, solo-living, single parenthood by choice, LGBTQI+ families and non-cohabiting relationships (Roseneil et al., 2020). In the dynamic and changing context of personal lives, LGBTI+ people have been identified as pioneers in the making of a new model for relationships. One powerful example at the turn of the twenty-first century was the notion of “families of choice” (Weeks et al., 2001), highlighting the importance of social and cultural ties over blood or biological ties.

Transformations in family life and intimacy have also influenced the way citizenship is understood and how individual and collective identities become politicized and recognized in the public sphere. Public concerns over personal relationship are visible not only at the national state level but also in local government and supranational institutions. Ken Plummer’s (1995, 2003) notion of intimate citizenship is particularly important in this regard, advancing an understanding of citizenship mostly centred on everyday life and how people can (or cannot) live, personally. Drawing on Plummer’s early writings, Sasha Roseneil (2010) suggested that we look on intimate citizenship as:

the freedom and ability to construct and live selfhood and a wide range of close relationships—sexual/love relationships, friendships, parental and kin relations—safely, securely and according to personal choice, in their dynamic, changing forms, with respect, recognition and support from state and civil society. (p. 82)

This definition puts selfhood and close relationships at the centre of recognition and support from both dominant legal frameworks and society at large. In so doing, intimate citizenship is extremely effective in capturing the merging of public and private and personal and political.

However, this apparently agreeable synchronicity between intimacy and citizenship cannot erase a shared memory of times (and contexts) in which citizenship was (is) armoured against gender or sexual diversity. More importantly, not only was diversity absent from the citizenship framework, but it was also considered deviant and abnormal. To illustrate the impact of such an understanding, suffice it to say that only in 2017 did the “International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision” (ICD-11) from the *World Health Organization* remove the categories for diagnosis of trans and gender diverse people from the mental health chapter. In addition, in Italy LGBTI+ people are still denied parenthood rights, and in countries such as Portugal, the so-called conversion therapies remain legal, despite increasing opposition (Gomes et al., 2021).

In recent times, across Europe and beyond, there have been increasing attacks on sexual freedom, with LGBTQI+ people being framed as particularly dangerous, especially to children. Examples range from LGBT-free zones in Poland to Hungary’s law banning the depiction of homosexuality to under-eighteens (Möser et al., 2022). The populist, far-right anti-LGBTI backlash has actively contributed to the demonization of gender and sexual diversity, producing narratives strongly reminiscent of the 1980s and the 1990s when mainstream society considered homosexuality to be linked to sexual abuse (the ghost of the gay sexual abuser) and/or disease (the ghost of AIDS) (Jarman, 1993). Those were the queer monsters in the 1980s and 1990s. In a surprising return to the past, the queer monster is being flagged up again today, with calls for punishment and silencing of LGBTI diversity grounded on moral panic (Möser et al., 2022; Patternote & Kuhar, 2017). In other words, previously achieved intimate citizenship rights are, once again, under attack.

The growing populist backlash on equality and anti-discrimination policies is one strong reason to reflect upon the current limits of citizenship and to push for further expansion of its theoretical and political potential. In this chapter, I suggest doing so through revisiting, unpacking and reclaiming the notion of monster and by ultimately advancing the idea of monstrous citizenship.

MONSTROUS CITIZENSHIP AND EMBODIED (QUEER) EPISTEMOLOGIES

In his keynote address for an audience of gender studies scholars and students in Louvain-la-Neuve in 2018, Ken Plummer confided that he had never been that interested in law, explaining how intimate citizenship was not about juridical texts because “rights on their own are not enough” (Plummer, 2018). As intimate citizenship is mostly about everyday life and how people can (or cannot) live personally, so monstrous citizenship can be understood as a symbolic platform, a cluster of arguments that sustain the (mostly sociocultural) possibility of a legitimate and safe existence beyond dominant material and/or moral categories. Similarly to what happens with intimate, sexual or reproductive rights, the link to citizenship anchors the notion of the monster in the broader framework of democratic justice and accountability, hence excluding any practice or behaviour that is contrary to the principles of the rule of law in democratic societies. In the following excerpt from Paul Preciado’s address to an assembly of health professionals, the transition from monster to citizen is described as a purposeful move away from pathologization:

Today I address myself to you, the academicians of psychoanalysis, from my ‘cage’ as a trans man (. . .) I am the monster who speaks to you. The monster you have created with your discourse and your clinical practices. *I am the monster who gets up from the analyst’s couch and dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a citizen, as your monstrous equal.* As a trans body, as a non-binary body, *whose right to speak as an expert about my condition, or to produce a discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognized* by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry, I have done as Red Peter did, I have learned the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you. (Preciado, 2021, p. 12, emphasis added)

In this empowering speech, Preciado is occupying the space of citizenship as someone who “dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a citizen”, as a “monstrous equal” to anyone in the room and as both an expert and a knowledge producer. Later on in the same book, a link is made between the changing regime of sexual difference and the early signs of emergence of a new epistemology:

Shaken by profound changes, *the epistemic regime of sexual difference is mutating and, within the next ten or twenty years, will probably give way to a new epistemology*. Trans feminist, queer and anti-racist movements, together with new approaches to filiation, to loving relationships and to identification in terms of gender, desire, sexuality and naming, are merely signs of this mutation and of experiments in the *collective construction of a different epistemology of the living human body*. (Preciado, 2021, pp. 30–31, emphasis added)

In this excerpt, the mutating “trans feminist, queer and anti-racist” dissident becomes the symbol of a new form of knowledge production that takes the body as its focal point. Drawing on the topic of monstrosity and, more specifically, of monstrous citizens, in this final section I want to advance the notion of embodied (queer) epistemologies.

The term epistemology is derived from the two Greek words *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *logos* (reason). Epistemology is defined as the theory of human knowledge, an area in philosophical thought that is concerned with issues having to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry. So what would a monster-friendly embodied epistemology look like? How would it operate, and what could it offer in the fields of academia, citizenship and culture? These are some of the questions that will guide us in the remaining part of the chapter.

QUEER TO THE BONE: THE MONSTER IN ME IS THE MONSTER IN YOU

The epistemological framework offered in this section draws on queer as epistemology, as the lens through which the world can be understood and, hopefully, monster-inclusive knowledge can be produced. Writing in 2009, Muñoz called for a hopeful future delivered by queerness as a map into other ways of being in the world:

We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing (. . .) the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1)

Before we return to Muñoz, I suggest we take a short tour to the imaginary world offered by the Italian artist Luigi Serafini who, between 1976 and 1978, created *Codex Seraphinianus*, an illustrated encyclopaedia originally published in 1981. The book is approximately 360 pages long, based on illustrations of monstrous creatures, and it is written in a cipher alphabet using an imaginary language. It is a very strong example of how relatable, unintelligible and interchangeable images can be. The human in us is revealed precisely through those interchangeable shapes. It is diversity, not silencing, that enables a sense of promise and future, even in contexts of strong deprivation of freedom and hope. Law and social policy need to retain the interchangeable nature of the multiple shapes of human. And this leads us back to Muñoz's eloquent appeal, according to which we can unpeel queer, expose its nuances and rejoice with its multiple layers. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to briefly mention five constitutive layers of queer. First, *queer as imaginary and representation*, both aesthetic and political (hence also personal), embracing difference (hence the misfit). Secondly, *queer as a project of becoming*, characterized by ongoing construction, embracing failure and undoing crystallized and binary perspectives. Thirdly, *queer as a promise* of future and as a promise of resistance, including queer as outlaw (disobedient, fluid, contradictory). Fourthly, *queer as a theoretical and political framework*, a field of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, intersectional and *undisciplinary* knowledge—a subversive knowledge—pleasure. Finally, *queer as standpoint* (and utterance), a platform from which to speak and a place of belonging.

I find this fifth aspect in queer—queer as a standpoint—particularly engaging for a project that draws on monsters to suggest a new embodied (queer) epistemology.

PLACING THE BODY IN THE (QUEER) EPISTEMOLOGY

In her work published in 2017, Sara Ahmed speaks of “a body that is not at home in the world” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13), explaining how that discomfort produces ideas, frameworks and concepts that are particularly difficult. These are “sweaty concepts”, and by this Ahmed means

a description of how it feels not to be at home in the world, or a description of the world from the point of view of not being at home in it. Sweat is bodily; we might sweat more during more strenuous and muscular activity. A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The

task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 13)

The notion of monstrous citizenship is a sweaty concept, in the sense that it stems from a dislocated body, a body that is not at home in the world, but which nonetheless is in the world. More precisely, monsters are often made to feel that they do not belong to the realm of citizenship, and yet here they (we) are—in the *polis*, in parliament, in the academia and in the world—trying, staying with the difficulty and owning the sweat. Two decades before Ahmed, Susan Stryker had pointed out to the transformative power of rage, explaining that rage resulting from stigma can become a source of power once it is put to use (Stryker, 1994, p. 261).

In 2017, Ahmed claimed: “the monsters will lead the way” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 227). Three years down the road, speaking of his own process of transition as a self-identified trans man, Preciado explained how embracing monstrosity released a multitude of possibilities that could never be anticipated under constraining cis-heteronormative regimes:

[H]ad I not preferred my monstrosity to your heteronormativity, had I not chosen my sexual deviance over your sexual health, I would never have been able to escape... or, to be more precise, would never have been able to decolonize, disidentify, debinarify myself (. . .) The monster is one who lives in transition. One whose face, body and behaviours cannot yet be considered true in a predetermined regime of knowledge and power (. . .) This awakening is revolution. It is a molecular uprising. An assault on the power of the heteropatriarchal ego, of identity and of name. The process is a decolonization of the body. (Preciado, 2021, pp. 23–24)

The “awakening of another genealogy” is described as revolution, as “a decolonization of the body”. It is this misfit, awakened, revolutionary body that enables monsters to lead the way into a new embodied epistemology.

In her book *Embodying the Monster*, Shildrick makes a strong claim for retaining the importance of the body. She wrote: “The task is to reject biologism—with its appeal to prediscursive natural givens—at the same time as recuperating the possibility of embodiment” (Shildrick, 2002, p. 2).

Drawing on situated knowledges as my own ontological positioning, I suggest that embodied epistemologies take the body as a point of departure, a platform from where to speak, a political statement. Embodied

epistemologies thrive on bodily nonconformity. Under this category of nonconforming embodiment, we can think of bodies that refuse reproductive normativities (e.g. the surrogate mother); bodies that refuse gender-based normativities (e.g. trans and intersex bodies in sports (A. L. Santos, 2020)); bodies that escape the bodily limits (e.g. conjoint twins); and bodies that leak (Shildrick, 1997, 2002).

The knowledge that embodied epistemologies enable is made possible through the recognition of nonconforming bodies as untamed monsters who become a source of conceptual challenge, cultural inspiration and political respect. Embodied epistemologies take the daily experience-based constraints and possibilities attached to corporeality and use this embodied knowledge in order to occupy space and to make room—hence ascribing theoretical and political centrality to the materiality of embodied resistance. There is much theoretical inspiration to be found in dis/obedient embodiment.

Finally, embodied epistemologies offer the scholarly basis for advancing a more encompassing monstrous citizenship, one that recognizes the unsurmountable role of monsters in assessing one's own humanity. Halberstam (2020) equates the monster in its different shapes (including the zombie) as the undead, eloquently described as follows:

The living, walking, suppurating dead are those bodies we have assigned to the grey zone between the good life and the bare life—they include the incarcerated, refugees, the hungry, the terminally ill, the sick and the dying, the very young and the very old, the homeless, the drug addicts, the endangered species, the mentally ill, the disabled, the starving, the dispossessed, the occupied, the unsaved, unremembered, irredeemable, illegible, illegitimate undead. The undead are hungry, they are angry, they are sick, and they are tired. And while you may look upon them with horror today, tomorrow you will no doubt try to save them in order to redeem a seriously compromised sense of your own humanity. (p. 174)

Once it becomes possible to overcome the terror triggered by the misfit body of the monster, a whole range of possibility and freedom emerges. As such, embodied epistemologies are an acknowledgement of the significance of both corporeal materiality and conceptual audacity, an appreciation of knowledge production that takes discomfort as a productive, driving force, in as much as failure has come to be recognized as imminently queer (Halberstam, 2011).

CONCLUSION

In 1780, Johann Silberschlag coined the term “Brockengespenst”, or Brocken spectre. Silberschlag, a German Lutheran pastor, went for a walk alone in the mountains and was surprised by an enormous, moving spectre in the clouds opposite to where he was standing. The apparition resembled a giant, grey monster, whose head was surrounded by halo-like rings of coloured light forming a rainbow. Associated since medieval times with magic forces and other obscure manifestations, these visions actually result from a rare weather phenomenon. Under the right combination of light, angle and mist, the magnified shadow of someone walking or standing on the top of a mountain can be projected upon clouds opposite the sun’s direction. The phenomenon takes its name from the Brocken, a peak in the Harz Mountains characterized by frequent fogs, but has been observed in other parts of the world (McKenzie, 2015).⁴

Writing in 2020, Halberstam argued that “we have fashioned monsters to embody what we cannot name, to frame what we have come to fear, and to banish what we cannot tolerate” (Halberstam, 2020, pp. 147–148). What I find particularly compelling about the Brocken spectre is the fact that these intolerable, horrifying monsters, sighted across the globe, were no less than humans themselves who, unknowingly, became terrified of the way they “looked”. Unable to recognize their own bodies, deformed, grey and massive as they were projected in the distant misty clouds, these observers found themselves in the ironic position of generating, through their own material bodies, the monsters who they deemed as dangerous and frightening. The moment they suspended their walk to observe, directing their human gaze towards the spectre, they were simultaneously connecting and detaching from monstrosity, illustrating the inescapable overlap of humans and monsters. Each monstrous spectre is simply an unexpected manifestation of the gazer’s own body.

Furthermore, the Brocken spectre points to the plasticity of representations of one’s body and highlights the importance of context and perspective. It is also a powerful reminder of the potential each person holds of suddenly generating unwanted reactions of fear and abjection in and from others (including oneself) because of features that cannot be prevented or stopped. In that particular moment in time, the observer cannot help

⁴I am deeply grateful to Ana Lúcia Santos for having brought this phenomenon to my attention in one of our many fruitful conversations over the years.

being that person on the top of the mountain who is faced with the monster (themselves).

Weather events aside, arguably each human is always already multiple, mutant, even kaleidoscopic. Humans are monster-like because the monster is no less than a human projection. Similarly, identities, practices and experiences are ever-changing and situated, blurred and strategically deployed (and silenced).

A central topic in the chapter was the ambiguity that produces two different but related ideas: that monsters are misfits (Garland-Thomson, 2011) and that the monstrous misfit generates both fear and desire. As was argued throughout the chapter, despite having been historically depicted as an imagined homogenous category, the concept of monster, when unpacked, will necessarily mean so many (wonderfully different) things to each person. Through the queer lens advanced in this chapter, the idea of the monster captures the multiple oppressions experienced by misfits—misfits who are immediately read as misfits, bodies which are visibly transgressive, but also invisible ones, like people with invisible illness or disability. Moreover, the monster embodies a potential which is richer and more promising than the one mainstream, homogenous heroes are programmed to deliver.

This chapter also aimed at questioning the gap between monsters and citizenship, and in so doing, it advanced the notion of monstrous citizenship. As explored in the chapter, citizenship lends itself to a fair amount of criticism. However, it also forces the state to pay attention and to acknowledge its own responsibilities. That is why, despite admitting that laws are not enough, most vulnerable groups have been organizing collectively across the globe to push for legal recognition. Law is still an important platform for public acknowledgement and cultural legitimacy. As such, citizenship remains a serious issue, with a great degree of formality and symbolic advantage attached to its procedures and outcomes. Therefore, when monster and citizenship are brought together in one sentence, causing perplexity, discomfort or unsettlement, the political work begins. Because monsters by definition are not subjects of rights—that is, are not citizens—the idea of a monstrous citizenship invites those who read or listen to pose the question: Why? What is it about? Who are these monsters who demand to be acknowledged and cared under the rule of law?

A related set of questions beg to be made at this stage. How does the law accommodate, block or encourage (monstrous) diversity? How do we characterize the dominant sexuality and gender regimes of a particular

country or region? How can culture explain both perpetuity and transformation? Which exclusions do we replicate in our multiple fora of militancy?

Surely, there are no single or easy answers to any of these questions. Any attempt to respond will undoubtedly be bound to one's own experience of time and place. Nevertheless, bringing context to the centre of our analytical concerns is a crucial political step that prevents monsters from becoming atomized exceptions, isolated accidents and residual collateral damage. In other words, as we have learned from feminist disability studies, it is never about someone's inability to fit—it is always about the context's inability to overcome the narrow boundaries within which it operates on a political, legal and sociocultural level.

Therefore, it is fundamental to take a closer look at local contexts and at the broader structures of power that so eagerly produce monsters as outcasts—sexism, homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, ableism, racism, ageism and fatphobia—the list goes on. In so doing, this chapter sits at the intersectional crossroads of queers, crips and other misfits, pointing towards the future of intersectional coalition making.⁵ This leads us to the final argument in the chapter: the suggestion of a new embodied queer epistemology drawing on the role of monsters as leading the way—embodied epistemologies—the way the (monstrous) body is perceived through its materiality, its practices and its experiences.

To conclude, I wish to reiterate that the category of monster holds enormous epistemological and political potential, especially when compared to some of its conceptual predecessors. It is possible to self-identify with categories that were once used as insults. For decades, people would not choose to self-identify as queer or crip. However, words change and concepts travel: from insult to political banner and from shame to pride. Contrary to the words queer and crip, which were insults attached to one particular category, the word monster already cuts across a range of possible identities and belongings from the outset. As Halberstam aptly notes, “The monster announces the fall of the father, the end of Oedipus, the solidarity of the monsters (. . .) The monster of whom you speak, has left his cage” (Halberstam, 2021, p. 1). The word monster is not attached to a particular experience and therefore contains the potential to relate to other categories of oppression. Butler once wrote: “It matters that as bodies we arrive together in public/As bodies we suffer/we require food/and

⁵ On the topic of intersectional and integrated ways of doing politics and generating coalitions, see Elpes (2020).

shelter and as bodies we require one another in dependency and desire. So this is a politics of the public body” (Butler, 2011). Monsters evoke intersectionality by exposing nonconformity as a constitutive element of humanity. Therefore, monstrosity cannot be dismissed as accidental or distant; it is here to inspire, to unsettle and to get us going—back, forward, sideways or in circles—but going until we can, at last, feel safe and embraced in all of our diversities.

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