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Progressive Connexions

Monsters Conference – DRAFT

With Love from Self to Self: Monstrous Doubling and an Ethics of Care in Adolescent Literature

In Noelle Stevenson's (2015) graphic novel *Nimona*, the titular shapeshifter is split in two when the "heroes" of the land seek to understand and tame her monstrosity. Assuming the form of a small child and a towering, fire-breathing beast, Nimona attacks those who have hurt her. When her one ally begs her to show mercy, both parts of herself – the child and the beast – assume a protective stance towards one another and respond, "No" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 237).

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996), in his seminal "Monster Culture: Seven Theses," claims that the "monster is the harbinger of category crisis" (p. 6). He points to the monster's hybridity as a source of disturbance, stating, "And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen, 1996, p. 6). Indeed, Nimona always exists between forms. Even her most common shape, that of a cheerfully murderous youth, is not her "true" self. Nimona does not have a real or singular form. She is all of the bodies she appears as, and she is also more than any of the other characters – or the readers – can guess.

This uncertainty, as Cohen's (1996) analysis suggests, does not sit well with most people, who require categories to understand the world and their place in it. Stevenson's (2015) entire text is a sendup of rigid categorization of good and evil in narratives, with Nimona serving as a sidekick to Lord Ballister Blackheart, a supervillain whose mission is to bring down his nemesis, Sir Ambrosius Goldenloin, along with the Institution of Law Enforcement and Heroics.

Unsurprisingly, all is not as it seems; the Institution is really quite villainous, Ballister has hidden depths, and by the end, he and Goldenloin aren't really nemeses after all. Nimona's arrival in Ballister's life is the catalyst for all of the formerly well-entrenched categories in his world to reach a crisis point. Appropriately for a shapeshifter, Nimona is an agent of change.

Yet that is only what she is to other people. What is Nimona to herself? Captured, experimented upon, she laughs at her tormentors: "This is what you wanted, isn't it? You went looking for a monster. Well, here I am" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 198). She is alone in her tank, separated from all others – until she is not alone, because she joins herself. No one else can help her in that moment; all care for Nimona's wellbeing is entirely up to her. In her child form, she admits to Ballister, "I'm not supposed to split myself like that. It makes me … unstable. The strong part stays and the rest disintegrates. That's how it works" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 229). To split herself is to risk losing a part of herself; ideally, she would remain whole and allow another to protect her. But who is up to the task of caring for a monster? Even Ballister makes mistakes, accidentally betraying her due to his lack of understanding about what she really is. In beast form, Nimona rages at him: "You're not the first one who thought you could HELP me … or FIX me … or SAVE me … You're not the first one who thought you could CARE about me until you found out how bad it really was" (Stevenson, 2015, p. 238).

Feminist theorists, followed by others, have been investigating this word "care" for decades. Joan Tronto (2017), one of the leading theorists in care ethics, writes in a recent article about how care can refigure the way we think about "human nature" in a neoliberal age. Her paradigm of care, first developed in the early 1990s, requires several steps: first, caring about, in which one becomes aware that a person or people have unmet needs; next, caring for, in which one accepts the responsibility to address those needs; then caregiving, in which the acts of care

are carried out; and, finally, care receiving, for receiving care is also an active process (Tronton, 2017, pp. 31-32). More recently, Tronto (2017) has added a fifth step: caring with, which "occurs when a group of people (from a family to a state) can rely upon an ongoing cycle of care to continue to meet their caring needs," leading to an interdependent community founded on "trust and solidarity" (p. 32).

Tronto (2017) writes that contemporary neoliberalism has defined humans as "the kinds of creatures who fit within … a market-driven world" based on personal choice and individual freedom (p. 29). Obviously, the necessity of care can never be denied, since all people require care as infants at the very least, and we all maintain a level of care to meet our needs for survival and safety. However, in a neoliberal paradigm, there are specific ways of giving and receiving care: "care for yourself by acting rationally and responsibly; if there are care needs that you cannot meet for yourself, then use market solutions; and, finally, if you cannot afford market solutions, or prefer to care on your own, then enlist family (and perhaps friends and charities) to meet your caring needs" (Tronto, 2017, p. 30). There are endless assumptions embedded in this paradigm about the availability of family, money, and rationality. Tronto (2017) proposes that by interrogating these assumptions, we can imagine humans instead as interdependent and relational – "not only social animals, but also caring animals" (p. 31).

When I see a conversation about defining human nature, I automatically see an opportunity to talk about monsters. Monsters are defined by and against definitions of human nature; they are the *non*human, the *un*natural. Yet while human nature is meant to be a closed system, with boundaries all around it providing it with form, monsters have no outer limits. We know what they are not, but it is much harder to know what they are. They shift. It is their very open-endedness that is so threatening, because if they manage to breach the boundaries of human

nature, they might reveal that safe closed system as an illusion. And it *is* an illusion, because if it were not, how could we even have debates in which we argue about what human nature is? We draw our theoretical boundaries around different qualities and practices, but whenever we stray from another's outline, we find ourselves in someone's monster territory. This, I believe, is particularly the case when trying to reconfigure the boundaries drawn by neoliberalism, precisely because of the emphasis on rationality and responsibility that Tronto (2017) identifies. It is so easy to discount – to literally dehumanize – those who reject neoliberalism's terms, because what do we know to be irrational and irresponsible? Monsters. Neoliberalism also assigns worth to productivity, but only certain types of productivity – that which aligns with a narrative of self-sufficiency and choice. Monsters frequently are the scapegoat for when that narrative inevitably fails: *I would have succeeded, if not for that evil, destructive, attacking thing in my way.* That does not mean, however, that monsters are *un*productive; they are *incorrectly* productive. They produce complexification, de-categorization, everything society does not want to foster. It therefore makes sense to deny the monster – or the *monstrosized*, the narrated-as-monstrous, the scapegoat – acts of care. Perhaps without care, the monster will not thrive, and therefore will be unable to harm us.

Care is an extremely broad term, and therefore is deployed in many disciplines. It has concrete policy applications for the delivery of care to children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and people with other health needs, as well as the paid and unpaid work of caregiving. I have found less emphasis on care ethics as a theoretical framework in media studies broadly or monster studies specifically, but I believe it is a useful lens through which narratives of monstrosity can be analyzed for what they say about humanity. *Nimona* is not the only young adult text that portrays monstrous doubling as a means of delivering care from the monster to the

monster when no one else will. Patrick Ness's (2017) *Release* and Eden Robinson's (2017, 2018) *Trickster* series also feature adolescent characters who use their own hybridity to enact emotional validation and, when necessary, violent physical protection towards themselves in the absence of care from a hostile mainstream society. The instances of monstrous self-care in these texts exist well outside of the neoliberal model of discreet, invisible, *responsible* care for the purposes of maintaining productivity. They are disturbing, dangerous (to both the monster and others), and fundamentally destabilizing. They are also necessary. They do not prioritize productivity, but simple safety and survival; the radical statement the doubled, caregiving and care receiving makes is *I deserve to exist for my own sake, no matter who disagrees.* The outwardly distressing self-care modeled by literary adolescent monsters acknowledges the necessity of actively counterhegemonic care in the lives of marginalized youth.

Release follows parallel plotlines. The primary plot takes place over a single day in the life of Adam Thorn, a white gay teenager in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Adam's father is an evangelical Christian pastor, and the family is homophobic. Over the course of the novel, Adam experiences a series of personal apocalypses: his brother has impregnated a woman out of wedlock, his best friend is moving away, he loses his job after his boss sexually harasses him, and his father for the first time acknowledges but rejects his sexuality. Meanwhile, a secondary plot follows the unfolding of a potential literal apocalypse that will take place if a lake spirit Queen and the ghost of an inadvertently murdered meth addicted girl are unable to disentangle. The girl, Katie, was dumped in a lake while she was still alive by her boyfriend, who strangled her nearly to death when he thought she stole his stash (Ness, 2017, pp. 84-85). Her ghost, in its furious refusal of her fate, catches the Queen's eye, and the two merge to

become a confused, enraged, and powerful entity. The only problem is that the Queen cannot wander the earth past sunset, or the “binds of the world” will come undone (Ness, 2017, p. 265).

There are many ways in which people can be ejected from the boundaries of human nature and deemed unworthy of care. This is important to keep in mind when using care ethics as a framework, especially given contemporary discussions within feminist criticism about historical shortcomings of theories of care. In “Rethinking Care Ethics: On the Promise and Potential of an Intersectional Analysis,” Olena Hankivsky (2014) talks about the necessity of an intersectional intervention into care ethics, so that one social category – in this case, gender – is not given a singular primacy in all the other factors of giving and receiving care. Intersectionality teaches that “gender, race, sexual orientation, geographic location, immigrant status, ability, and class, among other factors, converge to produce a social location that is different than just the sum of its parts” (Hankivsky, 2014, p. 255). Hankivsky (2014) later names religious affiliation and age (especially important when discussing adolescents) as two more factors that intersect with all the rest to determine particular social locations (p. 258). It is because of these intersections that adolescents may find themselves monstrosized along multiple axes and denied the care that they need. This is certainly the case for many monstrous characters in adolescent fiction.

The intersections of Katie’s and Adam’s cultural categorization position them differently. They are both from the same rural town and both of their families struggle with money, though Katie’s more so. Katie is a girl who has experienced intimate partner violence with more than one boyfriend (Ness, 2017, p. 118). The reader does not learn too much about her home life, other than that she was “unhappy” (Ness, 2017, p. 136). She also was addicted to a highly demonized drug, for which she never received adequate care on either a community or

institutional level. Adam, meanwhile, is less legibly uncared for in the eyes of the broader community, but the coupling of these two stories reveals that both adolescents lack safety in different ways. His family's religion and his sexuality intersect to produce a very unstable and insecure social positioning within his own household. Adam learns during his apocalyptic – both in the sense of cataclysmic and revelatory – day that he has internalized his monstrosization, devaluing his own feelings of love due to his family's warped perception of what love is (Ness, 2017, p. 168). His brother declares that queer love is not real in the way that heterosexual love is, and his father says that he must work hard to love Adam at all (Ness, 2017, p. 52, p. 212).

Adam, despite the dehumanization he faces, remains stubbornly human. Katie, however, fuses with the Queen to the point that neither can tell where her self ends and the other begins. For all intents and purposes, neither of them have a beginning or end anymore: they are each other, and they are loyal only to themself. The hybrid character, most often referred to as the Queen, goes on a quest to discover what happened to her in her last hours. Along the way, she engages in some shocking acts of violence, culminating in beheading her murderer, Tony (Ness, 2017, p. 247). However, she then undoes this action, commenting to Tony, "You are so small" (Ness, 2017, p. 254). The Queen's servant, a faun, realizes that he "does not know who is speaking now. He doubts she does either" (Ness, 2017, p. 254). I believe that both are speaking, for themselves and each other, recognizing that the overflowing monster-self is bigger and worthier than anyone ever acknowledged. The double monster-self can love the unloved parts of the monster in a way that no one else has, finally putting her needs first, but it is still not enough. Revenge doesn't soothe or save Katie. It was reactive care – a lashing out of, if not self-preservation, at least self-prioritization, much like Nimona's double "no." But it doesn't reflect

an *ethics* of care yet. It is hard to meet one's own needs when no one has ever modeled such a thing. Monsters try to care for themselves but do not always succeed.

But then there is Adam. At the novel's end, he encounters the Queen just as the world is about to end. She doesn't *want* to destroy the world, but the double-self cannot figure out how to disentangle. Destructive care is hard to leave behind when it is the only care one has known. Katie asks Adam how to let go, and he empathizes with her, saying, "Today was a day I had to let go of a lot of stuff" (Ness, 2017, p. 275). He presents her with a rose, and "the spirit steps away from the Queen to take it" (Ness, 2017, p. 276). Adam cannot give Katie vengeance the way the Queen could, but he can give her understanding from one monstrosized teen to another. Both of them have had their needs for care denied by their families and communities, but instead of being destroyed by their apocalypses, they are released through Adam's caregiving and Katie's care receiving.

The third text I wish to discuss, Eden Robinson's planned *Trickster* trilogy, which consists so far of *Son of a Trickster* (2017) and *Trickster Drift* (2018), is focalized mostly through Jared Martin, a Haisla and Heiltsuk teenager in British Columbia whose mother is a witch and father is the trickster Wee'git. Jared must navigate poverty, intergenerational addiction (including his own), domestic violence, and the ongoing oppression of Indigenous people in Canada. He takes on a caregiver role to the people around him, including his older relatives, who have been failed by institutional apparatuses. He provides tangible physical and financial care to his mother and the human he grew up thinking was his father, and he feels compelled to extend help to other students at school, to neighbors – to pretty much everyone except himself. However, as an individual, Jared is not able to ameliorate all the history that his community carries.

In addition to understanding Jared's positioning through an intersectional lens, it is fruitful to consider Jorma Heier's (2018) intervention into care ethics in her lecture entitled "The relevance of critical insights of postcolonial theory to a political take on care ethics." As care ethics positions humanity as a relational species, the nature of relationships must be taken into careful consideration. Heier (2018) notes that a postcolonial lens brings the power dynamics and potential coercion of relationships into light, bringing "critical insights into the tensions inherent in postcolonial relationships, and … all structurally unequal relationships" (p. 4). Colonial relationships may be deliberately constructed with the language of care (the "white man's burden" comes to mind) to obfuscate the fact that the beneficiaries of this relationship are all on one side. Perhaps most importantly, Heier (2018) points out that within the framework of care ethics, often "opting out of relationships is not an acceptable or desirable option" (p. 6). It is critical to remember that some relationships, very much including relationships in which care is exchanged, can be destructive and coercive, in which case rejecting that relationship would in fact be an act of self-care. This can be seen in Nimona's double refusal, in Adam's rejection of his family's definition of love, Katie's denial of her murderer's significance, and, as we will see, in Jared's experiences with abusive people in his life and, more broadly, the colonial context that continues to harm relationships by denying care over many generations. The monstrosized, almost by definition, are rejected creatures; to care for themselves, they must in turn have the power to reject.

In "What's the Trouble with the Trickster?", Indigenous scholar Kristina Fagan (2010) writes about some of the historical pitfalls of engaging with the Trickster figure in Indigenous art and criticism. Fagan (2010) explains that the Trickster figure can be flattened when it is simply treated as "a metaphor for a particular theoretical stance" (p. 7). However, she does not advocate

for abandoning the Trickster; instead, she urges artists and critics to take a "culturally specific approach" to the many iterations of this figure (Fagan, 2010, p. 10). As I do not have much knowledge of Haisla or Heiltsuk history beyond what I have read in Robinson's (2017, 2018) books, I would be far overstepping to speak to how she characterizes Wee'git as a specific Trickster, but in the way that she weaves together Jared's multiple marginalities as an Indigenous teen with his supernatural hybridity as well as his expressions of care, she creates an adolescent character who could only exist within his particular relational web, both positive and negative, of familial, cultural, and historical contexts.

Jared resists his nonhuman nature because he fears that being what he perceives as monstrous will hopelessly complicate his already complicated life. Notably, however, two key scenes of Jared's use of Trickster magic come at moments when he needs protection that no one else can provide. In the first book, there is a flashback to a moment when his mother's then-boyfriend is physically abusing Jared, and his mother, upon discovering the scene, takes revenge with a nail gun and prompts Jared to do the same (Robinson, 2017, p. 111). Jared's mother cares about him, but due to the weight of her own history and social positioning, she is unable to discern how best to meet his actual needs. So instead, Jared's spirit leaves his body to escape the trauma, and he finds his neighbor, an Indigenous woman who is able to put him back in his body when the violence has subsided (Robinson, 2017, pp. 112-113). This is Jared's "first act of magic," meaning that what he perceives as his own latent monstrosity is actually a means of survival and self-care (Robinson, 2017, p. 257). No one in his immediate surroundings could provide for his needs, so he splits, and his spirit cares for itself by leaving and for his body by finding someone who actually *can* help. As with Katie/the Queen, the monster's care cannot

entirely be handled alone, but doubling can be a stopgap or a first step until a relationship can be forged with someone else who understands.

In the climax of the second book, the abusive ex returns and nearly lights Jared on fire, but right as Jared thinks, “I want to live,” he transforms into a raven and flies away (Robinson, 2018, pp. 337-338). His hybridity saves him, and despite himself, he does not hate his monstrous side: “Once you tasted flying, how did you stop? How did you walk around on your legs?” (Robinson, 2018, p. 350). It remains to be seen in the trilogy’s conclusion how Jared’s relationships with himself and his community evolve. What relationships of care will he forge among other monstrosized figures, and what relationships will he be forced to reject to care for himself? In his contexts, safety and survival can be hard to maintain, but parts of himself will actively fight to protect the rest of him.

Theories of care center around the notion that no person should be left to their own devices. Tronto (2017) soundly rejects the ethos of personal responsibility and independence that pervades the contemporary neoliberal construction of human nature. This paradigm is unattainable, as people rely on interdependent communities to meet their needs of safety and survival. Monster narratives remind us that the illusion of independent humanity is deliberately exclusionary. Multiply marginalized, wrongly productive monsters are cast out beyond the boundaries of the human, denied even the paltry amount of care allowed in the neoliberal paradigm, and forced to fend for themselves. We should not be surprised when this is exactly what they do. A framework of care ethics allows us to see the doubling so common in monster stories as a desperate effort of self-care, an unstable and potentially destructive thing, but necessary nevertheless. The prevalence of this trope in adolescent fiction specifically shows how children and youth, whom our culture stereotypes as care-receivers more than caregivers, must

take on the responsibilities of care when their societies reject the specific intersections of their identities as uncategorizable, threatening, or irredeemable.

Nimona reunites with herself by the graphic novel's end, alerting Ballister to her safety but not rejoining him. He expresses his hope that she knows that he is still a friend (Stevenson, 2015, p. 256). Adam ends his story alongside his best friend and his boyfriend, his future uncertain but his chosen relationships strong (Ness, 2017, p. 273). The gesture of care he extends to Katie cannot restore her to live, but it frees her from destruction (Ness, 2017, p. 276). Jared's fate remains to be seen, but he is enmeshed in both a human and a supernatural Indigenous family, some of whom can be trusted, others of whom cannot; the care they extend towards one another will have to be renegotiated many times before it becomes sustainable. Monstrous care from self to self cannot be seen as sufficient; instead, it is the beginning of the story. It is the first acknowledgement, extended from within, that marginalized, scapegoated, and unstable selves are still worth caring for and caring with.

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