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Myth and Monstrosity: Teaching Indigenous Films

Abstract

The past few times that I have taught my course on religion and film I have included a number of Indigenous movies. The response from students has been entirely positive, in part because most of them have rarely encountered Indigenous cultural products of any kind, especially contemporary ones. Students also respond well to the way in which many of these films use notions of the monstrous to explore, and explode, colonial myths. *Goldstone*, for example, by Kamilaroi filmmaker Ivan Sen, draws on noir tropes to peel back the smiling masks of the people responsible for the mining town's success, revealing their underlying monstrosity. Similarly, Mi'gmaq Jeff Barnaby's debut feature *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* makes cinematic allusions to 1970s horror films in its depiction of the residential school system. In this paper, I will draw on these examples to discuss how examination of the monstrous in Indigenous films can help us to introduce students to the ideological power of myth, specifically in relation to colonialism.

Keywords

Monster, Indigenous, Horror, Noir, Pedagogy, Myth, Parable, Colonialism

Author Notes

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“What happens, then, to people of oral cultures if invaders wrest control of the education of their children? And, what happens if the invaders remain and take control of the land and of every aspect of the people’s lives, systematically de-educating the children so that they lose their ability to communicate in their native languages and, therefore, lose access to those foundational narratives of their people? What happens if these invading powers supplant the myths of the people with new myths in which the people are either maligned or ignored?”

Jo-Ann Episknew (Métis)¹

“The real monsters are people who are perverse about their function in life. Like a politician who is supposed to serve the people, and serves anyone but the people. A priest who is supposed to preach peace and solace and wisdom, and is an agent of corruption, brutal morality and destructive guilt. These are monsters for me.”

Guillermo del Toro²

Introduction: Teaching, Movies, and Monsters

Just over 20 years ago I began teaching a course on religion and film every so often at the University of Toronto. From the start, when I worked with fellow PhD student Tony Michael on an orienting vision for the course, it has been structured in a theoretically thematic manner: each week students are introduced to a topic that is relevant to the academic study of religion, and that idea is put in conversation with a film screened in class. So, for example, we used René Girard’s theory of mimesis and sacrifice as a lens through which to view John Woo’s *The Killer* (1989), or Katherine Fowkes’ analysis of gender and supernatural comedy films to examine Jerry Zucker’s *Ghost* (1990).³

My doctoral research involved the study of religion in contemporary Native literature in Canada, and so it seemed natural (and necessary) for me to include an

Indigenous film in this course.⁴ Originally Tony and I chose Māori filmmaker Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* (1994), which we considered in relation to notions of colonialism.⁵ I later replaced that selection with Cheyenne-Arapaho director Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998), discussed using theories of tricksters in Native American oral narratives.

I am embarrassed to admit, however, that until recently I only ever showed *one* Indigenous film in the course, and always in relation to an explicitly “Indigenous” topic. This approach is arguably problematic because, as Emma LaRocque (Nêhiyaw-Métis) has affirmed in relation to literature, the all-too-common tendency to relegate materials by Indigenous people *only* to the category of “Indigenous” is essentially a kind of “ghettoization.”⁶ And so I now (finally) list a number of Indigenous movies on the syllabus and as options for essays, and in relation to a wider range of topics and theories—which is to say, topics that are *not* specifically “Indigenous.” The response from students has been entirely positive, in part because most of them have rarely encountered Indigenous cultural products of any kind, especially contemporary ones. Exposure to these films provides students with the critically important experience of seeing Indigenous stories and perspectives presented *by* Indigenous filmmakers.

One example of a broader/non-Indigenous theory that I now use in relation to Indigenous films is John Dominic Crossan's understanding of myth and parable. I have consistently turned to his ideas to discuss modern noir films; originally I

looked at Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995)⁷ and then later Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000). In the fall of 2017, however, I linked Crossan's ideas to *Goldstone* (2016) by Ivan Sen (Kamilaroi), specifically because it represents a genre that Sen seems to have invented: "outback noir."⁸

Also in the fall of 2017, I happened to watch for the first time Mi'gmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby's debut feature, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013), which was shown at my school with Barnaby himself in attendance. This screening proved to be one of those fortuitous moments we are sometimes graced with as teachers. The film is not at all like *Goldstone* in terms of genre, as in many respects it is an homage to 1970s American horror.⁹ It is very much like *Goldstone*, however, in the ways that it connects to myth and parable in Crossan's sense of these terms. In other words it provided a great example of an Indigenous film that was doing similar things to the one I was already using in my course, but in very different ways. As a result I included *Rhymes* in a list of options students in my religion and film course could choose for a couple of writing assignments.

The other similarity between these two films, I came to realize, is that they are both about monsters. In particular, they play with notions of monstrosity to explore a range of topics including freedom, community, and exploitation, particularly as these all relate to colonialism. This realization added an entirely new dimension to my understanding of Indigenous films. Although it is not uncommon for scholars to demonstrate how these films push back against colonial myths, I

have not yet encountered in their analyses any discussion of monsters.¹⁰ In this paper, then, I discuss how examination of the monstrous in two Indigenous productions—*Goldstone* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*—can help us understand the ideological, colonial power of “myth” in these films, and with any luck at all pass this understanding on to our students.¹¹

Theories: Myth and Monstrosity

The text of Crossan’s that I use for my course is Chapter 2 of *The Dark Interval*. In this chapter Crossan identifies a spectrum of narrative: myth, apologue, action, satire, parable. He is most interested in the two ends of this spectrum. His notion of myth derives from Claude Lévi-Strauss, and is based on the notion that this kind of story is all about repetition and patterns.¹² In creating patterns a myth also creates meaning or, in Crossan’s phrasing, “myth establishes world.”¹³ One of his examples of how narrative patterns function “mythically” to produce meaning is the presentation of Indigenous people in American movies. This pattern reflects a “*structure of contempt* which was built into the portrayal of Native Americans on film.”¹⁴

Parable represents the opposite of myth: it subverts the world that’s been established by the patterns of myth; it “shows us the seams and edges of myth.”¹⁵ Parable is not an opposing myth, however; it offers us questions, not alternate answers. Parable is the “dark night of story,” undermining our faith in truths we

have taken for granted, and in so doing opening us up to new possibilities.¹⁶ Referencing Frank Kermode, Crossan asserts that myths are meant to reassure us, while parables change us.¹⁷ Speaking more metaphorically, he summarizes: “You have built a lovely home, myth assures us; but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault.”¹⁸

As it happens, monsters (variously defined)¹⁹ are closely connected to both myths and parables. One connection is apparent from the epigraph to this paper from Guillermo del Toro. He asserts that “real monsters” are people entrusted to positions of authority who pretend to be good, wise, and helpful, but who are in fact selfish, corrupt, and destructive. Like lovely homes built over earthquake faults, the safe and even ordinary appearance of these monsters masks their underlying deadliness. In del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*, for example, the true villain—“the monster that tried to destroy it all,” as he is described in the opening voiceover—is Colonel Richard Strickland, the privileged white heterosexual man of authority whose life is a model of conformity and success. Strickland is outwardly admirable, but inwardly vile.

Del Toro’s discussion of “real” monsters also of course suggests that there are “false” monsters. As we see from his films these are the outcasts, those who are vilified and often brutalized because they do not conform to social expectations of appearance, ability, or behavior. An obvious example of a false monster is the amphibious creature in *The Shape of Water*, who is only superficially “monstrous”;

in reality he is brave, thoughtful, and loving. Speaking of such monsters, del Toro states, “the moment they step in, what you see is what they are. Giant gorilla. Giant lizard. That’s what they are.” And yet: “Those are the monsters for whom I have empathy. Unlike a politician, these characters suggest the possibility that there are more things in heaven and earth than your imagination can conjure.”²⁰ Which is to say, such monsters ideally lead us to question our understandings—our myths—of what the world is “really” all about.

Timothy Beal makes a similar point about monsters-as-parables in reference to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and James Whale’s *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935):

The voice of the monster is the audacious voice of theodicy. It is addressed not only to the creator Frankenstein but also to the creator God. Why did you make me? Why did you put me here? What were you thinking? What kind of a world is this? What kind of divine justice is this? What kind of God are you? The monster in Shelley’s novel, as in Whale’s movie, stands for these questions and terrifying religious uncertainties. His questions pry at the cracks in the world’s foundations that open onto abysses of unknowing.²¹

When we follow society’s lead in understanding what a “monster” is, then, we are arguably falling for a particularly awful and pernicious myth. It is a myth that affirms the status quo, and that therefore leads us to do further harm to the already marginalized.²² Del Toro’s films are parables in this sense, showing us how this myth is a fiction that supports those in power in part by obscuring their inner

monstrosity, while at the same time—to put this in the most clichéd terms possible—revealing the inner beauty of the outwardly monstrous.

Goldstone: Land Monsters

The outwardly monstrous character we encounter in *Goldstone* is Jay Swan, who we come to learn is actually the protagonist. Jay begins his journey by driving into the fictional Australian mining town of the film's title, and he is very drunk. Jay is followed for a short distance by the town's only cop (Josh) as his vehicle weaves and wobbles; when he is pulled over we see that he is dirty, unkempt, and barely able to stand. Instead of speaking he only makes guttural sounds. And as is typically the case with cinematic monsters, once Jay is caught he is immediately caged.



When Jay is sober and Josh has verified his identity as a federal officer, he is released to pursue his assignment. Jay has been sent to investigate the

disappearance of a young Chinese woman named Mei. He soon discovers a town rife with corruption, in which, for example, the mayor (Maureen) and mining boss (Johnny) conspire in sex trafficking to provide women for the men who work for Johnny's company, Furnace Creek. They have also bribed the head of the local Aboriginal land council (Tommy) to convince his community to sign over property that will allow the mine to expand and make the ruling, rich settlers even richer.

As Jay—and slowly, eventually, Josh—begin to shine a light on what's really going on in the town, Maureen (this noir's version of a femme fatale) tries unsuccessfully to have them both killed. She *is* successful in getting Tommy to murder his own Elder, Jimmy, whose objection to selling out to Furnace Creek would have torpedoed the deal. Maureen thus is clearly the true monster of the film. She is outwardly friendly and successful, and even has a habit of baking pies for people. But she is absolutely cold-blooded.



The central myth of *Goldstone* is that land is only valuable when it can be exploited for profit. In asserting the critical importance of the mine, for example, Johnny declares: “Without Furnace Creek, we’d be a bloody piss stop on the highway to nowhere. Just like when the Blackfellas were in charge.” He similarly claims, “We keep this country in business. You see it’s all about *standards of living*. We can’t stop the wheel turning for anyone” (emphasis added). Johnny equates “progress” with money, individual success, and the exploitation of resources. The local Elder, Jimmy, is very familiar with this myth: “My grandfather saw the first white man here. . . . They all look for the gold stone. And they follow the same god. Money god.” From the colonial perspective, Indigenous people who hold on to traditional values and practices that emphasize community and balance are distinctly not “civilized,” and—as with Jimmy’s attempt to block the mine’s illegal land acquisition—may directly hinder civilization. As Maureen says to Tommy: “The past is the past. It’s time for your people to move on.”²³

Monsters like Johnny and Maureen puff themselves up with a sense of their own power and importance, gained from pulling the “gold stone” from the ground, from worshipping the “money god.” But the film repeatedly counters their perspective with striking overhead shots, which reveal people as actually quite small when you stand back and take a look at the whole picture. During his appearance to present *Goldstone* at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, Ivan Sen said that he intended these overhead shots to offer an “Aboriginal view.”

From this perspective people are *not* the center of the universe but rather are a very small part of a much, much larger whole.



One of the critical ways in which *Goldstone* pushes back against the colonial myth about land, the view that it has no value except as a means of generating wealth, is through Jay's personal journey. He begins the film as a broken man in many ways, struggling with a crisis brought on by the violent resolution to a previous case. He is estranged from his ex-wife, mourns for his recently deceased daughter, and appears almost entirely directionless; this is why he is drunk when we first see him. However Jay is still committed to justice, particularly for those on the margins, the people exploited by the monsters whose only thought is for their own "standards of living." As much as he finds purpose in this mission, the most transformative experiences he has in the film appear to come from his interactions with Jimmy. The Elder shocks Jay by saying that he knew his father as a child, that in fact Jay's father was from the very place where *Goldstone* now sits. It seems that

his father was one of the more than 100,000 Aboriginal children in Australia who were taken from their families, children referred to as the “Stolen Generations.”²⁴ Jay, in other words, has come home. Jimmy further deepens Jay’s connection to this land by taking him out in a dugout canoe. Water and land fill the screen while Jimmy’s song fills the speakers. The two men look at traditional Aboriginal rock paintings, which typically show creation events connected to that specific place and to the ancestors who lived there. At the end of the film, after Jimmy is dead and the case is over, Jay takes this trip again. This final journey seems to emphasize the truth of what Jimmy’s daughter Maria tells him earlier: “This land, you belong to it.”



Rhymes for Young Ghouls: School Monsters

The law in the Kingdom decreed that every child between the age of 5 and 16 who is physically able must attend Indian Residential School.

Her Majesty's attendants, to be called truant officers, will take into custody a child whom they believe to be absent from school using as much force as the circumstance requires.

A person caring for an Indian child who fails to cause such a child to attend school shall immediately be imprisoned, and such person arrested without warrant and said child conveyed to school by the truant officer.

– Indian Act, by will of her Majesty
the Queen in Right of Canada.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls begins with three title cards showing the text above. Although the cards do not offer exact quotes from the Indian Act, the main points are historically accurate: any legally-defined “Indian” child in Canada was required by law to attend residential school, and anyone who interfered with this process could be arrested and imprisoned.²⁵ This system had its origins in Jesuit endeavors in seventeenth-century New France, which were expanded into systemic church-run (but federally mandated) cross-country institutions in the mid-1800s. The last school closed in 1996. Over 150,000 Indigenous children were sent to 134 schools, where they were forced to speak English or French and practice Christianity, and beaten for speaking their own Indigenous language. In addition to officially sanctioned physical and spiritual torment these schools inflicted many other types of violence upon their students, including malnutrition, unsafe/disease-ridden living conditions, and sexual abuse. Existing records indicate that at least 6000 children died at residential schools.²⁶

By opening his film with a reference to this history, director Jeff Barnaby immediately raises the question of monstrosity. The Europeans who colonized North America adhered to the myth that Indigenous people were monsters, uncivilized/pagan beasts who needed to be transformed and assimilated. The explicit aim of the Canadian residential schools was thus to “civilize” the students. As Egerton Ryerson, one of the chief architects of this educational system, stated in 1847: “The North American Indian cannot be civilized or preserved in a state of civilization . . . except in connection with, if not by the influence of, not only religious instruction and sentiment but of religious feelings.”²⁷ As evidenced by their horrific treatment of children, however, the people who ran these schools were the real monsters. Barnaby underlines this point in the first scene of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*: in 1966 on the fictional Red Crow reserve, a Mi’gmaq man terrifies his nephew by telling him horror stories about the local residential school, St. Dymphna’s, where “they cook Indian kids up there for that zombie priest.”

The storytelling scene is followed by a tragic, gut-wrenching episode that leaves the mother and younger brother of the film’s protagonist, Aila, dead, and her father in jail. The film then jumps ahead ten years, and we next see Aila (now 15 years old) in 1976, wearing a gas mask. She looks, in other words, like a monster. Aila is apparently wearing the mask to protect her from the fumes as she spray paints an image on her friend’s van, drawn from her mother’s old sketchbook. We later see her wearing this same mask as she mixes a variety of drug cocktails for

the people at a party that her uncle Burner hosts. Being part of the local drug trade is how Aila stays out of school: the local Indian Agent, Popper, extorts money from her in exchange for letting her be. Aila's appearance as a monster is thus tied closely to parts of her life—art, her mother, and (limited) freedom—that are deeply meaningful to her.



When Aila finishes her van painting, Popper arrives with his men and ruins her work, taunts her about her mother's suicide, and demands early payment. Thus Aila reflects, in an echo of Jimmy's comment about the money god: "Indian agents don't speak Indian. They speak money. They speak it with their boots, they speak it with their fists, they speak it with their blood and bats." In this way the film clearly and simply establishes the visual dichotomy of false (outer) monster—Aila in a gas mask—and true (inner) monster—Popper the extortionist/gang leader.²⁸ This dichotomy is repeated almost immediately in a scene that opens with a shot of a skull, again suggesting external monstrosity. The camera pulls back to show that

the skull is decorating Aila's bike. As she rides towards the edge of the woods, one of Popper's men comes out of nowhere; he hits Aila in the face and knocks her off the bike, then kicks her unconscious.



Much of the film details the battle between Popper and Aila, which escalates after her father is released from jail. Like Jay in *Goldstone*, Aila the false monster is eventually caged. She breaks the rules one too many times and Popper imprisons her in the school. She's deloused, her hair is shorn, and she is thrown into a small cell, what Popper calls "the darkest, deepest hole we've got." Unlike Jay, however, Aila *planned* to be captured. It was part of the scheme she masterminded with her friends to rob and humiliate Popper, an operation they pull off with great success. During the heist everyone wears Hallowe'en masks, once again evoking the image of the false/outer monster. When the night is over, however, the film visually recalibrates so that the inner and outer realities cohere: the kids remove their masks

and shed their false monstrosity, while Popper ends up screaming in fury as Aila's plan covers him in excrement, transforming him into a literal shit monster.



Of course Popper is not done with Aila yet; the monster is not so easily defeated. He murders her surrogate grandmother, Ceres, and then brutally beats Aila before attempting to rape her. She is saved by one of her friends, the small boy Jujijj, who grabs Popper's gun and kills him. Aila's father takes responsibility for the agent's death to protect his daughter and her friend, to give the next generation a chance. Aila is taken in by Gisigu, a friend of her grandfather, who removes her from the drug trade and opens the door to a new life. The film ends with Jujijj asking, "What do we do now, boss?" Aila doesn't answer but seems to smile very (very) slightly, and then closes her eyes.



Conclusion: The Monster Always Escapes

The second of Jeffrey Cohen's seven monster theses is, "The Monster Always Escapes."²⁹ We see this happen in both films, as false monsters Jay and Aila literally leave their physical prisons. They also escape in other ways, as Jay is slowly freed (at least to some extent) from the paralyzing despair that grips him early in the film, and also freed from his sense that he does not belong anywhere. Aila, for her part, was similarly imprisoned long before Popper caught her. Thus she reflects early in the film: "For seven years I've dreamt of nothing but getting out of this place. But my world ends at the borders of the reserve. Where dirt roads open up to dreams of things you can never be here." In the end Aila is not only free from Popper and her role in the local drug culture, she is finally free to dream of what she can be now. Perhaps she is starting to dream of these possibilities as she closes her eyes in the final scene.

There are other meaningful escapes going on. Both films, for example, break free from certain genre conventions in important ways. One key trope of film noir that *Goldstone* subverts to some extent is that society itself is monstrous, a trap that defines our lives and from which there is no escape.³⁰ Thus, as Mark T. Conrad states, “at the heart of the noir mood or tone of alienation, pessimism, and cynicism we find, on the one hand, the rejection or loss of clearly defined ethical values . . . and, on the other, the rejection or loss of the meaning or sense of human existence.”³¹ Jay certainly seems to initially embrace this perspective, anesthetizing himself with alcohol and heading towards self-destruction. But he recovers in part through his connection with a different *kind* of society, namely with local Aboriginal traditions. These traditions, unlike colonial structures, focus on relationships and community, not individual (and ultimately empty) gain through exploitation. Talking about Jay’s previous case, local officer Josh embodies a more standard noir point of view, while Jay offers a slight but important amendment:

Josh: You think you, or me, or anyone, can make a difference to any fucking thing? Think you really cleaned up that town of yours? You might have stirred up a bit of dirt. But it’s just a matter of time before the dust settles.

Jay: But at least it’s a little bit thinner.

Goldstone, in other words, does not simply resign itself to declarations of meaninglessness or moral ambiguity, but is tentatively affirming and hopeful: it is possible for things to be better than they are, even if only slightly.

For its part, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* offers a critical departure from standard horror. Horror films tend to regard civilization more positively than noir, and so a key feature of this genre is that terror arises when civilization starts to crumble: “if established social and historical frameworks preserve purpose and order in human endeavour, they also come to define the terms and conditions of life itself, and the implied promise of the finite and eternal. The collapse of these frameworks is thus at the heart of the horror text.”³² In *Rhymes*, however, it is in fact civilization *itself* that is the problem. As Christopher Gittings points out:

[Director Jeff] Barnaby’s reparative practice appropriates and reconfigures the tools of the Hollywood genre system, re-presenting the residential school as a haunted site of abject horror and its administrators as monsters through the tropes of the horror genre that are combined with the revenge narrative to represent Aila’s story.³³

Both *Goldstone* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, then, present colonial societies as the source of real monsters like Maureen and Popper, and as the traps that false monsters like Jay and Aila are driven to escape. In contrast to colonial societies, certain Indigenous perspectives and people are shown as offering an alternative way to be in the world, a reconnection to more sustainable and less harmful values and ways of living.

These two films deal with two specific, key ways in which Indigenous people have been trapped under colonialism: land theft and forced “education.” Both of these processes have literally imprisoned people, on reserves and in schools.

Both have been supported by myths of Indigenous people as primitive, uncivilized, and monstrous, myths that helped colonizers justify taking away people's homes and children.³⁴ The protagonists of the films, Jay and Aila, are the parables to these myths. They are seen as threats by the real monsters in charge precisely because they challenge narratives about the worthlessness of Indigenous people, and about the corresponding value of colonial culture. They also, more materially, challenge the power structures that are supported by these myths. In effect, the films by Sen and Barnaby suggest that the colonial construction of the Indigenous as monster reveals colonial anxieties about the fragility and inhumanity of their own systems, and desire for more meaningful and sustainable ways of living. By presenting those societies as themselves monstrous, the films in turn attempt to reveal their inherent, horrific problems.³⁵

Analyses of Indigenous films tend to agree that challenging colonial myths is a key feature of these productions.³⁶ Tewa/Diné scholar and filmmaker Beverly R. Singer, for example, states:

Indians have been misrepresented in art, history, science, literature, popular films, and by the press in the news, on radio, and on television. The earliest stereotypes associating Indians with being savage, naked, and heathen were established with the founding of America and determined by two factors: religious intolerance for cultural and spiritual differences leading to the destruction of Native cultures, and rejection of Indian cultures as relevant subject matter by traditional historians in the writing of U.S. history.³⁷

“Challenged by this inimical history,” Singer continues, Indigenous filmmakers “have worked to share the totality of the American story in our images.”³⁸ This “totality” in part means showing Indigenous people *as* people, as complex and fully human. Some Indigenous characters, for example, harm people close to them for selfish reasons: in *Goldstone*, Tommy sells out his entire community and murders the local Elder; in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, Aila’s uncle Burner betrays her and her father to Popper. Meanwhile, the protagonists do their best to fight back against these betrayals and against colonial corruption, to help those who need it. These films thus offer much broader and more nuanced pictures of Indigenous people than the ones normally seen in colonial representations.

The other part of the “totality” Singer speaks of concerns colonial societies, which is to say that Indigenous films, as discussed above, counter the positive myths that settlers continue to tell about themselves. In particular, they show us the monstrous realities of these societies. It is this relation of myth and monstrosity that I have seen students respond to most often, and most insightfully. One such student, Urooj Saleem,³⁹ pointed out for example that monsters “escape” in both *Goldstone* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* in the sense that the “real monsters” eventually reveal themselves; they escape from their non-monstrous masks. Johnny the mining boss and Maureen the mayor are all civilized smiles at the start, offering beers and pies, but soon enough their inner monsters come out. Popper’s monstrousness is

evident at the start, but even still it escalates significantly from ruining Aila's painting to attempting rape and committing murder.⁴⁰

Another student, Josh Edwards, focused on a comment I mentioned hearing from Jeff Barnaby that one of his favorite films is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Josh pointed out that this earlier film popularized the notion of the "faceless killer," which appears in various guises in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*:

Barnaby uses this "faceless killer" throughout his film, particularly in the scene where Aila and her friends raid the Residential School to help her father. They are each wearing masks, and they all then take on the role of this "faceless killer," or in the case of this film, it is more like the "faceless retribution."

Josh went on to suggest that "the 'faceless killer' could also be seen as colonialism and the white-washing of Indigenous identities through the Residential Schools. This killer of the Native identity has no face but is the cause of nearly an entire culture bordering on extinction." And even though "*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* does give it a face, in the form of Popper's character," that character is being used "to exemplify colonialism, and the extinctive faceless dangers it possesses."

The point, in other words, is that it is of course not simply that particular *characters* are monsters, but that they represent histories and systems of oppression and abuse that have been long hidden from many people. Precisely because such inhumanity has been kept out of sight, many students in my class found that seeing and discussing an Indigenous story about colonial violence was incredibly powerful

and destabilizing. As one of these students, Marium Jamil, stated in relation to

Rhymes for Young Ghouls:

The film addressed the legacy of Canada’s violent colonist past and the aftermath of residential schools. I found this important because despite growing up and attending school in Canada, I felt the full truth about residential schools was never really told to us, rather it was always presented in a very concealed manner in our textbooks.

The true monster that “escapes,” the monster revealed by the film, is Canada itself. Similarly, the true monster that Ivan Sen shows us is not the fictional location of his movie’s title, but the real colonial society in which it is set: “Goldstone is a country, not a town, and its name is Australia.”⁴¹



¹ Jo-Ann Episkewew, *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 5.

² Guillermo Del Toro, “Perversity is always in the eye of the beholder,” interview by David Jenkins, *Little White Lies: Truth and Movies*, February 14, 2018.

³ For a description of our use of Girard and *The Killer* see Ken Derry and Tony Michael, “On the Pedagogical Benefits of Using John Woo’s *The Killer* as a Model of René Girard’s Theory on Religion and Violence,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 5, 1 (2001); for an account of my use of

Fowkes and *Ghost* see Ken Derry, “Believing is Seeing: Teaching Religion and Violence in Film,” in *Teaching Religion and Violence*, ed. Brian Pennington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 197–99.

⁴ As this is an essay on Indigenous films I should say a few words about what I mean by “Indigenous.” First of all, this is a very difficult concept to define, and many Indigenous people themselves have differing understandings of it. In general, I consider “Indigenous” to refer to people who have some historic, pre-colonial connection to particular places, and who have kinship ties to specific communities that self-identify as Indigenous. There are two elements of this definition I want to draw attention to. The first is that “kinship ties” are not simply (or at all) about DNA, but about being recognized *by* an Indigenous community as having a connection to it. As Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) states, “We construct belonging and citizenship in ways that do not consider these genetic ancestry tests. So it’s not just a matter of what you claim, but it’s a matter of who claims you” (“Sorry, that DNA test doesn’t make you Indigenous,” *CBC*, November 8, 2016). The second element is that Indigenous people belong to *specific* communities. TallBear again: “People who are not actually members of indigenous community, tend to define indigeneity or Native Americanness as a racial category. Now for us, those are umbrella categories which help us talk to one another, relate to one another, but our primary sense of belonging, and identity, is our particular indigenous or tribal community. They don’t use the word tribe up here [in Canada], but in the U.S. we do, so somebody might say ‘I’m a member of the Métis Nation,’ or ‘I’m a member of this particular Cree band,’ I would say I’m Dakota” (“Sorry”). For this reason, whenever I refer in this essay to anyone who’s Indigenous, I will always mention their community.

⁵ See Derry, “Believing is Seeing,” 202–5.

⁶ LaRocque goes on to say:

The lumping of our writing under the category “Native” means that our discussion of issues and ideas that are universally applicable may not reach the general public. For example, an analysis of the Canadian school system by a Native author is rarely placed under “education” or “sociology” or “social issues.” The poetry and poetic prose in much of the 1970s is rarely, if ever, placed under poetry or literature proper. (Emma LaRocque, “Preface, or Here Are Our Voices: Who Will Hear?,” in *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*, ed. Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance [Edmonton: NeWest, 1990], xviii)

Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) makes a similar point regarding the tools that non-Indigenous scholars use to interpret Indigenous work. He expresses concern that such scholars tend to avoid approaches they would use for non-Indigenous work, disregarding theorists such as “Mikhail Bakhtin or Jean-François Lyotard in critical studies of tribal literature” (Gerald Vizenor, Preface to *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989], x). Vizenor has himself done much to counter this tendency, producing studies—such as *Narrative Chance*—that provide important support for the position that critics such as Bakhtin and Lyotard, along with Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Paul Sartre, and so on have something significant to contribute to our study of Indigenous cultural products.

⁷ See Derry, “Believing is Seeing,” 199–202.

⁸ For a brief discussion of *Goldstone*'s "outback noir" elements see John McDonald, "Goldstone takes film noir into outback noir," *Australian Financial Review*, July 6, 2016.

⁹ For a discussion of the horror elements in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* see Kate Eleanor, "'The Art of Forgetfulness': Historical Trauma and Post-Apocalyptic Survival in the film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*" (unpublished essay, 2017); and Christopher E. Gittings, "Indigenous Canadian Cinemas: Negotiating the Precarious," in *The Precarious in the Cinemas of the Americas*, ed. Constanza Burucúa and Carolina Sitnisky (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 234–37.

¹⁰ Works that include discussions of at least some Indigenous films as anti-colonial, but that do not mention monsters, include Corinn Columpar, *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010); Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe, eds., *Reverse Shots: Indigenous Film and Media in an International Context* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015); Beverly R. Singer, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Lee Schweninger, *Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013); Houston Wood, *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World* (New York: Continuum, 2008). The one film essay that I know of that discusses monsters in relation to Indigeneity and religion is Brady DeSanti, "Classroom Cannibal: A Guide on how to Teach Ojibwe Spirituality Using the Windigo and Film," *Journal of Religion & Film* 22, 1 (2018). However DeSanti's discussion of the Windigo focuses on two *non*-Indigenous movies, *Wendigo* (2001) and *Ravenous* (1999).

¹¹ My journey into the world of pedagogy and monsters was started by a series of wonderful conversations with three great people who do not know each other (yet): Jennifer Harris, a friend and colleague at the University of Toronto, who has been teaching about monsters for many years; Kelly J. Murphy, a biblical scholar at Central Michigan University, who I have met at several annual gatherings of the American Academy of Religion and who in 2017 launched a bid to create a new AAR group on "Monsters, Monster Theory, and Religion"; and Urooj Saleem, a student in a fourth-year seminar course I taught in the winter term of 2018, who brought her life-long love of monsters to the class and who first introduced me to Jeffrey Cohen's monster theses. I am extremely grateful to Jennifer, Kelly, and Urooj for everything they've done to show me how rich the world of monsters can be.

The topic of pedagogy and monsters is an emerging one that to my mind shows much promise. For discussions of the pedagogical value of monsters generally see Adam Golub and Heather Richardson Hayton's very helpful recent collection of essays, *Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017). For reflections on the value of using monsters specifically in a university religion course see DeSanti, "Classroom Cannibal"; and Kelly J. Murphy, "The World is (Always) About to End, No Zombies Required," *Religion Dispatches*, March 5, 2015. At the moment, the most comprehensive single text on religion and monsters overall (despite its very "Western" focus) is Timothy K. Beal's *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Academic work on monsters from an Indigenous perspective is also growing. Currently most of this work focuses on the figure of the Windigo, or *wétiko*, a creature who is important to many Algonquian-speaking peoples. As Brady DeSanti (Ojibwe) explains, the Windigo is generally understood "to be a tall, rail-thin monster with a heart of ice and cursed with a taste for human flesh. The windigo's appetite for human flesh is believed to increase infinitely, assuring that it is never satisfied" ("Classroom Cannibal," 8). According to DeSanti, Windigo stories often serve as warnings about the importance of living a balanced life, a life lived in harmony with oneself, one's fellow humans, the natural world, and the spirit world ("Classroom Cannibal," 7).

For other discussions of Windigo by Indigenous scholars see John Borrows (Chippewa), “Heroes, Tricksters, Monsters, and Caretakers: Indigenous Law and Legal Education,” *McGill Law Journal* 61, 4 (2016): 795–846; and Carol Edelman Warrior (Sugpiaq/Dena’ina/A’aniih), “Baring the Windigo’s Teeth: The Fearsome Figure in Native American Narratives” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2015).

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1975), 32–34.

¹³ Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 42.

¹⁴ Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 33 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁵ Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 38.

¹⁶ Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 43.

¹⁷ Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 39; cf. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 39.

¹⁸ Crossan, *Dark Interval*, 40.

¹⁹ A useful (and often used) resource for theoretical discussions of monsters is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). While I make a few references below to Cohen’s opening chapter in this book, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” for the purposes of my class and most of this discussion I generally stick to del Toro’s simple distinction between “real” and “false” monsters. I have found this distinction useful for several reasons: it is a fairly straightforward way to help students consider the category of “monsters” in film; it works well with Crossan’s theory of myth and parable; and it seems to offer an approach for understanding at least some aspects of the discourse of monsters in several Indigenous films.

²⁰ Del Toro, “Perversity.”

²¹ Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 3.

²² Noah Berlatsky makes this point in his discussion of a Congressional election battle in Virginia (“The Pros and Cons of Kink-Shaming,” *Patreon*, July 30, 2018). On July 29, 2018, the democratic candidate Leslie Cockburn tweeted that her Republican opponent Denver Riggleman was unfit for office because he posted examples of “Bigfoot erotica” on Instagram. Berlatsky points out that there are many great reasons to oppose Riggleman, one of the main ones being his close ties to white supremacists. However in choosing to focus on her rival’s interest in a subgenre of monster porn, Cockburn is reaffirming existing prejudices against non-conforming (and non-harmful) sexual interests, which hurts marginalized people who likewise do not conform to the sexual status quo. As Berlatsky argues:

The issue here isn’t the honor of Riggleman, who is horrible and deserves to be mocked for any and every reason. The issue is that normalizing the idea that kink is dangerous or evil hurts people who aren’t Riggleman. Attacking Donald Trump as mentally ill or crazy or insane is a bad idea because it harms people who are mentally ill to associate them with an evil, racist, authoritarian

nightmare of a human being. Similarly, sneering at Donald Trump for being fat normalizes the idea that fat people are evil and should be sneered at.

Attacking kink has fall out especially for queer people and for sex workers. Queer people are often labeled deviant, and their sexuality is heavily policed; if it's okay to attack people for their bedroom practices, then queer people will be attacked. Similarly, if sex is seen as disgusting or if unusual sexual practices make you unfit for political work, it's a short jump from there to saying it's okay to silence sex workers, or to insisting that sex workers shouldn't be visible in the public sphere.

As it happens, the relationship between Elisa and the amphibian creature in *The Shape of Water* suggests that del Toro also wants to elicit our sympathies not just for (external) monsters, but for those who are sexually attracted to them. He makes this point explicit in his interview with David Jenkins:

There's no sexual act in the world that is perverse unless you make it perverse. . . . And it's the same way that I treat monsters or apparitions – 'Look, there's a ghost! Look, there's a faun!' . . . It says more about the person scandalised than the act itself when somebody says, 'That sexuality should not exist.' Why not? It's there. It does exist. Why is it not human? It's a position I simply do not understand. Unless it's a non-consensual, violent act or forced. If it's not that, I think everything is. Sex is like pizza. Bad pizza is still good. And good pizza is great. (Del Toro, "Perversity")

²³ Immediately after Maureen says this Tommy looks at the river where he's been unsuccessfully trying to fish, and three dead fish come to the surface. In many respects, *Goldstone* is not subtle when it wants to make a point.

²⁴ The film does not go into the history of Australia's "Stolen Generations" in any detail. However this horrifying practice offers a disturbing example of del Toro's notion of "real monsters," an example that is all too typical in the annals of colonialism. Between approximately 1905 and 1967 government and church officials took Aboriginal children away from their families in order to raise them in a "civilized" way. Records were typically not kept, so that when these children grew up they had no way of knowing who their parents were or the location of their true homes. For more information see Peter Read, *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969* (Surry Hills, N.S.W: New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs, [1982] 2006).

²⁵ The Indian Act was first passed in 1876 and has been altered many times since. An amendment in 1894 first made attendance at Residential School compulsory for all "Indian" children, and outlined legal punishments for anyone attempting to keep a child from attending (John F. Leslie, "The Indian Act: An Historical Perspective," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 25, 2 [2002]). According to Jennifer Henderson, the wording of the opening text from *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* most resembles the 1927 version of the Indian Act ("Residential School Gothic and Red Power: Genre Friction in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*," unpublished article draft, n.d.). As Henderson points out, one of the flourishes in the film version is the use of the phrase "The law in the Kingdom," which does not appear in the official Act. There is also no reference to "using as much force as the circumstance requires," although in practice force was in fact often employed by government agents in removing children from their homes. But again, the key points of law are accurately represented. Section 10.4 of the 1927 Act, for example, states:

Any parent, guardian or person with whom an Indian child is residing who fails to cause such child, being between the ages aforesaid, to attend school as

required by this section after having received three days' notice so to do by a truant officer shall, on the complaint of the truant officer, be liable on summary conviction before a justice of the peace or Indian agent to a fine of not more than two dollars and costs, or imprisonment for a period not exceeding ten days or both, and such child may be arrested without a warrant and conveyed to school by the truant officer. (*The Indian Act, 1927*, R.S., c. 81, s. 1)

²⁶ For a brief historical overview of residential schools, including their many abuses as well as testimonies by some survivors, see Celia Haig-Brown, "Always Remembering: Indian Residential Schools in Canada," in *Aboriginal History: A Reader*, ed. Kristen Burnett and Geoffrey Read (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 221–233. For a discussion of the residential school system specifically in relation to *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* see Sean Carlton, "On Violence and Vengeance: *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and the Horrific History of Canada's Indian Residential Schools," *Canadian Dimension* (November 13, 2014).

²⁷ Egerton Ryerson, *Report on Industrial Schools*, Appendix A (Education Office of Upper Canada, 1847).

²⁸ As Kate Eleanor states, Popper "is a brute all the way through, operating with unrestricted power and with the combined might of the church and state behind him. A monster of the first degree" ("Art of Forgetfulness").

²⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4–6.

³⁰ Foster Hirsch notes, for instance, "In all the films where characters are pressed by circumstances, there is no way out as the protagonists stare mutely at lives of absolute dead-ends." *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (San Diego and New York: A.S. Barnes, 1981), 180.

³¹ Mark T. Conrad, "Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 17. See also Hirsch, *Dark Side*, 178–82.

³² Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London and New York: Wallflower, [2000] 2004), 10.

³³ Gittings, "Indigenous Canadian Cinemas," 234. Miléna Santoro similarly states: "Barnaby thus uses the exaggerated conventions of horror films to expose the real horror of what many natives combat every day" ("The Rise of First Nations' Fiction Films: Shelley Niro, Jeff Barnaby, and Yves Sioui Durand," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 43, 2 [2013]: 274).

³⁴ In this way, colonial myths function to further harm people who are systemically abused. Referencing the work of René Girard, Jeffrey Cohen discusses this dynamic, pointing to "the real violence these debasing representations enact, connecting monsterizing depiction with the phenomenon of the scapegoat." And as Cohen notes, the most common and effective groups to frame as monsters/scapegoats are people who are already marginalized and oppressed ("Monster Culture," 11).

³⁵ In this way the films cohere with the first of Cohen's monster theses, "The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body":

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural movement—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant. (Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 4)

³⁶ One cautionary point I want to make here is that Indigenous films are not always about colonialism, and that there is in fact some danger in focusing too much on colonialism when discussing these films in general. While this might seem to be a reasonable fixation—and while films like *Goldstone* and *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* are very much about colonialism—the fact is that creative works produced by (previously or currently) colonized societies not always about colonialism. Critically important Indigenous films like *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Atanarjuat* (2001) only obliquely and occasionally gesture towards colonialism, if they do it at all, focusing instead on inter-Indigenous relationships, joys, struggles, etc. As literary theorist Arun Mukherjee notes in her discussion of “post-colonial” theory:

The theory insists that the subjectivity of the post-colonial cultures is inextricably tied to their erstwhile occupiers. It claims that we do nothing but search for or mourn the loss of our authentic pre-colonial identities or continuously resist the encroachments of the colonizers in our cultural space. . . .

I would like to respond that our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs and we have many more than constantly to “parody” the imperialists. I agree with Aijaz Ahmad that our (I am thinking of Indian literatures here) literatures are about our “class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our ideologies, our silences.” (Arun Mukherjee, “Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?” *World Literature Written in English* 30, 2 [1990]: 6)

³⁷ Singer, *Wiping the War Paint*, 1. Houston Wood similarly states:

Some Indigenous people have seen dozens, occasionally even hundreds of films, presenting their culture through the distorting perspectives of outsiders. Many Native filmmakers thus make films that explicitly aim at countering the effect that these earlier misrepresentations have had on their own Indigenous, as well as on non-Indigenous, audiences.” (Wood, *Native Features*, 73)

See also: Ernie Blackmore, “Speakin’ Out Blak: New and Emergent Aboriginal Filmmakers Finding Their Voices,” in *Reverse Shots: Indigenous Film and Media in an International Context*, ed. Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 63–64; Columpar, *Unsettling Sights*, 32; and Schweninger, *Imagic Moments*, 1–4.

³⁸ Singer, *Wiping the War Paint*, 1.

³⁹ Note that Urooj, along with Marium and Josh mentioned below, all gave their permission for me to include their comments in this essay. They all also asked that their names be used, rather than have their contributions presented anonymously.

⁴⁰ Maureen and Johnny also both literally escape, getting out of Goldstone before the police can arrest them. Popper does not get off so easily, however, as Aila’s young friend Jujijj ends up killing him with the monster’s own rifle.

⁴¹ Luke Buckmaster, “A masterpiece of outback noir that packs a political punch,” review of *Goldstone*, *Guardian*, June 9, 2016.

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