



“People, Corrupted”: Monstrous Transformations in “The Whistlers” and “Whitefall”

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Abstract

This essay explores monstrosity in two contemporary horror stories: "The Whistlers" by Amity Argot, and "Whitefall" by C.K. Walker, focusing on how the humans in these texts are monstrously transformed. The monsters and monstrosity present in the texts are read against some of the cultural anxieties of postmodernity, and against various monstrous frameworks such as that of the zombie, the terrorist, and the monstrous space and nature. Both texts present monstrous spaces intent on perverting humans by eroding them physically until they reach a state of bare life that mimics zombification and may allegorize socioeconomic inequality, displacement and the effects of capitalism; as well as by enticing them to commit atrocities against each other and transgress the very moral boundaries that defined them as human, up to and including cannibalism. In this way, these monsters reveal humans as their own annihilators, laying bare an innate human monstrosity that emerges from the traumatic conditions of postmodernity.

Keywords: monster theory, monstrosity, gothic, internet horror, bare life, zombies, heterotopia, cannibalism

Abstract (Swedish)

Den här uppsatsen utforskar monstrositet i två samtida skräckhistorier: "The Whistlers" av Amity Argot och "Whitefall" av C.K. Walker, med fokus på hur människorna i dessa texter förvandlas monstros. De monster och monstrositeten som finns i texterna läses mot några av postmodernitetens kulturella oro, och mot olika monstros ramar som zombiens, terroristens och det monstros rummet och naturen. Båda texterna presenterar monstros utrymmen som är inriktade på att pervertera människor genom att erodera dem fysiskt tills de når ett tillstånd av bara liv som efterliknar zombifiering och kan allegoriserar socioekonomisk ojämlikhet, förskjutning och effekterna av kapitalism; såväl som genom att locka dem att begå grymheter mot varandra och överskrida själva de moraliska gränser som definierade dem som mänskliga, upp till och med kannibalism. På detta sätt avslöjar dessa monster människor som sina egna förintare, och blottar en medfödd mänsklig monstrositet som uppstår ur postmodernitetens traumatiska förhållanden.

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Introduction

Humanity has never been able to rid itself of monsters—those threatening, undying Others always looming at the edges of reality. In her book *Gothic-Postmodernism*, Maria Beville posits that the Gothic is “the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity” (8) and serves to “broach our desires for terror and to expunge the fears” (Beville 10) of this culture of fear wherein death, violence, and other horrors are prevalent. Monsters are crucial figures when it comes to representing and allegorizing crises and human responses to them (Asma 290), and helping humanity define itself as well as problematize that definition. This is what they do: “de-monstrate” (Halberstam 2), or lay bare a monstrous knowledge which humanity cannot otherwise reach.

Monstrosity in contemporary gothic fiction is then the object of study. More specifically, this thesis seeks to explore monstrosity in two contemporary horror stories: “The Whistlers,” by Amity Argot, and “Whitefall” by C.K. Walker. “The Whistlers” is a short story that could be seen as belonging to the digital gothic genre: a subgenre of the gothic in which digital modes of cultural production and dissemination are central to the horrors of the tale (Balanzategui 147). Originally titled “Bought a camping backpack from an estate sale and found these pages inside”, it is a series of forum posts, shared in the Reddit community “r/nosleep”, in which users post horror short stories under the collective pretense that they are true events being witnessed (sometimes in “real” time), or accounts of experiences that truly happened and are being recorded digitally. The story itself is based on transcripts of a stranger’s old journal, found by happenstance, which document a group of folklorists’ terrible journey through a forest while being persecuted and hunted down by the same cryptids they intend to research. By the end of the series of posts, there were two different epistolary accounts of the whistlers by two of the folklorists, written independently

from each other but about the same events. C.K. Walker's "Whitefall", on the other hand, seems to have been originally published via an audio adaptation by the NoSleep Podcast (Cummings)—a venture which originally adapted stories from r/nosleep and gradually grew to accept submissions. The story was first published as audio in 2019, and subsequently self-published by the author digitally and in print. "Whitefall" follows Kris Stikes, a man at the cusp of fatherhood as he embarks on a transcontinental bus journey in hopes of a new beginning for his girlfriend and future child. Crisis arises when the bus passengers are trapped in a bus terminal in the town of Whitefall by a freak storm, and must fend for themselves in terms of food, warmth, and overall survival. Both texts share a preoccupation with monstrosity, and specifically with the human monstrosity that arises out of the perpetual traumas and terrors of postmodernity. I find these two texts especially enlightening to analyze for their close connection to the r/nosleep community from which and for which they were written. Firstly, I believe being independently or even anonymously published at first (as is the case with "The Whistlers") rather than having gone through traditional avenues allows the texts to more closely represent the themes and terrors of our cultural moment that I aim to read in them, rather than reflecting only what the publisher believes is marketable or appropriate. This is especially relevant considering there is criticism of capitalism communicated in these texts. Furthermore, "indie", self-published, and digital literatures are often understudied, yet are culturally significant methods of dissemination—especially for contemporary horror fiction (especially digital horror), where the text may sometimes require that factors such as author and fictionality be occluded or ambiguous (Balanzategui 149) so as to blur the lines between reality and fiction.

In this thesis, I argue that "Whitefall" and "The Whistlers" present journeys of the self through postmodern terrors such as isolation, persecution, sociopolitical

horrors and the loss of objective reality and truth, culminating in revelatory transformations towards a human monstrosity wherein the monster's origin *and* target is the self. The trauma and cultural anxiety of postmodernity are paramount catalysts for and participants in these monstrous transformations. I will show that in "The Whistlers", there are strong suggestions that it is the lost and terrorized humans who eventually become whistlers through a process of (self-)traumatization and erosion of the mind and body; that the whistlers reproduce via a mechanism that mimics infection as well as madness, and that they are self-perpetuating and cyclical. In "Whitefall", the bus terminal is a manifestation of a monstrous space undoing the human (Franck 244), but it is the humans in their descent into a/im-morality up to and including graphic torture and cannibalism that constitute the real monster whose revelation and metamorphosis is the central point of the tale. Thus, I will show how in these texts it is humanity that, having had its monstrous potential laid bare, ultimately plays the self-annihilating role of both victim and perpetrator, both aggressor and aggressed.

To parse the meanings and mechanisms of the monster and its transformation of the human in "The Whistlers" and "Whitefall", as well as the cultural anxieties of postmodernity that they may allegorize, the monsters-as-texts (Weinstock, "Introduction" 26) will be read through various frameworks. Jeffrey Cohen's "Seven Theses" on contemporary monstrosity, alongside other scholars' contributions to these ideas, will aid in defining what makes a monster. Jeffrey Weinstock's work on the contemporary focus on internal monstrosity in "Invisible Monsters" will be instrumental in delineating the monstrous frameworks to be used in the analysis. Other scholars' ideas on these monstrous categories and on the interaction between the postmodern and the gothic, will also be incorporated, as a Frankensteining of meaning not unlike monsters themselves. The reason for this multiplicity of frameworks is that the monster, and therefore the process of becoming monstrous, by

definition and by nature cannot be contained to a single category, a single form, or a single cultural lens through which to be understood.

Background and Theoretical Framework

The Monstrous Terrors of Postmodernity

The link between the gothic and postmodernity has been made evident before. As indicated above, Beville argues that the Gothic has a unique ability to communicate the horrors and the cultural anxieties prevalent in postmodernity (8), as the latter is an era characterized by fear, in which death, violence, “political terrors” (49), and “deconstruction of individual, cultural, and moral standards” (32) are constants traumatizing the subject. Frederic Jameson writes that “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which ‘culture’ has become a veritable ‘second nature’” (ix) as well as “a product in its own right” (x). This statement highlights the importance of Capitalism and commodification to the shift between modernity and postmodernity, and Jameson even states that “Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (x). Han-Yu Huang and Xavier Aldana Reyes both also mention capitalism as a catalyst for cultural anxiety. Huang writes that global capitalism operates with a “circular, vampiric logic of commodification” (90), and Reyes touches upon the fear of surveillance as being linked to corporate capitalism (Reyes, “Introduction” 2) ¹. Weinstock and Beville both mention 9/11 as a kind of defining event that marks the beginning of (and thus also end of) an era, and exemplifies a transition into a “terrorised culture” (Weinstock 365; Beville 23). Gwyneth Peaty adds technological advances as another source of terror

¹ Both claims in line with Karl Marx’s statement that “Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor” (257)

and cultural anxiety in postmodernity, arguing that the prevalence of technology and the necessity of using it in everyday life and for crucial tasks forces the human to relinquish control to an external Other that one can ultimately not fully understand or control (302). These factors reveal that that postmodernity is “a traumatic event in itself” (Mortimer 137), and that the experience of living in postmodern times can be inherently terrorizing.

Defining a Monster

Monsters can and do represent a myriad of these cultural anxieties and terrors. Often, monsters are not direct representations of specific terrors but rather allegorize them in such a way that aspects of the monster echo the cultural anxieties of the epoch (Chess 43). Beville calls Gothic terror a “universally necessary topos of counter-narrative” (18), in that it provides release to the repressed, and a venue for exploring the terrors and anxieties of existence while avoiding the real-world consequences and implications thereof (Grixti 172). Stephen T. Asma further adds that monsters prompt one to consider one’s response to crisis, and the strength of moral and ethical convictions in the face of the unimaginable, before or without or alongside having to live through such crises in the real world (291).

Monsters can also act as crucial catalysts for sublime and transformative experiences through which the self defines or loses itself. Terror in the postmodern gothic (and gothic postmodern) is often related to the loss of reality and crisis of the self through “totalising experiences” (Beville 26) wherein the boundaries between the real and unreal are shattered. The central point seems to be the loss and/or destabilization of reality and the self in a postmodern world (Snipp 742) wherein trauma is, as has been established before, perpetual. This destabilization is something that monsters do by the mere act of existing (or being written), as monsters are in and

of themselves a crisis of reality in how they defy the “borders of the possible” (Cohen 12), of category in how they avoid comprehensibility, and of the self in how they put into question what the self knows and whether it can know anything at all (Beville 25).

Jeffrey Cohen's *Seven Theses* charts the anatomy of the contemporary monster-as-text. The first thesis posits that monsters embody the culture or cultural moments that conceived them (Cohen 4). Monsters are never entities divorced from their context; on the contrary, their meaning is dependent on the cultural backdrop that engendered them and against which they are read. For instance, Peaty points out that during the Victorian fin de siècle, the figure of the doctor became an iconic monster of the age, fueled by the desire for as well as anxieties about scientific advancement (304). Jack Halberstam likewise posits that monstrosity is “historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal” (6), which suggests that the monster cannot be pinned down to a single static meaning, but rather that its meaning changes depending on the cultural and personal contexts around it. The second thesis paints the monster as undying in that it is recurrent and perpetually reemerging to embody contemporary anxieties again and again (Cohen 4). Because the meaning of the monster cannot be pinned down but rather depends on context, different, transformed iterations of broadly the same type of monster can reemerge again and again, each time with an additional layer of history tacked on. In this sense, monsters behave with the same “repetitious nature” (Mortimer 141) as trauma in part because they *are* embodiments of cultural traumas. Additionally, the monster is undying in that it often dwells in “a horrible state that is neither death nor life” (Chess 42), and which is both past (as an embodiment of trauma) and present, in defiance of human concepts of nature and of the mutual exclusion of those categories.

The third thesis claims that “the monster is the harbinger of category crisis” (Cohen 6). The monster is uncategorizable and to an extent incomprehensible because

its very existence challenges the framework of the self's world. To understand it totally is to lay bare the artifice of reality—a destructive endeavor. The monster is incomprehensible, and dangerous in how it threatens the self's constructed “natural” order simply by laying bare the artifice. As Weinstock writes, the monster “threatens understandings of the world, the self, and the relations between the two” (“Introduction” 3). In the fourth thesis, Cohen says that the monster is “difference made flesh” (7), that is, that the monster is the ultimate representation of the Other—a pure embodiment of difference: racial, sexual, gender-based, or physical; but also economic/class, cultural, or even political difference (8). Far from merely being Other, however, many monsters also transform their victims into Others as well. One example of a monster with that power is the Slenderman, a collaboratively-conceived monster who can turn his victims into shells of themselves, essentially becoming extensions of the monster and performing its will (Balanzategui 150). Acting in the role of monster, or in the name of monstrous intentions creates a further category crisis, wherein those victims cannot be comprehended as either human or monster, and wherein the labels “human” and “monster” cannot be said to be mutually exclusive anymore. The monster prowls along lines like these, according to the fifth thesis, that “must not be crossed” (Cohen 13). It is through the monster that the self is reminded of the moral, social, or even physical lines that hold together its reality. It is through rejection (some might say *abjection*) of the monster that the self constructs itself, and it is in opposition to it that the self knows its own borders.

Although, or perhaps *because* the monster causes terror, and because it threatens to annihilate humans and their construction of reality, it also attracts with the allure of the forbidden—be it forbidden knowledge, forbidden flesh, or a forbidden life as in the case of the vampire that promises a living death (Cohen 16). This attraction is evident through the romantic spin put on the monster in contemporary young adult

novels such as *Twilight* and *The Host* (Meyer), as well as movies and TV series like *Warm Bodies* and *iZombie* (Levine 2013; Thomas et al 2015), which go as far as romanticizing the putrefying zombie, though admittedly less so than the vampire and the werewolf (Reyes, “Contemporary Zombies” 89). However, far from “attracting” only within the romance genre, the monster also attracts because it lives along dangerous, uncrossable lines, and tempts the self to transgress the very moral boundaries that make it human (Cohen 16). For example, this monstrous transgression of moral and social boundaries is precisely the point of Dr. Jekyll’s transformation: it is not merely a consequence of it but a preconceived goal, a desire he uses science to attempt to quench. Cohen’s last thesis posits that the monster “stands at the threshold...of becoming” and “[asks] us why we have created them” (20)— that is, that monsters are human constructions and reflections of the humans themselves during a cultural moment, and thus can never truly be vanquished.

Reading Monsters

This section presents a few different frameworks or lenses through which to read monsters, which will be particularly relevant to parsing the monsters in *Whitefall* and *The Whistlers*. As mentioned, because monsters are by definition shifting patchworks of meaning, no number of frameworks will suffice to extract all meaning, as “in any attempt to fix monstrosity, some aspect of it escapes unread” (Halberstam 29). Consequently, I find that the most effective way to read a monster is to avoid forcing it into one neat mold or framework, and instead explore what meaning may be found when looking at it through multiple different lenses. Furthermore, the monsters present in “Whitefall” and “The Whistlers” do not firmly belong in one known category of monster such as the vampire or zombie. Rather, they are unique monsters that fuse and mismatch different monstrous characteristics to create a different beast.

While Gothic tales in the nineteenth century tend to place the monster as an external other threatening the core from the outside, contemporary monsters tend to have their origin within the self instead (Beville 46) — an idea connected to Lacan's "extimacy" or "external intimacy" (Huang 90), which puts into question the borders between self and Other, monster and human. In "Invisible Monsters", Jeffrey Weinstock posits that there has been a "decoupling of monstrosity from appearance" (359) in contemporary narratives. He then proposes four frameworks through which to understand monstrosity, connected to the self as monster and to the monstrous transformation of the self. Three of them will be relevant here: the psychokiller and the related figure of the terrorist; the virus that attacks from the inside; and finally a vengeful nature responding to human meddling (359). These will serve as a base, but other scholars' ideas on these categories and other similar facets of monstrosity will also be necessary in my analysis of the monsters in the two primary texts.

The Psychokiller and the Terrorist

When it comes to the "psychokiller" (Weinstock 363) and the terrorist as contemporary narratives of monstrosity, it is obvious that the self and its monstrous becoming are the focus. One of the psychokiller's main fear factors, as a human "monster" is that it could be— or rather, *must* be living among people (363), who are commonly represented as their prey in serial killer narratives. Lauren Christie writes that these figures "cannot be easily identified" (471) as they blend in with the rest of the population. The terrorist has emerged as the psychokiller's peer in a post-9/11 world (Weinstock 365) in which being among people, even in public, can mean being in danger. Unlike the psychokiller, however, terrorist narratives tend to be more connected to ideology or politics than other gothic narratives (365), an understandable shift in a postmodern world of constant political turmoil. Both figures highlight the shift in what makes a monster: where once the monster's difference would be etched

onto its physical form, with the contemporary psychokiller and terrorist it is actions and intentions— to do harm, to frighten, to kill— that mark the monster (363). Because they are outwardly indistinguishable from the rest of the population, the psychokiller and the terrorist force the self to look into its reflection and confront the darkness that may be staring back (Christie 469). This framework will be relevant in analyzing the character of Acker in “Whitefall” and how he plays the role of terrorist in the text.

The Virus

The concept of the virus—an invisible, transformative agent capable of changing the self from the inside— is a logical extension of the postmodern fear of monsters-among-us already explored in the psychokiller and the terrorist (Weinstock 368). Possibly the most recognizable viral monsters are zombies. In “Contemporary Zombies”, Reyes characterizes zombies as being a “palimpsest” (89) as their mythos is composed of a wide array of complementary as well as conflicting characteristics and contexts. Likewise, Anya Heise-von der Lippe asserts that the zombie is a representation of a variety of metaphors (219) related, for instance, to capitalism and displacement, which are relevant to my analysis of the human’s in “The Whistlers” and “Whitefall” and their descent into a zombielike state.

The zombie can represent the effects of contemporary consumer capitalism on humanity. Heise-von der Lippe links the zombie’s diminished or non-existent capacity for logic and coherent thought to the effects of mass-marketing and consumer culture, and further posits that the zombie—much like contemporary capitalism—“relegates the human to a lower rank in the food chain” (219). What is interesting about the zombie as relates to viral monstrosity, is that they are in a sense creating themselves. Because the lines between human and zombie are not firm—for instance, in multiple zombie fictions such as *Dawn of the Dead* (Snyder) an infected yet non-zombified human is simultaneously mourned and apologized to as a human, and executed or restrained as

a zombie—humans are in a sense pre-zombies, and zombies post-humans. In a similar way, Heise-von der Lippe asserts that zombie fictions explore “posthuman becomings” (219).

Contemporary zombies can also be read as allegorizing the results of displacement. Jon Stratton links the figure of the zombie as an invading species-via-virus to the cultural anxieties prevalent in developed countries about refugees and other immigrants occupying their space and taking up their resources (414) — to the extreme point of cannibalism, which Heise-von der Lippe calls “the ultimate human taboo, as well as a textual marker of inhumanity” (224). Interestingly, it appears that aside from fearing death by zombie, the most characteristic terror offered by the zombie is that of an existence of zombified living death (Stratton 415). Zombies are frightening because they threaten to turn the self into one of them, condemning it to an existence of “bare life”² (Stratton 416). This “bare life”, in turn, as a liminal space between being and not-being, is similar to legal and social situations in which masses of displaced people find themselves (416) brought about by “cultures of deprivation and oppression” (Newitz 242). This link implies that what humans fear from zombies is being relegated to the same inhumanity that displaced people are subjected to by other humans. Similarly, Reyes further adds that zombies continue to be useful in body horror’s explorations of “the body's social inscription, its vulnerability to attack, and its position in an increasingly commodified age that privileges surface and immediacy” (“Body Horror” 117)

Although it is not commonly understood in terms of viral monstrosity, I find it relevant to mention the vampire in connection to the zombie. The similarities are often clear: both figures serve as catalysts for human metamorphosis, both spread their

² Here, Stratton adapts the concept of “bare life” described by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* to the figure of the zombie.

species through cannibalistic behaviors and bodily fluids, and both retain an intimate relationship to humanity as beings who were once (and to some may still be) human. Furthermore, Wendy Fall defines vampires at their most basic as “beings that have died, come back to life, then spread death among the living” (205), a definition that invites readings of the vampire as a form of zombie with retained intellectual and moral (some may say immoral) capacity, or of the zombie as a more animalistic and less composed sibling to the vampire.

Monstrous Nature and Space

Whereas the terrorist and the virus are two facets of contemporary monstrosity that infiltrate the self— be it biologically, socially or psychologically—in monstrous spaces the external surroundings affect the self, often ending in either transformation or death. As such, monstrous spaces are often sites of metamorphosis. Monstrous spaces are connected to Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, which could be defined as a placeless place as well as a world reflecting or referring to a different one (Ng, “Conceptualizing Varieties” 444). Andrew Hock-Soon Ng clarifies that the heterotopia fulfills the role of “disclosing the fault lines of other spaces by inverting, rivaling, and/or mirroring” (443). Monstrous spaces can take a variety of forms, from hotels to museums (Ng 444), but the most relevant to this thesis are the forest, and monstrous architecture, which will aid in reading the whistlers’ forest and the Whitefall bus terminal as monstrous spaces.

When nature is monstrous, it often gains a degree of consciousness or intention. Weinstock posits that nature “becomes monster as it actively—and with seeming intentionality—threatens human survival” (366), suggesting sentience and intention (and therefore the capacity for moral alignment) from monstrous nature. He goes on to argue that monstrous nature can manifest as a punitive force against a negligent, environmentally abusive humanity (370). Elizabeth Parker concurs when mentioning

the role of nature as moral arbiter in horror fiction (Parker 281). On the other hand, Kaja Franck suggests that in the Gothic mode, nature “is amoral” (244), and that it reflects what the reader puts onto it. In that way, it is a text to be read just like any other monster, despite lacking what one would commonly understand as a physical body.

Though the forest can take a myriad of roles in gothic fiction, there are many recurring themes that place it in conflict with humanity. In “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Woods?” Parker presents her own seven theses on the role of the forest in horror fiction. Firstly she posits that wilderness is the polar opposite to “civilization” (277). Franck writes that, much like with defining the monster, it is by defining what is “wilderness” that humanity defines itself, and that this binary opposition allows humanity to understand what spaces are safe and which are outside human control (243). Wild spaces such as forests and the creatures that dwell within cannot be reasoned with using human logic (244), and they threaten to undo the human to the point of annihilation or monstrous transformation. Parker’s second thesis claims that the forest is connected to fears of the past (Parker 277), which suggests a connection with trauma and the resurfacing of the painful past haunting the present— particularly as the forest is a site of transformation and trial, which Parker brings up as the fourth thesis on monstrous wilderness (280). The forest, being wild and thus antithetic to humanity, threatens to leave humans stranded to fend for themselves; because it cannot be properly understood it can also not be properly navigated. This results in fears of being “lost” in the deep dark woods, not merely literally but also psychologically or morally. As Parker argues, “alone in the woods, one must strive to remain sane, while simultaneously managing to stay alive in the wild” (281). Another thesis Parker posits is that the forest is a place where humans fear being eaten (277), and that the forest is “a consuming threat” (282) for humanity in horror fiction despite the latter’s abuse of

the former in reality. The forest may also be a site where the “human unconscious” manifests itself (Parker 283), which is related to Franck’s claim that the wilderness reflects what humanity puts onto it. Parker’s last thesis posits that the forest is an “antichristian” (285) environment in the sense that it is a landscape that incites “sin” and the transgression of moral and personal boundaries for the sake of survival, and/or under its influence.

Quite similarly to the monstrous forest, monstrous architecture can also be a site of terror and transformation. In “Conceptualizing Varieties of Space in Horror Fiction”, Ng posits that lived space marks humans in the same way as people change the spaces they inhabit, and positions them as active participants in that relationship (441). Gesa Mackenthun argues that the haunted hotel—as in for instance The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (King)—is “a place where temporal linearity is suspended and which compels fathers to commit atrocities against their dependants” (93). Notably, Mackenthun speaks of the haunted hotel as being a part of “the American wilderness” (93), suggesting that seemingly human spaces may also be “wild”. The Overlook, for example, despite having presumably been built by people, is an isolated place surrounded by nature, in which the occupants are left to fend for themselves against forces much more powerful and less comprehensible than themselves.

Monstrous architecture is also connected to repression. Ng argues that the building in J.G. Ballard’s *High-Rise* is “an ominous site for the staging of the return of the repressed” (“Dimensions of Monstrosity” 23), that is, as a site that facilitates the resurgence of traumatic events, violent tendencies, or repressed desires. Mackenthun likewise posits that the haunted hotel brings “latent aggression” forth (94); as I will show in my analysis of “Whitefall”, this can apply to other monstrous buildings. Ng writes that the resurgence of the repressed past is part of a process of “monstrously

transforming the inhabitants” (23), as the monstrous space penetrates the human mind and attacks it seemingly by bringing the terrors inside it to the real of the external and inescapable. This could be understood through Katharine Cox’s idea of monstrous or anthropomorphized spaces as “postmodern literary labyrinths [...] where the labyrinth is reimagined as a textual prison without Minotaur” (339) — or perhaps in which the Minotaur is created by the repressed fears and desires and traumas of those trapped in the labyrinth.

Monstrous Body

Much of this section has rested on Weinstock’s idea of contemporary monstrosity as being decoupled from physical appearance, and being based on morality and harm (359). However, this contemporary focus on invisible monstrosity does not mean that the body as a site of horror and monstrous transformation has lost its importance. On the contrary, Brenda Longfellow asserts that postmodernism is partly characterized by “an enduring obsession with the body” (180), suggesting that the body is not irrelevant to postmodern monstrosity, but rather that the origins of monstrosity have shifted towards the internal and in a sense “human”, which then manifests itself in the body and its construction/destruction. Reyes similarly describes body horror narratives as characterized by an “inscription of horror onto the human body by virtue of a change, or series of them, that transforms the perceived ‘normal’ body into a negatively exceptional and/or painful version of itself” (“Abjection” 393). This could be related to the concept of the “abhuman”, defined as the condition of a subject that has moved away from or lost their status as (firmly) human (Reyes, “Body Horror” 109). This definition highlights the movement from one state to another rather than understanding the abhuman as a static category. Notably, Reyes’ characterization of body horror appears to highlight processual metamorphosis, suggesting that one key to the genre may be the process of perversion and (most relevantly to the primary texts

to be studied) erosion of the human body into an Other, rather than merely a preoccupation with the end result.

The Whistlers

In “The Whistlers”, there is evidence to suggest the whistlers themselves are transformed humans and, according to Bill, the only survivor of the tale, “were all like us, once” (Argot, “Bill's account - Part 2”). The fates of the other two lost folklorists Ira and Ruth support this idea. For instance, when Ira arrives at the lodge after being presumed dead for days, accompanied by the whistling, he is mistaken for a whistler by Ruth, who shoots him dead (“Part 4”). Once Ira is dead Ruth keeps his corpse for three days, saying that she is “trying to comprehend it” (“Part 4”). She goes as far as grooming him posthumously, though she is disappointed to find that it “didn’t make him look any more human” (“Part 4”). Aside from the abjection that might cause the corpse of a human to no longer register as truly “human” in the mind of the living, Ira’s body is also foreign and incomprehensible to Ruth because it has been “physically monstereed” “into a negatively exceptional and/or painful version of itself” (Reyes, “Abjection” 404, 393) and is no longer a body representative of what she understands as human (or at the very least, *only* human), causing a “category crisis” (Cohen 6) that Ruth attempts to overcome. Ruth makes it a point to describe the state of his body, writing that “his right arm is missing, torn away, the wound crudely cauterized somehow, but deeply infected. He was barefoot, feet frostbitten, his eyes riddled with broken vessels, hair missing in patches, the nails of his left hand grown and worn like claws” (“Part 4”). In this passage, Ruth paints Ira’s body as a monstrous, wild body. Her use of the word “claws” to describe Ira’s fingernails in particular calls forth associations with wild beasts, as does the imagery of an arm being “torn away” rather than “cut” or “severed”. Seen in that light, Ira’s body could be described as abhuman

(Reyes, "Body Horror"), in that while it was once human, it (he) moves away from that category and becomes a negatively and monstrously changed version of his old self.

Although the end of Ruth's account suggests she commits suicide, Bill recounts how he picks up on her trail and attempts to find her, believing that she is wandering lost. Then he writes of her footsteps: "suddenly they weren't just hers. There was a second set of the same steps, and a third, all dragging, and running together, and I was so fixed on my feet, on the tracks, on picking Ruth's tracks apart from the others, I didn't realize I was walking in a circle" (Argot, "Bill's account - Part 2"). Ruth's path merges with the path of the whistlers, and they absorb her into their circle and species. This could be read as Ruth becoming one with the whistlers, as suggested by the emphasis on the togetherness of the Ruth's and the whistlers' steps. Bill introduces the "Survivor Theory": "the idea that the whistlers are in some way dependent on humans and so will always leave one alive" ("Bill's account"). The Survivor Theory means, in this case, that Bill supposedly cannot be let go by the whistlers unless and until he is the only human left in the forest for them to terrorize. Because the forest lets Bill go almost immediately after he catches up with Ruth's new path, it is implied that Ruth may no longer be a human lost in the forest, as she has transformed into something else.

In his account, Bill references another folklorist who theorized that the whistlers are the end result of humans being "pushed so far by the harshness of the wilderness that they transformed into something else to survive" ("Bill's account - Part 2"). This statement invites readings of the forest as monstrous nature traumatizing the humans into a monstrous transformation. The forest in which the folklorists become lost does appear to have the "intentionality" ("Invisible Monsters" 369) Weinstock attributes to a punitive monstrous nature: after all, it is the forest that eventually lets the one survivor go. When Bill is finally released from/by the forest, he writes:

The whistlers never spoke up around me. They never came. And the longer I looked the more I saw across that valley. I saw a hard, unnatural line. A road. And before long there was a light on it, a moving light, headlights, winding up a neighboring ridge. And there were other lights—Christmas lights, window lights, the spangled glow of a small town (“Bill's account - Part 2”).

The way he describes it, it is not so much that he finds his way out of the forest, but rather that he stays put as the forest recedes and allows civilization to come into view once more— that is, the space actively changes around him after he overcomes the “trial” (Parker 276) that this monstrous nature has set for the humans. In this way, the forest is not merely the whistlers’ territory, but an active participant (Ng, “Conceptualizing Varieties” 441) in their life cycle.

The forest constitutes a heterotopic space (Ng, “Conceptualizing Varieties” 444) of perpetual, ongoing traumatization for the folklorists: physically in the form of starvation and exhaustion, and psychologically through constant persecution by the whistlers as well as through the loss of reality and morality that they cause. It is the constant, ongoing, unrelenting trauma and hardship that the folklorists face every moment in the forest that monstrously transforms the folklorists in mind and body. Ruth writes about the state of her body as “the body so much walking and hunger and fear had made” (“Part 5”), which Bill later describes as “thin as a scarecrow” (Argot, “Bill’s account”). This description bears a similarity to Ira’s body being described as “skeletal” (“Part 4”) right before he is shot, suggesting that Ruth’s body is in a sense an intermediate step on the way to becoming a whistler, and suggesting that the erosion of the body is as crucial to the monstrous transformation as the erosion of the mind. Bill also says: “Our bodies are broken. Little wounds, cuts and scrapes, twisted joints and tight muscles. Nothing gets a chance to heal. It’s just pain on top of pain, and

hunger beneath it all" ("Bill's account"), suggesting a transformation of the body for which the key is constant, unrelenting pressure, and not the end state of the body.

Regarding the erosion of the mind and morality, the role of nature as arbiter of morality is particularly relevant. In the monstrous forest, the folklorists are "tested through subjection to temptation" (Parker 281) to cross fundamental moral boundaries. Bill and Ira team up to kill all their companions in an attempt to make Ruth the final survivor according to the whistlers' rules. Of this transgression, Bill writes that "The whistlers make the rules, but we decide the order" (Argot, "Bill's account"). The forest being an environment that invites "sin" (Parker 285) and transgression, Bill and Ira abandon the uncrossable lines that are clearly drawn in human society but which mean nothing in the forest, wherein firm rules and rationality cannot triumph. They transgress these moral lines in an attempt to establish human order and control unto an uncivilized, wild nature, furthering their own monstrous transformation in the process. Morality is eroded, too, when it comes to Ruth's willingness to cheat on Ira with Bill, about which she says "I don't know why. I've never cheated on Ira before. Never even thought about it. This didn't seem wrong, in the moment, but now it's difficult to write down" (Argot, "Bought a camping backpack"). Ruth seems to find her actions inconsistent with the side of herself she knows, which lives a civilized life outside of the forest. Cheating on Ira is something brought about by the forest and the whistlers' persecution, a desire unexplored in the rational world that emerges in the wilderness. For Ruth in comparison to Bill and Ira, the transgression is evidently more sexual. For instance, aside from cheating with Bill, Ruth also has dreams of having sex with Gary Law, the dead man she finds in the woods, and later of carrying his child (Argot, "Bought a camping backpack"). By leading the folklorists away from the moral boundaries that define them as civilized, the whistlers chip away at their humanity and incite their monstrosity.

The other type of trauma brought forth by the forest and the whistlers is the returning kind, especially for Ruth. Parker's idea of the forest as a monstrous space where the past comes back to haunt the present (77) becomes relevant here. Throughout the story, Ruth returns to the stillbirth of her and Ira's daughter years ago. As the whistlers and the forest take hold of her mind and her brain and body are eroded into near-madness, Ruth progressively hears the cries of her stillborn daughter, starting on what would have been her birthday (Argot, "Part 5"). This development suggests two things: that past trauma is crucial to how the forest monstrously transforms the humans, and that the forest reflects what those humans within it carry with them in their "unconscious" (Parker 283). Since only the humans can know details such as the baby's birthday, it is implied that Ruth hears her baby's cries not because the forest or the whistlers mimic them, but because that is how her brain translates the whistling according to her specific past and trauma. In that sense, these monsters personalize the humans' descent into monstrosity by using their own minds against them—or, seen another way, the humans personalize their own descent into monstrosity.

In addition to being products of a monstrous space and nature, the whistlers also resemble undead monsters such as zombies or even vampires. The progressive descent into whistlerhood that I have previously read as being rooted in trauma, can also be read as operating virally. In his account, Bill writes "It's not symbiosis. Whatever it is, it starts in the mind, in the head" (Argot, "Bill's account - Part 2"). Bill's words imply an onset and a gradual spread, like a sickness that, according to him, affects the infected psychologically first. His mention of symbiosis calls forth associations with science and specifically biology, further implying illness or infection.

The monstrous transformation the whistlers cause resembles zombification. The state of Ira's body at the time of his death could be read as zombified. Bill says to

Ruth that Ira “wouldn’t have survived the night,” (Argot, “Part 4”), though it is possible that he would say that to soothe her. Regardless, Ira’s emaciated body and “torn,” “deeply infected” wounds (“Part 4”) place him in an abhuman (Reyes, “Body Horror” 109) state, and bear a strong resemblance to the image of a putrefying zombie. It also appears that the whistlers spend much of their time walking seemingly aimlessly or at least endlessly, an activity strongly associated with the walking undead. Ruth mentions seeing what “could be the tracks of dozens of pairs of feet, or just a few, going around and around the lodge” (Argot, “Part 4”). Bill comments that the whistlers “kept [Ira] walking,” (“Bill’s account - Part 2”), which suggests the possibility that Ira continues walking not because his body can sustain it, but because something else keeps him going past what the human body can withstand. Seen in this light, the whistlers’ victims share the zombie’s state of “bare life” (Stratton 416), and are relegated “to a lower rank in the food chain” (Heise-von der Lippe 219) — in this case as bait rather than being directly consumed.

On the other hand, The whistlers’ tendency to “only [come] at night” (Argot, “Bought a camping backpack”) and to remain unseen in the shadows could be connected to vampirism. Furthermore, whereas the zombie is usually grotesque and disgusting (Reyes, “Abjection” 397), the vampire tends to attract (Huang 93). In the whistlers’ case, too, attraction is central as they depend on human “curiosity” and the allure of the unknown to strand “more idiots in the woods” (Argot, “Bill’s account”). Like the zombie, the vampire transforms the source of its sustenance into itself (Stratton 415) and causes the erosion of the victim’s body—at least until the final transformation (for the vampire), or beyond (in the case of the zombie and the whistler). What these similarities between the zombie, the vampire, and the whistler highlight is the relevance of the cannibalistic life cycle, wherein feeding and

reproduction are entwined and the transformation of the victim into monstrosity is a key of the species' mechanism of survival.

Another part of the whistlers' process of traumatization and monstrous transformation of humanity lies in the loss of reality and the impossibility of objectivity and truth. As the folklorists attempt to comprehend the monsters and monstrous space around them, reality ceases to be stable and becomes monstrous as well. One manifestation of this lies in the differences between Ruth's account of the whistlers on one hand, and Bill's on the other. Much of Ruth's account presents the slow process towards the sublime or "totalising" (Beville 26) realization that the whistlers are not predators or monsters to be feared, but protectors warning the humans of a worse, even more irrepresentable beast. Ira appears to realize this first, saying "I understand it now. It's a warning." (Argot, "Bought a camping backpack"), thereby prompting Ruth to begin questioning the framework she has been using to understand the whistlers thus far. By the end of her account, Ruth can hear Ira's singing and her baby's crying in the whistlers' song, though the sound has not changed for Bill ("Bill's account - Part 2"). Understanding the whistlers—and through that becoming as incomprehensible as them—seems to be a key part of the humans' monstrous metamorphoses.

However, Bill's account extends further in time than Ruth's, and continues after the latter has abandoned her writing. It is through Bill that the truth (purportedly) is revealed: that it is not that the whistlers are a bystander species trying to protect the humans from a worse predator, but that the whistlers are predators to the humans' predator, and humans are merely bait in their food chain (Argot, "Bill's account - Part 2"). This second sublime realization undoes Ruth's own, effectively rewriting reality not only for Bill as the person living it but also for the reader, who because of the serialized reddit post format of the story, experiences the events in a secondhand-firsthand way: staggered as though the events were in real time, yet fully aware that the

events being read about are already over and that the “found manuscript ... has been discovered by a third party and assembled for viewing without the involvement of the original protagonists” (Reyes, “Introduction” 4). To the reader, as to Bill, it is not merely that they were wrong, but that reality has changed itself into something else, and the world they thought they were living in turns out to not have been there at all. Similarly, when it comes to the dog later found out to be a second, different species of monster: it is first set up as the ultimate, most insurmountable and incomprehensible threat, and then completely defused in Bill’s account. Such a back and forth creates a situation in which no revelation can be safely assumed to be correct, and thus the whistlers spare themselves from being comprehended and categorized (and thereby un-monstered) by the humans.

Throughout their stay in the forest, the folklorists attempt against all odds to understand the whistlers scientifically and thereby defuse them. Ruth speculates about whether the whistlers might “hibernate” and hopes that “the change in biome means a decrease in the whistler population” (Argot, “Bought a camping backpack”); Bill makes repeated references to other folklorists and their purportedly scientific findings about the whistlers. Time and time again, however, these attempts to science the monstrous fail, as the whistlers, like most monsters, are gatekeepers of reality and of “the possible” (Cohen 12), and therefore skirt human frameworks and rules for how an organism ought to operate. On the matter, Bill writes that “We humans, we’ve got a way of personalizing things. Of assigning motives, emotions. Help or harm” (“Bill’s account - Part 2”). The humans attempt to pin the whistlers down to pre-existing, human-made frameworks, with the assumption that the monsters must be either for or against human survival, that they must be either aggressors or protectors, devourers of humanity or misunderstood saviors. The reality breaks away from that duality, making the whistlers fundamental contradictions instead. Bill writes of the whistlers that

“There’s no explaining what’s actually out there, and I see that that is by design” (Argot, “Bill’s account - Part 2”), suggesting that the unprovability and instability of the whistlers is a crucial part of their *modus operandi*. This ability to remain monster and to remain incomprehensible in the face of human science seems, partly, to be a defense mechanism, as the whistlers depend on survivors to tell “a good story” (“Bill’s account - Part 2”) of their encounter with them to lure more humans into the forest and perpetuate the cycle again and again. For that reason, being understood scientifically—which would make them into another species in the animal kingdom rather than a monster that should not exist according to human logic—would be disastrous for their life cycle.

The whistlers’ life cycle and behavior itself is contradictory and unstable. To some extent, contradiction is expected when it comes to monsters, given their tendency to attract as well as threaten (Cohen 16) and their penchant for defying categorization (Cohen 6). For the whistlers, this contradiction extends to their behavior, to their life cycle, and to the humans’ position therein. On one hand, the whistlers are presented as uncivilized (or perhaps de-civilized) and feral, and on the other hand as highly intelligent and systematic. Of watching the whistlers eat the dog monster, Bill says:

They tore it apart. The effort went on for many long minutes, long enough for me to realize the dying thing looked nothing like a dog. Not in the least. It had long, black limbs. Sharp, angular, with joints protruding. Short, coarse hair that shone. It bled the same deep red of any mammal, long toes curled with black claws, flickering nerve impulses.

Part of my mind says it was a bear. Black fur, enormous stature, and that low growl, dark and strong in a way that grips your heart. It could have been a bear. It could have been any number of completely familiar things. There’s another

part of me that knows it wasn't a bear. Knows it isn't something I've ever seen before, isn't something I can describe.

And the whistlers took it down. (Argot, "Bill's account - Part 2")

In this passage, Bill describes the dog monster as uncannily Other, with incomprehensible and mismatched anatomy, and imposing size and capacity for violence and harm. Yet, regardless of how powerful and incomprehensible the dog monster is to the human mind, the whistlers are able to "tear" it apart—a word that implies animalistic, unrestrained violence. Bill goes into detail about the monstrosity of the dog monster, and his inability to bend language in a way that would communicate what was before his eyes, and then switches the focus to the whistlers, using the mere fact that they could take down a creature of such magnitude as illustrative proof of the whistlers' brutality. On the other hand, in the very next entry Bill writes of the whistlers "Anglers waiting for sharks. Ruth and I, we're not sharks. *Patient, patient, patient.* We're bait." (Argot, "Bill's account - Part 2"). This idea of the whistlers as monsters lurking in the darkness, and using humans to lure their real prey, as well as the focus on their "patience" paints the whistlers as cunning, intelligent, deliberate and methodical— not unlike humanity itself, but out of place in contrast with the animalistic violence with which the whistlers hunt and feed.

The duality of the dog's position in relation to the humans is also interesting to examine. Before Bill finds out the truth about the dog and the whistlers, the dog is both an innocent being trapped in the forest exactly like them, as well as an incomprehensible, unseen beast that Bill hears growling behind the whistling. Of Ira, Bill says "his screams were drowned out by the whistling, and the other thing, the screeching and deep growling and the snapping of bones" (Argot, "Bill's account"), relegating the dog monster's sounds to an afterthought—not because it is unimportant but because it is a terror too great to bare (and bear). Yet, Bill elsewhere talks of "the

anxiety in the dog's eyes" ("Bill's account - Part 2") referring to what he will later find out is the same monster in its dog form. He also refers to the shack the dog seems to use as its home as "the dog's house" ("Bill's account - Part 2"), and not "the house" or "the doghouse", thereby attributing the capacity for ownership and a certain degree of personhood and civilizing to the wild animal. Even after seeing the dog monster's real form, Bill still refers to its dog form as shown to him by the whistlers as "another pitiful creature alone in the woods" ("Bill's account - Part 2"). Even in his previously quoted description of the dog monster's real, uncanny form, Bill remarks that "it bled the same deep red of any mammal" and that it is "strong in a way that grips your heart. It could have been a bear" ("Bill's account - Part 2"). Here, Bill describes the creature as familiar and similar to him and to animals he can empathize with, even while describing its monstrous form. His claim that "it could have been a bear" has a dual meaning. Firstly, that his mind could convince him that the creature was actually a bear because of how incomprehensible it is. Secondly and perhaps more relevantly to this argument: that the creature is not unlike a bear, in that it too is an animal trying to survive in the wild rather than an unnatural monster in need of annihilation. What this suggests is that the dog monster is too Other to be comprehended in its real form by human brains, yet similar enough to the humans and their position in the forest to gather empathy and solidarity. It is a humanization of the irrepresentable, incomprehensible beast, and a suggestion that the cultural climate and unrelenting trauma of postmodernity may have once again resulted in an "identification" (Weinstock, "Invisible Monsters" 360) of humanity with the irrepresentable monster's plight.

In the whistlers' life cycle and food chain, humans take the position of both bait and fetus, both disposable and crucial. The previously quoted metaphor of the anglerfish waiting for sharks relegates humans to a status akin to insects, or to the worms fishermen use to bait the prey they truly seek to catch. Bill's realization that

humans are “not the prey. I see that now. Human beings are collateral damage” (“Bill’s account - Part 2”) suggests that, to the whistlers, human life is expendable and human death incidental. However, human survival is also necessary for the whistlers’ life cycle. If one thinks of the forest as a womb or pupa that facilitates the humans’ metamorphosis, then it follows that the whistlers and the humans can be seen as different stages in the life cycle of the same creature or phenomenon. By allowing humans to perish before their transformation into whistlers is complete, the whistlers contradict their own life cycle and jeopardize their own ability to reproduce. In that light, human death is both unimportant—as is the case for Bill’s suicide and the deaths of everybody killed by the dog monster or their own companions— as well as necessary to avoid, as in the case of the last survivor, who must not die before propagating their story to lure more people into the forest. The importance of storytelling is evident when Bill describes the Survivor Theory as:

The idea that the whistlers are in some way dependent on humans and so will always leave one alive. A living human begets more humans. A survivor tells the story, excites curiosity, leads to more expeditions, more idiots in the woods. It implies long-term thinking on the part of the whistlers. Planning. A cycle of sowing and harvest. (“Bill’s account”).

This passage implies that the whistlers also operate folklorically, in that they depend on human curiosity and storytelling to attract more bait and more potential whistlers. This folkloric method is implied to be an intentional or at least systematic part of their life cycle: not an accident that occurs when humans wander where they do not need to be, but a natural part of a creature’s food chain and reproduction. That humans are both bait and potential whistlers suggests an almost cannibalistic life cycle. The whistlers’ contradicting behaviors mean that they are the source of their own endangerment: if indeed whistlers were once human, then they are both the source of

torment (as whistlers/post-humans) and the object of said torment (as humans/pre-whistlers). Such a contradiction is comparable to conflicts and situations perpetually present in postmodernity, such as late-stage capitalism, constant war and sociopolitical conflict, and, notably according to Weinstock, the worsening ecological crisis for which a monstrous nature seeks to punish an arrogant humanity (Weinstock, "Invisible Monsters" 370). What all of these situations have in common with the whistlers' life cycle and food chain is an almost vampiric self-consumption wherein the victim and the perpetrator are one and the same.

"The Whistlers" can be seen as a cautionary tale against human hubris, but one that fails through the act of being told. Ruth writes "We had so many opportunities, over the years, to drop the question. To live with the unknown. We called ourselves folklorists, but we imagined we were adventurers, righteous explorers, exposing a mystery. We imagined we had the right" (Argot, "Part 5"), and of Bill that he wanted to study the whistlers "for science" ("Part 3"). Ruth paints an image of an overzealous and hubristic humankind, insisting on encroaching on spaces it cannot comprehend and which threaten to devour it (Parker 282). The folklorists, despite thinking themselves different from all the other whistler stories, end up in the same position as the people whose stories they "never believed" or thought "outlandish" (Argot, "Bought a camping backpack"). However, even though Ruth writes as though imparting a lesson on a future reader, she also makes it a point to state her wishes: "This account of events is for the families of the deceased ... I don't want it published. I don't want to be one more link in the chain of juvenile curiosity, another mystery in the big book of stories that sends people like us to places like this" ("Part 5"). As a folklorist who has been studying the whistlers for some time, Ruth recognizes that anything she might have to say to the world about her experience—especially posthumously—is bound to backfire by design

and cause more people exactly like her and her family to get lost in the woods. As such, her warning is one that would fail by being spread.

Yet, Ruth's tale does make it to readers' eyes. This is where the Reddit post format and the metafictional author come in. Rather than having the story publicized by Bill as the only survivor, Argot creates an additional character—an almost blank reader within the story that reacts to the content and has their own emotional arc, from finding Ruth's account in an "Old Backpack From an Estate Sale" ("Bought a camping backpack"), to pondering whether they are helping or harming by publicizing the account, to dealing with the aftermath in the form of Bill's suicide. The poster seems to get close to grasping that Ruth "never meant her words to be used this way" and senses that her spirit might be "angry" ("Bought a camping backpack") at them for it, but nevertheless continues to post her account in direct contradiction to her wishes. One factor somewhat unique to "new media tools" (Chess 9) like the serialized Reddit horror story is the audience's influence. In this case, the audience interacts with the poster, and some commenters are even responded to in subsequent parts. For instance, the poster writes:

In response to the reservations I expressed about posting the previous section,
/u/kiastrashero said:

By the notes you have transcribed it sounds more like she WANTS the story told as a warning for others not to go looking for whatever they were out there to find. Hopefully that eerie feeling you are getting is just from reading these accounts by yourself.

I hope that's true. I hope everyone who reads this will take it as the cautionary tale Ruth intended. (Argot, "Part 3")

Here, the fictional poster uses the audience's reactions to the tale, and their encouragement to continue publicizing it to justify something that they already had

“reservations” (“Part 3”) about. This makes the audience complicit in perpetuating the whistlers’ life cycle and supporting the monstrous transformation of their peers being “offered up as entertainment” (“Part 3”). The poster disguises their own interests—to continue publicizing the account they feel “needs to be finished” (“Bought a camping backpack”)— by projecting intentions onto Ruth, barely 25% of the way through transcribing her account. Additionally, the digital age and the possibility of immediate and wide-spread communication affords the whistlers a much wider range of people to lure and corrupt. Because the whistlers operate folklorically, Ruth’s warning becomes not so much a warning as bait itself, as contradictory as the whistlers that await in the forest. In this way, “The Whistlers” presents a humanity caught in a self-perpetuated, cannibalistic life cycle of self-traumatization and monstrous transformation—a cycle humans are too foolish and self-important to see even when it is spelled out for them.

Whitefall

In C.K. Walker’s “Whitefall”, a heterotopic, monstrous space in the form of a small-town bus terminal seeks to lay bare human monstrosity. The bus terminal can be read as a heterotopia in how it “mirrors” (Ng, “Conceptualizing Varieties” 443) and reflects the world outside it, and functions in a sense as a self-contained, twisted version of it. The terminal’s badly-stocked and unequally distributed vending machines (Walker 159), and the way the passengers divide themselves into groups based on which city they arrived to Whitefall from (Minneapolis, Kansas City, Salt Lake City, or Denver) (164) mirror conditions of scarcity and sociopolitical conflicts that run rampant in postmodernity. In that way, this monstrous space can be seen as allegorizing the “terrorized culture” (Beville 23) of postmodernity, and laying bare the cannibalistic, self-consuming horrors that result from it. Far from merely reflecting, however, the bus terminal becomes “lived space” (441), and “actively” participates (Ng,

“Conceptualizing Varieties” 441) in its relationship with the stranded bus passengers with seeming consciousness and intention.

The bus terminal differs from the whistlers’ forest in that it has a voice that can communicate directly in the humans’ language. The terminal uses that voice—disembodied as it is heard through a loudspeaker—to incite the humans further and further to the point of violence. This incitement can be observed through the voice’s progressively more absurd announcements. On their first day in Whitefall, the voice says “we are disappointed to have to inform you that the storm is not predicted to let up until this evening” (Walker 159). On the sixth day, it says “we are hoping the weather will clear in the next couple days” (171). Later on, the voice says

We’ve heard from the national weather service that the storm shouldn’t let up for another ten to twelve days. Not what you wanted to hear, I’m sure. But chin up! Help yourself for a coffee or tea and please, of course, let us know if you need anything or have any concerns. We can’t wait to get you back on the road. (176)

The bus terminal continuously moves the goalposts, and gives hope to the stranded passengers only to then take it away. The voice phrases all its announcements with the same uncaring and artificial customer service language, as though the circumstances were anything short of life threatening and inhuman—almost tauntingly. As the situation in Whitefall deteriorates more and more, the emotionally unchanged nature of the announcements and the voice’s invitations to “help yourself to a coffee” (176) that is no longer available become more and more ridiculous and offensive due to the passengers’ devolving conditions. The way the terminal progressively lengthens the expected time left until the storm is over also bears a connection to the suspension of “temporal linearity” (93) Mackenthun finds in monstrous architecture, as does the fact

that by the time the storm does finally end, only one night has passed in reality even though weeks have gone by for the passengers.

The monstrous terminal's goal of inciting the humans into violence quickly begins to succeed and then escalate. After the sixth day's announcement, the narrator and protagonist Kris Stikes, leader of the Minneapolis group, notes that "The room, which had been quietly gasping and cursing during the announcement, became loud and chaotic when it ended" (Walker 171), showing the agitating effects of the terminal's treatment of the stranded humans. Furthermore, much like the absurdity of the terminal's announcements is progressive, so too is the desperate aggression of the passengers worsening. This can be seen through the aftermath of the announcement on day 19—at which point at least one person has died of starvation (175):

Dead silence reigned after the PA shut off. Shocked silence. Appalled silence. Until some guy from Denver broke it. "I have some fucking concerns!" He screamed, and ran full force at the Employees Only door, using his head as a battering ram, again and again. I could see the blood spreading across the metal door from across the room. People sprung up out of their seats, but not to help him. No, they flung him aside and began battering the door. Over and over, piles of people, running into the door, shoving against it again and again. I could hear the metal buckling from the other side of the room. (176)

In this passage, the Whitefall terminal succeeds in causing human "latent aggression" (Mackenthun 94) to come forth by, essentially, mocking the passengers' pain with unfeeling platitudes, and calling attention to the inhumanity of their situation. Furthermore, the aggression it brings forth seems to be a collective, shared instinct that the humans respond to regardless of affiliation. When Stikes walks into the staff room on day 19, he finds out that "There were no drivers here. No one to make the

announcement. There was nothing. No one. So where had they gone? Where was the man who had been speaking to us five minutes ago?" (Walker 177). However, attention is diverted quickly to issues between the passengers, and the matter is never fully explored. In their dire conditions, the passengers are more concerned with their own short-term survival and social/interpersonal conflicts than with the implausible and potentially supernatural nature of the bus terminal that confines them. Partly, it may be that the urgency of the danger of starvation or human violence obscures the more abstract and incomprehensible danger that is a supernaturally-monstrous building. This glossing over of Whitefall's supernatural characteristics may also be part of the "psychic dynamics" (Ng, "Dimensions of Monstrosity" 23) caused by the monstrous space, to the extent that the passengers cannot recognize the mechanisms of the monster in whose belly they dwell.

While in the first instance the aggression is aimed at the monstrous station, this soon stops being the case, as Stikes recounts that "the first murder occurred" (Walker 179) a couple of days later. This first murder, of a man who spies on another of the bus-based factions, is also a display of collective human violence, as all of the people from his group participate in kicking him to death. Stikes describes the murderers as follows:

They were mad with bloodlust, punching, kicking, angry. Angry at their situation, the hopelessness of it, their likely impending deaths. But not at Jeremy, who by now had gone silent. And when the last of them finally ran out of steam and collapsed on the floor next to him, Jeremy breathed his last death rattle. (182)

This passage suggests that though the passengers directed their aggression towards Jeremy, the origin of it was neither Jeremy's actions, nor their group leader's threats of withholding food (181), but rather their situation of "bare life" (Stratton 416) and the mental toll of their inability to stop or alleviate it. Regardless of the cause, this event

marks the first time that collective human aggression results in death. Dillon, one of Stikes's closest allies alongside Mack and Gracie, seems to grasp the severity of this, noting that "Everything is going to be different now" (Walker 182). The progression from directing violence at the space that contains them to directing lethal violence to each other shows the descent of humanity into monstrosity, and highlights that this monstrous transformation of the human is of a cumulative nature. Stikes's description of the crowd as "mad with bloodlust" (182) also suggests a focus on a mental transformation aided by the physical erosion of starvation and confinement, and relates to Ng's claim that monstrous architecture (in his case, he refers to Ballard's *High Rise*) "enables certain psychic dynamics – or more precisely, psychosis – to gradually manifest, monstrously transforming the inhabitants" (Ng, "Dimensions of Monstrosity" 23). As the passengers' bodies and minds become further eroded by the inhumane, all-encompassing conditions of starvation and, now, self-perpetuated violence, their "repressed" (Ng, "Dimensions" 23) monstrous potential emerges.

The human monstrosity that Whitefall brings forth is threefold: socioeconomic inequality and the bare life it leads to, terrorism and violence and finally cannibalism. The first kind of monstrosity that Whitefall brings forth stems from conditions of socioeconomic inequality and conditions of bare life. Whitefall, as a heterotopic space that reflects and twists a multiplicity of conditions outside it, contains a crude, almost allegorized version of the fractured capitalist world of borders and division from whence the stranded passengers came. Although it is the terminal that creates the conditions of isolation and scarcity that bring these dynamics forth, it is the humans who enforce this worldview in the monstrous space. The passengers insist on forming subgroups and affiliations based on what bus they arrived on. They refer to their original companions as "my people" (Walker 161) and "my group" (177), and draw borders and assign territory based not on need but on happenstance, or by force. Mack

is the first to realize what this division into factions and loyalty to imagined communities “conceived in language, not in blood” (Anderson 26) entails. Of it, he says “I was talking to a woman from their group earlier. Went over to ask if anybody had a stamp. She was polite but basically told me to fuck off ... It means that the situation is devolving into every man for himself. More accurately, every camp for themselves” (165). What Mack observes is that, where in the beginning the passengers, collectively, were “all just waiting for [their] busses,” (167) the alignment with origin-based groups threatens that balance and that equality to the point that some groups inevitably attempt to exert power over others. That the groups are named after the city from which each bus arrived to Whitefall only strengthens that connection to national identity, as does the passengers’ escalating tendency to hoard their resources for themselves and their allies at the expense of other human lives that are not, according to them, their “problem” (192).

This adherence to imagined affiliations causes a situation that mirrors the socioeconomic inequality in the real world and the absurdity thereof. For instance, early on the following interaction occurs between Acker—the leader of Kansas City, the most brutal of the groups—and another passenger from a different group: “It’s our vending machine. Use the one in your area.” to which the other replies “Ours only has soda in it!” Acker responds: “So drink a fucking soda” (168). At this point in the tale, when resources are not yet scarce, Acker already declares the resources that happened, by luck, to be near his group as belonging solely to them. Despite resources still being available, Acker decides that nobody else in need should have access to these resources because of a twisted sense of claim to them, and that whatever scarcity the other groups face is their own responsibility to bear. This unequal division of resources mirrors conditions in reality such as artificial scarcity that have much more to do with political matters and capitalism than with an actual global shortage of available resources to

distribute to communities in need (Daoud 1). The words of Emily Pollock (leader of Denver) illustrate this further when she says that “The people who are supposed to get us out of here refuse to open the door. Or even speak to us. They don’t care what happens out here” (168), a comment not only on the bus terminal and its disembodied voice but on the all-seeing, capitalist governments said monster allegorizes.

“Whitefall” also touches upon privilege. Notably, Stikes recounts that “Acker’s group was surprisingly healthy looking and had more men than women or children. The other groups, even mine, were pale and tired. If he wanted carpet and a couch, he could have them” (Walker 178). This quote highlights the privileged position that Acker’s group enjoys: that they are healthier and stronger, and thus can afford to enforce their desires when the other groups cannot. Later, it is found out that the reason why Acker’s group is healthier and stronger is because they began to secretly cannibalize the dead before any other group had. This highlights firstly the importance of privilege when it comes to power and to survival, and secondly the insidious leeching off an equal’s life force for one’s own gain that characterizes both capitalism and cannibalism.

Acker exemplifies the “decoupling of monstrosity from appearance” (“Invisible Monsters” 260) that Weinstock sees in contemporary narratives of monstrosity. Despite being just as human as all the other passengers, Acker becomes a monster as he terrorizes his peers with intimidation and violence, and challenges their moral positions. A prime example of this is how Acker is the person that orders the violence that results in Jeremy’s murder (Walker 180). So while it is Emily Pollock and the Denver bus faction that beats Jeremy to death, they do so under Acker’s orders and threats of violence. In that sense, Acker plays the role of enforcer and could be read as a “proxy” to the monstrous terminal, “acting out the monster’s whims to extend his influence; or which may be the monster himself” (Balanzategui 150).

Much like the unfeeling, inhuman bus terminal, Acker cannot be reasoned with or dissuaded into forgoing violence. For instance, when the Denver group fails to keep their side of a trade, the following interaction occurs between Acker and John Pollock:

‘Stop! Just stop, we will get you what we promised, I swear it!’ John Pollock yelled as a woman held him back and another KC-en took a shot at his ribs. ‘Please, don’t hurt her, I swear, we give you twice what we promised for the books!’

‘It’s too late for that. Denver betrayed our arrangement and Emily Pollock speaks for Denver. Therefore Emily Pollock will take the punishment.’

Acker shoved Emily’s head deeper into the barrel and we heard the hiss of flame meeting skin and the smell of burning hair. (Walker 193)

This passage makes it evident that, for Acker as terrorist, it is not a resolution to the practical problem at hand that is desirable. Punitive, sadistic violence in response to any perceived slight, and the terror that arises from it are Acker’s desired outcomes—rather than merely being brutal means to a practical end. This claim is further supported by Acker’s words to John Pollock after Emily Pollock (his daughter) deflects blame unto him to save herself. Acker says to him: “Once you’re dead, we’re going to eat you. And then we’re going to eat your daughter.” (195), confirming that John Pollock’s life is not truly a trade meant to spare his daughter’s, but an additional source of the terror and violence that Acker seeks to inflict. That it is Emily Pollock who points the finger at her own father to spare her face from being submerged in flames by Acker (193), and that it is the members of the Denver group that kill Jeremy (one of their own) highlights Acker’s role as a harbinger of immorality and violence in others.

These socioeconomic inequalities and terrorism portrayed in “Whitefall” lead to an existence of bare life for the stranded bus passengers. Stikes recounts the situation as follows:

By the 18th day, I realized the baby wasn't crying anymore. We were dangerously low on food. Miles had dropped us to half rations. ... The boredom had really gotten to people. They laid around staring at walls, half catatonic. They begged Miles, keeper of our food, for something to eat. He'd just shake his head every time, not say anything. He looked to be cracking, too. Mack worked on his pages. Dillon drew. Gracie counted almonds over and over again. People played cards. We waited for rescue.

(175)

Stikes highlights not only the rapidly dwindling resources like food, but also the effects of the isolation and physical erosion on the mind. The descriptions of people “staring at walls, half catatonic” and the repetitiveness of their activities highlights a life or survival and nothing else. Stikes describes Miles, a fellow passenger from Minneapolis, as “cracking” (175) and implies everybody else is slowly cracking as well—a word which suggests unrelenting pressure and erosion pushing someone to a final breaking point. The liminality of the passengers’ zombie-like bare life (Newitz 242) is further exacerbated by the fact that their current lived space is one that implies transience and movement, but also one in which they are indefinitely trapped. Thus, the passengers are suspended in a state between being and not, yet clearly progressing towards a transformation.

Indeed, their existence of bare life seems to be key to the passengers’ acceptance of cannibalism. Amanda from the Salt Lake City faction says, “They’re tired. We’re all tired. No rescue is coming. They’ve accepted it. Before long, we’ll all be eating each other” (Walker 191). The exhaustion and hopelessness of the situation, coupled with the undeniable physical need for sustenance creates the perfect environment for the humans’ descent into cannibalism. Stikes argues with Mack that cannibalism “goes against [their] humanity”, to which the older man replies, “Son. Listen to me. We can’t

afford humanity anymore” (197). The use of the word “afford” strengthens the connection between cannibalism and capitalism as well as economic inequality, as the passengers need to leave behind their dignity and their humanity in order to continue to survive. In that way, Whitefall leads humanity to debase itself “to a lower rank in the food chain” (Heise-von der Lippe 219)—similar to what zombies do to their uninfected counterparts. Mack’s crude, possibly sarcastic use of the term “meat stock” (Walker 187) to refer to people in conversation with Stikes highlights this shift, wherein the human life cycle becomes one of self-dehumanization and self-consumption.

As the “ultimate human taboo” (Heise-von der Lippe 224), partaking in cannibalism marks the person indelibly, putting their humanity into question. However, for the stranded passengers this inhumane act that will irrevocably make them monstrous is also the only way to stay alive. As such, it is both an uncrossable line and one necessary to cross, a contradiction that highlights the artificial nature of the lines humanity draws between good and evil, human and monster. The following conversation between Acker and Stikes further cements this:

[Acker:]‘We do what we do to survive. At the end of the day we’re all animals. Would you blame an animal for killing to survive?’

[Stikes:]‘Animals aren’t people.’

[Acker:]‘No. But people are animals. And you’re starting to figure that out. We saw. Last night we saw you. Your people were cutting up that kid in the jets jacket. You’re gonna eat him. It was always gonna come to that.’ (Walker 202)

Acker spells out what the Whitefall terminal seeks to lay bare: that humans, despite thinking themselves civilized and superior to other species, have the same need for survival and the same capacity to commit violence in survival’s name as any other creature—any other monster. Crucially, Acker’s words emphasize a realization in

connection with the physical action of cannibalism, suggesting that a perversion of the human mind precedes the physical, and that this is a process of not only transformation into something but the return of a “repressed” (Ng, “Dimensions of Monstrosity” 23) nature that was always there and from which said transformation originates.

The passengers’ cannibalism also serves to remind them of their confinement to a physical form, and the imperative to respond to the needs of the flesh above and despite all others. Stikes recounts the moment he finally eats human flesh as follows:

But...it didn't matter if I couldn't. Because I had to. I was starving. I was *dying*. Mack died for me. Mel needed me. Our baby needed me. So, I reached over and picked up a chunk [*sic*] of silvery meat. It was well-done and looked like it was cut for a stew. The smell was sickening, but saliva filled my mouth just the same. I set the cube inside and began to chew. It was tough, and tasteless but I still swallowed it practically whole. I took another piece and ate that. Then another and another. Then I was rabid, feral. Fucking *starving*. (Walker 210)

In this passage, Stikes admits that his will and his morals are immaterial to the physical need for sustenance that cannot be denied. When the body’s survival is compromised, its drive to continue living surpasses any lines humans may draw regarding propriety or morality. In this way, cannibalism highlights the importance of the flesh and the body in the human descent to monstrosity. Stikes lists factors such as Mack’s death as attenuating circumstances that highlight the instability of categories like “moral” and “immoral”. That way, Stikes paints the “ultimate taboo” (Heise-von der Lippe 224) as a necessity. In this description of his first act of cannibalism, Stikes alternates between describing it as disgusting, and describing it in terms of food. He calls it “silvery” only to then associate it to “a stew”. He describes the smell as “sickening”, yet remarks that he salivated at it. The blurring of lines and hybridization of previously discrete

categories with regards to morality and monstrosity are again relevant here, as this passage can be seen to present Stikes' hybridization into something neither wholly human nor wholly monster. The way the paragraph progresses from his tentative first piece of human meat to a self-described cannibalistic frenzy gives the impression that this is Stikes's breaking point—the moment when Whitefall's work on him is complete.

While terrorism, socioeconomic inequality and its resulting bare life, and cannibalism operate differently, all of them can be understood as humanity perpetrating its own terrors. The figure of the terrorist, as seen through Acker, is as much a human as a monster. The conditions of bare life in which the passengers find themselves may have been brought about by the monstrous terminal, but the inequalities it allegorizes are human constructions, as are the bus factions and their unwillingness to share their resources. Finally, cannibalism is the ultimate self-consumption, and implies intra-species violence. Seen this way, and much like the whistlers “didn't kill anybody” (Argot, “Bill's account”), the terrors the passengers face in Whitefall are self-perpetuated, and are as much a transformation as a laying bare of an innate human monstrosity.

As mentioned before, part of Whitefall's perversion of humanity into monstrosity comes from the breaking down of human categories of right and wrong, human and monster, in an attempt to hybridize the human into a category crisis. This process starts well before the passengers arrive to the terminal, and culminates in the realization that all humans possess a latent inhumanity—which pushes them to accept the cannibalism described previously. Being that Stikes is both the first person narrator and the last person to succumb to cannibalism, and given that this acquisition of monstrous knowledge is key to the actual transformation, it is useful to examine his path to this realization.

The path begins before Stikes boards the bus that will send him to Whitefall, with his finding out that the girlfriend he is about to leave behind is pregnant (Walker 124)—a revelation that prompts an emotional journey and intentional change for him. This sudden change in Stikes's worldview frames the rest of his journey as he attempts to transform himself into what he understands as a good father for his future child. Notably, Mackenthun makes a connection between fatherhood and monstrous architecture, using *The Shining*—a copy of which Stikes finds in the terminal (Walker 178)—to illustrate how monstrous architecture triggers “the latent aggression stored within the typical American family” (Mackenthun 94). In Whitefall's case, it is this potential aggression in the form of violence and cannibalism that Stikes seeks to keep away throughout the tale. One example of Stikes's attempts at embodying his new role of father is his immediate decision to quit smoking cigarettes on the very day he finds out he is to be a father. On the subject, Stikes says:

A little sedan went by, a father with his toddler in a carseat behind him. He was smoking a cigarette while his baby slept in the backseat. And even though the window was cracked I could see the clouds of smoke drifting back from the front to his sleeping kid. Hell no. That would never be me. I was done with cigarettes. I wouldn't be like that dad. (Walker 134)

In this passage, Stikes molds his behavior according to what he observes and disapproves of: he defines himself in opposition to that which he considers morally reprehensible, and sees behaviors like these (or the refusal to engage in them) as markers of morality or parental aptitude. These are markers of morality that Stikes holds on to but which begin to be tested and eroded once he enters Whitefall. At this first stage, just as his ideas of right and wrong are superficial, so too are the people around them defined by the easily observable. For instance, Mack is initially only known as “Weary Traveler” (128) and Gracie as “Runaway” because of their

demeanors, and they *become* those shallow identities in Stikes' mind to the point that he even calls out "Runaway" to Gracie because he does not know her name (145). Likewise, Stikes and Mack clash with each other due to the latter's perceived weariness, which is portrayed as essentially his only trait up to this point. This initial situation wherein all characters are shallow and anonymous means that Stikes defines himself in opposition to everybody else at first and has no affiliation.

Next, confrontation with an Other leads Stikes and the passengers to define themselves. This Other comes in the form of "Scraggle" (Walker 141), a "methhead" (165) who boards the bus and seeks to harass Gracie. Of seeing Scraggle make his way to Gracie's side, Stikes says:

I started to stand up, hoping to move back to the seat next to her but [Scraggle] was too close. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and glanced back. Weary Traveler has moved up to sit next to her. He saw my intention and nodded at me. He had her covered. ...Weary-Traveler and I exchanged a look that may as well have been a conversation. He would stay right next to her and I was there if he needed help. (141)

Despite having clashed with each other previously, Stikes and Weary-Traveler (soon after introduced as Mack) become instinctively aligned when confronted by an obvious Other, which illustrates that humanity defines itself and its borders in opposition to (the monster's) "difference" (Cohen 7). The shift in alignment is so present that Stikes and Mack communicate wordlessly in what "may as well have been a conversation" (Walker 141), suggesting an underlying, shared morality and instinct to protect according to which Stikes and Mack define themselves, in opposition to Scraggle who seeks to harm and harass. In that light, Scraggle could be read as a precursor to Acker's later terrorism.

Once Stikes and the others become trapped in Whitefall, their previously drawn lines of shared morality and opposition to human monstrosities such as Scraggle begin to be eroded. Acker replaces Scraggle as the main figure against which to define oneself as the terminal blurs lines that Stikes has only just drawn for himself: those between good and evil, humanity and monstrosity. Stikes still attempts to adhere to firm lines and define himself in opposition to Acker, for example when he exclaims “What do you guys want to do? Eat people? Is that it? You want to become cannibals like Kansas City?” (196)—a statement not only about transgressing a boundary but specifically about becoming like an Other. However, Stikes’s moral lines cannot last long in Whitefall as an existence of bare life and violence grinds the passengers down. Eventually, people Stikes considers aligned with him, and who throughout the tale have been portrayed as moral, firm, righteous, and kind; engage in or condone cannibalism just like the Others against whom Stikes attempts to define himself. For instance, Amanda and Mack both urge their peers to use their bodies for sustenance (197, 199). Shortly before Stikes finally succumbs to cannibalism, morality is reversed in a way that places cannibalism as a morally upright position in the situation. Dillon challenges Stikes, asking “Have you ever told Melody that you would do anything for her? ... Would you do anything for your kid?” (209). Dillon’s pointed question implies that in order for Stikes to be the morally upright, ideal father and family man he set out to become at the beginning of the tale, he must commit the unspeakable act of cannibalism—an act in opposition to which he has been defining himself for much of the tale. Cannibalism, once unthinkable, becomes not only a justified method of survival, but a moral imperative according to the lines Stikes himself previously drew regarding fatherhood and family—and he succumbs to it directly after this reversal of morality.

At this stage, Stikes's and his peers' monstrous becoming is nearly complete, and all that is left is for Whitefall to lay it bare in full force. This laying bare is exactly what happens immediately after Stikes has consumed human flesh, when the Whitefall terminal announces that the storm is over and the buses will be leaving "in the next 30 minutes" (211). Stikes describes the sudden return of the electricity and lights as follows:

The power in the station suddenly clicked back on and we were washed in bright, white light. And in it, we could see our crimes more fully. The half-eaten bodies. The pools of blood. The glass. The broken things. Our sunken cheeks and the ribs in our chest. The gray piece of meat in front of me, once my friend. I could see the sinewy strings of muscle. And I ate that last piece right then. Because we were leaving, but I was still hungry. (211)

The passengers' actions, which have long benefited from the cover of darkness, are now revealed plainly and fully. Where once the violence was merely a matter of—as Acker justifies it—"surviving" (203), their actions now regain the status of "crimes" (211) as the light of civilization illuminates the aftermath. Stikes and the other passengers also observe the erosion of their bodies, the effect of the monstrous descent on their outside appearances. Stikes's choice to eat the last piece of human meat reveals that his monstrous becoming is an irrevocable one no abstinence or penance can absolve, as he has consumed one of his own and will be forever marked by crossing that forbidden line. This is the monstrous knowledge that Whitefall imparts on humanity—a humanity, in the passengers case, that can no longer be said to be only or firmly human.

The logical conclusion of the tale is not only that the lines between human and monster are blurry and crossable, but also that the two may not be mutually exclusive, discrete categories after all. Whitefall plunges the passengers into a heterotopic, monstrous space and creates the conditions for their monstrous transformations: a

physical and moral erosion and transformation, wherein the realization that human monstrosity is innate and ever-lurking is paramount to the humans' hybridization and breakdown of categories. The realization is also crucial to Stikes, who despite succumbing to cannibalism (and thereby also becoming monster) survives to tell the tale, and continues his journey armed with the monstrous knowledge Whitefall has forced on him. While "The Whistlers" portrays Ruth, Bill, and Ira's journey as another futile "link in the chain" (Argot, "Part 5"), "Whitefall" portrays Stikes's journey as a lesson of sorts that, apart from monstrously transforming him, aids Stikes's transformation into his role as father. In a way, Whitefall lays bare the reality of the monsters against which Stikes must protect his new family: human monsters, who look and sound just like him, and who he can observe by looking in the mirror.

Conclusion

In "The Whistlers" and "Whitefall", the whistlers' forest and the Whitefall bus terminal are heterotopic spaces that reflect the humans' own traumas, fears, and unconscious (Ng 443), traumatizing them into monstrosity in a process wherein the gradual, escalating, unrelenting erosion of the human mind and body is central. In "The Whistlers", Ruth becomes a monster through a descent into abhumanity—a process wherein the collision of past and present (Cox 339) via the return of past trauma and an existence of constant persecution are major catalysts. Bill, like the passengers in "Whitefall", becomes monstrous by using violence against his peers. Human monstrosity in "Whitefall" is defined by actions and intentions (Weinstock 363). Acker is a monster because he hurts others and takes pleasure in the fact. The other bus passengers are likewise monstrous because they transgress moral and physical boundaries that define humanity by consuming their peers' flesh. The whistlers and Whitefall deprive the humans of bodily needs such as sustenance and shelter, slowly condemning them to an existence of bare life that bears a resemblance to zombification

(Stratton 416). They erode the humans' minds by destabilizing reality and enticing their captives to cross the previously firm moral boundaries around which they define their humanity, through murder, violence, and cannibalism.

In these monstrous journeys, humans take the position of both victim and perpetrator. In "The Whistlers", the eponymous monsters may have once been human, and the monstrous transformation of humans is implied to be both the whistlers' form of reproduction *and* merely "collateral damage" ("Bill's account - Part 2"), making the whistler life cycle contradictory. The humans trapped in the forest are simultaneously helpless bait, as well as perpetrators themselves who murder their peers for a chance at survival. In "Whitefall" it is the humans who resort to violence in response to the incitement of the bus terminal. Likewise, it is the humans who, in their attempt to colonize the monstrous space, recreate an unequal economy that mimics real world socioeconomic inequality—not the terminal, which merely confines and taunts them though with apparent intentionality. Both stories suggest a cannibalistic view of the human species, wherein the human self-annihilates and turns itself monstrous as a response to living through conditions of crisis and trauma—conditions that in many cases can also be said to be humanmade, as with terrorism and socioeconomic inequality.

The bus terminal and the whistlers serve as catalyst monsters to these transformations, seemingly intent not only on turning humanity monstrous but laying bare the innate monstrous potential that humanity often rejects, but which is nevertheless—according to these monsters—a fundamental facet of humanity. These catalyst monsters create the conditions for human monstrosity to manifest itself, both as a monstrous transformation and in the acquisition of a monstrous knowledge through "totalising experiences" (Beville 26) of terror and transgression. In "The Whistlers" the monstrous knowledge is the humans' status as merely bait rather than

predator or prey, and in “Whitefall” the revelation is that humanity carries its own monstrosity from which no individual is exempt. In either case, the monstrous revelations destabilize humanity’s position in relation to monstrosity and to the world: where once humans could think of themselves as predators, or define themselves in opposition to monstrosity, these monsters lay bare the artifice of these categories and hybridize those lines. Interestingly, in both texts the monsters release the survivors once the monstrous process is complete, and this appears to be crucial to their mechanisms. Seen in this light, it is the monstrous transformation of the human and the laying bare of that innate human potential for monstrosity that constitutes these monsters’ *raison d’être*—and not merely human annihilation.

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