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Beyond Boundaries: A Review of *Monstrous Women in Comics*

Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody, (Eds), *Monstrous Women in Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi Press, 285 pages, 2020, ISBN 9781496827630

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This article reviews *Monstrous Women in Comics*, edited by Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody (University Press of Mississippi, 2020). This collection contains fifteen scholarly articles exploring a wide range of examples of female monstrosity as depicted in comics, and how the female characters often become the incarnation of difference by going beyond all kinds of boundaries through their monstrous forms. Within the expansive framework of a transdisciplinary approach, most articles succeed in exploring the dynamics between female roles in comics and the prevailing patriarchal viewpoints and tensions occurring among issues traditionally and stereotypically associated with women such as childbearing, motherhood, beauty, seduction as well as all stages of female sexuality, among other issues.

Monstrous Women in Comics, edited by Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody (University Press of Mississippi, 2020; **Figure 1**) is a collected edition of fifteen scholarly articles, most of them written by female authors (only three male contributors among the eighteen) that explores a wide range of examples of female monstrosity as depicted in comics, and how the female characters often become the incarnation of difference by going beyond all kinds of boundaries through their monstrous forms. In the Acknowledgements section (page ix), editors Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody write that the idea for the collaborative book *Monstrous Women in Comics* came about in May 2016, after they met at a symposium called *Comics and Sacred Texts*, at Haverford College, in Pennsylvania, USA. The working group took form during a conversation about the relationship between sequential art and the sacred, around a question that seems central to all monster studies: what are the ways in which the human imagination projects its fears, anxieties, desires, and ideals, and, for the specific case of this book, how is this reflected in female characters in comics? From my perspective as a Mexican female PhD student currently writing my dissertation in visual metaphors of horror made by women in comics, one of the highlights of this book is that the contributors included are mostly women, resulting in a point of view that comes from female experience rather than just a knowledge or interest in the subject.[1]

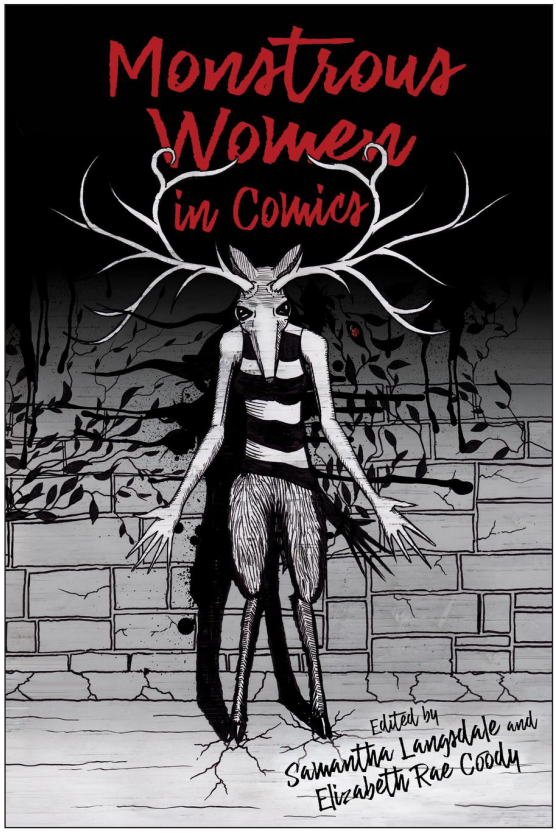

Figure 1: Cover artwork of *Monstrous Women in Comics*. ©2020 **University Press of Mississippi Press.**

[1] The question regarding the number of male and female authors does not arise from a senseless adherence to woke sensitivity or the enumeration of self-identifications or preferred pronouns. I do not question the ability of men to comprehend the topics and discuss them; rather, perhaps their ability to speak from experience (not that one always *has* to speak from experience, anyway). However, in the case of this specific book, it is justified because as societies we have spent many decades not allowing women to speak from experience. The fact that these analyses are conducted by women – individuals who historically had not been able to articulate what it was like to live in a female body— is valuable because it provides the opportunity to witness these female authors observe the issues that female characters are challenged with, which are similar to the ones women face on a daily basis.

In the first two articles of the book, authors Elizabeth Rae Coody and J. Richard Stevens, respectively, re-read female characters such as She-Hulk, Wonder Woman or Harley Quinn within the framework of post-feminist theory and explore the ambiguity with which their power and agency are perceived in the context of a patriarchal society, on the one hand exploited in their image and narrative purpose, and on the other, triumphant as heroic characters. 'Much of the fear surrounding monstrous women in comics springs from their paradoxical nature. When female characters actively choose monstrosity and exhibit agency that rejects normative femininity, they often create powerful tensions in books created by or aimed at traditionally male creators and audiences.' (Langsdale & Coody, 2020: 6) Heroism confronts ideas of the sacred and the profane, the latter represented by the monstrous, and in many cases, a female monster capable of making that difference visible. But, if the female monster makes societal discomfort visible, it is also capable of suggesting real and material experiences for the female body, very different from those previously represented by patriarchal culture.

As the editors state in their introduction, the idea of this volume is not just to 'examine discursive constructions, or to solely explore textual terrain, but also to witness how those constructions correspond to women's real material experiences' (Langsdale & Coody, 2020: 4). The volume examines how it is sometimes precisely this male gaze that perpetrates and establishes female monstrosity; it tries to figure out how and why this patriarchal gaze makes monsters out of women: 'The authors of this volume are specifically interested in patriarchal cultural contexts, wherein men are assumed to be representative of the normative, universal subject such that women frequently become monsters.' (Langsdale & Coody, 2020: 3). For some characters, this monstrosity is a means to escape, a way to repurpose their bodies, or to imagine an exit to the horror that surrounds their gendered roles. This is the case of the comic book *Marginal* (Moto Hagio, 1999) discussed by Tomoko Kuribayashi (p 152–168), where the biomodified posthuman characters can imagine genderless ways of 'producing humans' and thus resignify the iconic and mythical monstrosity that is usually presented around the topic of childbearing. Although it could be a mere example for the case of the intersection of maternity and female monstrosity, Kuribayashi stands out by presenting the reader with two different arguments and close readings of *Marginal*. 'By presenting a new "maternal" being that is a product of genetic engineering and is thus seen as both posthuman and monstrous, Hagio's narrative underscores the traditional intersection of the monstrous and the feminine/maternal (or feminine fecundity)...Or, instead, it can be a technological breakthrough that can counteract and vanquish such sexist fear of, and efforts to contain or even destroy, women...' (Kuribayashi, 2020: 152). Thus, Kuribayashi goes beyond the characterization of the feminine monster offering an alternative reading conveying the necessary complexity around this topic.

Moreover, far from being a compendium of cases of female marginalization; in fact, within the particular context of each case study, the authors offer a reading that contains the potential for a break out for these female characters; alternative exits of imposed norms that, as ambiguous or contradictory as the may be presented, attribute a new meaning to the figure of the female monster and make way to other forms of female existence. '...it is crucial not to collapse a study of monstrous women into nothing more than a survey of degradation and marginalization. As women exist at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and disability, and as representations of women become more monstrous as difference compounds, the potential for escape from damaging cultural norms expands...' (Langsdale & Coody, 2020: 3).

In my opinion the most interesting articles in the collection are those that cover marginal comics traditions or those which little is known about, either because they belong to a time, a place, or a culture far from the Western comics landmarks such as Western Europe, the United Kingdom, or the United States. Particularly valuable to me was the contribution of Marcela Murillo, an assistant professor of Spanish at Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida, and who is originally from Bolivia, a country where more than 40% of the population over the age of fifteen is indigenous.[2] Her article 'The Monstrous Portrayal of the Maternal Bolivian Chola' discusses the culture shock produced by forced Bolivian migration to European values and the resistance that the maternal-monstrous figure of the *chola* exerts over some type of homogenization that seeks to impose itself through the official narrative, disguised as tolerance, inclusiveness and *mestizaje* in Bolivia. 'The chola resists the classification devised by the national project of the twentieth century, and she is marked by her cultural difference. Her otherness is registered in contemporary Bolivian comics as monstrous. Chola femininity is framed as monstrous under the mestizaje gaze' (Murillo, 2020: 149). The author carefully observes the resistance to a European-like behavior and ideals in her home country, while weaving the figure of the *chola* through the ambiguities and values that represent women – particularly indigenous women and mothers -, in Bolivia as well as in most countries of Latin America. On the one hand, they are monsters who represent the otherness of the displaced past, who stand out visually because of their chola-style clothing 'which visually translates into a marker of subaltern femininity' (Murillo, 2020: 142); here, their monstrous character is triply marked, for being a woman, an indigenous woman, and a mother. The interesting contradiction Murillo finds is that while the figure of the *chola* guards her monstrosity with her large skirts and her eager eyes, she is also presented as an empowered and wise superheroine, as

[2] **International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)** Landing page. Available at: https://www.iwgia.org/es/bolivia/3736-mi-2020-bolivia.html [Last accessed 10 February 2024].

in the comic *Super Cholita* (Murillo, 2020: 149), which evidences the ambiguity of the monstrous in most feminine characters: 'The representations of the chola cannot be thought of as only liberatory or as exclusively marginalizing. All dimensions must be accounted for, which lends the perspective that there is not one sole depiction of the chola in comics' (Murillo, 2020: 150).

Another article that captured my interest was the one on the monstrous in the female characters of Kyoko Okazaki's work. In 'On the Edge of 1990s Japan: Kyoko Okazaki and the Horror of Adolescence', Novia Shih-Shan Chen and Sho Ogawa examine the career of this Japanese mangaka whose career came to a violent halt in the 1990s after a tragic accident that left her unable to draw. The subject is in itself compelling because of the way Okazaki uses the comics medium to express the tangled life paths to identity of young Japanese women in the 1980s and 1990s, but before that I would also like to highlight the way in which the authors draw a robust historical context that suggests readings that, while taking into account and using post-feminist and psychoanalytic theories seriously, transcend them and make sure to situate them in the real world. Perhaps this relates to Okazaki's art, which often makes sure to expose male exploitation over women (and thus women's own self-exploitation by making use and exchanging the commercial value of their own bodies) in a context of hyper-industrialization in 1990s Japan. In her work, Okazaki 'signals her conscious authorial intent to reveal the hardships of existence and self-searching in the debilitating social and economic contexts of 1990s Japan' (Shih-Shan Chen and Ogawa, 2020: 191).

It is perhaps this collaboration that best articulates the systemic relationship of the political and cultural present to the production of female monsters by bringing to the table elements such as differentiated manga-reading publics in Japan, specifically the emergence of the *shōjo* subculture (comics for adolescent girls) in which Okazaki's comics were marketed, and how this author was able to play with the anticipated characteristics of her female characters – the purity and innocence that post-war teenage girls were expected to have – introducing elements that question them in a world of patriarchal guidelines: 'Okazaki's works deviate from the conventional portrayal in most *shōjo* manga by drawing attention to the female body, displaying menstruation, the use of tampons, and female sexual pleasure and displeasure' (Shih-Shan Chen and Ogawa, 2020: 194).

This article stands out for its emphasis on not forcing a feminist reading of Okazaki's characters. It is a conscientious analysis that highlights the tensions between female representations in relation to the real situation in which they are produced: 'While a feminist reading of Okazaki's works is tempting, none of the three comics

present strong-willed and powerful female characters. All three female protagonists generally lack agency and capability to counter or disrupt capitalist patriarchy. Yet, it is exactly from this standpoint that we propose to read her works and characters beyond mere representations but in relation to the social and economic backdrop of 1990s Japan' (Shih-Shan Chen and Ogawa, 2020: 201). The contribution of these authors is unveiling the social and economic contexts that regulate the construction of monstrosity in female characters and the paradoxical potential they have to break into the continuum of female identities for readers of all ages.

Finally, I would like to note the way in which this volume is organized, which corresponds to an already standardized format within collected editions within the field of comics studies: a group of academic texts gathered around what seems to be a single theme. Whether it is because they have met as a working group at an academic event or because anthologies produce such synchronicities, this book sometimes incurs a kind of theoretical standardization where, no matter how different the case studies are, they present the same conceptual and theoretical framework, so that in the end it seems that many writers are handling very similar ideas and reaching very similar conclusions. As I mentioned above with the three examples cited, in this type of academic compilations, those articles interested in constructing theory after the thorough analysis of their object of study are far superior to those that construct theory *a priori* and only use comics to exemplify it. Either this happens because the editors have decided to remain open and inclusive or because the academic authors feel pressured to be included in the anthology and seek a topic that may not be suitable for submission to the suggested categories in scholarly collected editions like this one, the latter seems to happen very frequently. Readers would very much appreciate if editors would keep this sort of articles at bay as much as possible.

Monstrous Women in Comics presents great insights. As a collection, it offers extraordinary source material as well as useful methodological and conceptual approaches that are helpful to discuss the case studies it offers. This is a volume that could easily become an obligatory reference for comics scholars, as well as for anyone who is interested in horror and monstrosity in relation to women.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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