

*Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors.* By David D. Gilmore. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 210, preface, references, index, black/white illustrations and photographs, ISBN 0-8122-3702-1, cloth.)

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Volume 25, Number 1, 2003

Négocier la transcendance / Negotiating Transcendence

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/007134ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/007134ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Brodie, I. (2003). Review of [*Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors.* By David D. Gilmore. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 210, preface, references, index, black/white illustrations and photographs, ISBN 0-8122-3702-1, cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 25(1), 265–268. <https://doi.org/10.7202/007134ar>

study. Finally, it displays the way in which the change in economic systems and the resulting economic hardship in Native communities is creatively combated through an evolving tradition and the transference of skills and ideology to an alternate medium.

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***Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors.*** By David D. Gilmore. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. xiv + 210, preface, references, index, black/white illustrations and photographs, ISBN 0-8122-3702-1, cloth.)

To paraphrase Chesterton, the follies of folklore's youth are in retrospect glorious when compared to the follies of our own age. I have, of late, been perusing N.B. Dennys who, in his 1870 work *The Folk-Lore of China*, was fascinated by how an entire nation could adhere to "puerile systems of superstition" (2). As folklore/ethnology progresses through Boas, through Barbeau, through Dorson, through Lacourcière, through Yoder, through Greenhill, such patronising attitudes, one hopes, can be returned to with a proto-nostalgic pride of how much the science has changed. And then I open David Gilmore's *Monsters*. Gilmore, an anthropologist from SUNY Stony Brook whose previous work has included a book on misogyny and one on carnival in Spain, has written a book that is essentially offensive to (since his perspective is purportedly global) everyone.

Gilmore begins by setting out what he defines as a monster: "supernatural, mythical, or magical products of the imagination" (6). Being "strict" with his definitions is a result of how "people everywhere use monster 'glibly' to describe whatever they find loathsome, terrifying, or dangerous" (6). Metaphorical monsters, like Stalin or Hitler, or people with physical defects who were referred to as monsters in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, he explicitly omits, as he does sorcerers, witches, ghosts, and zombies. Monsters, for Gilmore, are those things which he recognises as monsters: gigantic, human-eating, hybridised creatures which are projections of the greatest of human fears.

Gilmore explicitly bases his analysis on “three major theorists: Sigmund Freud, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas” (16), but much of his approach is also influenced by Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In cultural myths, supposedly, heroes are required to defeat monsters, just as monsters are required so that a hero can defeat them. The relationship between hero and monster is believed by Gilmore to be ubiquitous: it is thus made all the more surprising when, in his survey of world monsters, there so often appear monsters without hero. The Ugaritic and Hebrew behemoth and leviathan, for example, have no opposing hero (33-34), and, while “none of the world’s cultures — preindustrial, industrial, or postindustrial — have richer or more diverse monster imagery than Japan” (135), there is no discussion of any Japanese monster-slayers. Much of his theory disappears when it cannot account for something.

Although there are certainly traces of Douglas and Turner through the book (specifically in the concluding chapter when he recalls his framework, and, with Turner, when Gilmore bases his treatment of Ndembu ritual entirely on *The Forest of Symbols*), Freud is the zeitgeist running throughout. The hybridisation is explained as working analogous to the conflation and combination of perceived images into one superimposed structure in dreams; cannibalism, the fear of being eaten, and the unbridled power of the monster are manifestations of the primary sadistic eroticism of the infant; the hero’s defeat of the monster (who is often primordial and antecedent to man) is a perpetual retelling of the Oedipal story; and monsters in general are projections of our guilt, fear, awe, and dread.

Monsters, and certainly the “capital M” monsters of Gilmore’s limited approach, can more or less be explained away by adverting to Freud, and the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* more or less becomes a line in the sand differentiating “us” (the enlightened readers of Gilmore) from “them” (those fools who believe in these sorts of things). If one does not understand them as projections of the psyche, and only that, one needs to be dragged kicking and screaming into the modern era. Then, and only then, can one appreciate monsters appropriately.

The preponderance of value judgments in the text is Gilmore’s primary offence. Of the ancient Greeks: “Instead of dismissing these beings as silly fables, many Greek authors wrote copiously about them, taking them quite seriously. Most authorities corroborated their existence

with whatever evidence they could muster. Apparently, there was a need to believe in them even among the otherwise skeptical" (43). Of India: "even today the danger of attack has not lessened. In the hinterlands of the Hindu world, not only in India proper but in the bordering states of Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, monsters and demons still prowl the land in the minds of the uneducated" (118). Of Polynesia: "One should point out, as an ethnographic fact, that the authors of these collections make it quite clear that these beliefs are still current, even among relatively sophisticated people" (143). Apparently, Gilmore likes the word "even."

A special branch of criticism can be reserved for Gilmore's discussion of Canada and our native population alone. To begin with, he can not seem to grasp the translation of the term "Native American" to north of the border; as a consequence, the United States has Native Americans: Canada still has Indians (75) and, not to be outdone, instead of Inuit, Eskimos (100). One can appreciate his sensitive use of the term in the following excerpt on the Windigo: "So intense is the fear among the local Indians that some whites living with them have come to appreciate and even echo the Indian beliefs — even some sophisticated people" (89). Further: "[Many] other weird creatures inhabit the northland imagination, not only among Indians but also among Europeans — of both English and French stock and both educated and uneducated. Let us peruse some of the eerie folklore of our northern neighbors" (97). On monsters of the Canadian west, he seeks an insight into Canadian psychology:

The folklorist John Napier [...] consigns the Sasquatch to what he refers to as the rich "Goblin universe" of western Canada and northwestern United States, a huge inventory of imaginary creatures, evil demons, and man-eating bogeys said to prowl the northern backlands in search of human victims [...] Perhaps this entire northwestern monstuary is ascribable to the mental effects of the heavy forestation and the misty climate on the cold-addled mind. But who can guess the cause of such imaginings in so enlightened a land? The distinction between native and white lore is negligible. (98)

It must be a tricky balance to write about monsters well: one does not want to betray any notion that one believes in them, but neither does one want to silence or admonish those who do. Gilmore could have benefited from a perusal of David J. Hufford's *The Terror that Comes in the Night* as an example of taking belief seriously. Hufford, however,

was basing his work on his own ethnographic data; Gilmore bases his almost exclusively on secondary sources. (His one contribution comes from observations in the Andalusian town of Fuentes during his work on carnival; ironically, the “monsters” he found are witches and ghosts (161), which he has already excluded from his survey, and which are nevertheless in the context of Turner’s didactic function of the monster in the liminality of ritual theatre.) Furthermore, for a book that has the word folklore (or the *lore* suffix) on virtually every page, he cites considerably few folklorists. One would think that someone so psychoanalytically driven studying folklore would have more than one Alan Dundes reference.

I am compelled to ask why this book was written, and more specifically why Gilmore was compelled to write this book. It has the air of “fun side-project” about it, with all the attendant false starts that might imply. At one point it seems that he is providing background for our continued fascination with monsters, but popular culture serves to illustrate the past, not vice versa. He promises an international survey, but South America warrants less than a page, and Africa is only represented by Turner’s Ndembu study. Sasquatch gets a paragraph and a half, while the story of the Maori hero Tamure’s defeat of the water serpent Kai-whare is given two pages, all of which is taken from the same secondary source (144-146).

There is much out there on monsters, by folklorists and ethnologists and by others, which attempts to approach this topic both sensitively, by respecting people’s beliefs, and inclusively, by studying what defines the monstrous emically and not by some external criteria. Perhaps it is time for a new anthology of monster-lore studies. Certainly, the delicate path of cross-cultural comparison can be trod more lightly than this. Gilmore’s book fails as description, as analysis, and as synthesis. It is a throwback to a time of cultural study one hoped had long ago been eclipsed.

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