

Speaking of the Dead: Analyzing “Mythology”, “Monsters”, and the Power of Matriarchy on Stolen Land in Darcie Little Badger’s *Elatsoe*

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In literature and film, monsters suffer from what Julia Kristeva calls “abjection”: “what disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules.” It is “[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Their disfigurements often leave them adorned with extra limbs; fangs; and wild, lucid eyes that hide in the dark, patiently awaiting their next victim. What remains notable about monsters is their ‘cursed’ nature: many monsters have an appetite for human flesh, as well as blood lust and general insatiability makes them unpredictable and dangerous to the world around them. In the novel *Elatsoe* (2020) by Darcie Little Badger, Ellie, the seventeen-year-old Lipan Apache protagonist, and the land itself act as extensions of one another. This relationship seamlessly flows throughout the story, marking colonization for what it is: monstrous and all-consuming. Colonization in this novel is capable of embodying “the monster itself” that “turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear somewhere else” (Cohen 4) amidst the course of Ellie’s journey as she seeks to solve the murder of her cousin Trevor, reckon with her own inherited powers, and take her place in the matriarchy of her family. The land around Ellie is consistently purged, thinned, reclaimed, and, ultimately, itself made monstrous, left in a state of abjection. In fantasy narratives, monsters “[offer] new perspectives on what is possible” (Baker 444), questioning the way colonizers interpret the land around us, and the stories held in the earth

since time immemorial. As genocide has swept the world in the form of colonization, so too have the monsters transformed from ghost stories on reservations into colonizers who caused the loss of land and knowledge in the first place. Ellie uses “mythology” to navigate the terrain of her colonized Indigenous land. By using her connection to the stories passed down from her elders, she is able to go up against colonial monsters and to listen, understand, and bring to rest the anger of traditional monsters who remain defenders of Indigenous land.

The novel *Elatsoe* is a fantasy where the many legends, folklore, and mythological stories are alive and interconnected. It can be read as Indigenous Futurism, which “is an artistic movement — that includes novels, video games, comic books and more — that explore questions...to reimagine what Indigenous people lived like in the past and consider an unlimited future” (“Indigenous Futurism”). Little Badger uses legends of oral tradition as a point of reconnection with Ellie and her ancestral powers, embracing tradition in order to reclaim the future. Ellie’s background as a Lipan Apache Native is a core focus in the novel. This aspect deepens her positioning as not only a defender of their land but as a young figure in the matriarchy whose sole purpose is to save the world from recurring colonial destruction. She uses her gift of raising the dead and her ability to communicate with the other side through her dreams to solve Trevor’s murder and to uncover and eliminate the dark forces behind it. Her deep admiration for her matrilineal ancestor Six Great, a warrior known to defeat monsters both Indigenous and colonial with her large pack of ghost dogs, allows her to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the other side. Ghosts, like her dog Kirby and her grandmother’s

resurrected woolly mammoth, offer her protection from monsters that threaten to steal Indigenous knowledge and magic. Great Six's story, told as episodes throughout the book, and Ellie's living connection to it, proves that energy in all forms is infinitely connected across the land and the people who protect it.

Throughout the novel, the symbolism of various 'monsters' remains true to the masked disfigurement of colonization, where only the colonized can see past its withering façade. As Daniel Baker says, "[fantasy] becomes just another 'surface' to be overcome, seen through, and shattered: it is false consciousness masking the true, repressive nature of reality" (Baker 443). The novel's main antagonist, Abe Allerton, is a warlock in the American town of Willowbee, Texas; he uses faerie and warlock magic to make him a wealthy and well-known doctor, responsible for "[vanishing] brain tumors", and "[repairing] spinal injuries" (Little Badger 236). Ellie makes clear that, "[he's] not a healer" as "[he] takes money from the sick to make different people sick" (236), an exchange in which her murdered cousin Trevor was unfortunately a part of. Allerton controls the town around him, even phony psychics who "[know] and [owe] him" (126), which work to his advantage in all kinds of warfare including the manipulation of the spiritual and paranormal world. His presence represents the mass genocide of Indigenous peoples and the control of their bodily autonomy through murders tainted by magic. Additionally, the selfish and gluttonous traits of Abe Allerton, ironically, bear an uncanny resemblance to a monster that is mentioned once throughout the novel, the Wendigo.

Ellie alludes to this connection when she says, “Dad. We’re Apache. Wendigo is a monster for the northerners” (67) in response to his warning that “[even] talking about it might invite...trouble” (66). Before even meeting Allerton or treading on the land of Willowbee, Texas, she unwillingly invites the colonial monster into her space. The Wendigo is a Native American legendary monster, often co-opted by non-Indigenous traditions, “that is said to have several skills and powers, including stealth”, being “a near perfect hunter, [knowing] and [using] every inch of its territory, and [controlling] the weather through dark magic” (“Wendigo – Flesheater of the Forests”). Like “a [leech]” (Little Badger 335), Allerton uses generational magic derived from his relative Nathaniel Grace, to drain others’ life forces in order to use them to heal the wealthier citizens of Willowbee. He does so by “[putting] a bounty on the Indigenous, the poor, and the vulnerable” (296), using their bodies as vessels of his greed, believing no one will look for them as he steals their life force or their ‘magic’.

Throughout her journey, Ellie becomes acutely aware of how magic in her land is used in the removal and displacement of Indigenous lives. In trying to solve Trevor’s murder, Ellie has encounters with Euro and Indigenous vampires who serve Abe Allerton that lead her to question what land means to her as an Indigenous woman. All throughout the novel, vampires continue to “[reiterate] a dominant discourse of otherness” (Lenhardt 197), while also being capable of serving as “culturally ultra-adapt-able” (Lenhardt 197) figures. In the case of Euro-vampires, they serve as an ‘othering’ force, while still being bound to traditional vampire laws, including the rule that vampires cannot enter into a home without an

invitation. While Ellie and her mother Vivian are driving past Abe Allerton's mansion with baby Gregory, Trevor's child, a Euro-vampire attacks them. Vivian banishes him by saying that "this is my home, my people's home" (Little Badger 153), asserting her land rights as a Lipan Apache Native. The power of Vivian's Indigeneity allows her to banish vampires from her people's territory, her home. This self-knowledge is seen through the physical disintegration of the vampire as he bleeds "[from] his tear ducts, his nose, his ears...his pores and [how] the pink sweat smoked, as if evaporating" (154). As an official matriarch, she is able to banish the vampire with ease, but the level of knowledge she holds correlates to the strength of her 'magic'. In contrast to her mother, Ellie is incapable of the same 'magic' as her mother because she is not a fully-fledged matriarch—an honour that only comes with wisdom collected through years of experience.

Euro-Vampires are a prime example of colonial monsters in this novel. Their fangs remain a phallic symbol of insatiable hunger, sucking the land dry of tradition and magic, seeking to conquer every living thing. In this scenario, "[the] monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' and 'that which warns,' a glyph seeking a hierophant" (Cohen 4). Desiring ultimate power, the Euro-vampires in the novel hungrily seek out Ellie and Vivian's Indigenous blood, full of traditional knowledge and magic manifested through the concept of blood memory.

Disturbingly, the vampire is all too interested in the blood of young Gregory, because he is young enough to be ripped away from Indigenous knowledge and influence. This specific scene demonstrates how the land is viewed as terra nullius

or “land that is legally deemed to be unoccupied or uninhabited” (*Oxford Languages*). Similarly to the land, Ellie, an Indigenous woman, is territory that colonial monsters desire to conquer and inevitably transform through forms of genocide including residential schools, the murder of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people, and the Sixties Scoop. As “fantasy begins with reality” (Baker 444), this colonial monster is a perfect example of how the genre expertly unmask the horrors of humankind throughout history. Corinna Lenhardt explains that in the case of “other vampires[,] [they] are constructed as opposing agents actively and critically engaging with their own conventional make-up in order to make visible and change the hateful discourse they have been subjected to” (Lenhardt 198). Later in the novel, Ellie attempts to use her mother’s trick to banish an attacking Indigenous vampire named Glorian, to which the vampire replies, “[curses] are strange things Elatsoe. Illogical magic. I have cut ties to all my family and culture but because this land was once mine, it will always be home” (Little Badger 279). Even though the Indigenous vampires are connected to the land they ‘haunt’, the vampires are displaced because of their embodiment of the ‘monstrous’ form. Here, “the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always displacement, always [inhabiting] the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again” (Cohen 4). Ellie’s encounter with the vampire’s curse not only “raises uncomfortable facts about dispossession and colonization” (Little Badger 155), but the long reigning topic of blood quantum and genocidal displacement within Indigenous communities. She views him as a settler because of his pale, monstrous appearance, which are typical physical

characteristics of vampires she has come across before. His body and his vampirism read as European. Upon further examination, the main issue with Glorian and his monstrous body is “its propensity to shift” (Cohen 5). Not only between former human to vampire, but from suspected European descent to Indigenous heritage, a history in which they share much to her surprise and brooding concern. In other words, this monster’s “ontological liminality” (6) or “refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’” is what brands Glorian and his fellow monsters as “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist to include them in any systematic structuration” (6), even within their own communities they belonged to in their former lives.

Additionally, vampires in the novel represent how colonial structures thrive just underneath the surface of the town of Willowbee. Similar to the function of vampires in *Elatsoe*, Nina Auerbach cites Stephen King’s novel *Salem’s Lot*, which cleverly introduces “a Dracula without pattern or rationale or rule-giving elders”, where “vampires are so abundant that there is no Dracula” (Auerbach 156). They know no bounds, living a life that is free of restraints or hierarchal structure of any kind. While the vampires in *Elatsoe* are not considered to reside at the top of the food chain as bodyguards of Abe Allerton, they are numerous and unafraid of being banished from a land they claim as their own. In some cases, they still belong to it because of their Indigenous heritage which cites blood as belonging even in the form of the living dead. They are a part of a silent system thriving just under the noses of everyone around them, which easily connects to how Willowbee as a colonial town encourages its residents to turn a blind eye to any form of dark magic. Auerbach

quotes what King said as he wrote *Salem's Lot*, that “[he] was thinking about secrets, things that have been hidden and were dragged into the light”, adding that “the thing that really scared [him] was not the vampires, but the town in the daytime, the town that was empty” (Auerbach 157). What Auerbach draws attention to in these vampires correlates with the way Little Badger’s vampires reflect the reality of how colonization functions in the lives of the Indigenous peoples in Willowbee. This connection is especially so when discussing Trevor’s death, and how the quiet town of Willowbee works together to erase his murder and, by doing so, treats him as a mere statistic. The vampires that run around masterless in this novel are the population that refuses to acknowledge every life as equal. To understand that even while they may not be committing murders themselves, the silence they provide in a small American town makes them just as complicit in the dark magic that demands the deaths of minority populations. While the monsters introduced in this novel are not entirely new, they bring to light the way genocide continues to function in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Even as “[the] anxiety that condenses like green vapour into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, [the] revenant by definition returns” (Cohen 5). Much like the relentless presence of vampires and other monsters in the novel, Cohen’s quote suggests that colonial structures and beliefs continue to reemerge as quickly as they are diminished. The connection between the shapeshifting qualities of vampires and colonization work in perfect symbolic symmetry as a structure that takes up space, land, and populations of people through numerous forms.

Near the end of the novel, Ellie is faced with a seemingly impossible task of reckoning with the ghosts of colonization's gruesome past and present. As Colleen E. Boyd and Coll Thrush say, "Indigenous people are more than metaphors in the settler imagination, or silenced victims of removal. Rather, they are active participants in the shaping of uncanny narratives as a form of both resistance and persistence" (12). In *Elatsoe*, Indigenous peoples are the protagonists, highlighted by their relationship to the fantastic, driving the topic of decolonization to the forefront. When Trevor's ghost emerges, he paints colonizers in a way that displays the layers of their atrocities. He describes them as "despicable leeches...Young and old...[who've] suckled upon centuries of suffering" (Little Badger 296), even proclaiming that "[they] are worse than vampires" because at least "[cursed] men drink blood indiscriminately" (296). The institutions of colonization are still very much alive whether that appears in the fantastic or through the mouths of emissaries. In our society, haunting "is a constituent element of modern social life.... it is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a social phenomenon of great import" (Gordon qtd. in Boyd 185). Through the mouth of Trevor's emissary, he notes that even in death colonial structures "still [desecrate] [Indigenous] bodies and [legacies] with hideous magic" (Little Badger 296), requiring haunting as a necessary reminder that the past is not dead.

Ellie makes sure that readers know that despite her 'happy' ending, there is still much to learn from 'myths'. Her story goes against the notion that "all fantasy 'begins with a problem and ends with resolution'" (Attebery qtd. in Boyd 443). While Allerton proposes that "[history] is intrinsically malleable" (Little Badger

328), Ellie knows that even if recovery is possible, the violence of colonization is far from forgotten in Indigenous stories. This lingering violence is demonstrated through Trevor's character remaining dead and the grief that follows the acceptance of his loss and others left to come. At the end of the novel, Ellie has saved Willowbee and her world from Allerton's magic, but she knows that new monsters will inevitably take his place throughout her lifetime and beyond, as "they always return" (Cohen 20) in countless forms. Her decision to continue working towards becoming a paranormal investigator after her big save reiterates how the presence and return of monsters "[brings] not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but [how] they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the outside" (Cohen 20). After all, monsters offer teachings that humans cannot, continually unveiling a world that is heavily mirrored through their impulsive, unpolished instincts.

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