Monstrous Reproduction
*The Power of the Monstered Maternal in Graphic Form*

A thesis submitted
to Kent State University in partial
Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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March, 2017
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Vera Camden for her guidance and feedback on this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Tammy Clewell and Dr. Sara Newman for participating on my thesis committee and providing incredibly helpful responses and questions to address in my research.
Introduction: Seeing Monsters, Seeing Women

In *One Hundred Demons* cartoonist Lynda Barry reflects, “...I knew a lot more about monsters than I did about people. Monsters were understandable...Monsters hardly ever started out as monsters. Something always transformed them” (Barry 92). Barry’s understanding of monstrosity as transformative and relatable is important. The birth of monsters into our consciousness, their transformation into something uncanny that we both recognize and reject needs to be examined closely. Like Barry, many of us are fascinated by monsters, but they are particularly appealing to those of us who feel like outsiders. A long list of groups and individuals have been deemed monstrous in an effort to relegate those beings and their bodies to the margins. Women, in particular, have a unique history of being made monster and have come to embody monstrosity outside of the shadows nonhuman Others have often been forced to inhabit. Comics and other visual media have carved a space for monstrosity and for women’s experiences that relays perhaps better than any other medium the importance of looking at monsters.

As Julia Kristeva notes in *The Powers of Horror*, the womb is often depicted as and understood as simultaneously repulsive, threatening, and desirable. Images of maternity and womb-ish places permeate our popular culture, but with very minimal recognition. Perhaps there is such cultural resistance to stories about monsters like these because they run the risk of causing a self-reflexive aporia for the viewer. These beings unveil the longstanding rhetoric of control that patriarchal social structures depend upon in order to police the possibilities of not only women’s bodies in terms of personal agency, but also of sexuality and reproduction. Because they are often unable to reconcile their own space in the world, these monsters help
unveil the complexity of attempting to exist in alterity when dominant culture cannot conceive of shifting from binary divisions of being.

Patriarchal anxieties about and resistance to women’s embodied power has pushed women into the margins with the monsters. Catherine Silver draws upon Freud’s well known theory of penis envy to posit that resistance to women’s reproductive power and the desire to regulate and control women’s bodies as womb envy. Silver’s essay “Womb Envy: Loss and Grief of the Maternal Body,” Kristeva’s theories of abjection and the maternal, and various threads of Freud’s theory of the uncanny are key underpinnings in this research.

A number of feminist scholars have discussed the connection between women and monsters. Perhaps most notably, Donna Haraway’s recognition of the relationship between women and monsters in Simians, Cyborgs and Women continues to be a powerful testament to the necessity of polymorphous perspective to begin to better see and understand conventionally “othered” individuals and groups. She notes, specifically, the importance of monstrosity in helping to shift our cultural perspectives saying, “simians, cyborgs, and women...have had a destabilizing place in the great Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives. These boundary creatures are, literally, monsters, a word that shares more than its root with the word, to demonstrate. Monsters signify” (2). Our cultural fascination with monsters is (de)monstrative; it exposes how routinely and ritually we rely on monstrousness to insure what we call normal. It is time to look more closely at the stories of the monsters among us.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” serves as a guideline for the possible ways that monsters can expand our vision. Cohen’s list of “breakable postulates in search of specific cultural moments” highlights that monsters are culturally significant because
they embody difference\(^1\) (4). In line with the discussion Haraway begins, Cohen notes that

> The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond-- of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic social (7).

Cohen considers monsters as symbols and while I too examine the symbolic roles of nonhuman monsters in stories, I also look closely at the “normal” bodies that rely on the identity “monster” to tell their real stories.

> Not all of the stories I investigate are explicitly about women. However, the presence of what Barbara Creed aptly defines as the “monstrous feminine”\(^2\) and explicit images of reproduction and the womb are present and essential in each of the texts I discuss. I have limited my consideration of monsters to those found in stories about reproductive bodies, who share the following three key characteristics: (1) They are visible and visual in nature -- they demand to be seen and to see. Unlike some of the creatures of the night from classic horror, these creatures may have been born in a shadow world, but they all desire to come into the light; (2) They identify as monsters yet perform as humans -- these beings are called or call themselves monsters, but often perform identity within normative and limited humanist boundaries of the civilized “Man,” which often leads to a harmful, fractured sense of self or even to death; (3) Their experiences are infused with the maternal -- hopes for, fears of, and attachment to womb--as both real organ of reproduction and as symbol of fecundity; images and experiences of reproduction

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\(^1\) The seven theses presented in “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” are: “The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body,” “The Monster Always Escapes,” “The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” “The Monster Police the Borders of the Possible,” “Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire,” “The Monster Stands at the Threshold...of Becoming” (Cohen 3-20). I find each of these theses to be relevant to the discussion in this paper, however, there is simply not time to delve into each.

\(^2\) Creed notes in The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis that the monstrous feminine is markedly different from a female monster because it is a figure that performs very particular roles associated with femininity/womanhood such as pregnancy (see Creed pp. 3)
propel their stories. The monsters I discuss are often “en-wombed” they find themselves both revealed and revolted by their own reproductive capacity. I seek to investigate, then, how this connection to and identification with and repudiation of monstrosity influences larger cultural discourses about reproduction, identity, and agency in society.

Visual stories about reproductive bodies, however marginal, depend upon symbolic, and sometimes literal, representations of the womb and emphasize monstrous reproductive bodies to invite engagement with the product of a patriarchal rhetoric of dominance intended to erase bodies. Comics, in particular, offer a powerful lense through which to view monstered maternal figures and spaces. Women have been made monsters often against their will, but the visual narratives I discuss from the 20th and 21st carve a space for self-proclaimed monstrosity as a call for visibility of monsters as powerful agents with multidimensional identities that must be seen and understood. This paper focuses on representation of the monstered maternal in comics, but also considers other narrative modes when important. Discussed in this paper are the comics of Phoebe Gloeckner (A Child’s Life), Brian K. Vaughan (Saga), and Alan Moore and John Tottleben (The Saga of the Swamp Thing). These texts beautifully and painfully exhibit the fracturing of self that can occur through embodied experience (e.g. child birth, menstruation, and sex) and highlight the uncanny sense evoked when the womb, both literal and symbolic, is represented as a powerful reproductive space. My argument will be that these texts depict a monstrous body that is both enveloped and explosive; enclosed and engendering. I argue that monstrosity allows these authors to take up the reproductive bodies that mainstream comics such as Fun Home (Alison Bechdel), Persepolis (Marjane Satrapi) often obscure as they gain acceptance in a culture that distorts women’s capacity to reproduce.

After a brief historical discussion about one of the origins of monstrous mothers in visual
culture, I will examine how feminist comics creators pushed back and subverted the use of the maternal body and monstrosity as a means of reclaiming agency in the 1970s and beyond. Then, I will develop an understanding of psychoanalytic understandings of the womb. Finally, I will consider the long-standing connection between women’s reproductive bodies and the reproductive body of the Earth in order to consider how our continued anxieties and desires to police and regulate the womb are influencing the ways we impact our natural environment. This section, focused on a discussion of Alan Moore’s comic Swamp Thing is the beginning of a much larger discussion about the harmful justification of the policing of both human and nonhuman bodies through the patriarchal language of dominance that has seeped into so many of our social spheres of knowing.

There is a pressing need for the opening up of this discussion. The rhetoric of control and of policing the body are all around us. The womb and women’s reproductive powers have been frequently undervalued under the guise of religious and moral motivations. The social reality, however, is that clinging to a misogynistic, Humanist “world order” to preserve the illusion of Man as inherently more powerful, and more valuable than woman, is faltering. Preserving this structure requires a denial of any identity that falls anywhere beyond binary categorizations, which is dangerous. The eruption of voices in our current social moment is making it nearly impossible to silence difference (though some are fighting desperately to do so). To admit the power of women’s (reproductive) bodies in our social discourses threatens to overturn a history of dominance “for our own good.” Dismantling the rhetoric of dominance and regulation that envelops and consumes women’s lived experience would open up connections to a long lineage matriarchal power. Reproductive bodies are often obscured in favor of frail, hungry bodies whose power is destabilized. Furthermore, breaking down this lexicon of control, opens the door
for additional productive contestations regarding what identities “count.” Mainstream images and stories may fail to account for women’s embodied power, but by looking at monsters and listening to their stories, we can begin to expand our vision.
Mothers Imagining Monsters: The Maternal Imagination and Monstrous Embodiment

The link between monstrosity and the maternal can be traced through history, particularly through western archives. At least one of the origins of some of the lasting connections (connections that remain in depictions of the maternal throughout the 20th and 21st century) between women and wombs as abject and monstrous in western culture. Before literacy rates grew to standardized proportions, graphic communications were a mode of reaching large audiences. In Elizabethan England, broadside ballads were mass-produced for consumption by the public. The pamphlets frequently featured woodcarving illustrations and are early comics\(^3\). The style of the ballads is similar to some of the independent comics from the 1970s that I will show later in this paper, but, importantly the spirit of the two forms is markedly different. The Broadside ballads warned against moral faltering, whereas the spirit of the comics in the 20th century and beyond have been used predominantly as spaces of revolutionary dissent and protest.

\[^3\] According to Scott McCloud’s definition of comics as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” in *Understanding Comics* (18). Though the ballad above is not a grid layout like the comics we are used to seeing, the deliberate interaction of text and image to convey a message is comics form.
Ross Hagen’s article “A Warning to England: Monstrous Births, Teratology and Feminine Power in Elizabethan Broadside Ballads” provides an excellent example of one of the aforementioned ballads (Hagen 23). “The Forme and Shape of a Monstrous Child” was distributed in 1568 in London and illustrates is a baby with what we now understand to be birth defects caused by any variety of medical or developmental complications (Hagen 23). During the 16th century, the monster was “a divine reminder of social boundaries” (Hagen 27). The babies were a cultural fascination as was their status as monsters. The label “monster” applied to anyone who did not fit the able-bodied human criteria normalized in society. The purpose of monstrosity, as a warning and a demonstration, closely aligns with the cautionary purpose of monstrosity that Cohen describes.

Every monster is...a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster
serves. The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot -- must not -- be crossed (13).

I will return to this idea of being double, or more than double, when discussing the maternal according to Kristeva. In this context, though, the ballads certainly worked to reinforce the boundaries of the possible. What these publications actually managed to do, though, was to exclude from society those figures who might shed light on the power of women as not just reproductive bodies, but as generative and psychically powerful.

When reporting monstrous births, the specifics of the babies’ conditions were meticulously traced to various moral failures in the parents, but special attention was paid to the influence of the mothers in incubating and infusing these “monsters” with their own moral depravity. Hagen explains the criticisms faced by the mothers or “producers” of the deformed babies and says:

The accounts of human birth deformities also contain a specific critique of women who defy the social order either through their actions or through impure thoughts. Julie Crawford notes that these ballads often draw parallels between birth deformities and specific individual behaviors, especially those concerning legitimate marriage and childbirth, literally marking the mother’s sexual and social indiscretion in the flesh of the child (24).

The perceived transmutability of the child by way of the womb solidifies an important historical connection between monstrosity and motherhood and also illustrates a pre-psychoanalytic anxiety about the womb as abject. It seems that there is an anxiety about the merging or blurring of inside and outside that inspired the creation of these ballads. Despite the lack of “advanced”
medical knowledge, the womb was certainly perceived as unclean because it was a part of the female body, marked by original sin and marred further by menstruation. If the mother’s mind could influence the “product” of her womb, then it was to be detested as a monstrous space that destabilized the boundaries of internal and external, mind and body, pure and impure.

The ballads envisioned and warned against what might result from breached boundaries, but paid little attention paid to the fact that women were considered so powerful that they could will into existence beings beyond previously imaginable forms. According to Kristeva the abject is historically perceived in religious transgression. She notes that when the abject is linked to sinful behavior “it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness--but always nameable, always totalizable.” In other words, there is a powerful resistance to engaging with or acknowledging the abject because it calls into question all comfortable, “normal” boundaries. When authoritarian systems, in Kristeva’s example the Church, attempt to name and totalize the abject and the uncanny, the intention is to disempower its source. As she explains, however, and as is evident in the persistence of later stories of monsters as symbols of agency for women, naming the abject, or attempting to purify it leads to representation of the abject through art. Representation only encourages its proliferation, which means the “truly” abject cannot actually be harnessed and purified for elimination (17).

Kristeva’s understanding of the maternal as abject will be discussed at length in the next section of this paper, but to understand the historical ties between the maternal and the monstrous it is key to note that an acknowledgement of the power of women’s reproducing bodies risked and still risks disrupting systemic control over the construction of ideal, subservient subjects through the preservation of a rhetoric of ownership over women’s bodies. The power to produce a moral aberration through a monstrous birth is still power to defy
subjective boundaries and push back against the boundaries of self or mind and body set forth socially and politically. The amount of power that is suggested in claiming that a woman can wholly regulate the product of her womb through not just her physical behavior, but also through her mind, is starkly contrasted by the insistence that women were inferior in mind and body to men.

Before these ballads became a regularly circulated cultural product, women had already been monsters in stories for centuries and their monstrosity is often linked to their motherhood. It seems fitting, then, that women in society were presumed to possess the same characteristics as their narrative counterparts. Of course, stories about male power, perseverance and strength were far more common, so what better role for a woman to fulfill (outside of a subservient maid) than as the monstrous foil to men’s heroic perfection?

Hagen looks closely at the scholarship of Ambroise Paré, a French surgeon in the 16th century who outlined all of the ways that women might run the risk of producing monsters. In particular, Paré emphasized the use of specific Biblical passages to consider why society was witnessing an increase in the birth of “monsters.” Paré focuses primarily on apocalyptic warnings as evidence. He notes that “2 Esdras 5: 8-9 states that the end of time will be presaged by beasts ‘changing places’ and ‘menstruous women [bringing] forth monsters’” (Hagen 28). The apocalyptic focus of Paré’s theories solidified a connection between women’s bodies and monstrosity that has prevailed. Among many other theories, Paré asserted that a child conceived during a woman’s menstrual period was more likely to be born monstrous (Hagen 28). The link

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4 Grendel’s mother in Beowulf, for example, comes to mind here. She is a monster, but upon close reading she is unbelievably sympathetic when understood as a mother mourning the loss of her child. Also see “Tereus, Procris, and Philomela” in Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Shakespeare’s reinvention of elements of the tale in Titus Andronicus. In these stories women consume or kill their children in ways that seem monstrous (taking monstrous to mean inhuman) only because of the restrictions placed on them and their roles as mothers.
between women’s bodily processes, as well as the anxiety surrounding the ability of women to be both inside and outside simultaneously, will be revisited later in this paper. The importance of it here, however, is that women were represented as monster makers, as the group singularly capable of producing that which would destroy humanity, and as the members of society who were most apt to demonstrate God’s dissatisfaction with his creations to the world. Women’s bodies become documented breeding grounds for monsters. Ultimately, this historical example serves to set a rough starting point for the ongoing connections between what Kristeva later discusses at length.

Through attempted representation of abject bodies as cautionary examples, as Kristeva suggests, monsters persisted beyond these publications. Perhaps the most important example of how art proliferates and resists purification of that which is perceived as abject is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Shelley is frequently and lovingly called the “Mother of Monsters.” However, her role as producer of monsters and as a harbinger of our gazes at one very iconic monster shifts the status, if only retrospectively, of women’s ties to monsters. She is keenly aware of the power of monsters and ultimately resists the derogatory affiliation between her reproductive capabilities and morality. Though she creates a monster through Dr. Frankenstein, Shelley as a writer exercises the same kind of psychic manifestation of monstrosity that the Elizabethan ballads warned against.

In her introduction to *Frankenstein*, Shelley first addresses doubts regarding her ability as a woman to create such a story, but, what is most interesting is that she deliberately emphasizes the absence of herself in the text. She writes “It is true that I am very averse to bringing myself forward in print, but as my account will only appear as an appendage to a former production, and as it will be confined to such topics as have connection with my authorship alone, I can scarcely
accuse myself of a personal intrusion” (1). To insist in the first paragraph of her introduction that she has intentionally avoided inserting herself in the story contradicts the later remarks she makes about its origins. She partially attributes the development of *Frankenstein* to her husband, but her language insists a kind of psychic reproduction that brought the now canonical novel into reality.

Shelley recalls some of her first experiences with writing and explains that it was both an escape and a way in which to construct identities that were not hers. She says, “It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered” (2; emphasis added). Interestingly she attributes the birth of her ideas to writing in a space of total solitude. She is only able to tell her “true” stories when she is safely outside of the boundaries of “civilization” in the country and in nature. She goes on,

I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes of wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age than my own sensations (2; emphasis added).

Again, Shelley emphasizes that she is not within her stories, but simultaneously says that she is the creator breathing life into the embodied accounts of her psychic children. She is aware of her limitations in life, likely because of her gender, but she affirms that she is not “confined” to her own identity, to her own body. Perhaps this is why we are given a bodily composite character in *Frankenstein* through which to understand the manifestations of a vivid mind living in a restricted body.
Her early experiences of writing as a way of constructing alternate identities set us up to understand how she came to create Frankenstein’s Monster. After explaining that she set out to write a ghost story because of Lord Byron’s challenge, Shelley tells readers that she simply could not come up with a story. But then, after hearing discussions of advancing science, she briefly imagined how a corpse might be reanimated. The same night, she says that she could not sleep. She was consumed with her reflections from earlier in the day. She recalls,

I saw--with shut eyes, but acute mental vision--I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. Frightful it must be, for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist… (5)

To see “with shut eyes” introduces the recurrence of vision as power in stories about women. Also, it emphasizes the importance of seeing the unimaginable. What Shelley describes above is a confrontation with the uncanny. Rather than turn away, Shelley chooses to look more closely at the monstrous in her own mind. By looking, she is able to manifest on paper a creature that defies possibility, but who possesses incredible knowledge. Frankenstein’s Monster is required to live in silence for much of his life, which creates a harmful separation from him and the “normal” world. The lessons that the monster has to teach are often overlooked because of the horror of his body. Despite Shelley’s protestations that she does not appear in her own stories, it is difficult to ignore the striking connection between the silenced experience of women because of their bodies and the silenced experience of the monster as aberration in Frankenstein. Surely
there is no better author for the horrors of embodied otherness than a woman like Shelley who was brilliant, imaginative, but, ultimately, limited by the signs attached to her body.

Shelley’s remarks on her writing are important to an understanding of how an awareness of the limitations placed on women because of embodied power did exist, even if the awareness could not be explicitly named. Additionally, *Frankenstein* is an important extension of the increased medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth that began with the documentation of monstrous births and continued to the decline of midwifery in favor of obstetrics in the early 19th century (McDermott 6).

In “Birthing Rhetorical Monsters,” Lydia McDermott discusses the continuation of the Greek myth of Metis as it appears in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The myth is one of the earliest written examples of what is later defined as womb envy. In the myth, Metis, whose name stands for “rhetorical and embodied intelligence,” is pregnant with Zeus’s daughter Athena. Threatened by the potential for Metis to give birth to an equally intelligent and powerful woman and overthrow him, Zeus swallows Metis and gives birth to Athena himself (McDermott 3). McDermott questions why all powerful Zeus needed to swallow Metis. Her answer is that “In swallowing Metis, Zeus swallowed the one power he could never have: the female power to give birth” (4). This early myth of the desire for not only women’s reproductive powers, but also their knowledge, something that is outlined through Metis’s character as unique and desirable, demonstrates what is evidenced culturally in the broadside ballads and later in Shelley’s novel.

Throughout her essay, McDermott focuses on how perceptions of the maternal imagination, the ability for women to impact the conditions of their womb and the physical and mental state of their offspring through their minds, has evolved. McDermott explains that
theories of the maternal imagination evolved and were solidified in medical rhetoric as obstetric manuals were published. She notes that

One prevalent concern with these new obstetric texts was the production of monsters (Kukla; Fissell)... Echoing classical medicine... in which the woman’s womb was depicted as a wandering desirous animal, the obstetric writers of the eighteenth century portrayed women’s bodies as dangerous (McDermott). Their danger was located both in the womb and in the brain (organs analogously related at the time). Doctors and philosophers of science were concerned with both the womb’s influence over the mother’s desires as well as the mother’s imagination and its influence over the womb (6).

Here we see an extension of the myth of Metis and also the historical cementation of a need to regulate women’s bodies, especially their reproductive processes, medically and eventually legally. The womb is paid specific attention and is seen as an entity that is both within the woman’s body, but is also an independent agent. The reciprocal influences of woman’s mind and womb continues to spurn anxiety about the powers of women’s bodies. McDermott also recognizes Shelley’s awareness of the power of her imagination saying “Both conceiving women, Metis and the woman subject to the theory of the maternal imagination, exhibit power to transfer their imaginations to maternal embodiment, a discourse Mary Shelley draws on in her Introduction” (7). McDermott’s discussion of Shelley and of early literary examples of the theory of the maternal imagination demonstrate that there is power to be found in women’s experiences and this power is threatening.

All of these early examples highlight the development of the perceived need for practices of control in order to preserve patriarchal systems. Citing Rebecca Kukla, McDermott notes
By the 1820s male-dominated obstetrics had virtually replaced female midwifery, and the theory of the maternal imagination also fell into the realm of folklore or ‘old wives’ tales’ (Bewell; Kukla). Despite the fact that the scientific world of medicine had discredited the theory of the maternal imagination by the nineteenth century, pregnancy advice manuals as late as S. Pancoast’s 1865 edition of the *Ladies’ Medical Guide* were still advising women to avoid frights and overactive imaginations, lest they deform their developing babies (6).

This means that just over 150 years ago, medical documents still supported ideas generated in Greek mythology and emphasized in Elizabethan moral code. And, as I will demonstrate in examples of later comics, patriarchal systems of control are still dependent on these flimsy theories intended to police thoughts and bodies.

From a different perspective, it is possible to view these stories as instances of female power that was almost realized. Of course male control generally comes in to prevent fruition of female power through reproduction, but beginning roughly with Shelley’s novel there is a visible shift in the use of monstrosity in stories about reproduction. The tendency to associate women with monstrosity in an attempt to obscure their power, as we will see in comics from the 20th and 21st century, has been reclaimed to emphasize the power of reproduction through monstered embodiment.
In “Womb Envy: Loss and Grief of the Maternal Body” Silver revisits Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” in order to better define the envy of the feminine jouissance, as defined by Kristeva, as womb envy. She explains that the sense of the uncanny, or the abject that is repeatedly tied to the womb and to women’s subjectivity is a form of male anxiety about and resistance to the unknowable and unattainable experiences of female embodiment. Silver outlines the prerequisite knowledge for understanding womb envy in her terms:

Two points are relevant to our discussion of womb envy: first, the consistent and uniform visions of the womb as a menace to the social order, and, second, the feminization of hysterical symptoms as a result of modernity. In these formulations, the womb...is like a wandering bodily affect that had to be controlled by social institutions and symbolic systems, disciplined through self-restraint, and experienced as internalized fears and anxieties of castration, maternal power, and female eroticism (411).

Silver goes on to say that

In traditional psychoanalytic theory, women have been described as wanting the penis/phallus and the power it symbolizes. However, much less has been said about men’s desire for woman’s power of pregnancy and childbirth and its effects on the psychic economy of men and women and society at large. Even less consideration has been given to a rethinking of subjectivity beyond the binary categorization of Self/Other, male and female (411).
The fact that so little has been said about womb envy denotes a careful cultural protection of patriarchy. It is deemed nearly unimaginable that a man would desire feminine power. From Freud’s perspective, an awareness of a connection to the womb evokes the uncanny, and so anxiety. Recalling the first “home” within the mother’s body is within our consciousness, but the specifics are indeterminate, uncanny. Therefore, there is a desire to control the womb to stave off the return of this uncanny feeling that threatens to arise in men who cannot return to the safe space of the womb (Freud 17-18). Thus, the womb remains one of the most compelling symbols in our cultural lexicon. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva states that “To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about and effect and not yet a sign” (10). That which is perceived as abject, in this case, the womb, influences corporeal responses of anxiety and fear because the sign itself cannot be returned to or wholly reconstructed. Ultimately, the desire to resist contact with the abject, which is motivated by this corporeal resistance, is handled through impulse to control it through repression.

Kristeva provides the framework that allows a psychological understanding of womb envy in men and the consequential efforts to control the womb and women’s bodies. She explains that abjection arises from “narcissistic crisis.” She observes that

It is precisely at the moment of narcissistic perturbation...that secondary repression, with its reserve of symbolic means attempts to transfer to its own account, which has thus been overdrawn, the resources of primal repression. The archaic economy is brought into full light of day, signified, verbalized. Its strategies (rejecting, separating, repeating/abjecting) hence find a symbolic existence, and the very logic of the symbolic -- arguments,
demonstrations, proofs, etc. -- must conform to it. It is then that the object ceases to be circumscribed, reasoned with, thrust aside: it appears as abject (15)

The womb and symbols of it appear as abject in patriarchal systems of power because the narcissistic observer fails to ascribe the object that is outside of himself to himself. No matter what, as Zeus discovered with Metis, there is no way for a man to directly possess the reproductive power of women to give birth, but there are ways to assert power by denying the importance of women’s embodied experiences.

Second wave feminism responded assertively to the need to represent embodied power in women. Resisting the notion that female bodies are abject spaces, feminists, particularly artists strived to put new subjects in front of the male gaze. Aware of the abject and monstered qualities ascribed to their bodies, women, in the spirit of Shelley, used their history of exclusion as monsters to tell compelling stories. Underground comics were a particularly generative space for representation, identification, and catharsis through monstrous embodiment for women.

*Wimmen’s Comix* was created by Trina Robbins and an all woman group of comics creators in the early 1970s as a response to the exclusion of women’s voices in a male-dominated underground comics movement. *The Complete Wimmen’s Comix*, which collects all issues of the comic, was released in 2016. Each story showcases women’s experiences honestly and directly. Until the formation of The Wimmen’s Comix Collective, women existed in comics and some women cartoonists had produced mainstream work, but, for the most part, as Robbins says in the introduction to *The Complete Wimmen’s Comix*, “The big problem, if you were one of the few cartoonists of the female persuasion, was that 98% of the cartoonists were male, and they all seemed to belong to a boy’s club that didn’t accept women” (Robbins vii). The publication of *It Ain’t Me Babe* (the first issue of what would be re-named *Wimmen’s Comix*) in 1970 made
visible those stories, the “grotesque” and “extreme” experiential accounts of being a woman that had long been denied representation in the mainstream.

Women cartoonists after the publication of *Wimmen’s Comix* are aware of the power of female bodies and of the strength of visual representation. They dare to reclaim monstrosity to represent themselves and other women and create careful and powerful reversals of identity hierarchies. They push back against the ideals established in the Broadside ballads and beyond, often in raw, bold style and demand to be seen. These comics shine a bright light that extends to the margins where monsters, women, and monstrous women live.

Among the contributors to *Wimmen’s Comix*, is cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner. She tells stories that are gritty, uncomfortable, and explicit. Though she has just a few featured stories in *Wimmen’s Comix*, Gloeckner has also published a number of works independently. *A Child’s Life*, which collects some work originally published in *Wimmen’s Comix* and *The Diary of A Teenage Girl* are perhaps her two best known books. She has come under some scrutiny for her illustrations of sexual experiences, particularly instances of sexual abuse, but she maintains the position that stories are most effective when they are shown without a filter. In an interview with Gloeckner in *Outside the Box*, Hillary Chute asks “What do you think about your work being labeled obscene or pornographic” to which Gloeckner replies:

> I think my work is not at all pornographic. I think that I’m just drawing life, and at the times where sex is important to depict, I depict it. I never felt at liberty to pick and choose anything else but what seemed important, and I don’t judge it, but I certainly have felt judged a million times. I guess I’ve become inured to it. I’ve been accused of doing things just to be provocative, which is bullshit (123).
Gloeckner’s response, speaks to the unique ability for comics to show and tell. Comics creators, even those with an art style that is more hyperbolic or “cartoony,” often rely upon a careful understanding and representation of reality to effectively tell stories. Gloeckner often tells stories that have roots of some kind in personal experience. Her stories deal with sexuality and abuse in ways that are difficult to stomach, but that are important examples and points of identification for women and men. The scale of her drawings is as extreme as the content; one image often fills an entire page unlike many traditional “grid-style” linear comics. There are also elements of hyper-realistic human-ness that registers as monstrous. In a number of instances she draws on the link between monstrosity and women’s bodies to convey the experiences of being pregnant, abused, or feeling desire both visually and in her textual narrative. All of the things that women struggle to find visibility and voice to express, Gloeckner captures in her comics.

Gloeckner addresses the abject directly and pushes us to confront what disgusts and horrifies us. Her work suggests that if we stop telling the stories that are hard to stomach, then we lose something about the reality of being a woman in this world. The uncanny monstrous is both familiar and repulsive to us and it is inescapable once in our vision (Freud 10-11). In The Monstrous Feminine Barbara Creed explains that “Even if we do look away -- as do many spectators -- we still have a fair idea of what is about to happen. Such scenes satisfy a morbid desire to see as much as possible of the unimaginable...before we are forced to look away” (29). Film as a visual narrative device, in many cases is more conducive to voluntary “breaks” in vision. And, at the very least, audiences in theaters know that the lights will come up and they can (imagine that they) leave what they’ve seen in the theater when it’s over. Comics, however, are intimate visual experiences in a different way. Because comics form is often un-real, we fill in details that the artist doesn’t insert by embodying the figures in our own minds. This causes
not just a confrontation between story and reader, but also a temporary inhabitation of the character by the reader. This can cause not just an interrogation of a reader as a spectator, but also incites careful reflection of reader-as-character.

In “The Sad Tale of the Visible Woman and Her Invisible Man” from A Child’s Life5, which is a short sequence of full page images, Gloeckner hybridizes realistic human characteristics and the monstrous in order to emphasize physicality. The comic tells the story of a woman who becomes pregnant and is abandoned by the child’s father. The monstrous pregnant woman that Gloeckner renders on the page looks nothing like a traditional cinematic monster, but, as Creed suggests even if we look away, we can’t really unsee the woman that has just infiltrated our vision, and, we don’t really want to.

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5 “The Sad Tale of the Visible Woman and Her Invisible Man” was first published in Wimmen’s Comix.
Excerpts from “The Sad Tale of the Visible Woman and Her Invisible Man” from *A Child’s Life* by Phoebe Gloeckner

The nameless woman’s body in the comic is distinguishable as human, Gloeckner even labels internal organs reminding us of her history as a medical illustrator, but her ghastly expressions, grotesque disproportions, and heavy, bulging, stretched body conveys her trauma and emphasize how her body is the focal point of her life rather than the betrayal and abandonment she has suffered. All of the background characters are overly simplistic, faceless, without identity, but she is in vivid detail. The Visible Woman, ironically, is only seen as a body, but not as a person.
The increase in visibility from outside observers does not correlate with a deepened understanding of her position.

This comic demonstrates that the maternal is monstrous. However, in this case, a woman is confronting her own perception of maternity as monstrosity. The Visible Woman is defined wholly by the presence in her womb and is burdened by her own body without relief. The female body is depicted as monstrous as a cathartic imagining of the embodied experience of being pregnant outside of a socially accepted model of familial organization. This representation runs counter to the pervasive mythos about the glowing pregnant body which insists that women, since biologically able to give birth, are all happiest when they are with child. Gloeckner is able to show with very few words that the reality of pregnancy is that the female body is carrying itself and someone else simultaneously. Without a system of support and with only acknowledgement of the baby carried inside her womb, a woman who feels like a “gal in trouble,” would likely experience the same sense of alienation and fear that is depicted in the comic.

As monstered body, the Visible Woman breaches the boundaries that Cohen insists monsters usually do, but also, illustrates Kristeva’s understanding of the anxiety that occurs when inside and outside are no longer discernable spaces. The Visible Woman abjects the product of her relationship with The Invisible Man that exists within her. Kristeva explains that

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength, when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject (5).
Her pregnancy and the baby within her womb are the impossible that are made up of her and not her. In order to reconcile the inescapability of the other within herself, The Visible Woman decides herself as abject. The space of abjection, leads to dejection and exile.

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing...he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations (Kristeva 8).

The Visible Woman’s experience of self abjection is painful and cathartic to witness. The image of a monstrous pregnant body rejects the notion of the ever-glowing mother to be and offers women a point of identification that may feel truer to their experiences than what they find in pregnancy books or even what they hear from other women. Kristeva repeatedly uses the term “power” when discussing the abject. Though there is an attempt to rid ourselves of the abject, the confrontation with ourselves that the abject invites, she asserts, is almost unavoidable. The power in Gloeckner’s work and what I see as a cathartic expression, comes in refusing to turn away in repulsion from what appears to us as abject.

Witnessing the abject womb of the Visible Woman is unavoidable. Gloeckner draws the womb as an open cavern with a peaceful baby floating inside its blackness. Kristeva argues that...

...in very maternal fashion, the desire for the abject...insures the life (that is, the sexual life) of the man whose symbolic authority she accepts. Very logically, this is an abjection from which she is frequently absent; she does not think about it, preoccupied as she is with settling accounts (obviously anal) with her own mother. Rarely does a woman tie
her desire and her sexual life to that abjection, which, coming to her from the other, anchors her interiorly in the Other (54).

For the Visible Woman, her abjection of self, ultimately preserves the life of the man who has impregnated her. Rather than perceiving his body, which is wholly outside of herself and outside of her vision, as abject, she turns inward remembering the infusion of his body to hers, resulting in the child she now carries.

For readers, looking at the womb and the Visible Woman as a monstered body, we have the option to perceive the abject and expel it through our body, but we have already seen it. As Kristeva continues, “But devotees of the abject...do not cease looking, within what flows from the other’s ‘innermost being,’ for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” (54). The maternal body asks to be seen. Interestingly, though, Gloeckner, an experienced medical illustrator, chooses not to draw the womb in great detail. Instead, she emphasizes the organs pushed to the edges of the body around the womb and the face of the woman and child. The womb itself shows the umbilical cord that anchors the baby to the mother, and the vaginal canal are depicted, anticipating the birth to come. It is perhaps the psychological unimaginability of the boundary-breaching quality of the womb that prevents a detailed representation of it, but it is more likely that the anatomy is left out in favor of emphasizing the cause of the woman’s distress, the pregnancy and the baby that will be born.

Gloeckner’s work reminds us how the experience of reading comics prevents looking away or denial in ways that another medium like film might allow. To be sure, there is always a desire to look at representations of the unimaginable, but the corporeal symptoms of fear and horror certainly make it tempting to turn away. Comics can only be ignored after they have
already been seen. If you turn the page to an image like those in Gloeckner’s “Sad Tale” shutting the book will only prevent close study, but the image is so bold and so telling that it will have likely already imprinted itself on your mind. It seems to say, “you might as well look.”

The womb as abject space, is also a space for self-analysis, particularly for women. Kristeva notes “That abjection, which modernity has learned to repress, dodge, or fake, appears fundamental once the analytic point of view is assumed” (26-27). In other words, reflection and analysis are required in order to come through abjection and into cathartic relief or understanding. She goes on, “One must keep open the wound where he or she who enters into the analytic adventure is located -- a wound that the professional establishment, along with the cynicism of the times and of institutions, will soon manage to close up” (27). This speaks to the infiltration of patriarchal control over embodiment and vision. The visible womb, when confronted in representations like Gloeckner’s, runs the risk of unveiling the complexity of reproductive bodies and identities. To analyze one’s own relationship with the maternal, with the womb, would be to delve into the open wounds of the mind and uncover the power of the maternal buried beneath constructions of patriarchal dominance. Kristeva urges for analysis and for keeping the wound/womb open. In order to see beyond abjection, to find catharsis, and to open up understanding of embodied experiences, images that invite us inward are imperative.

Kristeva explains the painful but sometimes deceptive catharsis of entering the womb/wound by stating:

For the unstabilized subject who comes out of that -- like a crucified person opening up the stigmata of its desiring body to a speech that structures only on condition that it let go -- any signifying or human phenomenon, insofar as it is, appears in its being as abjection.
For what impossible catharsis? Freud, early in his career, used the same word to refer to a therapeutics, the rigor of which was to come out later (27). Catharsis, though relieving, is painful and it requires work. Psychological desires to avoid reminders of the unreliability of the borders of our identities are powerful, but moving past the deceptive nature of abjection as something to avoid is absolutely critical to developing a deeper awareness of the self and of others.

The power of the monstered body as generative outside of human reproductive is clear in this story. Gloeckner’s poignant illustration of abjection of self through pregnancy in “The Sad Tale” allows readers/viewers to see the open wound/womb and enter it. By staring at the uncanny space that is both familiar as our first home as living beings and also unimaginable as it exists inside some other body, we can find deeper understanding about the embodied experience of women and the powerful multiplicity of reproductive identity. By choosing to depict the reproductive woman’s body as monstrous, Gloeckner demystifies pregnancy and opens up a traumatic relationality with identity and the maternal that may very well be buried within our own unconsciousness.

Despite this powerful invitation to see and to understand, the sense of dejection that occurs through self abjection for The Visible Woman, speaks to a persisting representation of pregnant bodies as bound to male-dominated systems of bodily control. What Kristeva notes as an unconscious preservation of the Other’s body, leads to abjection of self for women and a perceived continuation of control for men’s non-maternal bodies. The maternal continues to be associated with the abject despite efforts to change representations. In later feminist comics, the maternal is depicted similarly to Gloeckner’s early art. For example, Craig Thompson’s Habibi⁶,  

⁶ Habibi is fantastic further reading and will be included in my expansions of this research. The scope of this project does not allow for a lengthy discussion of this intricate and complex comic.
emphasizes the experience of pregnancy for one of the main characters, Dodola, and essentially recreates the image of the Visible Woman.

Thompson’s representation of pregnancy empowers the feminine body in a way that, Gloeckner’s work does not. *Habibi* depicts the alienation of self that occurs for women during pregnancy, but from perhaps a more compassionate position. Though there isn’t an indication of direct influence, Thompson’s independent status and the “underground” style of his work nods to comics creators like Gloeckner. Because the abject womb has been represented and seen, abjection can be understood from more empathetic and complicated positions. Dodola’s pregnancy in Thompson’s comic is the result of sexual interaction with a character who embodies misogyny; she subsumes the abject through sex, but her identity, though fractured, is not completely lost from herself as it appears to be for the Visible Woman.
From Craig Thompson’s *Habibi* (106)

I was a lumbering giant in that final trimester—

--purple streaks cracking across my stomach--

--a bloated belly dragging the rest of my body on its back--

--my real self buried in layers of fat and aching bone.
Dodola even says “--my real self [was] buried in layers of fat and aching bone” (106; emphasis added). Her identity through pregnancy is compromised and she feels a sense of alienation, but she does not experience the level of self abjection that Gloeckner illustrates. Though from the woman character’s perspective, her body is not her own, it is monstrous, she understands that there is a subjectivity within the monster that she can return to. Monstrosity is not cathartic for Dodola or for the Visible Woman, but both examples insist upon a visual engagement with monstrosity as a road to cathartic understanding for readers. Habibi points to a significant shift in the perception of pregnancy as monstrous. Though there is certainly an awareness of abjection and trauma, there is also more emphasis on jouissance through pregnancy. The pregnant body is empowered here, and in other comics, in a way that allows for shifts in understanding and empathy for women and their lived experience.
Resistant Wombs: Shifting Abjection and Displacing Control Through the Monstrous Maternal

Kristeva’s theory of abjection opened the door for reconsiderations of womb imagery across genres of literature and film. Abjection, of course, lends itself best to images within horror stories, but, as I noted in my discussion of Phoebe Gloeckner, the monstrous in the ordinary can be uniquely horrifying. Monsters are represented visually in a number of mediums and they are prevalent in comics, but the monstrous maternal body has been addressed in fascinating ways in film as well. In line with the discussion of monstered maternal bodies in comics that I’ve begun, I have observed important extensions of Kristeva and, later, Catherine Silver, in film. This section first discusses the film *The Brood* as an extension of the research begun by psychoanalytic film scholar Barbara Creed and then considers connections to the contemporary comic *Saga*. Though comics are static and film fills in the gutter between images seamlessly, both, as explained by Kristeva, prevent complete expulsion of the abject once it has been introduced as possible.

Creed’s definition of the “the monstrous feminine” in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* is key in understanding shifts and evolutions in representations of monstrosity and women since at least the 1960s and even earlier in some cases. Independent comics like *Wimmen’s Comix* or the work of Phoebe Gloeckner, like the horror films Creed investigates, are marginal. For both horror films and comics, peripheral spaces were also the most generative locations for more resistant and complex representations of women through
monstrous embodiment. For Creed, the monstrous-feminine is not simply a female monster. She writes:

I have used the term “monstrous-feminine” as the term “female monster” implies a simple reversal of “male monster.” The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase “monstrous-feminine” emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity (Creed 3).

As the women in Elizabethan culture were targeted for their sexuality, the monstrous-feminine is often marked by hers. Interestingly, the terror evoked through the monstrous-feminine, which relies on the theories of abjection outlined in my last section, is often more easily regulated or stopped than male monsters. This speaks to the history of monstering as control of women’s bodies and offers opportunities to re-envision monstrous reproductive bodies as reminders of maternal power.

Monstrous-feminine figures are significant potential site for identification. Discussing the work of Linda Williams, Creed explains that the woman audience member and the monstrous-feminine share a “similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing.” She goes on to note that according to Williams, “Both are constructed as ‘biological freaks’ whose bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality. This has important implications for the female spectator. ‘So there is a sense in which the woman’s look at the monster...is also a recognition of their similar status as potent threats to vulnerable male power’” (6). The identifying look at the monster is notable in film and comics and offers a sense of empowerment and unification for
real women seeking a means through which to escape and resist patriarchal systems of control over their bodies. Creed’s entire body of work is fascinating, but for my purposes, it’s important to look at how the maternal monstrous-feminine in horror film offers a means by which to instill the abject in the viewer without an abjection of self in the monstered body. This turn from catharsis through identification with self alienation to catharsis through witnessing the embodiment of monstrous, reproductive and sexual power in the maternal is a notable mode of resistance to restrictive myths of the feminine as impure and abject.

Kristeva’s theories of abjection are crucial to Creed’s work which focuses on how abjection occurs or works on viewers in terms of boundaries of identity, “mother-child relationship,” and “the feminine body” (Creed 8). She situates the abject by saying that “The place of the abject is ‘the place where meaning collapses,’ the place where ‘I’ am not. The abject threatens life; it must be radically excluded’ from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (9). For women, the abject is abundant in their bodily experiences. Because childbirth, a notably feminine experience, in particular, is rife with all of those materials we attempt to deny or turn away from (blood, feces, vaginal fluid), women themselves are viewed as abject objects that must be relegated to the “outside” of normative society. That is, Creed suggests, why the monstrous-feminine is so often deemed monstrous for her sexuality.

There is a particular emphasis on the images of abjection that occur in horror films. This important link between the visual and visceral experiences of repulsion applies to comics form, as evidenced in the earlier discussion of Gloeckner’s comics. Creed writes:
In terms of Kristeva’s notion of the border, when we say such-and-such a horror film ‘made me sick’ or ‘scared the shit out of me.’ we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a ‘work of abjection’ or ‘abjection at work’ -- almost in a literal sense. Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure…but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, to throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator’s seat) (10).

Audiences can attempt to block their vision, but their inevitable corporeal response to horror insist an awareness of the fragility of the boundaries of their identities.

*The Monstrous-Feminine* examines a number of maternal figures, but pays special attention to the appearance of the abject womb in David Cronenberg’s 1979 film *The Brood*. As Creed explains, the mothers in films like this, with the exception of the alien mother from *Alien*, are depicted as normal human women. Their monstrosity is always revealed through transformative experience (as Lynda Barry understood at a young age⁷). The mother character Nola from *The Brood* is an excellent example of this. Nola’s instability is understood through the hushed conversations between her male psychologist and husband, but we see very little instability in Nola herself until the climax of the film.

Notably, a review of the film by Roger Ebert describes *The Brood* as an “el sleazo exploitation film” that is “disgusting in ways that are never really entertaining” (Ebert). For something that was reviewed as “reprehensible trash,” the film has quite a significant body of scholarship to support its significance. Admittedly, the film is not masterfully executed, the acting is melodramatic, and the killer children who pop up (birthed from an external womb as a

⁷ Recall Barry’s reflection on Monsters in the introduction of this essay from *One! Hundred! Demons!*
product of Nola’s rage) are more comical than sinister. However, Nola is undeniably powerful because of her role as the monstrous-feminine.

Nola has a traumatic past. The repression of her rage towards her abusers (her parents) is deep, but when she receives treatment from a questionable, experimental “psychoplasmics” facility, Nola accesses her rage and pain and manifests it outside of herself by birthing a brood of nonhuman children to act out her repressed desires. Nola signifies the catharsis of analysis that Kristeva encourages by entering her own womb/wounds, her traumatic relationship with her mother (Kristeva 27). She manifests and expels the psychically abject in physical form and forces those around her to confront it.

When Nola’s husband, Hal, discovers that Nola has been reproducing abject minions, he sets out to stop her in order to protect their human daughter. In their final confrontation, Nola, who is dressed in white, with beautifully done hair and makeup under an ethereal light, raises her arms to reveal her external womb to her husband. The reveal is shocking, but reads as an incredible assertion of strength and power. Not only is Nola undoing biological possibilities, but also she is proclaiming that she can generate her own power through her body without a need for her husband, a fact which horrifies him, and which is intended to shock and horrify the audience. This moment for audiences, at least on a subconscious level is both visually disgusting -- not only do we see Nola’s swelling, veined external womb in full view, but also her body is covered in pustules threatening to burst, all of those “things” that should stay inside the body are in our direct line of vision -- and psychologically disconcerting. We are confused. How can she produce without fertilization of her eggs with sperm?

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8 Considering this, Ebert’s review seems derived from male anxiety about the power of a woman who can produce children without a man.
The conventional reading of women who dismantle the need for men is that they incite anxiety in male audiences because they tap into a subconscious fear of castration. Freudian psychoanalysis suggests that men perceive women as mutilated (castrated) men and so they represent the ultimate other and the ultimate source of anxiety. Creed addresses the fear of the castrating woman as presented by Susan Lurie.

Lurie challenges the traditional Freudian position by arguing that men fear women, not because they are castrated, but because they are not castrated. Lurie asserts that the male fears woman because woman is not mutilated like a man might be if he were castrated; woman is physically whole, intact and in possession of all her sexual powers. The notion of the castrated woman is a phantasy intended to ameliorate man’s real fear of what woman might do to him (Creed 6).
Lurie’s assertion is important because it connects all the way back to Elizabethan notions of the (im)purity of women. Because women were seen as in touch with external and internal simultaneously, they were, and are, perceived as somehow less clean than men. It follows then that the perception of women as whole and complete without the need of a phallus to concretize the space of their identity as definably split between inside and outside would create a sort of identity crisis among men. If a women’s bodies are not simply malformed or mutilated copies of men’s bodies, then that would allow women to stand in power without the support of a male counterpart to make her “complete.”

In Nola’s reveal, the womb as abject is vividly presented. The already uncanny space of the womb is made abject when it literally breaks the boundaries of the possible by existing and proliferating on the surface of Nola’s body. Creed explains that

The fact that the womb is still represented in cultural discourses as an object of horror tends to contradict the argument that the reason for this is ignorance. A more probable explanation is that women’s wombs -- as with her other reproductive organs -- signifies sexual difference and as such has the power to horrify woman’s sexual other (57).

Catherine Silver’s discussion of womb envy confirms this assertion. She writes that “The fear of women’s hidden powers and women’s invisibility is captured in the oscillation between seeing/not seeing that is at the center of a visual technoscience culture” (Silver 413). Nola makes the mysterious and invisible womb wholly visible, which, for her husband and for her doctor, is unimaginable. Despite all of their level-headedness throughout the chaos of the film, a confrontation with Nola’s womb renders both of them impotent. Silver notes that the complexity of womb envy comes to light when absence is revealed.
Woman’s sexuality is seen as an absence or lack, a “hole in men’s signifying economy” in Irigaray’s formulation. The hole becomes defensively filled with the language of penis envy, creating a negative space in relation to the phallus that provides a paranoiac reassurance for castration anxiety (Irigaray, 1998, pp. 79-80). At a deeper level men’s fears hide the unconscious wish to be a woman and the disturbing feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability that arise in young boys in relation to their powerful mothers (413).

Nola evokes this vulnerability and inadequacy when she realizes her embodied power. She exemplifies the risk to patriarchal control if women are allowed to access the womb and find catharsis through it. Interestingly, the men who go through the same treatment as Nola, only become sick to the point of near death. They cannot fully process their traumas the way that Nola can. Her unique power comes from her position as maternal and monstrous-feminine.

Sadly, what has the potential to be an incredible feminist triumph, is clearly not intended to be admired. Nola’s power is quickly dismantled and the emphasis shifts to Nola’s senseless violence and stereotypical feminine hysteria. She is without reason and must be stopped (controlled). When she is eventually murdered by her husband, audiences perceive his actions as both necessary and heroic. Her death offers a return to misogynistic control.

Cohen suggests that “the monster’s destructiveness is really a deconstructiveness: it threatens to reveal that difference originates in process, rather that in fact (and that “fact” is subject to constant reconstruction and change)” (15). Nola’s revelation of sexuality independent of a male partner forces a confrontation with sexual difference, while simultaneously shattering the perceived gender roles that are constructed by it. Nola’s rage, her desire, acts as both womb and phallus. She is, then, a figure that defies categorization. She is not truly man or woman, but a composite monster.
The highly visible abject womb in *The Brood* marks a shift in possibilities for representations of reproductive bodies as powerful through monstrosity. The intense anxiety that Nola’s power evokes is explained by the womb envy that the men around her experience. Despite the film’s concession to patriarchal dominance, a small opening appears in this narrative that paves the way for further considerations of not just embodied power, but also of the regulatory practices over that power that is spurned from envious desire for reproductive power.

*Saga*, a comic series created in 2012 by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples, is aware of the power of the maternal, but also remains conscious, on some level of the inscription of abjection on the womb. The series is comprised of a diverse cast of characters, which includes an extensive list of monstrous mothers. *Saga* further expands the sliver of space that is created for reimaginings of maternal power through monstrosity in *The Brood*. Though the forms of these stories is different, both appear in similar spaces. *The Brood* is a marginal film, considered popular among horror aficionados, but obscure in the mainstream, whereas *Saga* is a well known series, but is published by Image comics, an independent publishing company with an intentional, progressive political message. *Saga* features a monstrous, hybrid between a human woman and a spider named The Stalk. Her bold revelations of body and sexuality are reminiscent of Nola at the climax of her power.

The Stalk first appears in the woods as a threat to Marko and Alana, the two main characters of the series. Despite a set of eight eyes and missing arms, The Stalk possesses a mystical beauty, which is further emphasized by the glowing moon behind her. Alana is shocked to see her in forest, but The Stalk, at first, says nothing. She stands confidently with bare breasts in the moonlight staring straight ahead. After it is revealed that The Stalk is a Freelancer who has

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9 Celebrating 25 years of publishing, Image comics has devoted each month of 2017 to a different cause. In March of 2017, 100% of the proceeds of 11 variant issues of Women’s History Month comics was donated to Planned Parenthood (Salazar).
been sent to track and kill her, her skirt is lifted to reveal the lower half of her body which is composed of spider legs with human hands. The underside of her pale body, her spinneret and abdomen, is darkened into a pinkish tone, drawing attention to the space where her human genitals would appear. She is holding a holster, which mimics a chalice beneath her spinneret/vagina, which is indicative of her femininity and her womb.

 Saga Volume One, Chapter 2

The Stalk breaches boundaries of the imaginable, which makes her simultaneously desirable and horrifying. Interestingly, The Stalk as spider, is indicative of the archaic mother that Creed analyzes in Alien. Creed challenges Freud’s notion of the pre-Oedipal mother to consider the mythological maternal through Kristeva. She notes that Kristeva introduces the “fecund mother-as-abyss” which appears in Alien, and, it is apparent, in Saga. Creed says that
“Kristeva discusses the way in which the female body is constructed as an ‘abject’ in order to keep the subject separate from the phantasmatic power of the mother, a power which threatens to obliterate the subject. An opposition is drawn between the impure fertile (female) body and the pure speech associated with the symbolic (male) body” (25). The Stalk is representative of the archaic mother and also embodies the idea of the mother-as-abyss. Her monstered body is neither wholly woman nor wholly Other and her reproductive organs are emphasised. The Stalk, as a kind of archaic mother is a figure of matriarchal power that threatens to dismantle patriarchal order.

The Stalk seems directly linked to matriarchal origin myths. Creed recalls the myth of the Spider Woman, an origin story from the North American Indians. The Spider Woman “...spun the universe into existence and then created two daughters from whom all life flowed...Within the Oedipus narrative, however, she becomes the Sphinx, who also knows the answers to the secret of life but, no longer the subject of the narrative, has become the object of the narrative of the male hero (26). The Stalk is an uncanny reminder of the archaic mother who possesses infinite knowledge. She demonstrates the significant shift away from matriarchal order to patriarchal control through the revelation of her abject womb. Her reproductive body, in fact, is what ultimately weakens her character, in some ways, into object position.

The Stalk’s monstrosity empowers her, the affirmation of her human reproductive process is the destabilizing element in her short running narrative. When the question of reproduction is raised during a sexual encounter with her human male partner, we are reminded of the vulnerability and impotence that was stirred in Nola’s husband Hal. The Stalk is killed within the first volume of Saga. She dies during a mission for work and her partner and ex lover The Will obsesses about her. Memories of The Stalk infiltrate his mind and he even hallucinates
her presence. He remembers that during sex in her spider web The Stalk had cried out “oh god...I want to have...your babies...” to which The Will replied “What now?” (Vaughan). The Stalk angrily denies that she was serious, but gets up and walks away saying “I’ll get myself off” to emphasize that she doesn’t need him, though her dramatic exit denotes attachment. The Will is ashamed reflecting on this moment, but the impossibility of her reproduction is guaranteed in that she is only a memory, a persistent, but unreal phantasm.

The phatasmagoric nature of the archaic mother is something Creed discusses at length. She explains that

What is common to all of these images of horror is the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole that signifies the female genitalia which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path. This is the generative archaic mother, constructed within patriarchal ideology, as the primeval ‘black hole,’ the originating womb which gives birth to all life (27).

The Stalk, though somewhat human in appearance, is a monster and the potential ties between her monstered womb and archaic maternal power threatens to generate further feminine power. Like the Spider Woman myth, she does not need the phallus to attain power, and her offspring would likely be women, to allow the return and proliferation of the Spider Woman in this story would hav unimaginable consequences for a society driven by men.

What is more promising in Saga than in The Brood or in other comics about the monstrous maternal, is that feminine power does not disappear with the loss of The Stalk. Though she is symbolic of a matriarchal mythology, she is also unimaginable in the sense that her nearly completely inhuman body does not have a livable space in our cultural imagination. Other characters who are more human, proliferate and succeed, and the presumption of physical
or mental power as strictly male oriented is challenged in multiple ways throughout the ongoing series.

Ultimately, Nola and The Stalk demonstrate an important shift through abjection. They reverse the experience of abjection and force the viewer into it without experiencing abjection of self. This allows for glimpses of embodied maternal power through monstrosity. Though the moments of power are brief, their images are generative as sites of identification and inspiration for further recognition of the power of the feminine and the maternal. Glimpses like these speak to the persistence of a nearly unshakable patriarchal rhetoric of fear motivated by womb envy which leads to the perceived need for dominance over reproductive bodies. By continuing to look at and go through that which is repeatedly represented as abject, there is hope for shifting perceptions of the womb as abject into images of the womb as generative and powerful.
After seeing how the perceptions of the maternal have evolved in visual narratives, we could hope that experiences for women would shift and though they have, our current political atmosphere suggests that womb envy and desire to prevent the realization of feminine power is still pervasive. Though resistance to patriarchal control over women’s bodies is strong, the continued struggle for agency in sexuality and reproduction is sets a profound and dangerous precedent for how we treat nonhuman reproductive spaces.

The connections between women and their monstered wombs is often explicit. But the maternal exists in other bodies. In Creed’s discussion of the archaic mother mentioned in the previous section, she notes that the matriarchal Greek figure Gaia, which means earth is a “Mother-Goddess who alone created the heavens and the earth” (24). Much of the rhetoric of dominance that pervades discussions of restrictions and entitlements to natural resources is dependent upon patriarchal constructs of power that stem from resistance to women’s reproductive bodies. The same “Mother Earth” who sustains us is, like the womb of the mother, desirable, but horrifying for the subject who exists outside of if. Earth is a constantly reproducing and constantly consumed body that humans are desperate to control.

Ecofeminist studies frequently understand Earth Gaia, which, I think, is the ideal lens through which to consider the connections between womb envy, the ongoing battle of reproductive rights, and the rhetoric and politics of control that are applied to both human and nonhuman bodies. If we understand the earth as a woman’s body or as a sort of open-faced
womb, then it follows that there is an inclination to perceive the space as abject, which fuels a desire to control to uphold illusions of firm boundaries of existence.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway pays special attention to reproduction as it impacts our movement through what, instead of Anthropocene, she refers to as Chthulucene. She chooses this term to emphasize the power and obscurity of our particular ecological moment. She explains that “Chthulucene is a simple word. It is a compound of two Greek roots (*khthôn* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (2). While Anthropocene is the label for our time that has persevered, Haraway’s discussion of the importance of “response-ability” in place of apocalyptic panic is important. Her message is hopeful and insists, in her fashion, that improving and expanding our vision will improve and expand our consciousness.¹⁰

Haraway’s insistence on a kind of monstering of our world is emphasized by her assertion that we “make kin, not babies”(137). Making kin, for Haraway, requires an embodiment of the maternal by all people. This is not the maternal in the sense that the biologically sexed body is impregnated and reproduces, but maternal in the matriarchal sense of the powerful archaic mother who is generative and aware.

Though making kin does not require the presence of a literal womb, if we see the earth as Gaia, then we must acknowledge that we all are inhabiting the surface of a womb. The earth as a womb from which one is born, but inhabits perpetually is a notion that certainly evokes the uncanny. Humans are born from human wombs, yet, an awareness of the reproductive power of the space around them elicits a notion of familiarity and an inability to fully come into that space.

We are both within and without constantly. The embodied and gendered Earth as Gaia association is powerful, which threatens to turn patriarchal order on its head.

To realize the reproductive power of the body that humans have colonized is a horrifying aporia. Most horrifying, perhaps, for the man who desires the powers of the womb. We inhabit a reproductive body and then deny its value, power, and wisdom by attempting to define, bind, and regulate it. What better way to absorb and trap the womb within patriarchal boundaries than to claim it as great only in terms of the extent to which it can be regulated by (hu)man.

The uncanny sense of being simultaneously within and without the womb is depicted exquisitely in *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* a comic written by Alan Moore and Drawn by John Totleben. A critique of human’s abuse of the environment, Moore’s graphic work offers an early glimpse of how the earth and its kin have been excluded from considerations of agency.

In *Saga of the Swamp Thing* Book 1, biologist Alec Holland awakens in a swamp to find that his body has become a mutated reflection of the natural elements around him. Though humanoid and bipedal, Holland’s body is composed entirely of moss, muck, branches and leaves. A saga of epic proportions, Moore’s comic extends 6 collected volumes. Len Wein, the creator of Swamp Thing, introduces Moore’s overtaking of the story saying, “What I neglected to tell you was what a weird and wonderful place home can be. Come on in, set yourself down in that moldering old easy chair, and get comfortable. In this case, home is where the horror is” (6). Wein reminds us of the uncanny sense that pervades not only the swamp, but also our “home” Earth. Perhaps because the swamp emulates the womb so well, it is more likely to spurn anxieties about our awareness of and relationship to the maternal. It is fitting that Donna Haraway frequently turns to the swamp to understand the complexities of ecological webs of

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11 Swamp Thing is a character trademarked by DC Comics whose story and character has been reimagined by a number of different writers and artists since his first appearance in “House of Secrets” issue 92 in 1971. His storyline was taken over by Alan Moore in 1984 with the issue “Loose Ends.”
being. She is keenly aware that the swamp is a space of constant reproduction, but also constant
dying. Symbiosis and parasitism allow for the realm to remain mystical and lush despite the
efforts we have made to police other natural spaces. In many ways, swamp ecosystems are the
last remaining relic of the primordial, violent, and productive Earth that existed before humans
claimed all space as theirs.

Pre-human knowledge is in his swamp and in the fibers of Swamp Thing’s body. He is
inscribed by the womb from which he rises and of which he is composed. In Dark Ecology,
Timothy Morton positions the biosphere as the uncanny womb in order to, in line somewhat with
Haraway’s suggestion of making kin, suggest that speciesism is a harmful trace of metaphysical
inscriptions of value. He calls us to think at “Earth magnitude,” that is to attempt the multiple
positions that we simultaneously inhabit on earth and says that “…thinking this mother’s body at
Earth magnitude means thinking ecological embodiment and interdependence. The uterus is not
just a symbol of the biosphere, nor even an indexical sign of the biosphere, pointing to it like a
footprint of a car indicator. The uterus is the biosphere in one of its manifold forms” (36). The
swamp as a complex system is then another form of the uterus. It isn’t a symbolic womb, it just
isn’t a human one and neither is the monster that rises from it.

Morton’s call for “ecological embodiment and interdependence” mirrors Haraway’s call
for generative imagination and the making of oddkin, or what she calls “Sympoesis…a carrier
bag for ongoingness, a yoke for becoming with” (Morton 36; Haraway 125). In both instances
there is a strong call for recognizing the value of the nonhuman reproductive body and in Swamp
Thing we have an opportunity to imagine the monstrous reproductive body that is born from a
nonhuman, but distinctly maternal womb.
As I’ve mentioned, the uncanny pervades *The Saga of the Swamp Thing*. From the beginning of the text, Swamp Thing is struggling to come to terms with a simultaneous fracture and doubling of self that has occurred. In the first issue of the series taken over by Moore entitled “Loose Ends,” Swamp Thing is searching for the body of his nemesis Arcane. He needs to see the body to confirm that the battle between them is over and to evaluate his own position in the world. He says, “I don’t think I realized before...how *important* you were to my life Arcane. I don’t think I really understood before this moment” (14). Notice that he doesn’t say “how important you were to me,” but rather “how important you were to *my life*.” Swamp Thing’s very understanding of his existence is dependent upon his ability to see that he has an antithesis. He needs to have an opposite to situate himself on one side of a binary of existing. Once Arcane dies, this position is shattered and, as we will see, Swamp Thing is barely able to reconcile his position in the world. He goes on to say “You were my opposite. I had my humanity...taken away from me. I’ve been trying to claw it back. YOU started out human...and threw it all away. You did it **DELIBERATELY**” (15). The death of abject humanity leaves Swamp Thing with an irreconcilable sense of absence. He cannot understand his position within humanity if, by definition he has been cast out of it.

*The Saga of the Swamp Thing* Book One, “Loose Ends” pp. 14-15
Throughout the comic, Swamp Thing is called a monster, yet his awareness of the value and the power of what it means to be human offers a biting critique of the abuses of power that humans often enact. Arcane was a man become monster, but Swamp Thing is a monster who tries, at least for some time, to maintain his identity as man. Humanity is the one thing Swamp Thing does not want to give up, but a flimsy notion of humanity, which he notices is frequently and carelessly tossed aside.

Swamp Thing doesn’t struggle to understand his position until he considers the humans around him. He reflects:

It’s a...new world, Arcane. It’s full of ...shopping malls and striplights and software. The dark corners are being pushed back...a little more every day. We’re things of the shadow, you and I...and there isn’t as much shadow...as there used to be. Perhaps there was once a world...we could have belonged to...maybe somewhere in Europe...back in the fifteenth century. The world was **FULL** of shadows then...full of monsters… (21).

The consumer culture that surrounds Swamp Thing conflicts with the longer thread of knowledge that fills his consciousness. He sees himself as the kind of monster from a medieval story, a modern day Grendel. The monster on the edges of the world that the town rallies to eliminate. Of course, Moore paints Swamp Thing as the most sympathetic figure in this series, which allows for a more complicated understanding of monstrosity. Swamp Thing as a monster is more aware, has better vision, than the human monsters that populate the world around him.

Swamp Thing says that the shadows are disappearing, but perhaps those peripheral shadow places are only deepening in awareness and only monsters can bring to light the valuable insights that lie just outside of our restricted lines of sight. At the end of his long inner monologue, Swamp Thing concludes “Maybe the world has run out of room...for monsters...or
maybe...they’re just getting harder to *recognize*” (Book One, 21-22). This thought positions Swamp Thing both as monster and as outside of the more dangerous implications of the term. He is, importantly, the kind of monster that “(de)monstrates.” The monsters that he is wary of are the human monsters who have sacrificed their “superior” humanity for power and control.

Though the character is part of a storyline that was started earlier and that has been continued into recent years\(^\text{12}\), comics lovers know that every major comic book character has an important origin story. Origin stories are undeniably postmodern in that the origin is never wholly traceable or identifiable because there are a multitude of beginnings depending on the writer, series, etc. Moore’s version of Swamp Thing’s origins is compelling. In *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* Book 2, which collects issues 28-34, we learn the origin story about our swampy protagonist.

Clues leading up to a terrible knowledge have been provided throughout the series. In issue 21 “The Anatomy Lesson” we learn that Dr. Jason Woodrue, a man who can morph into a being with plant-like characteristics, is obsessed with Swamp Thing’s genetic composition. He finds Swamp Thing’s body and dissects it. He knows that Alec Holland was in a laboratory accident and that the bio-restorative formula that Holland was developing seeped into the swamp during the explosion that Holland was in. The assumption has been that the formula mixed with Holland’s body to create a mutation. What is revealed in “The Anatomy Lesson,” however, is that the explosion killed Holland and the swamp ate up his body down to the bones. Woodrue explains to the General he is speaking to:

> His body goes into the swamp along with the formula that it is saturated with. And once there...it decomposes...a patch of swampland like that would be teeming with microorganisms. It wouldn’t take long, General. But what about the plants in the swamp?

\(^\text{12}\) See DC’s *Swamp Thing in The New 52!* which is ongoing.
The plants that have been altered by the bio-restorative formula? The plants whose hungry root systems are busily ingesting the remains of Alec Holland? Those plants EAT him. They eat him as if he were a *planarian worm*, or a cannibal wise man, or a genius on rye! They eat him...and they become infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realize it is no longer alive! (Book One, 48).

The swamp is rich with production and elimination. As an ecosystem, it is full of organisms that can destroy the supposedly fortified human body rather quickly. This is horrifying because the microorganisms are attributed with hunger and eagerness to destroy. They are the consuming black hole revealed by the archaic mother who live in Gaia’s womb.

The volatility of the natural is highlighted here from a humanist perspective. Those spaces that are not beautiful and that do not work symbiotically with humanity are portrayed as powerful and dangerous. It is important to remember that the ecosystem in the discussion has been dramatically altered by Holland and the scientists that have been working to create the bio-restorative formula that would theoretically supercharge the growth process of agriculture. Their hunger is then a kind of revenge. Once the swamp is “infected” by human consciousness, it gains even more power, which leads to the construction of Swamp Thing’s body.
Swamp Thing’s rebirth mimics the development of a human fetus in a womb, but we know that Swamp Thing is not human. He is entirely a product of the swamp; he is a monster. The fact that he is composed of the womb that produced him should make him abject, but, one of the shortcomings of the comic, is that Swamp Thing is humanized to the point that we don’t always remember the significance of his birth. Importantly, however, Swamp Thing does offer a starting point for considering how to think the maternal at Earth magnitude as Morton suggests. His character raises important questions about where identity exists if the body is lost as well as
the importance of re-defining humanity to encourage symbiosis with Gaia instead of an enforcement of power over her.

Woodrue, the scientist obsessed with Swamp Thing’s body, experiences a kind of womb envy when he is made aware of Alec Holland’s death and the monster’s rebirth. He is obsessed with dismantling Swamp Thing’s sense of identity and of livable space, and he intends to destroy his security through scientific study. The use of science as a policing force against bodies is certainly not a new addition to attempts at controlling reproductive spaces. Silver notes that “In political terms, womb envy can be translated as the government desire to control the future (re)production of selected human beings --workers, soldiers, and so on...the womb as a phantasized space has been used to mobilize narcissistic desire and transfer personal persecutory anxieties onto the social order” (419). Woodrue’s desire for the power to control Swamp Thing’s origins is a desire to prevent the proliferation of the power of the womb outside of systemic control. His motivations are entirely self-serving and founded on self-preservation. Woodrue’s envy of Swamp Thing’s inheritance of women’s reproductive power (which I will discuss further) is likened to that of the Zeus’s cannibalistic incorporation of Metis as a way of absorbing her ability to give birth.

*Swamp Thing* functions as a cyborg of sorts. He is a generative composite of humanity, monstrosity, and the maternal. Though his own uncanny realization of his “nonidentity as Alec Holland” is fueled by anxiety, he ultimately learns to accept a new kind of identity that was previously unimaginable. Though the kind of monstrous reproduction that occurs in this comic appears different than some of the other considerations of it in this research, it is important to understand that though Swamp Thing performs masculinity, he does not have a phallus. Swamp Thing is only Alec Holland to the reader because his performance encourages that reading.
In one key scene in the comic, Swamp Thing engages in an erotic exchange with love interest Abby. Swamp Thing removes a piece of fruit growing on his body, washes it in the swamp, and hands it to Abby. Confused she asks, “Uh…what you want me to, uh…what, you mean, like, I’m supposed to, uh…eat it?” (209). Swamp Thing replies, “Yes. Does…this idea…repel you?” (210). Abby accepts the fruit, a moment that seems to open the door to move away from the problematic norms she has been bound to, and asks “You wanted me to do this as, like, a symbolic thing?” (210). She is unable to think of Swamp Thing as anything but the “other” despite her desire for him. She does not acknowledge that she is literally internalizing a physical part of Swamp Thing, but rather thinks the only way to “consummate” their relationship is symbolically. For Abby, a refusal to eat the fruit would deem Swamp Things monstered body abject. Her decision to consume difference undoes, at least temporarily, the pervasive association between abjection and a return to/visualization of the womb.

As the fruit takes Abby into a euphoric altered state, she becomes indistinguishable from Swamp Thing. The illustrated figures are more anatomically ambiguous and they begin to speak
in unison. This scene is completely without temporal or spatial construct and there is no gender, no desire, only a sort of vast expanse of consciousness. Within this altered state and utter consciousness Abby is completely unaware of any problem with her desire for or relationship with Swamp Thing. In fact she recognizes that there is no inherent “nature” except what they choose to enact, she expresses “we…are…one creature…and all…that there is…is in us…” (216). This sentiment is telling because it acknowledges that there is no spatial binary, no norm outside of the system of signification imposed upon them by society. There is an incredible violence within this euphoria, though; as Abby falls deeper into this plane of consciousness she realizes “…the light is not all that we know…” (217). Her silhouette is depicted with larva in her womb. This is both a reminder of her awareness of her normative role, and how her communion with the monster has perhaps impregnated her with “pollution.”

The Saga of the Swamp Thing, Book 2, pg. 217

Abby and Swamp Thing enact the kind of imagined “becoming with” and making of “oddkin” that Haraway encourages. The psychically liberating communion of the two unlike bodies has traces of the abject that occur when boundaries are breached, but the euphoria
outweighs the traces of fear that persist. Haraway’s “Camille Stories” offer a kind of sequel to this episode. The imagined stories construct a future world in which reproduction is highly intentional and genetics are spliced to incorporate human and nonhuman bodies in order to foster a community of oddkin. She says that “the work of these communities was and is intentional kin making across deep damage and significant difference” (138). Swamp Thing’s exchange with Abby offers a generative narrative of the pleasure of kin making without human reproduction. There is a symbiosis achieved through erotic exchange in the story that also imagines the pleasure of a harmonious connection to Gaia as maternal.

Despite the personal closeness and expansion of consciousness that develops from this relationship, human awareness of their impact on the world is troubling throughout the comic. There is a lack of awareness that pervades the text and ultimately insists that the view of the earth as object rather than nonhuman agent must be reconsidered. The womb envy that leads to the policing of human bodies is repeated in the treatment of nonhuman reproductive places. Again the monstrous maternal demonstrates the power of reproduction while acknowledging anxieties about it.

*The Saga of the Swamp Thing* offers a space to begin to consider the nonhuman womb through the monstrous maternal. Though Swamp Thing doesn’t produce offspring in the human sense, the surface of his body is a reproductive space that mimics the swamp he was born from. The topography of Swamp Thing’s monstered body and his generative relationship with Abby offer a strong example of the possibility of overcoming harmful speciesist modes of hierarchizing the value of bodies as commodities.
Conclusion: See More Monsters

The monstrous maternal has evolved, and visual narratives, particularly comics can show us how. Though the anxiety and distress evoked by a sense of womb envy that upholds patriarchal systems of dominance is powerful, reproductive bodies persist. Women’s reproductive and sexual experiences are particularly important to continue to see, but the mimetic nonhuman reproductive spaces are equally valuable to examine. The connection between archaic awareness and the maternal is present in threads of our cultural consciousness, but, as Haraway suggests, we need to keep telling stories to imagine livable alterity. There are infinite ways that monsters embody humanity, but their births (into existence and of others) help us to see the margins of experience more clearly. Each of the stories discussed can help expand our sight and lead us through the uncanny, perhaps not unharmed, but stronger.

In addition to a call for more powerful representations of the maternal in comics (*Saga* is a fantastic start!), this research opens up space for reconsidering how reproducing bodies are treated. The snapshot of Gaia as the womb that we inhabit that I’ve begun to parse out opens up space for further considerations about human and nonhuman reproductive bodies through psychoanalysis. Despite the anxieties caused by the placement of the reproductive body somewhere “else” as anxiety-causing, if we are to progress in terms of the rights of humans, of women specifically, we will have to open up our discourses significantly. We cannot expect to effect change on the womb that supports us all, an incredibly fragile space, but an incredibly important one, if we cannot even conceptualize the rights of an individual in terms of agency over their own body. Bodies do not belong to someone, but our stories aggressively refute this
point. Where to start? Always with language. The rhetoric of control is so ingrained, so strong, that our behaviors and our stories follow suit, which only serves to replicate harmful mythologies about who matters and how they can live. By continuing to watch monsters, we can expand our vision and learn to see and treat bodies better.
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