

CULTURE, FOLKLORE AND ABJECTION AND THE EXPLORATION OF SUPERNATURAL REALMS

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Being glued to books relating to ghosts and spirits, humanoids, monsters and unidentified flying objects from childhood, the stories of the supernatural have always been at the forefront of my life. The three keywords I have chosen to research are **Culture, Folklore and Abjection**. The focus of these keywords is to encapsulate these interests. So for the section on **Culture**, I will discuss the 'art of telling a story' and 'Dark Tourism'. For the section on **Abjection**, I will discuss Japanese War Poetry, the 'Taiken' or an 'unusual experience' and the 'Yurei' or Female Ghost. The section on **Folklore** will contain information regarding Japanese Supernatural Creatures including the 'Oni' (Demon), Tengu (Goblin) and the Tanuki (Humanoid Raccoon Dog).

Culture

The word 'Culture' is diverse and far-reaching. There are a myriad of meanings and to make it succinct and pertinent is a hard task. According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'Culture's meaning is *the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society* (Stevenson 2010)

Throughout history cultures all over the world have enacted the art of storytelling. (Iwasaka, Toelken 1994) *Folktales, legends, beliefs, and the like probably persisted because as they developed, they brought together a recognizable constellation of related beliefs and cultural traditions phrased in vivid, concrete detail (much like a fine poem)*. As the Soowahlie First Nation People in Southwest British Columbia suggest *Indigenous storied memory can be thought of as a bone needle: a useful tool for sewing, mending, and bringing Indigenous stories, storytellers, and listeners together for meaningful engagement*. (Archibald, Xi'em, Q. 'um Q. 'um 2018, p. 240).



IMAGE 1- A Street Entertainer-Storyteller, 1790 (woodblock print).

Supernatural stories and traditions of the vernacular kind are characterized using local history and knowledge and are based on social interactions usually of the oral and gestural nature for example body language. This requires the orator to use one's body as a performance tool and **stories** range from funny to powerful to mundane, but all are evocative. They communicate culturally or personally significant information to their audiences. (Thomas, Goldstein et al. 2007, p.25).



IMAGE 2- A Ghost Story

The art of acting and the telling of a story and its historical lineage can be distorted Its present set of circumstances including the environment alter the feel to the story as well as the character who is executing the narrative. "Do you believe?" belongs to the people narrating or listening to a

haunting experience. They decide what to believe or even if they want to engage with the narrative in terms of belief at all. What folklorists do is take supernatural narratives and belief traditions seriously; they pay attention to them and treat them analytically (Thomas, Goldstein et al. 2007, p. 26).

As an example, if you place yourself in a scenario of sitting around a campfire in the middle of the Black forest in Germany at night whilst eating marshmallows and discussing stories relating to 'Disappearances in National Parks,' this representation can generate specific narrative forms as the forest becomes the obstacle the hero must overcome and traverse to accomplish a mission. In addition, while knowledge can be gained, it often comes at a price. The sense of marvel that is continually associated with the forest gestures to its intersection with folkloric discourses. (Shimabukuro 2016) Perhaps the same story generated in a local hairdresser's would not bring about the same impact. Or would it? (Iwasaka, Toelken 1994) In general, the structure of a story generally stays the same, but over time the way it is told varies. The 'Original' is never the true 'Original' The metaphoric 'Chinese Whisper' is perhaps prevalent.



IMAGE 3-, 'Mystical' photograph . Wistman's Wood, Dartmoor National Park, England

The geography of supernatural stories establishes that the origin of ghosts and creatures are native to places outside of and/or unknown to the human world. They derive from marginal, hidden, or abandoned sites: graveyards, sewers, or old houses. That is, they belong to environs outside of and unknown to ordinary social life. It therefore could suggest that given this theory, geography of horror could be a figurative spatialization of the notion that what horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories and is, by force of circumstance, unknown. (Carroll 1987)

Where geography and the interconnection of tourism are concerned, Goldstein and Grider (2007, p. 172) discusses the notion that Ghost tours, haunted hotel travel guides, ads for haunted restaurants, real estate, cars, and all manner of other places and things publicized as haunted attest to the importance of other-worldly visitors to the tourism and leisure industry and to contemporary consumer culture .This is particularly prevalent in Japan where 'Dark Tourism' (De Antoni, 2019) is a cultural phenomenon. It encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites," or "the act of traveling to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre," and has presently become the most widely used term in scholarly articles that analyze these kinds of phenomena (De Antoni 2019)



IMAGE 4- 'Dark Tourist' Netflix Series

This has similarly been explored in the *Netflix show 'Dark Tourist'* (Netflix 2018) in which David Farrier visits *unusual and often macabre tourism sites from around the world from a nuclear lake to a haunted forest* such as 'The Suicide Forest' in Japan or 'Aokigahara' meaning 'Sea of Trees' situated at the base of Mount Fuji. Visiting such sites reawakens eerie feelings of many personal supernatural experiences, which are echoed in Japanese Folklore. Many cultures have this kind of Dark Tourism, for example in London 'The Original Terror Tour' *Jack the Ripper walks* (Discovery Tours and Events 2021) in London's East End and 'The World Famous Underground Ghost Tour' in Edinburgh (Viator 1997) which I experienced firsthand. Goldstein and Grider (2007, p.173) look at the merchandizing of haunted real estate and ghost tourism suggesting that to the contrary, commodified culture is multifaceted, complex, and as likely to be a site for social meaning as any other.

ABJECTION

According to Buchanan's 'Dictionary of Critical Theory' (Buchanan 2010), *that which disturbs the self, by provoking either disgust, fear, loathing, or repulsion belongs to the realm of the psychic. It is rather a peculiar type of response, the strange power of which seems to suggest we are drawn to that which repels us.*

The Japanese seem to be open to spooky experiences and they even have their own word for it. The word "taiken" can be used as both noun and verb in Japanese and is usually translated as "experience." A taiken (noun), however, is generally an experience that is a bit out of the ordinary, whereas an "ordinary" or everyday experience is expressed with the word keiken. The use of taiken as a noun refers to a narrative of personal experience which usually focuses on the benefits received by a believer who has internalized and followed the teachings of that religion or belief system. (Anderson 1995). Yoshimura's example (Yoshimura 2015) of this is the Japanese 'Kanashibari' phenomenon better known in North America and the wider world as the "Old Hag." whereby personal experiences demonstrate how Japanese individuals self-diagnose their narratives by referring to culturally prescribed explanations both scientific and supernatural.

IMAGE 5- Japan: The Yamamba is a mountain hag. From the Bakemono Zukushi Monster Scroll, Edo Period (1603-1868).



In Japan, a female ghost is called a Yurei and are central figures in numerous myths and folktales dating back to the Edo period (1603-1867). 'Tokaido Totsuya Kaidan' or Ghost Story of Totsuya. 'Bancho Sarayashiki', The Story of Okiku and 'Kuroneko', Black Cat, are just three of the more popular kaidan "supernatural tale" or Japanese ghost story. (Wee 2011) According to the Cinema Journal (Wee 2011, p 58 & 59) the horror movie 'Ringu' or 'The Ring', the Western remake, defines horror in terms of abjection whereby the female entity or 'Yurei' mocks culturally defined boundaries and divisions creating obscenity's.



IMAGE 6-The servant girl Okiku is dropped in the well by two retainers of the samurai Aoyama, from the Himeji Castle version of the 'Ghost Story of Okiku'

Postwar poetry in Japan illuminates and impregnates a strong sense of abjection and is a condition of the abstract. Poets from this period are graphic in their curious actions, often melodramatic, or outlandish and strive for a physical sense of righteous desolation that Japanese citizens were exposed to during and after the war. Ishigaki Rin situates her poetry in scenes of abjection relating to ritual permeating in her writings the moral fabric of postwar Japanese society and the sense of struggle that intensely informs the reader with the appearance of childhood encounters of fairytales or known in Japan as the 'Dowa' and Childhood Songs or Nursery Rhyme Motifs known as 'Doyo'. Borrowing elements of childhood designs becomes an instrument for exposing the ramifications of deep-rooted discrepancies of experience, on both personal and political levels. Ishigaki fulfills Kristeva's notion that "the work of purification now rests solely with 'that catharsis par excellence called art'" (Friederich 2009). And just like the trials and tribulations of the abjection of war and its alienation *on the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.* (Kristeva 1982)



IMAGE 7- Bugaku performance before an audience of noblemen, a large drum in the foreground. 'The Monk Henjo', from the series 'One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets',

Folklore

W.J. Thoms in a letter to the Athenaeum in 1846 wrote: What we in England designate as popular Antiquities, or popular literature (though it would be most aptly described by a good Saxon Compound,

Folklore the Lore of the People) and was becoming associated with the past with words such as 'traditional' or 'legendary' (Williams 1988, p. 136).

In Urban Culture as (Reider 2010) points out, the 'Oni' is a kind of 'Yokai' demon or ogre in Japanese Folklore who menaced Japanese society and remains visible in literary, visual, and performing arts even to this day. With the end of the Edo period in Japan nearing this supernatural risk was still lingering. Bureaucrats knew the unexplained was something they had no control over. Official warnings to Demons were common in Japan and were made known to the local and wider community. Advertisements were posted out to all supernatural demons especially when high ranking officials were coming to town. On one occasion in preparation for a visit by the fourteenth Tokugawa shogun, Lemochi, one notice stated:

'To the Tengu (flying goblin) and the other demons: Whereas our shogun intends to visit the Nikko mausoleums next April: Now therefore, ye Tengu and other demons inhabiting these mountains must remove elsewhere until the shogun's visit is concluded'. (Reider 2010).



IMAGE 8- This illustration shows the notorious gagoze, a demon who attacked young priests at Gango-ji temple (Japan, Unknown Artist)

In Native American Folklore the 'Skinwalker' or 'Naaldlooshii' 'He or she who walks on all fours' is a powerful witch or corrupt medicine man who shapeshifts between humans and animals depending upon what their intentions are. It is suggested that a 'Skinwalker' has attained the highest level of priesthood whose supernatural abilities can inflict harm and suffering on others. In "Some Kind of Power" (Tucker 2012) by Margaret K. Brady offers insight into Navajo children's understanding of the supernatural. These stories uphold social boundaries between witches and non-witches and suggests that ceremonies can counteract witchcraft's effects.



Skinwalker, a Navajo Witch

IMAGE 9- Navajo Skinwalkers – Witches of the Southwest.

Having had a spooky urban experience in downtown Tokyo myself, I understand the nature of feeling rattled and perturbed. Was I being visited by a Ghost an Extraterrestrial Being? Maybe an Urbanised Goblin was on my case. Perhaps the author Komatsu Kazuhiko, a longtime scholar and writer was onto something when he argued that (Williams 2015) the extinction of goblin folklore in Japan was predominantly due to the exodus of traditional dwellings and living arrangements together with the outburst of technologies such as electric lighting in homes and urban settings such as paths, lanes, and roads. These modern advancements diluted the centuries-old belief systems regarding specific areas of the traditional home and exorcised the dark and cryptic areas that previously had been rich ground for the confrontation of creepy feelings.

Foster discusses that Utagawa Kuniyoshi (Foster 2012) one of the last great Masters of Woodblock printing designed comical images featuring humanoid Tanuki a Japanese Raccoon Dog known for enlarging their scrotums. Although a real animal that looks crossed between a possum and a dog in Japanese Folklore it is a supernatural creature that has a long history as a common character in folktales, legends, local beliefs, and more recently, all sorts of commercial iconography. Since at least the Kamakura period (1185-1333), narratives have featured the tanuki as a trickster who enjoys causing mischief



IMAGE 10-*'Scene from a Ghost Story: The Okazaki Cat Demon'*

(Ortabasi 2013) Having a well-worn style of personifying animals and their supernatural abilities, Kuniyoshi's interpretations of these Mythical Humanoids suggested that animals lived secret double lives hiding behind the guise of everyday tasks such as going to work and apparently insinuating themselves into human life and capturing the enigmatic moment of metamorphosis.

Like that of the Japanese 'Tanuki' in Islamic Studies the 'Jinn' who is a mischievous entity who wreaks havoc but can also form alliances with humans is a 'trickster' but also help shape the culture form part of their everyday life. (Rodionov 2008)



IMAGE 11- Iran / Persia: 'The King of the Jinn', from a Persian 'dawatnamah', .

As mentioned in my introduction, as a child I was always fascinated with concepts of amazing stories of the absurd and unimaginable. *'The world-wide fraternity of children is the greatest of savage tribes, and the only one which shows no signs of dying out-Douglas Newton'. (Fine 1980, p. 170)* The enchantment of my childhood mind linked my consciousness with the possibility of other worlds and other unworldly creatures that perhaps roamed the earth or maybe were living in a dimension that was not connected to ours. *Many children have such preoccupations, as Peter Dendle (2006, p. 13) writes, "The idea that there could be creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster, the yeti, Bigfoot and the giant mystery cats of Africa was fantastic; but even better was the idea that dragons and other creatures which I had read about in storybooks had some sort of corporeal reality. This is part of childhood and perhaps these other worlds prepare us for the opportunities of adulthood, Grider suggests. (Grider 1980, p. 161) that 'studying the traditions of children enables us to recognize the shared experiences of the human condition. Furthermore, studying childhood gives us a place to stand conceptually, because we were all children ourselves once. Truly, the child is father to the man'. Much as the caterpillar is in preparation to become the butterfly, many writers and artists revisit such childhood vistas in the search for something both attractive and terrifying. Mary Shelley muses in the Introduction to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein about how "I, then a young girl, came to think of, and dilate upon, so very hideous an idea" Recent scholarship has come to see Frankenstein as a "birth myth" or "fantasmagoria of the nursery" pg. 49 (Lehman 1992)*

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IMAGE 12 -BIGFOOT (alias BIG FOOT)

Synthesis

The humdrum of the everyday world can be quite dull and stagnant. What if you could discover new worlds and open yourself up to such things as *alternative archeology of the supernatural kind* (Hiscock 2012) or perhaps become the next world-famous ghost hunter. Such areas of culture, folklore and the notion of abjection allude to the fact they are both attractive but scary all at the same time. This idea and fascination with the unknown enable designers of the modern world to delve deep. Exploring new dimensions is like venturing into the scary forest and not knowing what will happen. As a designer you need to be a risk taker and realize that we have nothing to fear apart from our own preconceptions.

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Images

IMAGE 1- JAPANESE SCHOOL, (.C., 18th Century. *A Street Entertainer-Storyteller*, 1790 (woodblock print). MA, USA: Mead Art Museum, Amherst College.

IMAGE 2- THOMAS, GEORGE HOUSMAN (1824-68) (AFTER), *A Ghost Story*. London: London News.

IMAGE 3 - BURNELL and NEIL, *Mystical*. Wistman's Wood, Dartmoor National Park, England: .

IMAGE 4- NETFLIX, 2018-last update, Dark Tourist. Available: <https://www.netflix.com/qb/title/80189791>.

IMAGE 5- UNKNOWN ARTIST, *Japan: The Yamamba is a mountain hag. From the Bakemono Zukushi Monster Scroll, Edo Period (1603-1868)*.

IMAGE 6-YOSHITAKI UTAGAWA, (., 1871. *Japan: The servant girl Okiku is dropped in the well by two retainers of the samurai Aoyama, from the Himeji Castle version of the 'Ghost Story of Okiku', Utagawa Yoshitaki (1841-1899), 1871*. Japan:

IMAGE 7- KUNIYOSHI and UTAGAWA, 1842. *Bugaku performance before an audience of noblemen, a large drum in the foreground. 'The Monk Henjo', from the series 'One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets'*, Japan: .

IMAGE 8 -JAPAN UNKNOWN ARTIST: *An unidentified demon, possibly a gagoze. From the Kaikidan Ekotoba Monster Scroll, mid-19th century*. Japan: Pictures from History / Bridgeman Images.

IMAGE 9- Navajo Skinwalkers – Witches of the Southwest. <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/navajo-skinwalkers/>

IMAGE 10- KUNIYOSHI UTAGAWA, 1850. *Japan: 'Scene from a Ghost Story: The Okazaki Cat Demon'*. Pictures from History/Woodbury & Page / Bridgeman Images.

IMAGE 11- *Iran / Persia: 'The King of the Jinn', from a Persian 'dawatnamah', . 14th century. Paris: Bibliotheque Nationale.*

IMAGE 12 -BIGFOOT (alias BIG FOOT) *still film* ,de Robert Slatzer avec Joi Lansing sur le dos du Yeti (bigfoot, abominable bonhomme de neige) 1970