

妖怪カルタ——プレイフルな「モンスター」理解に向けて

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本稿は江戸妖怪カルタを対象に、この「カード」の中の民間信仰の要素と影響を明らかにする研究である。このノートではまず、妖怪カルタの歴史的また具体的な概念を述べる。そのあと、モンスター、妖怪、遊び、それぞれに関する先行研究のあり方を概観する。ここ30年のうちに西欧、とくに英米圏で形成されてきた「モンスタースタディーズ」という学問領域で、そもそも「モンスター」なるものはどのように理解され、解釈されてきたのか、あるいはその解釈や理念は研究対象をいかに規定してきたのかなどを分析する。本ノートでは、モンスタースタディーズの現状と課題を指摘し、それが現在まで見落としてきたことを明らかにすることを目指す。

YŌKAI KARUTA: TOWARDS A MORE PLAYFUL MONSTROSITY

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Yōkai karuta is a Japanese card game originating in the Edo Period (1603-1868) featuring images of *yōkai*, or what could be called traditional Japanese monsters. The primary aim of my research is to examine the images and text in surviving decks of *yōkai karuta* from the Edo to Showa Periods to identify direct and indirect connections to Japanese folk spiritual traditions captured in the cards. Both *yōkai karuta* and Japanese folk spiritual traditions have seen very little English-language research, so I hope, at the very least, to build interest in these two fascinating areas.

My preliminary goal, however, is to integrate insights from research on play, monsters and *yōkai* to create a framework for understanding monsters in terms of their inherent playfulness. I will then identify the position of *yōkai karuta* within this framework in order to better understand the significance of any connections to spiritual traditions and to make space for further exploration of the relationship between monsters, play and spirituality.

Before going any further, let me first provide a brief overview of the background and history of the cards. *Yōkai karuta* are a *yōkai*-themed subset of *iroha karuta*, a genre of card-matching games that developed in pre-modern Japan. The origins of *iroha karuta* go back to earlier “shell-matching” or *kai-awase* games (“kai” means shell, and “awase” means match) using small shells painted with

intricate images.

The Japanese term “karuta” is actually based on the Portuguese word for card, “carta,” since paper playing cards were brought to Japan in the 16th Century by Portuguese traders. This new format led to, on the one hand, Japanese interpretations of European playing cards with altered suits and face cards, and, on the other hand, paper versions of the shell-matching (*kai-awase*) games that would become known as *iroha karuta*. Each card in a deck typically measures around 63 x 42 mm, and they were printed with the woodblock printing technology that enabled diverse forms of popular visual culture to flourish in Edo Japan. Thus, *iroha karuta* combined older image-matching games with the new format of paper playing cards and Edo Period woodblock printing technology – and in the case *yōkai karuta*, *yōkai* visual culture and folklore.

WHAT IS IN A DECK OF YŌKAI KARUTA?

A deck of *yōkai karuta* (or any *iroha karuta*) typically involves 48 illustrated cards and 48 corresponding text cards. These 48 pairs correspond to the 48 syllables in written Japanese (the 45 standard syllables of modern Japanese plus three archaic syllables). Each text card has a sentence that begins with a given syllable and references the image on its illustrated counterpart.

Take, for example, the following card for the syllable “mu” (ム), seen in Figure 1. The illustration shows two *yōkai* bursting out of a box, and in the upper right is the Japanese syllable pronounced



Fig. 1: Illustrated card for the syllable む (mu) from an Edo Period deck of yōkai karuta.

“mu.” The corresponding text card reads “Mukashi no omoitsudzura,” a reference to yōkai said to appear in long-forgotten boxes. In an actual game of *yōkai karuta* a reader would read this text card aloud, and then players would scramble to grab the card above from among 48 illustrated cards spread out before them.

Not every deck featured the same yōkai, however, although a few turn up frequently across multiple decks. Figure 2 shows four cards from different decks depicting variations of a yōkai based on a wooden pestle (as in a mortar and pestle used for grinding) with an eye and wings. Notice that the syllables in the upper right are different: れ (re) and す (su). These vary depending on the sentence used on the text card, and the difference in this case corresponds to two words for “pestle” in different dialects.

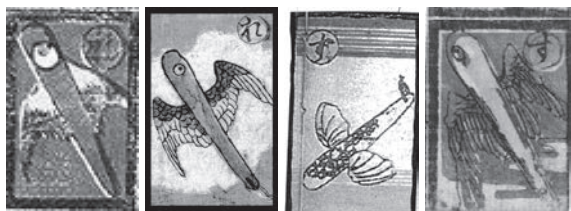


Fig. 2: Four cards for a yōkai called *rengi-no-bakemono*, among other names, based on a pestle.

Part of the tradition of *tsukumogami*, or old tools that come to life after 100-years, this particular

yōkai has all but disappeared today despite its apparent popularity in the Edo Period. Thus, *yōkai karuta* can serve as a time capsule for yōkai and the cultural references they contain even after they’ve faded from the popular imagination. In contrast, yōkai selected by Shigeru Mizuki for his famous yōkai-themed manga *Gegege no Kitaro* were brought back to life in the imaginations of a new generation of modern readers (in addition to some original yōkai he invented). Other yōkai have found new life as mascots for products or towns, as video game characters, or through other manga and anime. Maybe *rengi-no-bakemono* simply lost relevance because grinding ingredients with a mortar and pestle isn’t as common as it once – or perhaps this yōkai might have been iconic today if only Mizuki had decided to feature it in his manga.

In any case, *yōkai karuta* decks surviving to the present day are often incomplete, probably due to their small size and easily destructible material. There is no way to know how many decks were created in the Edo Period, but certainly many more existed that have been lost or destroyed in the centuries since then.

Finally, *yōkai karuta* are not the only variation of *iroha karuta*; other versions revolve around proverbs or poems. In addition to serving as a way to learn written Japanese, *iroha karuta* games like *yōkai karuta* also exposed players to information about yōkai, poetry, or any other theme of the cards, which could have benefited them both in-game, by letting them more quickly recognize matches, and in real life, by transmitting cultural knowledge.

METHODOLOGY: A “MONSTERFUL” APPROACH

Before beginning I must address how my background makes me somewhat of an outsider – or monster, you could say – within the field of monster studies and influences my perspective as a researcher. My experience as an artist creating video games and other work related to monsters makes me acutely aware of the practical realities of the creative process, especially regarding the

inherent delight in imagining a creature that doesn't exist in physical form. As someone who has held workshops for adults on creating new monsters, I also know that well-known monsters in popular culture are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to all possible monsters; new monsters can and do appear every day, whether in doodles in the margins of books or sketches on pieces of scrap paper, to name two vibrant sites for monster creation that are only rarely addressed in monster studies.

This means my research takes a partially autoethnographic approach in which I draw on my own experiences with monsters and play in order to continually ground discussion in the practical reality of monsters and the functions they serve – acting as an invitation to play, for example. Monsters are often described as the physical embodiments of cultural forces or discussed in relation to human bodies, making it all the more important and relevant to bridge the gap between abstract theory and embodied practice. Blurring boundaries between the academic and the personal or experiential could also be called taking a “monsterful” approach insofar as it involves embracing ambiguity to create new possibilities beyond rigid categories and occupying the grey zone where monsters are said to reside.

Guided by this approach, I seek an *inclusive* definition of monsters that places playfully scribbled creatures on par with the most well-established monsters of legend. This opens up vast new avenues for research given that most work tends to focus on well-known monsters in famous literature and mass media, despite the frequent assertion that monsters are ambiguous creatures occupying liminal spaces. Perhaps we as researchers should be turning our attention more intentionally to liminal spaces when seeking objects of inquiry rather than working only with those monsters that have found their way into the spotlight at the center of society. I see this, too, as part of a more “monsterful” approach to monster studies.

PRECEDING RESEARCH IN “MONSTER STUDIES”

In this section I offer a general overview of the field of monster studies, revealing how playful aspects of monsters have been historically overlooked and suggesting ways that the inclusion of insights from play studies could transform the way we think about monsters. My own definitions of “monsters” and “play” will be covered in later sections along with a framework for understanding *yōkai karuta* and other instances where monsters and play intersect. I believe play studies could illuminate new directions both for research in monster studies and creative production related to monsters.

“Monster studies” or “monster theory” refers to the English-language field of academia that has emerged primarily in North America and grown rapidly from the 1990s to today. Explicit interest in monsters appears stronger today than ever before, with at least two active academic podcasts on monsters¹ and a Center for Monster Studies opening this year at the University of California, Santa Cruz, among other monster-focused research organizations and events around the world.²

Discussion of monsters within the field has so far largely revolved around a paradigm of “fear versus fascination,” where monsters or monstrosity more broadly are analyzed in terms of how they pose a disruptive threat from the outside. A pervasive focus on fear is clear from a cursory glance at the titles of texts: *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Asma 2009), *The Science of Monsters: The Origins of Creatures We Love to Fear* (Kaplan 2013) and *Monsters: Evil Beings, and Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Gilmore 2003), to name a few. Other books have focused exclusively on individual monsters such as Frankenstein, Godzilla, zombies or vampires, which is in part a reflection of the fact that a considerable portion of work has been devoted to the genre of horror, especially in film.

Researchers often express how difficult it is to define monsters but frame this elusiveness itself as

core to what monsters are - they exist at the border of the known and unknown, their very existence a challenge to existing categories. This “ambiguous” or “hybrid” nature of monsters is then used to explain why monsters are inherently disturbing and destructive, sometimes citing Freud’s idea of the *unheimlich* (“unhomely,” as in entities from outside the home that have entered the home and cause one to feel “not at home”).³ In this regard, given that there is nothing inherently frightening or disturbing about being difficult to define, the field of monster studies seems to be haunted by a widespread and unspoken logic in which ambiguity can only be experienced as terrifying.

BEYOND “BIG, SCARY MONSTERS”?

Discussion of more “positive” portrayals of monsters tends to be limited to cases where monsters are “dangerously sexy” (such as vampires) or are cast as the unfairly vilified “good guys” (such as Shrek in the film *Shrek* (2001)). This makes it possible to keep monsters contained within the conventional definition of “big, scary creatures” even when they’re not scary: sexy monsters embody our repressed desires in a way that combines fear and fascination, while monsters like Shrek represent a modern desire to “become the monster” and assert oneself against the *real* monster of broader oppressive forces in society. Monsters that inspire simple joy or delight unrelated to deep psychological fears – the creatures of *Sesame Street*, for example, who refer to themselves as “monsters”⁴ – are almost universally ignored. This suggests that these creatures either are not considered monsters or are not considered worthy of academic inquiry. If true, the latter could stem from the devaluation of play in modern Western culture (addressed extensively in play studies), causing monsters that are “only” playful to be seen as shallow or irrelevant.

I would argue that the residents of *Sesame Street* are complex creatures whose form and function cannot be sufficiently summarized with

conceptions of “big and scary monsters,” “disturbingly sexy monsters,” or “unfairly vilified good guys.” Rather, they could be better described as “guides through the unknown,” serving to make the unfamiliar familiar – the opposite of *unheimlich* monsters that make ones home feel “unhomely.” A similar function can be seen in other self-identifying monsters,⁵ which I mention here only as one role performed by monsters, possibly among many others, that has gone virtually ignored in monster studies.

When it comes to who or what is allowed to be a “monster,” monster studies has been dominated by three definitions: 1) “Monster” as a term to identify immorality or evil in society, focusing on a vastly broadened concept of “monstrosity” to discuss how people in real life are othered and made “monstrous,” 2) Monsters as fictional entities within a text that symbolize frighteningly powerful forces or a fear of the unknown or Other, or 3) Monsters as non-human, non-animal creatures or hybrid creatures in general, technically without any connection to fear.

The first differs significantly from the second two in that it focuses on real-life situations (outside the context of fictional media) where people are declared inhuman (“monsters”) and therefore deserving of punishment. Research using this definition discusses how powerful figures in medieval Europe declared babies with physical abnormalities to be monstrous or demonic,⁶ and how “serial killers” or “terrorists” are described as immoral “monsters” today. As editor Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes in *The Monster Theory Reader*, this line of thought has led to a “decoupling of monstrosity from appearance,” where invisible oppressive forces have replaced scary-looking people or creatures as the *real* monster (monster in this case meaning “embodiment of evil”).⁷

This trend in monster studies builds on work in gender and sexuality studies, race studies and anti-colonial studies, among others, that focus on systematic oppression. Thus, it includes many instances where the terms “monster” is not used in context at all, but where “monstrosity” is used by researchers to conceptualize the way people

are “othered” and excluded from the category of “human.” This leads Weinstock to create the term “traditional monsters” to refer to imaginary creatures like Dracula that are no longer an object of inquiry in this line of thinking.⁸

Meanwhile, there is still a great deal of research on these “traditional monsters.” However, in many cases researchers shift between definitions of monsters without acknowledgment that any such shift is occurring: the fact that we call serial killers “monsters” (*a term to identify immorality in society*) is implied to be related at a core level to the way we feel about any imaginary creature called a “monster” (*monsters as non-human, non-animal creatures*);⁹ and, when a fictional creature is a hybrid of multiple animal parts (again, *monsters as non-human, non-animal creatures*), it *must* be disturbing or terrifying because monsters embody our deepest fears (*monsters as embodiments of fear in fictional media*).

Weinstock’s introduction to *Monster Theory Reader* offers a typical example of how monsters are described seemingly playfully while ultimately forced back into a framework of fear.¹⁰ He initially describes monsters as what sounds like a playful tool for making sense of the unknown¹¹ and lists a “a panoply of fantastic creatures that testifies to the fecundity of the human imagination.” Soon after, he asks rhetorically, “if monsters are repulsive and epistemological vertigo is unpleasant, what explains the human fascination with monsters?” This is framed as an unanswerable mystery, which is puzzling considering that the previous pages offer a clear description of monsters’ connection to play, imagination and delight. From a practical perspective it isn’t mysterious that people enjoy using their imagination simply for the fun of it, and perhaps it was Weinstock’s intent to hint at this. Nonetheless, there is an almost universal reluctance to explicitly state and explore the playful side of monsters as being on par with their terrifying side; instead, monsters are kept rooted firmly in a binary of fear and desire.

In this light, the title of the book *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the*

Hideous and the Haunting (Poole 2014) neatly articulates the current state of monster studies, especially given that many of those who have helped establish the field are based in the United States and have focused on monsters in Western media. The few cases where monsters are discussed as truly neutral (that is, truly ambiguous) or grounded in something other than fear tend to be about monsters outside of Western countries. Authors in these cases are sometimes hesitant to issue a definition of monsters¹² or even to assert that the subjects of their research are monsters at all due to the history of European colonization in which indigenous people, spirits, and deities were declared “monsters” to legitimize their subjugation.¹³

YŌKAI & POSSIBILITIES FOR PLAYFUL MONSTERS

One well-researched tradition of “monsters” outside the realm of North America and European cultural traditions is Japanese *yōkai*. Often translated into English with a list of monster-like nouns (ghost, specter, ghoul, goblin, etc.), they appear regularly in anthologies on monster studies, thanks in large part to leading English-language researcher Michael Dylan Foster. He describes *yōkai* as embodying a nuanced combination of fun and fearful aspects, hence the title of his book, *Pandemonium and Parade* (Foster 2008).¹⁴ Foster goes so far as to identify one of *yōkai*’s core attributes as a “ludic mode,” or an inherent connection to forms of play and games across hundreds of years of history.¹⁵

Foster details the social position and motivations of major figures involved in creating the category of *yōkai*, establishing the field of *yōkai* studies, and facilitating their proliferation in popular visual media. He goes on to discuss how modern-day fans of *yōkai* outside academia form casual gatherings to discuss *yōkai*, sell handmade *yōkai*-related products, dress up as *yōkai*, and generally celebrate these creatures. He then connects this diverse cast of actors throughout Japanese history and around the world as a “Yōkai Culture

Network” that transcends space and time.¹⁶

Foster’s attention to the practical reality of monster creation and consumption leads to valuable insights on the inherently playful nature of *yōkai*, and a similar assessment of other monsters discussed in monster studies might be similarly worthwhile. This could include recognition of the intense time and energy devoted to creating costumes based on monsters for events such as fan conventions (“cons”) or Halloween in the United States (although this may of course differ greatly in terms of scope or context from *yōkai* meetups in Japan). Upon closer scrutiny, many “scary” monsters may show a surprising tendency towards play and revelry, just as much if not more than any tendency towards bone-chilling terror.

Take Frankenstein’s monster, for example. Described as having “impeccable credentials for a monster,”¹⁷ it is perhaps the archetypal example of a “big, scary monster” that embodies cultural anxieties about the unknown. However, Frankenstein was created as a character in a work of fiction, giving it an inherent connection to leisure and entertainment. From a practical, creative perspective, the idea of this monster in the imagination of Mary Shelley inspired her to write a book, and it would continue to inspire creative action by fans of Frankenstein for centuries to follow, with Frankenstein (or an extremely Frankenstein-like monster) appearing as a comedic character in a live-action TV show,¹⁸ as a romantic partner in a monster dating-themed video game,¹⁹ as the shape of countless children’s snacks at Halloween, and many other cases that reflect a “ludic mode.”

Similar observations can be made about many of the scariest monsters discussed in English-language monster studies, with perhaps the only difference between the “ludic mode” of *yōkai* and other monsters being the *degree* to which this mode is present in practice and recognized in theory. I believe this “ludic mode,” or inherently playful nature of monsters, stems from what Weinstock calls “the delight of imagination” (Weinstock 2020: 14). Taking a more “playful” look

at monsters might guide us toward a more broad and inclusive monster studies that gives space to all sorts of monsters *without excluding cases that are fun or light-hearted*.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The next step in my research will be to synthesize insights from play studies to more clearly illuminate the playful side of monsters that has been largely overlooked in the bulk of English-language research, as described above. In doing so I will create a framework for understanding monsters built upon their inherent playfulness in order to open up new monstrous possibilities beyond a binary of fear and fascination. Finally, I will locate *yōkai karuta* within this framework and explore their connection to Japanese folk spiritual traditions in order to explore the interaction between monsters, play and spirituality.

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¹ On *The Monster Professor* podcast, host Josh Woods invites an expert on each episode to discuss a different monster. On *The Show Where They Talk About Monsters* podcast, host Mike Halekakis and “monster expert” Dr. Michael Chemers discuss various monsters.

² “The Monster Network” is a network of academics interested in monsters whose founding members are based in Northern Europe. Meanwhile, “MEARCSTAPA” (“Monsters: the Experimental Association for the Research of Cryptozoology Through Scholarly Theory and Practical Application”) focuses primarily on monsters in the Middle Ages, its title an Old English word that means “border-walker.”

³ See pp. 4-5 in Beal 2001.

⁴ See Stone, Jon. *The Monster at the End of this Book*. Golden Books: 2003, where Grover acknowledges that he is in fact a monster. See also the musical album performed by Sesame Street monsters: *Sesame Street: Monster Melodies*, Sony Wonder, 2007.

⁵ See Llenas, Anna. *The Color Monster Goes to School*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers: 2020. The book could be said to reflect a “desire to become the monster,” since the monster wears a backpack and goes to school, but I think a better summary of the monster’s role here would be “a guide through the unknown,” with the unknown in this case being school and a child’s emotions.

⁶ See pp. 8-9 in Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. “Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory.” In Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. *The Monster Theory Reader*. University of Minnesota Press: 2020.

⁷ See pp. 360-363 in Weinstock, Andrew. “Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture.” In

Weinstock (Ed.) 2020.

⁸ See Weinstock (Ed.) 2020: 360-363.

⁹ See for example the discussion of serial killers and terrorists alongside imaginary creatures in Asma, Stephen T. “Monsters and the Moral Imagination.” In Weinstock (Ed.) 2020, pp. 290-293.

¹⁰ Specifically, pp.4-19.

¹¹ “Whether the monstrous comes to us or we conjure it up, monstrosity is a loose and flexible epistemological category that allows us space to define that which complicates or seems to resist definition.” (Weinstock 2020, pp. 4)

¹² See Drewal, Henry John. “Beauteous Beast: The Water Deity Mami Wata.” In Mittman, Asa. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Ashgate Publishing: 2013.

¹³ See Looper, Matthew. “The Maya ‘Cosmic Monster’ as a Political and Religious Symbol.” In Mittman 2013; and Myhre, Karin. “Monsters Lift the Veil: Chinese Animal Hybrids and Processes of Transformation.” In Mittman 2013.

¹⁴ This is discussed explicitly on pp. 8-9.

¹⁵ The ludic nature of *yōkai* is discussed throughout the book, but especially on pp. 48-49 of Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. University of California: 2008.

¹⁶ The idea of a “*yōkai* culture network” is introduced in Foster, Michael Dylan. *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. University of California Press: 2015, pp. 75-76.

¹⁷ See pp. 239 in Six, Abigail Lee, and Thompson, Hannah. “From Hideous to Hedonist: The Changing Face of the Nineteenth-century Monster.” In Mittman 2013.

¹⁸ *The Munsters*. Created by Allan Burns and Chris Hayward, Kayro-Vue Productions and Universal Television, 1964-1966.

¹⁹ *Monster Prom*. 2018. PC [game]. Three Awesome Guys.