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Blurred Binaries and Gendered Judgment:

Monstrous Femininity in *Black Hole*

The world of Charles Burns' graphic novel *Black Hole* has an ebbing undercurrent of rigid sexuality and gender binaries. When a character crosses or blurs a line, the world punishes these transgressions through various manifestations of monstrous femininity. In this essay, I will examine the ways that Chris, Rob, Eliza, and Keith each subvert gender and sex expectations, and I will discuss how the resulting monstrosities reflect a violation of the female body.

In order to consider the implications of these transgressions, a few foundational principles of monster theory from Cohen and Halberstam should first be considered. Cohen's fifth thesis states that "the monster polices the borders of the possible" (20). The figure of a monster warns its culture of the dangers and consequences that lie beyond a boundary. The primary monster in *Black Hole* is a shape-shifting enemy: a sexually-transmitted disease that presents itself differently in each of its victims. Halberstam specifically argues that sexuality and gender have become the dominant markers of monstrosity in contemporary horror as the Gothic fiction tradition has evolved into a visual medium (127-128). Furthermore, they assert that visual horror "depends upon the explicit violation of female bodies" (Halberstam 125). If we consider these ideas in tandem, we can examine how feminine monstrosity emerges in *Black Hole* from the transgressing of expectations of gender and sexuality.

Of the main character pairings, Chris and Rob are the most punished for their blurring of the gender and sexuality binaries. These transgressions occur textually as well as visually in the chapter entitled “Racing Towards Something”. Their relationship begins with Chris subverting feminine expectations; she asserts herself and pursues Rob. On the page where Chris begins to take charge of their interaction by suggesting they leave the party, the two splash panels trade perspective (see fig. 1). In spite of the center gutter, the two bodies with their backs turned seem to visually merge into one central - and genderfluid - figure.

Figure 1. (Burns)

When the two arrive at the cemetery, gender roles are further reversed. Chris destabilizes societal expectations of girls as demure and chaste; Rob instead seems to assume that role. Chris brushes past Rob’s “kind of shy…hesitant” kiss and pulls him in “for a *real* kiss” (Burns). She pressures him not to worry and assures him that she wants to have sex. Following these gender role binary transgressions, Chris discovers that Rob is infected with “the bug” which presents itself as a mouth – that is, an extra orifice – along his collarbone. The characters register mutual

horror about her realization in another set of panels which visually merge the two figures across a gutter (see fig. 2). Again, the male and female binary blurs, and the monster takes another host.

Figure 2. (Burns)

Rob's manifestation of "the bug" serves to further feminize him. We first learn about it in the chapter "Planet Xeno". Todd mockingly recounts seeing Rob "checkin' himself out in the mirror" – an insult because caring about one's appearance is stereotypically feminine - only to realize that Rob was examining the mouth on his neck (Burns). The mouth gives Rob further trouble in the chapter "Who's Chris?" during a fight with his girlfriend, Lisa.

Lisa seems to follow conventional gender roles, and one can reasonably assume that she expects the same of Rob. She laments that she made dinner for Rob and gave him shelter, only for the mouth on his neck to reveal his true emotions and anxieties in a "squeaky and awful" voice while he slept (Burns). Not only does the voice's description lend itself to images of the stereotypical 'shrill woman', but its words also overturn masculine expectations. Rather than repressing Rob's remorse, the monster forces him to share his pain. When Lisa confronts him, Rob even tries to reassert his masculinity and deny the mouth's revelations (see fig. 3). Later on, in the chapter "Seeing Double", Chris actually shares a kiss with this symbol of femininity on

Rob's neck. Her transgressions against sexuality and gender binaries ensure that the monster ultimately consumes her.

Figure 3. (Burns)

Rather than masculinizing Chris, however, the monster instead emphasizes femininity's function as a punishment. A tear in her skin opens up along her spine. Its first appearance, in fact, actually coincides with the beginning of her menstrual cycle in the chapter "Racing Towards Something". When Chris strips down in front of her classmates to go swimming, they stare at her back in shocked silence; self-conscious, she wonders if her underwear is blood-stained. This simultaneity is significant. Dr. Erin Harrington makes this point in an essay about menstruation in the horror genre:

> This interplay between the categories of the clean and the impure, the abject push-pull between the desire for and revulsion at the maternal body, and the way the female reproductive body may (or may not) be rendered knowable and controllable, intersect in the codification of menstrual blood and the menstruating body (227).

Menstruation is used in horror to heighten societal anxieties about the female body. In this moment at the lake, we understand Chris's body as doubly monstrous. Her anxieties about potential blood stains implicitly reflect the layered repulsion that society has towards the menstruating body. While Chris perceives herself as unclean due to her menstruation, however,

her classmates discern impurity through her infection. The desirable form of the female body has been ‘tainted’ by her sexuality. Asserting control over her own anatomy has resulted in this uncontrollable, metaphorical punishment.

Chris’s mutation further aligns with menstruation imagery in that she periodically sheds her skin, matching a specifically feminine characteristic of monstrosity that feminist scholars Deborah Wills and Toni Roberts describe as “bodily volatility” (2). Over time, Chris becomes less perturbed by the process (see fig. 4). The shedding becomes a routine part of her hygienic maintenance. The reader recognizes that her condition is less severe than other mutations seen throughout *Black Hole,* but the damage to her reputation is done.

Figure 4. (Burns)

Impregnated with the virus, Chris faces much harsher judgements than the boy that inflicted it upon her. Word spreads about her infection. Unlike Rob, who conceals his condition, Chris is ridiculed and ostracized. She eventually drops out of school to hide out in the woods. Keith, the novel’s other main character, works to navigate his feelings for Chris after discovering that she has the bug. As shown in figure 5, he considers her condition with abjection, thinking,

"It was awful…too awful to even think about…The only way you could get the bug was by having sex with a sick kid. I just couldn't see her *doing* something like that" (Burns). This moment recalls our discussion of Cohen's fifth thesis. Here, Keith considers Chris – the monster – with abjection. She has stepped beyond the border of the possible by existing as a "perfect" girl who also exercises sexual agency, and Keith is complicit in the policing of her actions by

Figure 5. (Burns)

registering his disgust. For her transgressions and for her feminine mutation, Chris is a monster.

Chris and Rob's storyline demonstrates the dangers of crossing gender and sexuality binaries by using the monster to inflict each character with feminine body horror. Their transgressions ultimately lead to their destruction. Rob is brutally murdered, and Chris becomes an alcoholic to cope with the loss of her love and her former life. The novel concludes with her potential suicide. As the piece's most female-centric thread, it is significant that it is also the most tragic plot line in *Black Hole*.

The parallel plot of *Black Hole* primarily revolves around Keith. Early on, he is set apart from his hypermasculine friends, Dee and Todd. In the first chapter, the three boys discover the campsite of a former classmate who has become infected with the bug. Dee and Todd happily ransack the tent (see fig. 6). When Keith does not partake in the destruction and questions their doing so, Todd spurns him for this moment of compassion – a stereotypically feminine trait.

Figure 6. (Burns)

In the chapter "Bag Action", a new love interest emerges for Keith. Stoned, he wanders into the kitchen of his new weed dealer's house. Here, he encounters a roommate: Eliza. She is nude from the waist down. Before she covers herself, Keith catches a glimpse of her tail: this is her manifestation of the bug. It is a clear phallic symbol, thus masculinizing her otherwise feminine form. That masculinization, then, serves as the 'violation' of her female body that marks monstrosity throughout *Black Hole*.

Figure 7. (Burns)

Eliza also exhibits behaviors traditionally associated with masculinity. For example, Keith observes her "wolfing down" a sandwich in figure 7. Wills and Roberts assert that insatiable female monster appetites "[speak] to the social demand for female bodies to be disciplined, cautious, and restrained in their desires" (9). Not only is Eliza ravenous, but her monstrous appetite seems to extend to vice. She admits to being on hallucinogens and offers Keith marijuana, and she is overtly sexual within minutes of their first encounter. In these ways, Eliza blurs the sexuality and gender binary lines.

Keith is instantly attracted to Eliza, and he admits to feeling arousal specifically because of her tail (see fig. 8). When they lie together on her bed, he even imagines it as penetrative while feeling her "strong hands" on his back (see fig. 9). This moment is demonstrative of Cohen's sixth thesis: "Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire" (25). Keith finds allure in the exotic way that the bug has mutated Eliza's body, and its foreign nature encourages his most transgressive thoughts and fantasies.

Figure 8. (Burns)

Figure 9. (Burns)

After this encounter, Keith still is not infected, but his relationships begin to shift. By feeling attraction to a woman marked with both physical and behavioral masculinity, he transgresses the binary of sexuality. It is only after this violation occurs that his social status erodes. In "Windowpane", the next chapter that follows Keith's plot after his transgression, he begins his evening feeling annoyed with his friends for being late to pick him up. When they arrive, he expresses further irritation at the destination Dee and Todd have chosen: the home of a girl whom Dee is interested in. A bad LSD trip triggers an overwhelming sense of the uncanny, and Keith feels disgusted by his own friends. He leaves the house and descends into the woods. When he comes upon the colony of infected teenagers, they comfort him and listen to his anxious ramblings. He decides to spend the night around their campfire. It is clear that Keith's

perspective has shifted; his transgressions with Eliza have inwardly transferred him to the monstrous realm.

Figure 10. (Burns)

The next time Keith and Eliza meet, they have sex and Keith contracts the bug (see fig. 10). His mutation manifests as small protrusions on his torso which he compares to tadpoles. This variant of the bug is a clear example of monstrous feminization. The "tadpole" tails are markedly similar to Eliza's manifestation of the bug: it is as though she has impregnated Keith with her specific mutation. This is the primary way in which we see Keith inflicted with feminine monstrosity.

In this relationship, Eliza is ultimately more punished for transgressing sex and gender expectations. Towards the end of the novel, she explains to Keith the arrangement that she had

with her old roommates. In exchange for essentially acting as a maternal figure – being passive and cleaning their home – she was allowed to live in the basement (see fig. 11). When they came into her space during a party, her belongings started to get destroyed. She dropped her mask of docile femininity to assert herself – a masculine act - and she was beaten and sexually assaulted for this behavioral transgression of the gender binary (see fig. 12 and fig. 13). Horror for Eliza, then, arises from two separate instances of female body violation. She experiences it through her masculinizing mutation, and she has also been monstrously abused by hypermasculine characters.

Figure 11. (Burns)

Figure 12. (Burns)

Figure 13. (Burns)

The last time we see Keith and Eliza, they are falling asleep after exchanging "I love you"s. The couple has escaped their hometown to presumably begin a new life together. Their male-centric storyline does not match the horrors and woes faced by Chris and Rob. Significantly, though, Eliza – the female counterpart of the pair – has experienced trauma and ostracization, whereas Keith makes it through the novel relatively unscathed. Evidently, in the world that *Black Hole* creates, to be female is to be in danger.

Black Hole utilizes sexuality and gender binaries as a means to mark monstrosity. Throughout the novel, horror emerges in conjunction with grotesque manipulations of the female body. As we can see with Chris, Rob, Keith, and Eliza, blurring the lines that mark societal boundaries cannot go unpunished – and in this piece, monstrous femininity is the ultimate punishment.

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