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Finding the Gray in Black and White:

Examining Blurred Binaries 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 marks their transgression in monstrous ways. In this essay, I will examine instances of the visual and textual blurring of these binaries in Chris and Rob's relationship, and I will consider how they relate to the novel's concept of monstrosity.

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). If we consider these ideas in tandem, we can examine how 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



Figure 3. (Burns)

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

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. 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.

Chris's mutation further aligns with menstruation imagery in that she periodically sheds her skin. Over time, she becomes less perturbed by the process (see fig. 4). The shedding becomes a routine part of her bodily maintenance. The reader recognizes that her condition is



Figure 4. (Burns)

less severe than other mutations seen throughout *Black Hole*, but the damage to her reputation is done. For her transgressions and for her feminine mutation, Chris is a monster.

Halberstam points out that visual horror “depends upon the explicit violation of female bodies” (125). 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. Furthermore, as the novel’s most female-centric plot, it is also the most tragic. 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. In the world *Black Hole* creates, to be feminine is to be in danger.

*Black Hole* utilizes sexuality and gender binaries as a means to mark monstrosity. Chris and Rob’s transgressions against these boundaries are met with consequences. In this piece, monstrous femininity is the ultimate punishment.

Works Cited

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