

Return of the Yōkai

妖怪

怪



Roman Mars - This is 99% Invisible. I'm Roman Mars.

Chris Carlier - I think a lot of Japanese people go about their day and they don't really pay any attention to the mascots that are everywhere.

RM - The Mascots. Real world, life-sized character-costumes with sweaty actors inside.

CC - Most people ignore them. But I always found them really fascinating.

Here in the US, mascots are used to pump up crowds at sporting events or traumatize generations of children at Chuck E. Cheese, but in Japan it's different. There are mascots for towns, aquariums, prisons...

CC - Sometimes I'll just go to the dentist and the dentist has their own mascot.

RM - There are mascots that tell people not to litter or remind them to be quiet on the train. Everything has a mascot and anything can be a mascot. There is an anthropomorphised bear mascot. There's an anthropomorphized melon mascot. There's an anthropomorphised bear whose head is made out of a melon. His name is Melon Kuma and he's the mascot of a region known for both its bears and its melons. And so as Carlier adjusted to his new life in Tokyo, he started snapping photos of all these mascots he was coming across.

CC - I just realized one day I had like hundreds of pictures of mascots. So I started putting them online.

RM - Carlier's hobby has since morphed into a wildly popular Twitter account called "Mondo Mascots." And if you were to build a twitter account in a lab, you could not concoct a more "Vivian Le" set of content than this Twitter account.

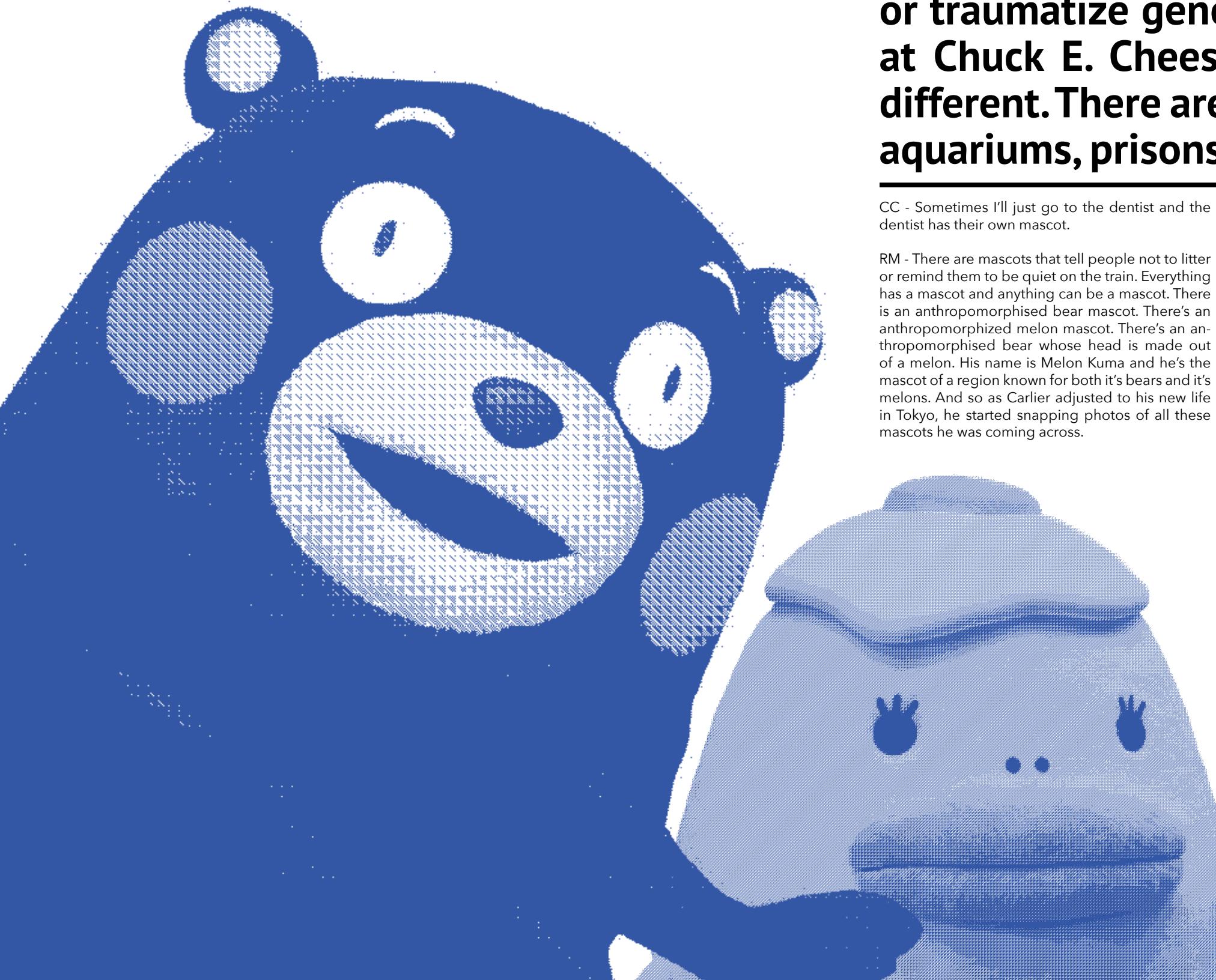
Vivian Le - Yeah. It's one of my favorite things on the internet.

RM - That's producer Vivian Le.

VL - Twitter has been a rollercoaster ride of emotions for the past few months so it's a real treat to see a picture of a manatee with a pompadour made out of cabbage.

VL - One mascot was making quarantine workout videos for people stuck at home, another posted photo after photo of himself just staring blankly into space. But around mid-March, I saw something kind of odd and very meta happening on the Mondo Mascots twitter. Some of the more well-known mascots were adding these similar new flourishes on top of the regular mascot costumes. They were all wearing long, flowing blue wigs and colorful fish scales. The mascots were dressing up as the same creature.

RM - Usually these costumed mascots are out interacting with the world, waving to tourists, and opening supermarkets, but like the rest of us, they recently had to spend a lot of time indoors in order to flatten the curve of the coronavirus.



CC - I posted some mascots dressed as a kind of mermaid type creature with long hair and three legs and a beak.

RM - It was a mythical character called Amabié, a 174 year old monster that has recently become the unexpected hero of the COVID era in Japan.

Matt Alt - There's so many layers. It's like an onion, just peel the layers back.

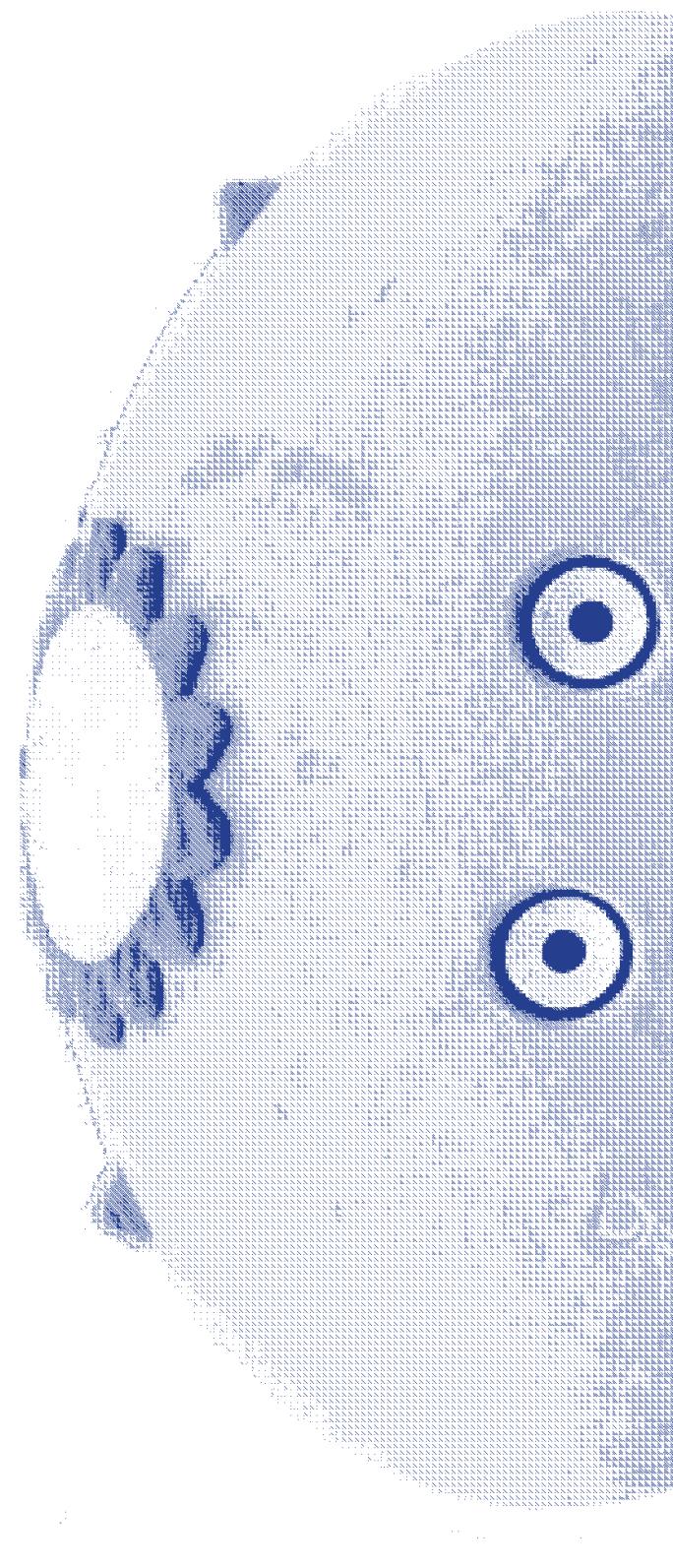
VL - Matt wrote about Amabié for the New Yorker, and is also the co-author of a book called "Yōkai Attack: The Japanese Monster Survival Guide." I spoke with him and his co-author Hiroko Yoda in order to peel back all of the oniony history layers of this Twitter moment. Matt and Hiroko explained to me that Amabié is a creature from Japanese folklore. What's called a Yōkai.

MA - Yōkai are monsters from Japanese folklore and they've been part of the oral storytelling tradition here in Japan since before Japan has been Japan. They're basically like superstitions with personalities.

Hiroko Yodda - Yeah, the yōkai are characterization of natural phenomena or unexplained phenomena.

RM - Yōkai is a pretty broad term that includes everything from shape-shifting demons, to cuddly animal-like creatures, to spirited inanimate objects... and also ghosts. It's kind of like trying to lump fairies, vampires, leprechauns, and an angry toaster into the same category.

VL - Yōkai are supernatural manifestations of the unknown. If you don't know what made that noise that went bump in the night, you blame it on yōkai. Occasionally they take the form of benevolent "guardian angels", while some yōkai are completely innocuous. One of my favorites is the Azuki Arai which is a spirit that washes azuki beans... that's it.



RM - But more often than not they're malevolent beings associated with a specific place. Kind of like regional ghosts or the troll that lives under a particular bridge.

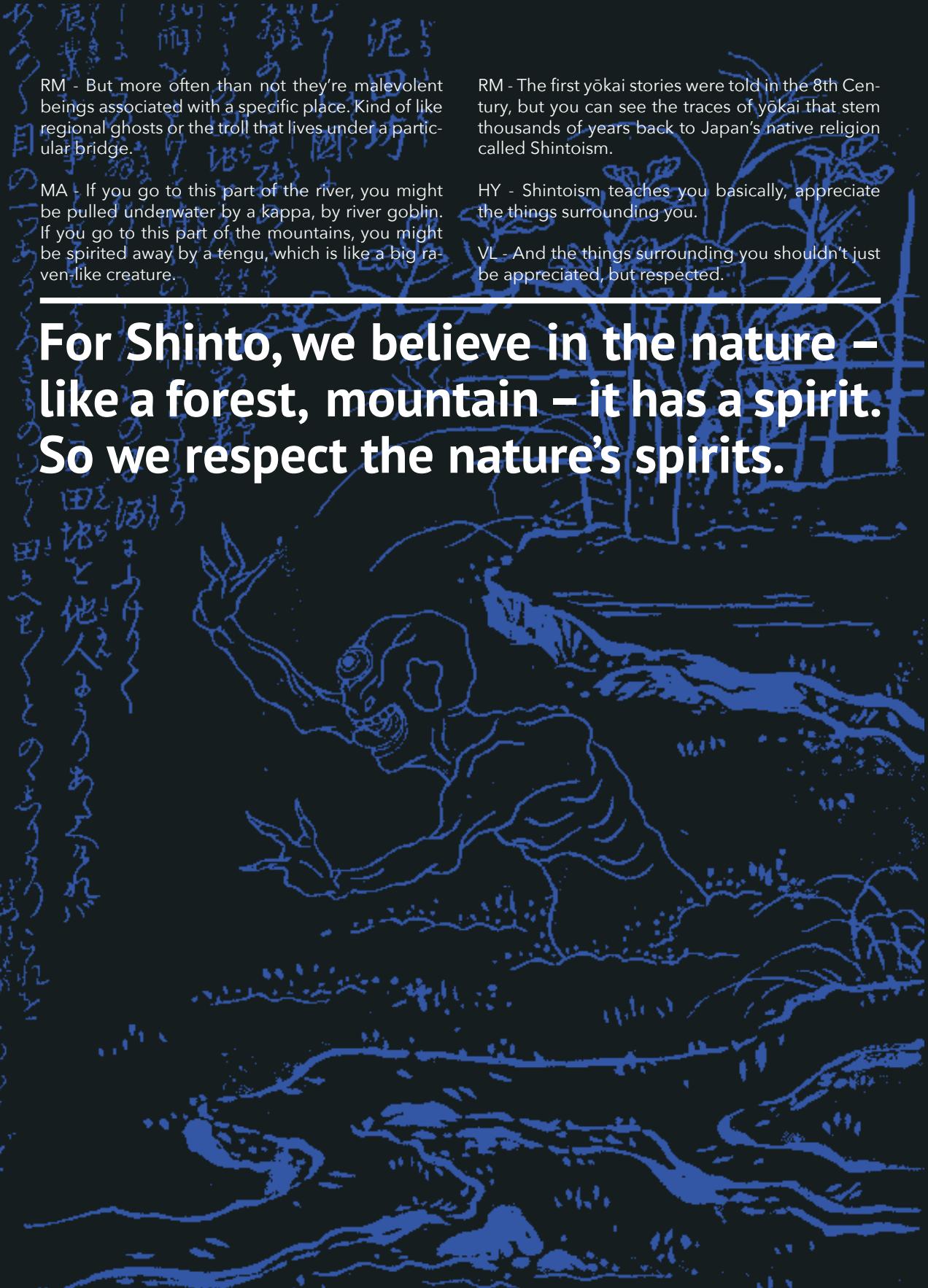
MA - If you go to this part of the river, you might be pulled underwater by a kappa, by river goblin. If you go to this part of the mountains, you might be spirited away by a tengu, which is like a big raven-like creature.

RM - The first yōkai stories were told in the 8th Century, but you can see the traces of yōkai that stem thousands of years back to Japan's native religion called Shintoism.

HY - Shintoism teaches you basically, appreciate the things surrounding you.

VL - And the things surrounding you shouldn't just be appreciated, but respected.

For Shinto, we believe in the nature – like a forest, mountain – it has a spirit. So we respect the nature's spirits.



These Shinto “spirits” are called Kami and they reside within everything – from the trees, to the wind, even your iPhone.

VL - This is Izumi Hasegawa, head priest at Shin-to Shrine of Shusse Inari in America. Hasegawa says that Shinto is a religion that's so tightly woven into the fabric of Japanese society that it's difficult to separate where the religion ends and Japanese culture begins.

Izumi Hasegawa - Modern day Japanese people didn't realize Shinto is our culture's basis. I say it's not religion. It's more like a way of living in culture, tradition, custom.

VL - Hasegawa says that Shintoism is a belief system that venerates millions of deities that live all around us and impact daily life.

IH - After the rain stops, and sun shines, and then plants grow so well.... Oh, maybe like the sun has some kind of spirit. Rain water had some kind of spirit. The growing, the productivity has some kind of the spirits. We should respect them.

RM - Shintoism fosters the mindset that everything in the world is animated and has a spirit. Anything can become a character. EVERYTHING IS ALIVE.

MA - You have this belief system in which nearly anything can be a receptacle for a deity or a soul. And many of those kami are actually personifications. That world view, that belief system of polytheism and animism is the soil from which yokai emerged.

RM - In the beginning, tales of ‘spirit monsters’ varied drastically from region to region and were passed on as verbal stories with no real visual form attached. A kappa water goblin from the south might be described totally differently from a kappa from the north. That is, until the Edo Period.

VL - The Edo Period, which took place between 1603-1868, was a time of political stability and economic growth for Japan, and during this time the publishing industry started really taking off.

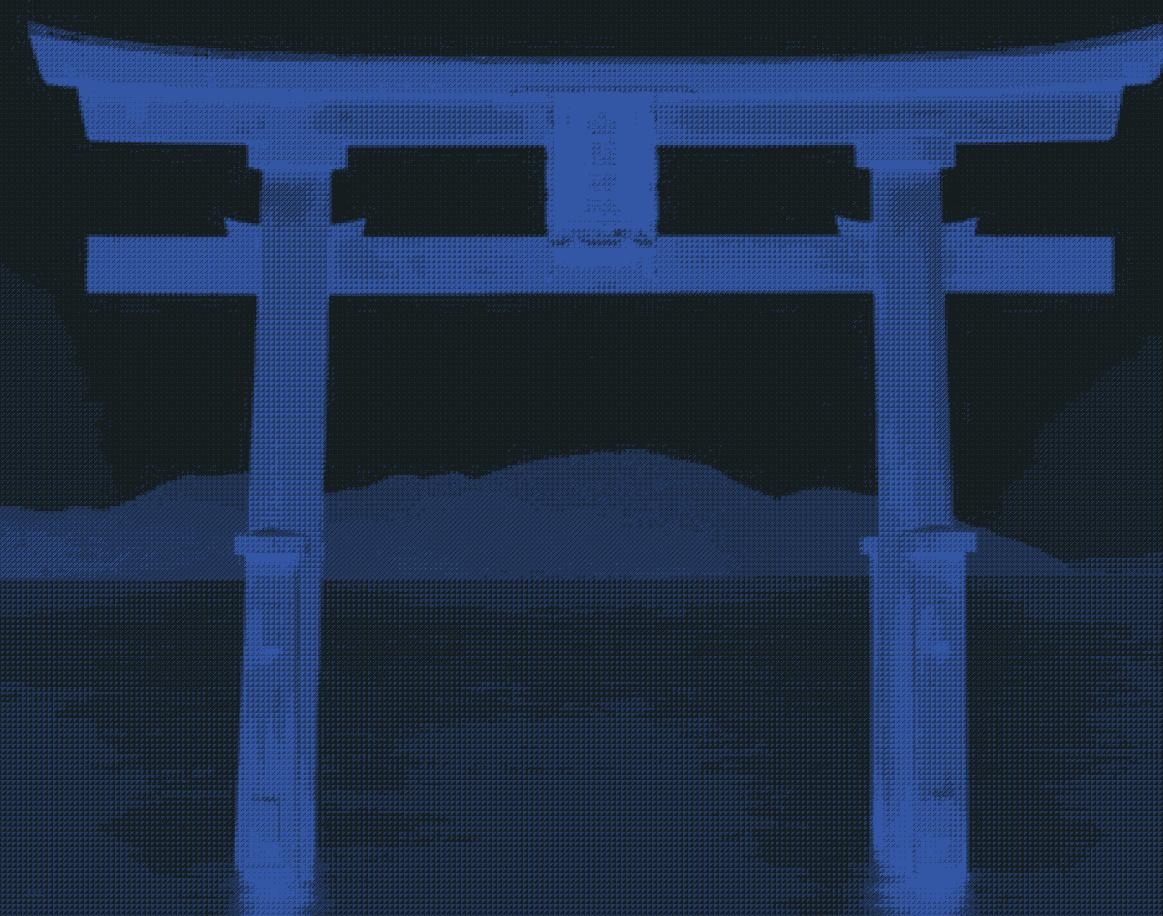
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MA - In the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries in Japan, one of the most popular forms of book was the encyclopedia. And encyclopedias are what? Full of data and information. Well, around 1776, a artist named Toriyama Sekien came around and he published a parody encyclopedia that wasn't full of facts at all.

RM - It was an encyclopedia of yokai. Sekien created a catalogue that gave each yokai a name, a description, and an illustrated image associated with it.

VL - And this was the moment that the modern concept of yokai emerged, Sekien's books were some of the first mass-produced reference images of yokai. The entire nation was literally on the same page about who these monsters were and what they looked like.

HY - Before Toriyama Sekien's book came out, the yokai were only drawn on Japanese scrolls. The people in general cannot really see them.



MA - It essentially cemented the image of a lot of yokai in place. And those are the images that we know today.

RM - By creating an illustrated index of them, Sekien took all these local legends and consolidated them into a piece of national pop culture. In part, because of Sekien's encyclopedia, stories about yokai flourished during the Edo Period, both as entertainment and as a way of explaining the many unknowns of the world, including highly infectious diseases caused by invisible microorganisms.

HY - You know, today we have science to explain... like plague for example. But back in time, there's not that much information about medical. And so it's very unknown. And in that way, that's when the yokai come into play.

VL - And a plague was actually where the yokai known as Amabié specifically came into play. Throughout the 19th century cholera epidemics were sweeping the world, and Japan was hit especially hard. Wave after wave of outbreaks devastated the country over the course of several decades. And at the same time, very little was known about the disease and how to fight it.

RM - According to an actual newspaper story at the time, Amabié was spotted off the coast of Southwestern Japan in 1846.

VL - For several nights in a row, villagers could see a mysterious light radiating off the coast towards the sea. One night, an officer was sent to investigate the source.

RM - He followed the light towards the water until he was greeted by a strange looking creature who appeared out of the sea. It had the beak of a bird, long locks of human-like hair, a body covered in scales, and three legs with webbed feet, kind of like a cross between a mermaid and a duck.

MA - And it declared that its name was Amabié. It said that there would be a abundant harvest. And then it said, [JAPANESE LANGUAGE] if plague should ever ravage these lands again, [JAPANESE LANGUAGE] show an image of me to the people.

RM - And then, it was gone.

VL - Because of that story, Amabié became a talisman against plague in Japan. People would draw a picture of it and display it for others to see so that Amabié would protect the world from harm.

MA - It appeared in a Japanese newspaper of the era as a little article, and it was accompanied by a very charmingly crude drawing that looks almost like a child might have done it.

RM - Mythical creatures like Amabié played an important societal role within Japan in the 1800s. But by the turn of the 20th century, Japan's relationship with its Yokai began to shift.

VL - Largely because of one man in particular. A philosopher named Inoue Enryo.

HY - So Inoue Enryo is known as a "Doctor Yokai." And if you see the word Dr. Yokai, you know, sounds like he is really into yokai.



VL - But it was the exact opposite—he made it his mission to displace yōkai from the Japanese psyche for good. Inoue was born right at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration which was a moment when Japan began opening up to the rest of the world after hundreds of years of isolation. But as the country began opening up, leaders wanted to be able to compete with Western countries in terms of science, technology, and military power.

HY - So in his eyes and some politicians, Japan is very behind from the west and they have to catch up the west.

RM - Inoue saw yōkai as a crutch holding back the nation. If Japan was going to become a world power, it needed to actively embrace modern science and technology. He felt that so as long as people clung to yōkai and superstition to explain away the unknown, Japan would never reach its full potential.

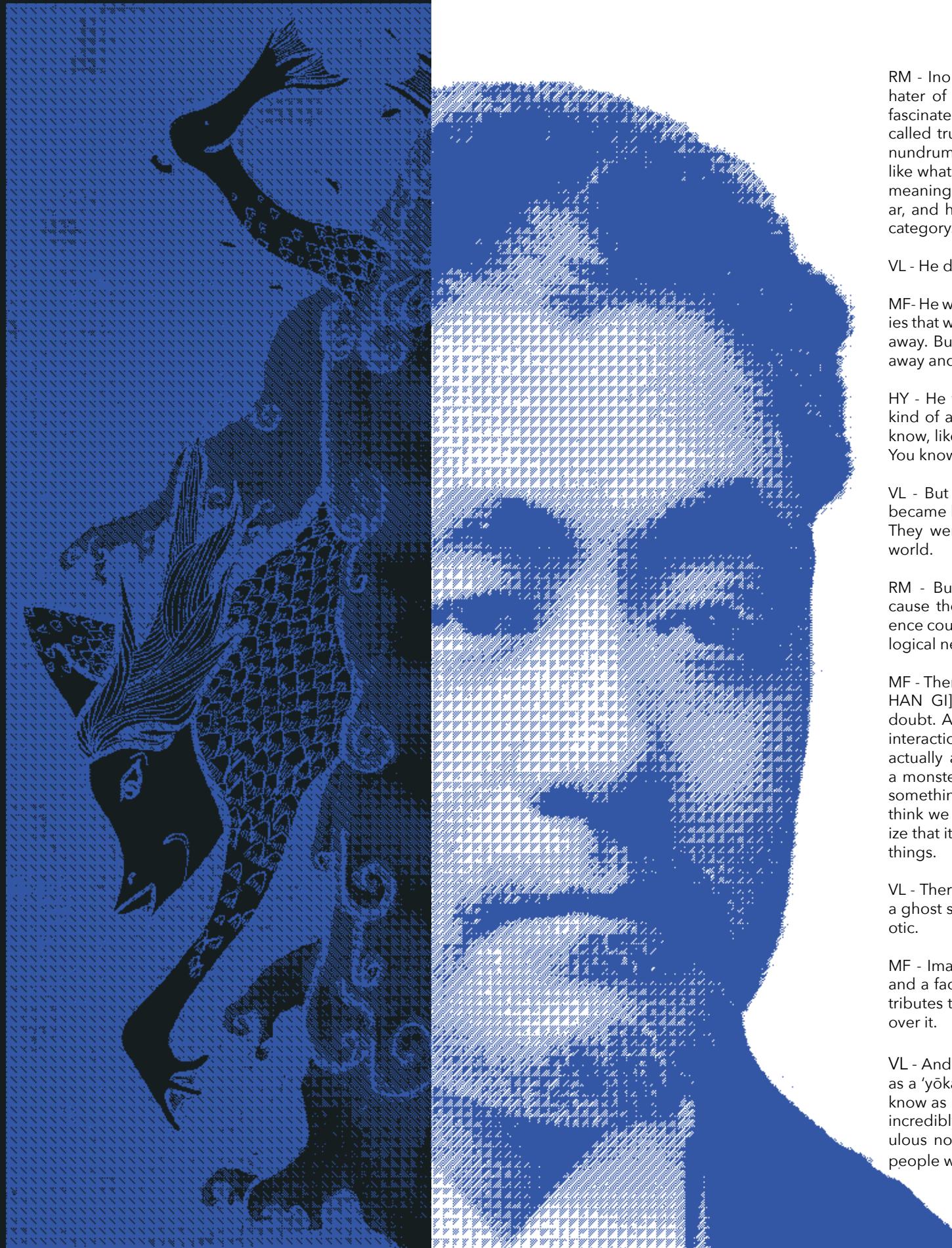
MA - He went around the country finding examples of superstitions or places where people said a spirit was responsible for things or urban legends and basically debunked them.

VL - Inoue became a sort of ghostbuster. He created his own area of research called "yōkaigaku" or "Yōkai Studies" and would basically go from town to town being "that one guy" at magic shows pointing out all of the trap doors and mirrors in the illusions. He used scientific experimentation to explain away the natural phenomena that yōkai were previously attributed to. But it didn't just stop at yōkai, a lot of local customs and traditions were quashed during this time.

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HY - I think that movement went too far. Our local beliefs are totally killed by the modernization, the local deities, or the Buddhist deities, and small temples are shut down.



RM - Inoue wasn't necessarily some crotchety old hater of all things wondrous. If anything, he was fascinated by the great mysteries of life, what he called true mysteries. They were the universal conundrums that we may never find an answer to like what happens to us when we die or what's the meaning of life. But he was a Buddhist and a scholar, and he just didn't think monsters fell into that category.

VL - He didn't deny all possibility of mystery.

MF - He was basically saying that most of the mysteries that we see, most of the Yōkai, can be explained away. But there are those that can't be explained away and those are what we have to find.

HY - He tried to come up with solutions or some kind of answers for unexplainable things like, you know, like Mulder / X Files, like "truth is out there." You know what I mean?! He's trying to find it.

VL - But because of Inoue and his work, people became less and less interested in stories of yōkai. They were no longer needed to understand the world.

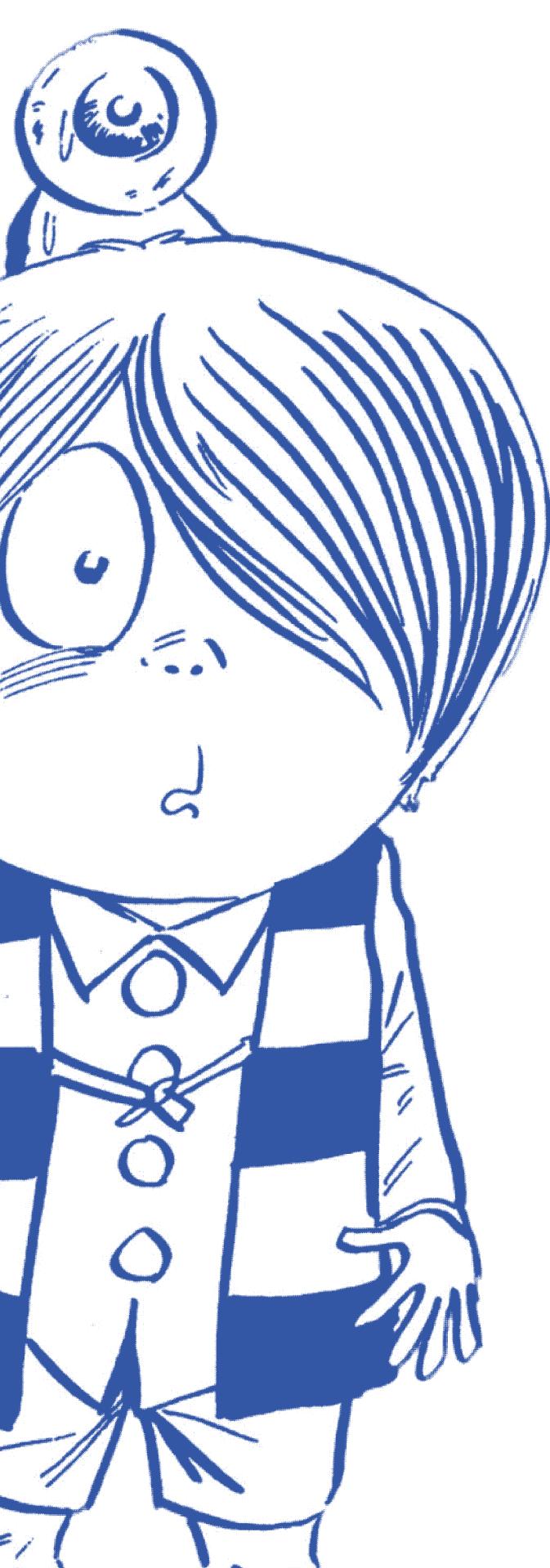
RM - But they didn't completely disappear, because they provided something that modern science couldn't. Yōkai filled a different, more psychological need for comfort.

MF - There's an expression in Japanese [HAN SHIN HAN GI] which is translated as half belief, half doubt. And I think that's how in our sort of daily interactions with so many things in the world, we actually approach them. People think of a yōkai, a monster creature, a supernatural explanation of something as being irrational in some ways. But I think we have to sort of turn that around and realize that it really is a very rational way to think about things.

VL - There's an expression in Japanese Sometimes a ghost story can make the unknown feel less chaotic.

MF - Imagining that it's a monster—putting a form and a face and sometimes a name and various attributes to something gives you a sense of control over it.

VL - And even though Inoue earned the reputation as a 'yōkai killer' it's actually thanks to him that we know as much as we do about yōkai. Inoue was an incredibly thorough researcher and kept meticulous notes. His work has been really helpful for people who study folklore.



HY - Even though he's famous for a debunker, I guess, of paranormal activity, but because he left so much data to look for the absolute truth, his data is very useful for folklorists today.

RM - For years yōkai existed in this nebulous space. Their stories weren't entirely forgotten, but they were suppressed in the name of rationality and progress. It wasn't until after WWII that yōkai crept out of the shadows and back into the public imagination.

MA - In the postwar era, when Japan is finally recovering from the horrors of war, a consumer economy starts up again, a publishing industry starts up again, and there's a huge hunger for entertainment. Manga - comic books, cheap comic books - become one of the main forms of entertainment.

RM - In the postwar era, when Japan is fiAnd just as it took basically one man to exorcise yōkai from Japan's collective consciousness, it only took one man to revive them. An artist actually.

HY - The manga artist, Mizuki Shigeru brought it back. He's very known by the animation called GeGeGe no Kitaro.

VL - In the 1950s, an artist and animator named Mizuki Shigeru released a manga that was adapted into a popular animation series called GeGeGe no Kitaro. It's charming... in a deeply unsettling way that will haunt your dreams. The story centers on a one-eyed ghost boy named Kitaro who keeps the peace between the world of yōkai and the world of mortals. Mizuki was also a folklorist and he used this series as a platform to propel yōkai back into the Japanese mainstream.

HY - When I was a kid, I saw the animation and I grew up with it. It was huge and popular. So a lot of characters are created by him. But also many of yōkai are based on the old yōkai. He brought them back.

Since Mizuki's reintroduction, yōkai have been a constant presence in Japanese pop culture.

RM - And these monsters are all over the cultural exports that we Americans flip out over. You can see the dark whimsical undercurrents of yōkai in the work of Haruki Murakami or the animation of Hayao Miyazaki.

VL - Not to mention one of the biggest franchises in the world, Pokemon. There's a certain pokemon that is inspired by a yōkai called Sōgen-bi which is depicted as a ghoul floating head engulfed in a fireball. Let's see if you can guess...

WHO'S THAT POKEMON?

RM - No clue.

VL - Come on, Roman.

IT'S GHASTLY!

VL - Mizuki Shigeru, the man who revived yōkai in the 20th Century, was concerned about whether yōkai could survive in modern society. They're products of an older era - one that relied on faith and superstition rather than science and technology. In an interview before his death, Mizuki says that in the bright lights of modern Japan, yōkai can't flourish like they once did.

VL But despite the bright lights and modernization, yōkai are still thriving.

MF - I don't think Yokai will ever go away.

VL - Foster says that yōkai have been a part of popular imagination, and will remain a part of popular imagination in one form or another.



MF - The need for explaining mystery never disappears. Once we scientifically explain it, it just moves on to something further along, something deeper. And there's still that mystery needing to be explained. So in other words, Yōkai themselves will never go away. (Highlight)

VL - They may not take the same form or address the same fears as they did hundreds of years ago, but yōkai will always adapt to inhabit the world around them. And you can see this in the character culture of Japan.

MA - A lot of times foreigners come here and they see this and they're just blown away by the sheer amount of super cute characters running around on the streets of Japan and the forms of illustrations and signs and things like that. And they mistake it for it being kind of infantile or childish. But in reality, the roots of that character and mascot culture can be found in the yōkai who are sort of mascots for a bygone era.

VL - Which brings us back to that plague-fighting Edo Period mascot, Amabié.

RM - Until recently Amabié was actually not a well-known yōkai in Japan.

MA - But then suddenly, in late February, just as COVID-19 was starting to sweep the world in earnest, a Japanese artist on Twitter kind of resurrected Amabié and he posted an image of the original newspaper article and then he posted an illustration that he had made of Amabié saying, "Amabié, I'm following what you said. I'm sharing your image. I hope this helps."

RM - Thousands of people on twitter from all over the world started posting their own renditions of Amabié with the hashtag #AmabieChallenge.

VL - I've seen hand-drawn sketches of Amabié, watercolors of Amabié, wildly inappropriate humanoid female forms of Amabié... all with the same luxurious flowing locks, scales, and three legs.

MF - One thing that we can do is latch on to this idea of the Amabié as a kind of counter attack to the virus.

VL - Here's Foster again.

MF - Most people would say they don't really believe in them, but the idea that there is the possibility that something could exist, that potential for there being something beyond our current way of explaining the world I think is a very attractive thing to a lot of people.

HY - If you're facing something unknown or something that you cannot... you don't understand or something uncontrollable. It's just, it's chaos. Obviously, your drawing of Amabié is not gonna give you hardcore solutions or vaccine or anything like that but yōkai, it gives you a way - one of the ways - to control things, to give you peace of mind.

RM - So if you're feeling anxious about the pandemic these days, go ahead and draw a picture of Amabié and put in your window for everyone to see. It is not going to stop the virus. I cannot stress this enough. But why not have a yōkai around the house? You might just feel a little bit better... What also might make you feel better and would make the whole world better would be if you wore a mask. I also can't stress this enough! Wear a mask. Draw Amabié on it if you want to but wear a mask. Thanks.

RM - Speaking of Japanese character culture, did you know that Hello Kitty isn't a cat? I certainly didn't. Vivian comes back to explain after this.



RM - So I'm talking with Vivian Le again. How are you doing?

VL - I'm good, Roman. How are you?

RM - Excellent. In your closet. Doing good.

VL - Yeah, I'm in my quarantine studio surrounded by like... I didn't realize how many pairs of overalls I have and rompers. So this is kind of embarrassing.

RM - No, you should not be embarrassed. Rompers. One piece of clothing is extremely acceptable in the new era.

VL - It's very efficient. So I really appreciate that. So Roman, how familiar are you with Hello Kitty? I'm guessing you didn't grow up collecting a lot of, like, stationery and coin purses, but I don't want to assume.

RM - No, I don't think I became familiar until my 20s, actually. Like, I didn't quite catch on to it at the time. You know, I'm somewhat familiar, but that's about it.

VL - Hello Kitty is one of those characters that is like a huge cultural export from Japan so even if you're not a fan, you would still, you know, recognize the character.

RM - Absolutely.

VL - She kind of came up in conversation during my interview with Matt Alt and Hiroko Yoda. Matt told me about this big news story from a few years back that I had completely forgotten about.

MA - "I don't know if you remember, like a couple of years ago, there was a big brouhaha when it was announced that Hello Kitty wasn't a cat."

M - She's clearly a cat. She has like cat ears, like her name is Kitty. Like, could she...? That's a cat.

VL - It's incredibly misleading. But back in 2014, there was a retrospective exhibit on Hello Kitty at the Japanese American National Museum. And the curator was an anthropologist named Christine Yano. And she'd written a book about Hello Kitty. So she was doing an interview with the L.A. Times, which was covering the exhibition. And Yanno said that she was writing up some texts and she had referred to Hello Kitty as a "cat" and she said she was firmly corrected by Sanrio and was told that Hello Kitty is not a cat. She was a girl.

RM - Oh, so it is Charmmy Kitty a cat. Like is Charmmy Kitty her cat.

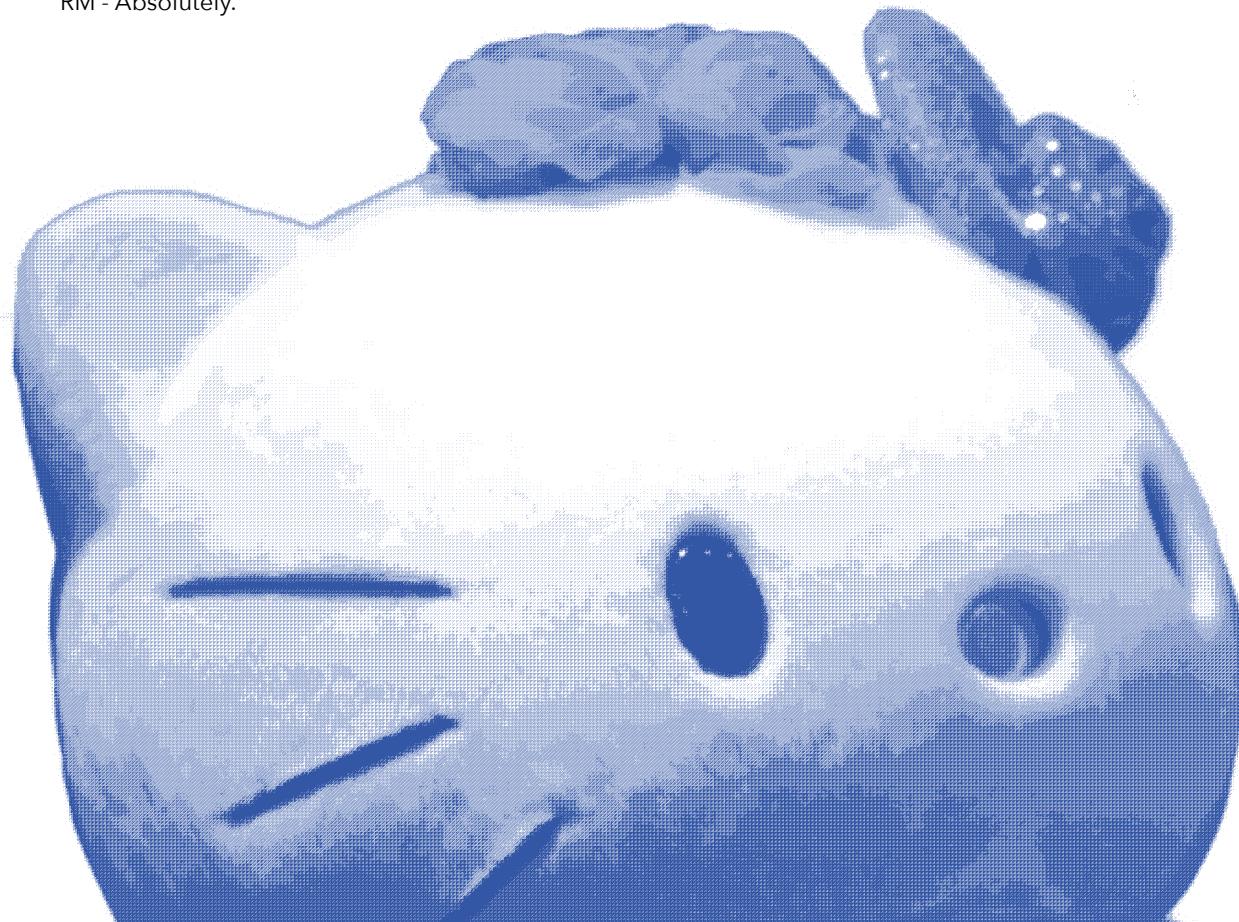
VL - From what I can tell, she's a cat. She looks exactly like Hello Kitty. But she walks on all fours. So I guess technically she's a cat.

RM - Wow. So, okay. So I'm trying to think of other cartoon characters. So like if you're thinking of Donald Duck, okay? I'm aware that Donald Duck is not like a real duck, that he wears clothes and smoke cigars. That's not a real duck. But I wouldn't say he's not a duck. You know what I mean? Like, that's a weird choice.

VL - It's a very clear distinction.

RM - Right.

VL - So it's kind of funny cause Yano casually slipped this "Hello Kitty is not a cat" thing into an interview with the L.A. Times and people just didn't take it very well.



[SHE MAY LOOK LIKE A FRIENDLY FELINE, BUT THIS WEEK, FANS OF HELLO KITTY WE'RE TOLD THE SHOCKING TRUTH.]

[I CAN SEE THE CAT. IN MY HEART, SHE'LL BE A CAT FOREVER. I'M A CAT LOVER. SHE'S LIKE THE AMBASSADOR OF CATS.]

[ALRIGHT, YOU'RE IN HELLO KITTY, RIGHT?] [YES. YES, ABSOLUTELY.] [WERE YOU APPALLED TO HEAR THIS? WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION?] [I ACTUALLY WAS APPALLED.]

RM - I think he's leading the witness, Your Honor.

VL - But like even the Washington Post headline was, "Hello Kitty is not a cat. Everything is a lie." And even Josh Groban had an opinion on the matter and tweeted, "Hello Kitty is a cat. She has whiskers and a cat nose. Girls don't look like that. Stop this nonsense."

RM - It seems that people just can't fathom a universe where Hello Kitty is not a cat.

VL - Actually, after this news broke out, a bunch of reporters ended up reaching out directly to Sanrio. And the company actually, you know, revised their statement and they said maybe it was too far to say she was not a cat. But they clarified that Hello Kitty is a personification done in the motif of a cat, which I think may have still been confusing to a lot of people.

[BUT IF YOU READ REALLY CAREFULLY, WHAT SANRIO IS SAYING IS SHE'S A PERSONIFICATION OF A CAT. SHE'S ACTUALLY A LITTLE GIRL. AND THIS IS SOMETHING THAT WESTERNERS COULDN'T WRAP THEIR HEADS AROUND AT ALL.]

VL - And that's not to say that all Japanese people immediately understood that Hello Kitty is not a cat. There there's still a lot of confused Japanese people. But the word that Sanrio used to describe her is that she's a Gijinka, which translates to anthropomorphization. And you see this in those costumed mascots on the streets of Japan but also everywhere in the country. Like there's an anthropomorphized strawberry on the pack of fruit or like a cartoon phone in the manual of your phone. And it's just something that's incredibly present in Japan in a way that it isn't here in the West.

HY - "I started using Gijinka to explain the culture difference. Especially to me, it's like America versus Japan. So it's kind of natural. It's just there, like air, to me."

VL - So I think that when Sanrio was trying to explain why Hello Kitty is not necessarily a cat, they were working off this understanding of, you know, anthropomorphism that you could look at a cartoon cat and not necessarily think of it as a cat per se.

"Anthropomorphism really runs through Japanese culture and that, I think, is the thread that connects things most of all."

MA - "Anthropomorphism really runs through Japanese culture and that, I think, is the thread that connects things most of all."

HY - "Yeah, it's just... You don't see it. You don't see it outside Japan. It's actually a unique thing of Japan. It's so natural to us."

RM - Hmm. So I guess the answer is that Hello Kitty is not a cat, but is also, you know, not not a cat.

VL - Yeah, she lives somewhere on the spectrum of cat. But you're a fan of "The Mountain Goats," right?

RM - Yeah, sure. Yeah.

VL - So if you're, like, confused, you could just take a cue from them because they tweeted, "Hello Kitty is not a cat. Hello Kitty is a God. You exist only at Hello Kitty's pleasure. Crawl like drugged roaches before her splendor."

RM - That's a very John Darnielle take. [LAUGHTER] Oh, that's so good. Well, I feel like I understand this a whole lot more in some way.

VL - But also like a lot less.

RM - I could say that I both understand it and don't understand it. Thanks a lot, Vivian.

VL - Thank you!

99% Invisible was produced this week by Vivian Le. Mix and Tech production by Bryson Barnes and Sharif Youssef. Music by Sean Real. Katie Mingle is our senior producer. Kurt Kohlstedt is the digital director. The rest of the team is senior editor Delaney Hall, Emmett Fitzgerald, Joe Rosenberg, Chris Bebrube, Sofia Klatzker, and me, Roman Mars.

Special thanks to Miho Gallagher.

Matt Alt has a new book out right now and I mean literally as I am recording this and we're releasing this episode. It comes out today. It's called "Pure Invention: How Japanese Pop Culture Conquered the World." If you're interested in reading more about Hello Kitty and Pokemon - you know, if you're a regular Vivian Le - you should check it out.

This episode is supported by the Bagri Foundation. Based in London, UK, and led by three generations of the Bagri family, the team and trustees share a spirit of curiosity.

Through a diverse arts and culture program, the Foundation celebrates extraordinary talent from across Asia, encouraging artistic dialogue between both traditional and contemporary disciplines. Learn more at bagrifoundation.org

We are a project of 91.7 KALW in San Francisco and produced on Radio Row, which is now distributed in multiple locations across North America but in our hearts, it will always be in beautiful downtown Oakland, California. You can tweet at me @romanmars and the show at @99piorg. We're on Instagram and Reddit too but our true home on the open internet is 99pi.org



