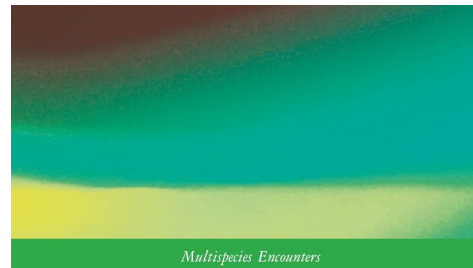


Otto Latva: *The Giant Squid in Transatlantic Culture: The Monsterization of Molluscs*. Routledge 2024.

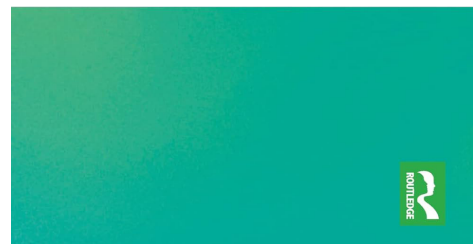
With a nod to recent attention given to more-than-human relations, the Routledge series *Multispecies Encounters* aims to present interdisciplinary research on human relationships with other-than-human beings. In doing so, this series helps create space for discussing more-than-human-relations and interrogating human exceptionalism. Historian Otto Latva's new book on the monsterization of the giant squid is a helpful contribution to this conversation, prompting the reader to consider how characterizations of monstrous animals come to be, and how the historical contexts of knowledges that help to promote this image. Latva explains the historical development of a multispecies entanglement between giant squids and humans, but also includes other cephalopods, importantly octopuses, and sperm whales.

Constructed from extensive primary source material from the 18th and 19th centuries, Latva explores how the giant squid came to be depicted as a monstrous animal, centering on transatlantic cultural contributions. For this research, Latva terms a monster as "large, ugly,



**THE GIANT SQUID IN
TRANSATLANTIC CULTURE**
THE MONSTERIZATION OF MOLLUSCS

Otto Latva



or frightening, or all three" (p. 4). Latva prefaces the research with the monstrous depictions of cephalopods in popular culture, allowing the reader to think critically about where they may have encountered the giant squid in contexts including Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu-mythos, or the ominous background squid-creature in the video game *BioShock*. These images of frightening cephalopod-like beings may mingle with (other) readers' interests in how to cultivate and understand sustainable futures in which we coexist with more-than-hu-

man others. Latva suggests that monstrosity is not an inherent characteristic of squids and other animals, nor is it based on a natural human tendency to fear them. However, these fears are culturally defined and important to interrogate. Through this work, Latva's intention has been to demonstrate that humans have not always seen giant squids as monsters, and that this characterization came about relatively recently. Through examinations of primary sources including newspaper articles and whaling records, Latva sheds some light on the meanings humans derive from relations with these beings.

To this effect, Latva has conducted extensive research of historical records written by and about whalers, fishermen, other seafarers, and naturalists. Through these records, he has analyzed the perceptions of these groups towards giant squids and other cephalopods, and the agencies of these animals. Latva presents evidence that the monsterization of the squid did not start with fishermen and whalers. Rather, these groups had little reason to fear squids, as they were perceived to be useful, possibly owing to the close contact they had with dead squid bodies. As members of overlapping lifeworlds, fishermen sometimes found the dead bodies of squids washed ashore or floating on the surface of the sea. These bodies were used for purposes such as fishing bait or fertilizer. In a similarly instrumental sense, whalers under-

stood the dead bodies of squids as a sign that sperm whales were nearby. Sperm whales would often also vomit the bodies of those squid as they died in the process of being hunted.

The book is organized chronologically, with three sections discussing the late 18th, early 19th, and late 19th century encounters and public discussions about the giant squid. Within these sections, the book is helpfully divided into accounts of empirical encounters with giant-sized squids, and speculations about giant squids and their impact on public discussion. Through such a division of the content, the reader can consider the ramifications of speculation about and fear of other species, especially when empirical evidence may be hard to come by. Indeed, Latva finds that the giant squid was not thought of as a monster "universally and since the dawn of history" (241), but that this characterization emerged in the late 18th century by those who relied on speculation to understand the nature of these beings. Owing to the difficulty in capturing a live specimen for examination, squid were also defined under the now obsolete taxon *vermes*, unclassifiable due to the difficulty in obtaining a specimen. In its structure and content, this book therefore poses an interesting starting point for understanding knowledge contexts, and how these come to produce a multifaceted idea of an animal with whom few people have had a living encounter.

Due to Latva's source material, I find that some questions remain for researchers to explore in future. While primary source material such as whaling logs and naturalists' records can give helpful insights to how these people perceived encounters with giant squids, he also claims that these logs reveal something about the agency of giant squids and their monstrosity. However, when examining relations among more-than-human lifeworlds, agency becomes difficult for me to pinpoint. For example, there are instances of what Latva refers to as accounts of the non-intentional agency of the squid, such as natural historian and priest Antoine-Joseph Pernety's description of a squid that throws so much of its weight onto a ship that it may capsize. While Latva observes that Pernety's writing is likely a mix of sailor lore and interpretation, the interpretation of non-intentional agency raised some uncertainty in me. What can be said for certain about the intentions of any being other than oneself? What does this mean for the interpretations of an animal as monstrous? These are claims which I felt would have been supported by a close consideration alongside Karen Barad's agential realism (Barad 2007). In terms of multispecies entanglement, sperm whales, humans, and innumerable others are also a part of how the monstrous giant squid came to be. From the perspective of agential becomings, this would have aided my understanding of

how the giant squid came to be a monster. As humans, we are entangled with these beings, and future research can be devoted to understanding how.

The contribution of *The Giant Squid in Transatlantic Culture* for human-animal histories is its inclusion of non-mammal species in shaping the world, and its use of a considerable array of historical source material to accomplish its goals. Through his work, Latva has successfully demonstrated the importance of historical contextualization of knowledge production. Part 1 of the book was particularly fascinating as a contrast between whaling practices and Enlightenment schools of thought which sought to demystify and make sense of the world through certain ways of knowing. I found Latva's work insightful as an exploration of more-than-human relations with beings of the sea, and deepening understanding of a world that is built on the relations among these more-than-humans. Through his research, he claims that with a better understanding of how humans relate with squids and other so-called "monstrous species" (such as sharks and wolves), we can better understand how to live with these beings for sustainable futures. Latva suggests that some may fear nature that is beyond human control; it may also be necessary to consider how to live with those useless or frightening beings we have labeled as monsters.

References

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