

*Monster Voices***Rosanne van der Voet**

2012. Below a traffic bridge near IJmuiden, the rumble of cars and sea intermingling. The bridge grey, the water black, green reeds at the edges of the scene. From the margins, an elongated body emerges, slithering through the mud. Limbless, soundless, a monster out of place. Lone and unseen, yellow and black skin inscribes itself on cool soil, imprints of scaly skin. Coldness radiates through the entire body, unflinching, headed for the canal. Tip of tongue inspects the humid air, extends, retracts, extends. Unblinking amber eye seeks out canal-edge, into the water, an attempted hunt, just the small head visible, diving, surfacing. A few insignificant ripples, a splash, out of sight. Gliding along the canal, the animal moves towards the grass, into the light. There, she rests, scales glistening with water, basking in the sun. Enjoying natural light for the first time in her life, she is set to make a new home. Her first real home, as she has never had the opportunity to create her own dwelling. To make her own life. To crawl through the unknown landscape, to seek out mice burrows waiting to be conquered. Thrown into the world, this is her first chance to imagine them, to find them. Leaving behind her captive beginnings, she looks ahead, perfectly round eyes alert at any movement in the grass.

Eyes focussed, invisible ears set on the rustle of mouse legs in channels below, the unwanted pet becomes the first wild Pacific gopher snake in the Netherlands.¹ Making her home in the sandy dunes of Holland, a surprisingly good substitute environment for North-American deserts, soon the pioneer is labelled a dangerous invasive species. Declared a threat to local biodiversity, to already vulnerable coastal ecosystems. To the nests of struggling coastal birds, the protected sand lizards and natterjack toads, the recovering rabbit populations held at bay by the foxes.² They are now left to the mercy of the invasive predator, future casualties of a once more interrupted ecosystem.³ Yet the first Anthropocene serpent, the symbol of sloppy human interference, has not invaded the landscape. She has merely survived where she was thrown.

1 Struijk, Richard P.J.H., *Feitenrelaas rondom Pituophiswaarnemingen uit de duinen tussen Scheveningen en Katwijk* (Nijmegen: Stichting RAVON, 2018), p. 4.

2 Rijksoverheid, 'Konijnen en Vergrassing en Verstruiking Duinen, 1984-2014,' *Compendium voor de Leefomgeving*, 14 April 2015 <<https://www.clo.nl/indicatoren/nl112912-konijnen-en-vergrassing-en-verstruiking-duinen>> [accessed 21 December 2022].

3 Struijk, p. 15.

Monsters are useful figures with which to think the Anthropocene, this time of massive human transformations of multispecies life and their uneven effects. Monsters are the wonders of symbiosis and the threats of ecological disruption. Modern human activities have unleashed new and terrifying threats: from invasive predators such as jellyfish to virulent new pathogens to out-of-control chemical processes. Modern human activities have also exposed the crucial and ancient forms of monstrosity that modernity tried to extinguish: the multispecies entanglements that make life across the earth, as in the coral reef, flourish.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt, eds, 'Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies,' in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. M1-M12 (p. M2).

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Eight years after the first snake was discovered in IJmuiden, newspapers report the dunes of The Hague are teeming with the creatures.⁴

Meijndel, 2020. The Anthropocene serpent is permeating the coastal landscape north-east of Scheveningen, clustering around overgrown areas, next to the sand paths, at the edge of dune lakes. Under a dune rose, next to a paved bike path encircling a lake, a low and still creature sits. A young but fully-grown female gopher snake, her thick skin gleaming in the sunlight, the intricate patterns of black and amber dazzling. Under a blue sky, the waves of the North Sea are rushing and crashing in the distance. The landscape is yellowing at the edges, struggling to recover after the hottest week ever recorded. The relentless sun burns the leaves of the plants, slows down every animal. It should be 10 degrees cooler, significantly wetter and cloudier. It should be the old landscape people still think it is – a mild nature without creatures even remotely perceived as dangerous. Instead, an almost Mediterranean climate, dunes resembling desert, creating ever better conditions for the young female to lay her eggs. She is a symptom of a confused, interrupted landscape, of a process of human disturbance going on for centuries. A process of destroyed connections, of newly introduced, risky Anthropocene entanglements. Labelled an invader, people are looking for her, prodding the bushes with sticks. If found, they will take her to a shelter, use her body as a research object. They will take skin samples, check her DNA, determine which type of hybrid she is. If she lays eggs in her cage, they will take them away from her and incubate them under a lamp. Neither she nor her offspring would ever see the light of day again. They would not feel the sun, slither through dune sand, feel the prickly bushes on their scaly skin. They would not lie resting under a dune rose, feeling a soft breeze as they picked up the scent of a small rodent in the vicinity. They would not glide on the sand hill without a sound. Accelerating, they would not pursue the wood mouse, not feel the creature's final jolts of life while it was already halfway down their throat.

For now, she returns to her hiding place. If seen by people, her appearance will not benefit her case. For what is more monstrous than her slender, gliding appearance, her scaly skin and featureless face? She is one of the oldest monsters in the human imagination. She is dangerous.

Only about half the cells in our bodies contain a "human genome." The other cells include about 160 different bacterial genomes. [...] Human bodies are and contain a plurality of ecosystems. Our mouths are different ecosystems than our intestines, or our skin, or our airways. The volume of the microbial organisms in our bodies is about the same as the volume of our brain, and the metabolic activity of those microbes is about equivalent to that of our liver. The microbiome is another organ; so we are not anatomically individuals at all.

Scott Gilbert, 'Holobiont by Birth: Multilineage Individuals as the Concretion Of Cooperative Processes,' in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, pp. M73-M89 (p. M75).

Life has been monstrous almost from its beginnings. In ancient times, prokaryotes (bacteria and archaea) gave birth to monsters in which one organism engulfed others or joined immoderate liaisons, forming nucleated cells and multicellular organisms called eukaryotes. Ever since, we have muddled along in our mixes and messes. All eukaryotic life is monstrous.

Tsing et al., pp. M1-M12 (p. M5).

⁴ RTL Nieuws, 'Haagse Duinen zitten vol met Stierslangen,' RTL, 19 June 2020 <<https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/editie/artikel/5160186/haagse-duinen-zitten-vol-met-stierslangen>> [accessed 21 December 2022].

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She has to be removed. Nature needs to be put back in order. Yet without widespread deforestation by humans, the open dune landscape as it is now would have been impossible.⁵ There is no pristine state, nor has there ever been. She, a snake native to North America, a continent she will never visit, is the embodiment of this knowledge. Born in a breeding facility in a country too cold for her, she has moved from terrarium to terrarium. Suddenly thrown into an environment not ill-suited to her needs, she has her one chance at living. She defies the anthropo-dominance, keeps inscribing her sleek body into the sand. She is a stubborn presence, like the people that divide the landscape with paths for their own use. That create feigned order in chaos, if not with fences and bike lanes, they do so in writing, with research reports, policy statements, stories. And so she entangles her serpent-form with the dune-curves, buries her body in burrows, looks out from under bushes with a gaze of belonging. She is here to stay. She is here to slither over sharp corners, to flow straight through demarcated areas, paths, fences. A coiling serpent, playing with sand as though with water. She is scaly, slithering, cold-blooded. It is too late to deny her will of life, her urge to dwell, her suitability to the heating dune hills. She is here. The sun shines ever more relentlessly. The nitrogen descends, killing slow-growing plants. The sea advances. Carbon flows into the air. Machines sculpt the sand. Unwittingly, people have created new monstrous landscapes, have released the serpent into hot sand dunes which may one day be warm enough for her eggs to hatch. No evidence has as yet been found that the snakes have successfully reproduced in the dunes, and experts are sceptical that they can.⁶ But within her strange monstrous entanglements, the Anthropocene serpent has made her home.

Meijendel, 2024. The slender animal, hidden under a dune rose, assesses the temperature. Another heatwave is coming. Having consumed all the wood mice of the local burrow, the Anthropocene monster has taken over their home. Unafraid to use global warming for personal gain, she buries her fertilised eggs in the sandy burrow. Situated on a bare stretch of sand in the valley, the burrow is exposed to the sun, the eggs heated to at least 28 degrees for weeks to

Enlightenment Europe, however, tried to banish monsters. Monsters were identified with the irrational and the archaic. [...] But the forms of progress and rationalization that the Enlightenment and Reformation sparked have proved far scarier than the beasts they sought to banish. For later thinkers, rationalization meant individualization, the creation of distinct and alienated individuals, human and nonhuman. The landscape-making practices that followed from these new figures imagined the world as a space filled with autonomous entities and separable kinds, ones that could be easily aligned with capitalist fantasies of endless growth from alienated labor.

Tsing et al., pp. M1-M12 (pp. M5-M6).

⁵ Neeffjes, Jan, *Cultuursporen in het Duin: Inventarisatie en Waardering van het Erfgoed in het Duingebied Meijendel – Berkheide* (Wageningen: Overland, 2010), p. 3.

⁶ Struijk, p. 17.

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come. As she begins to move away from the valley and up the hill, the invasive snake blends in perfectly with her surroundings. In the shade of the rose bushes, orange scales like sand, black skin the colour of roots. For hours, days, weeks, the burrow is still. A few days after the temperature has finally dropped again, a rustling in the sand. Faint, intermittent, becoming louder, more constant. The shells of the eggs emerge, slowly creaking, shadowy silhouettes within squirming. The baby snakes swimming in the eggs, black worm-like shadows, pushing against the walls of their worlds. Creaks becoming cracks, little snake faces emerging, retreating, suddenly afraid of the world beyond their shells. Slowly, the first wild Pacific gopher snake babies slither out of their eggs, into the sand, into the dunes.

Eyes set on the ground, the baby snakes crawl at the foot of dune oaks, inspect the rosehips, find shelter in the characteristic marram grass. At the lake, they wonder at tadpoles, at shells on the bottom. Coastal desert snakes, the babies discover the danger of hedgehogs, learn to distinguish the footsteps of foxes, humans, cattle. The baby snakes and their surroundings are a wondrous unexpected combination, a strange entanglement of creatures, some introduced long ago, some recently. The little serpents, knowing only this as their home, will become experts at finding new ways of living and dying in the Anthropocene landscape. The baby snakes may challenge some local animals, may change the dune ecosystem, just like humans and other animals did before them. Full of life, the Anthropocene babies will slither through the dunes, forging new ways of survival. They will get used to the sea breeze, the cold winters spent buried in the sand. They will accept the humans constantly roaming the landscape, pinching them, capturing them. Unlike the people, the little snakes will not try to erase the changes in the landscape. They will merely make the best out of it.

Some kinds of stories help us notice; others get in our way. Modern heroes— the guardians of progress across disciplines— are part of the problem. Thus, for example, McFall-Ngai has suggested that biologist Lynn Margulis, who first imagined symbiosis as the origin of cells, has not been accorded the preeminence she deserves because she is a woman and thus not eligible for hero status. Male scientists tend only to cite men, she explained, while women scientists tend to cite male and female scientists equally. Unless we learn to listen broadly, we may miss the biggest story of life on earth: symbiogenesis, the co--making of living things. Practices of storytelling matter.

Tsing et al., pp. M1-M12 (p. M8).

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