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Rethinking the Monstrous: Gender, Otherness, and Space in the Cinematic Storytelling of *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*

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Abstract: Through comparing the Hollywood films *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*, this article explicates the films' similar portrayals of gender, social collaboration, and monstrosity. Although the mainstream media in the United States has linked the idea of the monstrous to larger global forces, the two films suggest that "the monster" exists much closer to home. Hence, this article makes the case that monstrosity occurs in a variety of formulations such as the actions of national authorities like governmental officials that oppress and endanger a myriad of American citizens as well as newcomers. Further, this article makes the case that the films of Guillermo del Toro and Denis Villeneuve encourage viewers to reimagine the idea of monstrosity and its relationality to several spaces for the sake of the greater public good.

Edward CHAMBERLAIN

Rethinking the Monstrous: Gender, Otherness, and Space in the Cinematic Storytelling of *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*

> Outsiders. The voiceless. The misunderstood and the monsters who stalk them—these are the characters who have long populated Guillermo del Toro's singular imagination. For more than two decades, the ceaselessly inventive Mexico-born filmmaker has communed with demons and ghosts and other wild-looking creations.
>
> - Gina McIntyre, *The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairytale for Troubled Times*

In August 2017, the Mexican film director Guillermo del Toro debuted a feature film titled *The Shape of Water*, which portrays a whimsical story about an American woman named Elisa Esposito, who discovers an unusual creature in a high-security government lab. Set in the waterfront city of Baltimore during the early 1960s, the story begins with a voice-over from one of the film's main characters, an older white gay man named Giles, who is played by American actor Richard Jenkins. Giles is a close friend to the film's protagonist – a beautiful white woman named Elisa, who is said to be "mute." Yet as the film shows, her communicative ability is a key facet of her identity. Played by British actress Sally Hawkins, Elisa is marked as *Other*, although she exhibits a superior intelligence, which is visible in the way she concocts an artful plan that would free the creature from the chains of the U.S. government. Through crafting this plan, Elisa is shown to be a politically subversive figure who challenges U.S. authority. As *The Shape of Water* suggests, Elisa's subversion is a rejection of constraining U.S. political ideology of the 1960s that came to characterize the Cold War era when tensions ran high between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although her actions may be read as anti-American by some loyalists in the film, her subterfuge is driven by compassion for the creature and a desire to engage in a meaningful social intimacy with this human-like, yet monstrous character.

As the narrator Giles introduces Elisa, viewers are treated to an underwater milieu that actually consists of two scenes in one. Viewers perceive a watery world that is superimposed on Elisa's apartment—a view that links the underwater world with that of humanity. This mixing of two seemingly distinct worlds speaks to one of the salient themes shown across the storyline – the relational nature and togetherness that arises between ostensibly distinct cultural identities, who resemble the "outsiders" that Gina McIntyre theorizes in the epigraph above. To address such otherness, this article speaks to the ways that *The Shape of Water* and another popular film titled *Arrival* from the French-Canadian director Denis Villeneuve both duplicate and challenge conventional notions of monstrosity in depictions of U.S. and global interactions. As the films' Americans come into contact with monstrous figures from beyond U.S. borders, the portrayals of gender, *Otherness*, and spatiality exhibit notable similarities. Focusing on these matters as the points of comparison, I explain how the films make a similar statement about monstrosity. By situating my discussion in the cultural theory of scholars in American studies, Gender studies, and Latinx Studies, I elucidate how the films construct allegorical narratives. These allegories utilize the discourse of monstrosity as a means of commenting on the ways that powerful U.S. institutions such as governments that at times have abused and silenced people of color, women, and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). In bringing these groups into a dialogue, the films signal the potentiality of creating positive social change through alliances built upon social experiences of unbelonging, or what this article is calling *collaborative Otherness*. Rather than rejecting *Otherness*, the two films offer viewers an entreaty to build bridges with *Others* in the ongoing work of instantiating a more socially just world.

Instead of maintaining patriarchal ideology, the storytelling and styles of *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water* can be explicated as encouraging audiences to re-examine the social and political dimensions of exclusionary ideology in personal and intimate contexts. In contrast to exclusions, *The Shape of Water* and *Arrival* exhibit the benefits of friendship and collaboration in a range of forms. Before the creature enters into *The Shape of Water*, the film highlights the friendly social dynamic of Elisa and Giles, who are very close friends and share a fondness for watching older movies. At times, Elisa and Giles are portrayed as solitary outsiders, who are shown as being rather *unlike* mainstream white America, however they bond in their shared status as people who have been *Othered*, or marked as different by the dominant U.S. culture and society.

Figure 1: Elisa and Giles share a moment in an apartment.

As a story of *Others* who are frequently excluded due to their so-called difference, *The Shape of Water* builds upon the popular narrative of the U.S. underdog, who disregards social and narrative norms yet rises above prior hurdles such as isolation. Over the course of the film, the U.S. underdogs are brought into an improvised coalition with an undercover Soviet scientist, who has infiltrated the U.S. government and has been ordered to kill the creature. In harkening back to early monster movies, the creature in *The Shape of Water* resembles the merman shown in 1954 American film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. That film's amphibian-like behemoth acts malevolently and abducts a physically attractive white woman. Yet in Guillermo del Toro's film, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2018, the creature shows a capacity for love and healing, which makes the characters think he is "divine," or as some critics say – a "Messiah" (Travers and del Toro). Much of del Toro's film focuses on the creature's incredible body, which is brought to life on screen with special effects. The monsters in del Toro's *Hellboy* and *Pan's Labyrinth* feature this same concept of the unknown creature, though they possess human-like characteristics that lead viewers to identify with their plight.

Addressing the Social Problems of Prejudice and the Puzzles of Language

Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* and Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* both call attention to human beings' tendency to prejudge people and label unusual figures as monsters. Calling attention to the salience of communication, Del Toro's film encourages viewers to *re-envision* what counts as monstrous and thus reconsider what happens when people engage in simplistic, unthinking ideology that often pits humans against monsters from beyond their local realm. A similar pattern plays out in the recent cinematic storytelling of Denis Villeneuve, whose 2016 film *Arrival* presents a comparable vision of monstrosity. Based on Ted Chiang's novella *Story of Your Life*, the film *Arrival* depicts a woman who similarly challenges the conventions of gender when she finds a way to prevent global war as well as communicate with a fleet of twelve large alien ships land around Earth. While the aliens, or "Heptapods" (as they are called) appear to be monstrous due to their immense bodies with seven large legs, the film's scenes imply that the film's terrible "monsters" are actually the humans who try to exterminate the aliens.

Over the course of *Arrival*, human factions around the planet Earth come to fear the aliens who possess highly advanced technology. This fearful behavior is highlighted in several moments of Arrival, pointing to the idea that human beings tend to become afraid of people, situations, and things that are less known, which is a modality of storytelling that is commonly explored in science fiction. As in the case of *The Shape of Water*, the fear of the unknown can partly be traced to an inability to communicate effectively. In both *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*, the physically monstrous figures are unable to speak English, which inspires several efforts of translation that take time. While translation is less of a priority in *The Shape of Water*, nonverbal expression is shown to be a key method of communication for the monstrous figures in both films. Yet humans in both films struggle to interpret such alternatives to speaking. Like in *The Shape of Water*, the protagonist in *Arrival* is a conventionally beautiful and gender-

conforming white American named Dr. Louise Banks, who is played by Amy Adams. Along with her colleague Dr. Ian Donnelly, efforts are made to translate with the aliens for the sake of keeping peaceful relations. These efforts convey there is a benefit to bridging divides between cultures as well as creating diplomatic collaboration. Collaboration is highlighted through the humans' acts of translation, which leads the linguist Louise to hypothesize that the aliens are hoping for humans around the world "to work together" to decipher the language.

In this worldwide spatial context, the aliens in *Arrival* align themselves with a more global concept, emphasizing the larger idea of connectivity and unity through their deployment of twelve ships around the world. While the number twelve is not entirely explained in the film, Arrival's emphasis on the themes of space and time may lead viewers to deduce that it represents the temporality of Earth's rotation around the sun – twelve months – the unit of time by which millions mark their life-span. This common denominator unifies much of humanity and thereby reifies the wellworn idea that instead of giving into division, human beings should work together to address unknowns such as the aliens' otherworldly mode of expression. Categorized as being "logograms," which structurally resemble written symbols in nonwestern human civilizations, the aliens' means of expression (and the difficulty translating it) is a hurdle for the monolingual Americans as well as those beyond. Overcoming this linguistic hurdle in fact mirrors additional tensions in the film such as the lack of communication between the U.S. and China—a situation that is shown as dividing the two nations and hence sends the message that humanity cannot let their outdated stereotypes cloud their decision-making. As the humans cannot see the aliens' bodies as anything but monstrous, the humans are unable to read the aliens as having a goodwill mission or an evolved sense of ethics. In both films, it takes a brave woman to bridge the divide, however to solve the puzzle of language, both women must transgress the governments' rules. As in the case of *The Shape of Water* where Elisa teaches sign language to the creature, Louise acts as an intermediary figure that the scholar Sophie Mayer interprets as a modern "Malinche" who exists at the border between the United States and lesser known culture (Mayer 40). In this context, Mayer casts Louise as a betrayer of humans in the film, which is shored up by the fact that Louise has helped the U.S. Military to "make quick work" of a group of foes in the past.

After Louise is brought in by the military, she has to explain to the African American commander, who is played by Forest Whitaker why translation is a "messy" process involving more than language. In translation, there are factors that can complicate the decoding of a simple sentence. Despite the Heptapods' technology, they remain seemingly unable to translate human languages. As such, the film suggests that the process of deciphering language is a larger *project* that the aliens have set before humanity. According to the film's logic, it will take what Karin Rosa Ikas calls a "global village" or larger coalition, to piece together the entirety of the aliens' language (Ikas 8). This idea is upheld by Louise's colleague Ian, who articulates, "We have our friends in Pakistan to thank for their study of how Heptapods write"—a statement that suggests a sharing of knowledge across borders. At the boundary between the Heptapods and the military, Louise and Ian come to resemble what the Chicana poet and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa calls "border people"—the people existing at politically-charged interstices of cultures and nations. Through her study of the aliens' behaviors and language, Louise comes to be a mix of human and alien cultures, thus reorienting her way of looking at the passage of time and the world around her. In the process of learning the language, Louise learns that the aliens came to "help" human beings in return for humanity's help in the future. This help is a "unification" of nations including the U.S., which is embroiled in geopolitical tensions. In *Arrival*, nations beyond the U.S. are shown to be hostile and war-like, however by the end, this political dynamic falls away in a manner similar to that of *The Shape of Water,* leaving the viewer to ponder the impact of *the global* on the characters' relations. To comprehend this impact on the characters' lives, this article develops its analytical lens by ruminating upon insights of transnational thinkers.

Situating *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water* in Critical Frameworks and Cultural Theory

To explicate the two films, this project synthesizes a critical and theoretical lens from relevant methodological approaches including close reading, historical contextualization, and visual analysis. Examining the elements of dialogue, visual scenes, and historical contexts allows for a well-rounded and critical perspective on *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*. Through these approaches, I explicate the films' representations of figures who are *Othered* (or codified as being *different*) through the discourses of gender, monstrosity, and racialization in institutional and public spaces. The idea of *Othering* takes several forms in *The Shape of Water* such as near the beginning of the film where the narrator Giles refers to Elisa as a "princess without voice," a phrase that suggests a woman who is *different*, yet still resembles the archetype of "damsel in distress," who often is scripted as needing a heterosexual white man to save her from a villain or peril (Knight ix-x). Instead, Elisa is the heroine who saves the creature

that is played by the U.S. actor Doug Jones, hence reversing the entrenched gender roles of Hollywood cinema. Further, *The Shape of Water* shows that the amphibian-man's identity extends beyond the presumed one-dimensional villain figure commonly portrayed in most monster movies, thereby creating a storyline that challenges dominant generic conventions. This creature is captured by U.S. agents in the waterways of South America and brought to the U.S. mainland for research purposes, but the creature is subjugated to cruel and violent treatment by U.S. authorities. While viewers are not privy to his capture, we witness the unloading of the creature in a gloomy lab, which leads us to consider the socio-political implications of jailing and torturing a sentient being in a space that resembles a secret government prison—a topic that resonates with the present-day United States where migrants and people of color are being incarcerated and maimed by the U.S. government.

Instead of maintaining simplistic notions of monstrosity, *The Shape of Water* suggests that some U.S. institutions and the figures associated with them have exemplified an even more abject form of monstrosity. As governments have cast migrants and people of color as monsters, these same institutions have wielded considerable state authority and lethal weapons against impoverished populations for political gain. Taking into account this portrayal, I interpret the films of Guillermo del Toro and Denis Villeneuve as imparting the idea that today's citizens need to rethink the concept of monstrosity in a more nuanced and complex set of terms, starting with the notion that "otherness" and "monstrosity" has been racialized at times by the white U.S. citizenry. To challenge problematic white supremacist standpoints, it is necessary for us to consider how monstrosity is neither *monolithic*, nor *singular* in its composition. For as scholars Bernadette Marie Calafell and Barbara Creed have theorized, there are multiple ways that we can conceptualize "the monstrous" (Calafell 2015, 118, and Creed 1993). As Calafell and Creed suggest, everyday people such as people of color and women have been codified as threatening monsters due to the way they depart from the ingrained physical standards of U.S. patriarchy and white supremacist ideology. As Calafell and Creed show, many U.S. Authorities, which have remained predominantly white and male-driven for centuries in the public sphere, have attempted to keep down women, people of color, and LGBTQ peoples through concocting demeaning structures of sexism, racialization, and heterocentrism. Such societal structures have shaped how U.S. peoples have conceptualized everyday people as monstrous "others," and thus are made to not belong in the U.S. public's social sphere, even as diverse forms of *monstrous behavior* have been enacted by authorities in the U.S. public sphere as well as abroad by U.S. agents and groups.

My intervention in this dialogue is an exploration of the ways that monstrosity becomes more than a solitary act in *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*, resembling more of a collaboration. The films *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water* exhibit a notable form of *monstrous collaboration* that allegorizes U.S. sociopolitical experiences including the social realities of minority groups for the sake of questioning entrenched problems like systemic bias and inequalities in social spaces that historically have been male-dominated and white-centric. For this commentary, I theorize the notion of *monstrous collaboration* as being a phenomenon that is enacted by people banding together and siding with the so-called "monster" for the sake of challenging the forces that attempt to oppress or assimilate the *Other* and the monstrous. I envision this framework of *monstrous collaboration* both in terms of the large physical scale of monstrosity that the films portray cinematically as well as the manner in which several monstrous figures become the center of operations that take the shape of coalitions and work towards social justice. To make sense of these coalitions, I integrate the critical approaches that are employed in the fields of Transnational American Studies and Global Gender Studies due to how these critical frameworks provide a useful intellectual apparatus for analyzing the films' subtexts and formal cinematic elements. More precisely, I integrate these fields' geospatial and social perspectives to explain how these two films' approaches and representation comment on the deep social impact of powerful U.S. institutions that regularly incarcerate *Others* unfairly. In this analysis, I likewise show how the films endeavor to foster empathy by showing the unsavory *Otherness* experienced by peoples facing struggles with border-crossing, labor policy, racism, and comparable bias.

From a historical viewpoint, the critical lenses of American Studies have been assailed for being too insular and focusing on the local experiences of U.S. lives. However, scholars such as Inderpal Grewal and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes have observed an ongoing formation of a "transnational turn" in the interdisciplinary field and research of American Cultural Studies. Instead of solely looking inward, there has been a desire to think about the way U.S. experiences, lives, and institutions are imbricated with cultures, forces, and groups around the world. This "worlding" of American Studies has led scholars to be critically-minded of how the United States has endeavored to exert its influence over a broad range of events and peoples, even as the United States itself is changing in multitudinous ways due to patterns of migration, flows of ideas, and transnational industry (Gilman, Gruesz, and Wilson 259). Such perspectives on flows also help to explain the way that the United States of America is imbricated with

a wide array of places and peoples in the films explored in this study. The scholar Inderpal Grewal speaks to some similar global and transnational connections in her studies of consumer cultures and transnational theory by emphasizing that the concept of *the global* is a "powerful imaginary" shaping innumerable existences, knowledges, and sites in multifaceted ways (Grewal 22).

Inderpal Grewal cautions that the phenomena of "the 'global' is not and never was quite global, but that there certainly was a will to globalization that was both profoundly cosmopolitan as well as imperialist" (Grewal 22-23). Taking a cue from Grewal here, this article's commentary proceeds with understanding the phenomena of global contexts and globalization as being rooted in an ongoing set of transnational processes and ideas that have been spread and taken shape in a bevy of spaces around the world. Further, this project is mindful of the way that Grewal develops her viewpoint by arguing that this global imaginary is "produced through knowledges moving along specific transnational connectivities." That is to say, global perspectives, experiences, and processes are shaped complexly by the crossing of physical borders. Such crossings have the effect of concatenating diverse cultural spaces and peoples as well as making amalgamations, hybridities, and interdependencies. Though Grewal's notion of global phenomena largely speaks to experiences of cultures beyond the scope of the present study, her perspectives nonetheless exhibit a resonance with materials considered in this article. In the contexts of the films, which build upon a larger global imaginary, I understand Grewal's critical concept of "transnational connectivities" to be a useful heuristic because this notion can be used to identify the way that peoples come into contact, travel, and attempt to exert influence across multiple boundaries.

In the case of *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*, the concept of the monster *travels* and takes myriad forms beyond solely one formation that might be deemed as strange or ugly. One bigoted character in *The Shape of Water* – a handsome white man named Strickland – attests to this idea when he suggests that a monster in U.S. contexts can also be seen as a "God" in South America. To a similar extent, Strickland himself becomes evidence of the same idea when his injured finger becomes diseased and begins to decay—a moment that suggests he is a deathly monster. Acknowledging this monstrous variety begins the process of opening eyes to consider alternative ways of looking at the world. Such approaches have also been explored by Latina/o and Latinx Studies scholars such as Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, who examines the socio-political intersections of ethnicity, race, and transnational experiences in U.S. cultural production and transnational connectivities. La Fountain-Stokes illuminates how queer Latina/o and Latinx populations have been codified as "Other" by modern day authorities as well as the imperial powers that have extended their reach across oceans historically (La Fountain-Stokes 116). In questioning such political modes of *Othering*, my research explicates these films' allegorical representation, thus speaking to the U.S. propensity to colonize, police, and marginalize *Others* including migrants, women, people of color, and figures who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). Both films address transnational issues in subtle and overt ways, however *The Shape of Water* provides a productive starting point for querying U.S. sociopolitical formations and moving beyond normative practices of consigning people to the status of alterity.

Representing Desire and Dissent in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

In their research, both Inderpal Grewal and La Fountain-Stokes examine daily social occurrences and cultural formations that bespeak the daily lives of excluded peoples. Their work shows how artistic and quotidian circumstances are legible as catalyzing positive social change and potentialities beyond exclusionary practices that inhibit transnational connectivities. These scholars' approaches are particularly useful for understanding the story of the protagonist Elisa Esposito, who has been identified by critics and reviewers as a "cleaning lady," however she is depicted as being a passionate intellectual who comes to look beyond the immediate, surface-level for the sake of aiding a transnational figure – the creature – who allegorically represents real figures captured by U.S powers. As the film portrays her, Elisa is an "educated woman" who comes to resemble a form of white savior in the film. Though she cleans up the messes of U.S. agents and scientists, she nonetheless possesses a modicum of white privilege, which allows her to transgress boundaries in the film's narrative. In contrast, Elisa's close friend at work – Zelda Fuller, a middle-aged African American woman – is given less leeway in the film and conveys that she feels less empowered than Elisa. Played by the Academy Award winning actress Octavia Spencer, Zelda only quietly critiques men for their careless behavior. As Zelda and Elisa clean the men's bathroom, Zelda questions why the male workers act as they do. She comments: "Look. Some of the best minds in the country peeing all over the floor in this here facility. Hmm. Hmm. Hmm. There's pee freckles on the ceiling now. How'd they get it up there? Just how big of a target do they need, you figure? They get enough practice." In her critique, Zelda contests the idea that men are superior and leads viewers to examine how men's spaces like bathrooms function as indicators of some

males' contradictory social mores. In this collaboration of cleaning and commentary, the women encourage viewers to query males' decision-making, which sets the stage for some later questioning of men's actions. Following this moment, the film's main villain Richard Strickland enters the bathroom carrying a club-like object covered in fresh blood, signaling there is immorality beneath his handsome exterior.

As the women characters Elisa and Zelda prepare to leave the bathroom, the film's villain speaks from the urinal, thereby creating an uncomfortable moment for the two women. Instead of maintaining a separation of the sexes in bathroom spaces, Strickland's open-fly dialogue with the women exhibits a disregard for social and gendered boundaries. This disregard also is mirrored in several more instances in the film, connoting that Strickland embodies the U.S. imperialism that brought the creature to the secret governmental lab. As he discusses the creature with the women, he says: "You may think that thing looks human, stands on two legs, you don't think that's what the Lord looks like, do you? […] He looks like a human like me, or even you, maybe a little more like me." Strickland's statement carries a white supremacist message that marks himself as divine, while also distancing Zelda from his belief system due to her gender and skin color. Through his presumption, Strickland racializes Zelda as an *Other,* bringing to mind the way that white supremacist sentiment and human-centered norms are upheld through policies and practices that often have the effect of elevating white males and heterosexuality above all *Other* cultural identities. While this blatant racialization never occurs in the film *Arrival*, the film's casting of white actors in the two lead roles of Louise and Ian largely preserves the racist approach of excluding people of color from the primary heroic roles. Contrary to the idea that Hollywood is a free-thinking place of creation, most filmmaking companies continue to cast a greater number of white actors in major films, shoring up white supremacist sentiment.

The racism of the villainous Strickland is coupled with appalling efforts to silence women both at his home and on the job in the U.S. government lab. Toward the midpoint of the film, Strickland harasses Elisa in his office in a sexual manner. When Elisa is commanded to clean up a spill in Strickland's office at the lab, he propositions her by saying, "I bet I can make you squawk a little"—a comment that reduces her to the level of an animalized sex object. Elisa escapes Strickland's office unharmed, yet his comment links her to similarly voiceless figures that are senselessly harmed in the diegesis including a cat and the amphibian-man. Strickland's demeaning attitude has led critics such as David Crow to categorize Strickland's approach as a form of "toxic masculinity" (Crow). This social phenomenon is made doubly clear through the maddening torture that he inflicts on the captured creature when he wields a powerful cattle prod to electrocute the shackled amphibian-man. This torturous scene is reminiscent of the way that the government and scientific establishment has used its powers against minoritized figures such as LGBTQ+ peoples, who have been led to endure intense electroshock treatments for the sake of being converted to heterosexuality (Rhodes 103). In recognizing the horror being inflicted by the monstrous government agent Strickland, the film's characters come together inadvertently in a form of solidarity, hence leading viewers to consider how they too can resist oppression.

The reviews and critiques of *The Shape of Water* have called attention to some of these issues of otherness, yet few have expounded on the alternative desires, heroism, and intelligence of the main character Elisa. Instead, some critics perceive *the creature as the hero*, overlooking Elisa's notable accomplishments including her intellectual breakthrough in communicating with the creature through utilizing her emotional intelligence and sign-language. Neither Elisa, nor the creature speak English vocally, representing the way that many people communicate in diverse forms beyond the inculcated English. Critical frameworks proffered by Border Studies scholars like Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández prove useful too for elucidating *The Shape of Water* as these frames have shown a greater openness to non-normative social practices and spatial phenomena such as acts of border-crossing. Guidotti-Hernández's scholarly frame illuminates how the act of border-crossing involves more than geography to the extent that intimacy, marginality, and social modalities such as intersectionality underpin human acts of geographical movement (Guidotti-Hernández 23). Considering Elisa's actions, let us look to how Elisa exhibits a courageous desire to empower the creature to escape, which in turn leads to her sexual intimacy with the creature when she brings him home. Rather than maintaining a divisive "us vs. them" perspective that is common to Hollywood-made cinema, Elisa uses kindness such as providing food like eggs as well as opportunities for dance and music to foster more meaningful social connections.

Social interactivity takes several forms across the narrative of *The Shape of Water*, though the escape scene epitomizes the collaborative and integrative sensibility of the film. For when Elisa ventures to the lab to free the creature, the undercover Soviet scientist named Dr. Hoffstetler disobeys both his Soviet and U.S. superiors by providing the keys to unlock the creature from his shackles. This scientist, who is played by the white American actor Michael Stuhlbarg, wishes to help the creature to live instead of

being dissected as the U.S. government plans to do. The actor Michael Stuhlbarg fascinatingly plays a role in the film *Arrival* too as a governmental figure who attempts to maintain U.S. policy when Louise disobeys an order. In both films, Stuhlbarg's characters bring matters of policy and disobedience into focus. Just before Stuhlbarg's scientist provides assistance to Elisa, she convinces her friend Giles to help with the escape plan. Though Giles is hesitant to subvert U.S. authority, he changes his mind when he witnesses two egregious forms of homophobic and racist discrimination at a diner, which emphasizes the necessity of standing up against normalized forms of discrimination and injustice. Shortly thereafter, Giles enters the government's lab in a van, posing as a driver for a local laundry service and intending to drive the creature to safety. Zelda arrives in this same moment and tells Elisa "Don't do this," but ultimately, Zelda helps Elisa to carry out the plan. When a member of the U.S. military police stops Giles at the gate, the Soviet scientist steps into the scene to subdue the police by injecting him with a toxin. Here, the improvised coalition of outsiders loads the creature into the van and they begin to ride away just as Strickland enters and begins shooting at the escaping vehicle. This brave collaboration evidences the power of several seemingly ordinary citizens, who face numerous challenges including homophobia, racism, and sexism. Yet their collective action interestingly is mirrored to a certain extent by the television news coverage that is shown earlier in the film where multiple African American people are protesting against discrimination, but are being blasted by white authorities' fire-hoses. These moments of resistance speak to the film's viewer, suggesting real change cannot happen without embracing *Otherness*, taking risks, and working in a collaboration for the public good.

Figure 2: Zelda and Elisa collaborate to free the creature from the lab.

After the coalition of friends liberate the creature, Elisa creates a space in her apartment above a movie theater, suggesting that her life is built upon the storytelling of film. This idea is reified as the film showcases older film scenes such as the stairway dance of the white child star Shirley Temple and the African American dancer Bill Robinson in the film *The Little Colonel* (1935). This early popular film has been celebrated for being one of the first films to showcase an interracial collaboration in dancing, where bodies mingle and touch. This moment mirrors other physical collaborations in *The Shape of Water* such as a fantasy-based dance scene between Elisa and the creature. This theme of collaboration is emphasized again in the climax of del Toro's film where the film's main characters collaborate to vanquish the monstrous Strickland, who shoots the creature and Elisa, saying "I do not fail." Yet Giles knocks out Strickland, and the creature heals himself so he can slice Strickland's throat with his razor-sharp talons, silencing him. Strickland's death thus mirrors his own earlier efforts to silence the creature and his wife, calling attention to the white man's attempts to dominate them. After killing Strickland, the creature carries Elisa away, jumping into a nearby canal. While the creature and Elisa were shot by the monstrous Strickland, viewers are led to believe that the creature has used his healing power to revive Elisa and give her the capacity to breath underwater, enabling her escape. As in Villeneuve's narrative, *The Shape of Water* implies that when hate and violent institutions threaten people's lives, it is our global connections with cultures across borders that allow for new opportunities to rebuild our lives and explore new spaces of collaboration.

Crossing Borders: Communicating and Building Bridges in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*

In the 2016 film *Arrival* from the French-Canadian director Denis Villeneuve, viewers are treated to a story that at first portrays the aliens as being intimidating, multi-legged figures prima facie, yet instead of maintaining this notion, the film comes to suggest that the real villains are actually another group of humans that are shown later in the film. Although many science fiction films such as *Independence Day* and *War of the Worlds* have maintained the belief that aliens are monstrous antagonists, there is another segment of science fiction such as the *Star Trek* films that suggest aliens can be allies to humans. A bevy of science fictions point to the physical dimensions of aliens' bodies as being indicators of difference and hostility. In the early scenes of *Arrival*, the camera focuses on the way that the aliens each move with several legs, which makes the creatures look like enormous spiders in their physical appearance. The aliens' unusual bodily characteristics marks the aliens as *Other,* though the film also challenges the idea that the aliens' bodies are indicators of morals and philosophy. The scholar Anne Carruthers speaks to this focus on bodily experience in *Arrival* when she states, "It is crucial to understand that the film exudes embodiment and encourages the viewer to be aware of how the body and the senses are being challenged" (323). While Carruthers largely speaks to bodies in term of pregnancy and sexual reproduction, her work illuminates how bodies are interpreted like texts. Her comment about the "senses being challenged" provides support for this article's contention that the aliens' bodies are *misread* as being portents of evil, immorality, and violence by several figures in the film due to ingrained American cultural values. It is this false equation of physical difference and negativity that I read as an allegory of the way that border-crossers such as migrants and immigrants are being misconceived as monstrous figures in some Americans' minds. To teach the viewer that such (mis)readings of *Other* bodies can be a flawed approach, the film introduces a group of largely faceless American soldiers who feel threatened and decide to bomb the alien ship.

After surreptitiously placing a bomb aboard the aliens' ship, the shadowy U.S. group retreats, however in that exact moment, the film's main protagonist Louise decides to return to the alien ship with the hope of communicating and determining the significance of the aliens' cryptic statement "offer weapon." Unaware of the bomb, Louise and her associate Ian attempt to communicate, thereby heightening the suspense. The aliens begin to knock on the glass window that functions as a barrier between the aliens and the humans, desperately trying to communicate. The aliens point at the bomb, yet they ostensibly realize that the humans have not realized that the bomb is near detonation. To protect Louise and Ian, the aliens utilize an unseen physical force to expel the humans out of the ship, while closing their ship's door in order to keep the detonation within their ship. This move saves Louise and Ian from being killed, however this explosion not only does physical damage to the alien ship. The bombing causes the aliens to distance themselves from the soldiers on the Montana land, and the bomb causes one of the aliens to go into a "death process." As the ship retreats, the U.S. military commander mutters, "Why does this feel worse?" In keeping their distance, the aliens challenge the ingrained maxim that violence begets violence, thus allowing for an outcome beyond the science fiction trope of *aliens as violent invaders*. Though *Arrival* exhibits parallels with Villeneuve's prior cinematic works such as the films *Prisoners* (2013) and *Sicario* (2015), which similarly shows humanity's violent proclivities, *Arrival* takes an intellectual approach that suggests it is *humanity* that must overcome their own limitations, myopia, and fear of the *Other*. *Arrival* further underscores this entrenched human hostility and violence by depicting tensions between the U.S. government and those of Russia and China. This matter is dramatized when lines of communication deteriorate in the film's latter half, which leads Louise to emphasize the countries must communicate. The lack of communication among Americans and abroad is shown as having deadly consequences.

Looking more closely at the bombing as allegory, the explosion is reminiscent of earlier horrific chapters in U.S. history where home-grown terrorists have taken the lives of thousands. Such mindboggling terrorism is observed in the cases of the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh as well as the violence of white supremacists like those of the Ku Klux Klan, a group that has killed and tortured myriad African Americans repeatedly (Law 121). The film's bombers are shrugged off as "soldiers been watching too much TV." Contrary to such violence, *Arrival*'s protagonist Louise offers another path as she persists to build bridges by deciphering the visual language of the aliens, which has multidimensional implications due to the fact that it alters human perception. Both *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water* exhibit a focus on the challenges of interspecies communication, albeit using distinctive means. Despite the aliens' radical form of expression, which manifests through sprays of ink, Louise begins to understand the language. When she realizes the U.S. government has abandoned the translation project, she takes matters into her own hands. Much like Elisa, Louise becomes a subversive figure. In learning the aliens' language, she gains a new fantastic ability to see the future, existing outside of linear time and

connecting in transnational ways. Subsequently she uses her ability to communicate with the Chinese military commander, and in the process, she acquires the personal phone number of the commander overseeing the operation in China. In making a call on a U.S. military phone, Louise repeats a personal message that the Chinese leader received from his dying wife – "In wars, there are no winners, only widows." Her brave collaboration with the *Other* leads the commander to stand down for the sake of peace. Although the U.S. military perceives Louise as a traitor, her call is a key step towards creating what the Chinese commander calls "unification," intimating that at times we must disobey our own people's policies to create safety and connectivity.

Further, *Arrival*'s protagonist Louise leads viewers to reconsider the aliens' enigmatic message of "offer weapon" in a new light when she comments that the term *weapon* may be conceptualized in multiple ways that extend beyond violent purposes. As she suggests, the idea of a weapon also resembles the notion of a "tool," suggesting that the alien language being shared with the humans could be considered a new means of connectivity with both humans and aliens across boundaries. Connecting in a new language like that of the Heptapods allows for solidarities where characters generate novel ideas to address conflicts. Such social potentialities of connectivity resemble the hybridity that scholars theorize in diverse human contexts such as cross-cultural communication. In his assessment of such contexts, the scholar Marwan M. Kraidy speaks to the hybrid nature of connectivities where distant cultures connect, arguing hybridity has been "the cultural logic of globalization," and thereafter he conceives of several hybridities as unique forms of "localized practice" (Kraidy xii). In this view, Kraidy lucidly contends that globalization is never a single, monolithic phenomenon, but rather simultaneous processes like the exchanges of communication that we witness in film. Integrative acts such as collaborations and translation are held up as the means by which bridges are built over the borders that some U.S. authorities have attempted to use as a means of dividing multitudinous cultures.

Towards a Conclusion: Translating Monstrosity and Collaborative Otherness

Near the start of the film *Arrival*, Louise is said to have written that language is "the first weapon drawn in a conflict" and "it is the glue that holds a people together." Through these words, language is shown to be a highly important tool for collaboration; though, as *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water* suggest, not everyone gleans the potentiality of language in daily lives. As the allegories *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water* imply, speaking more than one language is a means to instantiate a hospitable social space. Through language learning and translation, we can empower people to understand (or translate) the monster's intent such as the *Other's* desire to connect in meaningful forms of coalitional action. Creating such alliances requires us to embrace *Other* possibilities of communication and connectivity that involve risky transgressions where unusual monsters have equal footing with humans. The cinematic works of Villeneuve and del Toro offer an inspiring set of spaces for theorizing alternative and transnational connectivities because, as the scholar Ann Davies observes, "del Toro makes use of copious monstrous figures" that connect the strange and the human (Davies 43). Researching the diverse forms of monstrous collaborations is worthy of further scholarly theorizing because such work can lead to a deeper understanding of the ways *Otherness* is imbricated with the discourses of gender paradigms and transnational relationality. Although ostensibly conforming, these films' heroines – Elisa and Louise – embrace the *Otherness* in the films' unusual figures for the sake of advancing salient communication in valuable forms. In so doing, these characters inspire us to challenge ingrained normativities where patriarchy and imperialism exert influence over the narratives and *Others* we embrace. Through brave solidarities forged in nonverbal expression and translation, Elisa and Louise form coalitions that engender an alternative means of addressing difficult conflicts in transnational contexts. The films' distinctive collaborations across boundaries therefore provide the message that collaborations through *Otherness* enable us to positively reimagine our diverse relations. Reconceptualizing such daily relationality allows for unexpected and beneficial alliances that bear the promise of changing how we think about the world for the better.

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