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The Stalking Cat's Pajamas: An Argument for Excluding Dennis Avner

from *The Monstrous Encyclopedia of the Monsters*

Our *Encyclopedia* has entered Phase Two of completion, and the fruits of our labor thus far are well within our grasp. It has been a pleasure taking part in this endeavor, and it is because we have all invested so much in this project, and because I expect nothing but the utmost integrity of our hard work, that I must lodge a small complaint with regards to one of the figures being considered for inclusion. I would urge you not to include Dennis Avner, a.k.a. Stalking Cat, in our *Monstrous Encyclopedia of Monsters*. Some would make the claim that extensive bodily modification through plastic surgery or other biotechnological means indicates a movement away from humanity and thus towards monstrosity, yet after debunking a more outdated view of monstrosity and showing that humanity itself necessitates a degree of inherent monstrosity, I think you will be convinced not only that Stalking Cat should be omitted from the *Encyclopedia*, but furthermore that he isn't altogether "monstrous" in the layman's sense of the word.

Monsters and synthesis go hand in hand. Rarely is a monster encountered that is not a grotesque hybrid of man and animal—the Wolf Man, the Mothman, Bigfoot, and countless others inspire fear because of their liminal natures, existing in an intermediate stage between fully human and fully inhuman. These are the monsters that inundate our culture, and it is then only natural that at first glance, Dennis Avner (or Stalking Cat, his

Native American name) appears to fit right in with these chimeric beings.<sup>1</sup> Avner, who was strongly influenced by Native American mysticism throughout his life, felt that he identified deeply with his totem animal, the tiger. A mixture of Huron and Lakota blood, Avner took his ancestors' traditions to the next level, enduring numerous surgical procedures and extensive body modifications to transform himself into the likeness of his totem animal. He underwent reconstructive surgery to alter his eyes, cheeks, nose, and lips, lending his features unmistakably feline attributes. Transdermal implants were embedded under the skin of his lips and forehead, allowing him to wear artificial whiskers. His teeth were filed into points, and he had extensive tattoo work done on his face and body that mimicked the tiger's stripes. Tragically, he was found dead in November of 2012, apparently from suicide.

Due to some outdated preconceptions about the nature of monstrosity, it is understandable that Avner could be mistakenly lumped into the monstrous category. Stalking Cat's shocking transformation elicited reactions that ranged from praise and admiration to allegations of monstrosity, and it is the latter of these that are of the most interest to us. Avner blurred the line between the categories of human and animal, and there were those who were quick to label him a monster for his refusal to conform to whatever basic human model they believed to be the standard. These appellations are not

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<sup>1</sup> All information regarding Avner was taken from the following sources:

“Dennis Avner, ‘Stalking Cat,’ Dead at 54: Body Modification Enthusiast May Have Committed Suicide.” *Huff Post Weird News*. Huffington Post. 13 Nov. 2012. Web. 24 Oct. 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/13/dennis-avner-stalking-cat-dead-suicide\\_n\\_2122947.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/13/dennis-avner-stalking-cat-dead-suicide_n_2122947.html)

“Stalking Cat (Dennis Avner).” *BBC Human Body & Mind*. BBC. Web. 24 Oct. 2013. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/articles/disorders/gallery/gallery\\_case2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/articles/disorders/gallery/gallery_case2.shtml)

uninformed outcries from narrow-minded fundamentalists. They are the product of centuries of a cultural conditioning that has promulgated the idea that everything natural can and must be neatly categorized into a distinct set, and that anything that fails to conform is monstrous. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” echoes these familiar yet often inarticulable sentiments: “This refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (Cohen 6). A monster, according to Cohen, is a being that defies categorization, what he calls a “harbinger of category crisis” (6), existing as an amalgamated in-between entity that belongs to no one taxonomical set. These creatures are consistent in their inconsistency, united only by a sort of ontological simultaneity. Avner appears a textbook example of this category crisis, and that he brought it about of his own volition almost serves to make his deconstruction of seemingly sacred natural boundaries all the more horrifying and monstrous. He chose to divorce himself from humanity’s taxonomical standard, in effect becoming a hybrid creature that could no longer be classified according to conventional nomenclature. Mustn’t his willingness to distance himself so radically from his fellow human beings be indicative of some innate monstrosity? Stalking Cat certainly attempted to become a form suspended between forms, but for all his extensive surgeries and modificational procedures, did he really change anything about his fundamental nature, or was he simply altering his body’s external appearance? That this question need be asked at all says something about society’s current criteria for monstrosity, yet it also begs us to explore what it means to be “monstrous” in a more modern sense.

Cohen's category crisis hypothesis is not one without value, yet it is also flawed in that it rests upon the archaic assumption that nature has any inherent teleological structure from which a human could deviate. Useful in explicating this critique of Cohen's theory is a passage from Steven T. Asma's essay "Future Monsters," from his book *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, in which he addresses issue of whether or not mankind itself is an end of nature or something less exceptional. He maintains that "we now live in a Nature different from that of previous ages...we don't know what the *purpose* or teleology of an animal species is (including ourselves), and we are increasingly capable of creating a new one" (Asma 276). Essentially, Asma is proposing that recent breakthroughs in science and technology have shattered the illusion that man as a species is an end, stating later that "we don't *know* the purposes of nature because *there are no purposes of nature*" (276); to extrapolate from this, if man in his most basic form cannot be thought of as an end, then deviation from a supposed biological template is not a move toward category crisis, as man is no longer a distinct category. Cohen's thesis relies on the supposition that there exist categories to diverge from or drift between; ironically, this categorical paradigm that was born of science has now been obviated by science. So what is Stalking Cat in the context of a more modern perception of monstrosity, one in which nature and teleology don't figure into the equation?

To ask whether Avner became more monstrous through his body modification requires asking what exactly it means to be "monstrous," and to this end Patricia MacCormack in her essay "Posthuman Teratology" offers a useful and thought-provoking definition: "'The monster' refers to the element outside the observer that

sparks and creates an event of perception which necessitates the participation of two unlike entities. . . . referring to a monster only ever refers to an encounter with alterity” (MacCormack 294). MacCormack’s definition of the monstrous differs significantly from more mainstream explanations in that she defines the monstrous not as a necessarily corporeal entity, but as any catalyst which forces interaction between two ontologically different beings. Any encounter with difference can be said to be a “monstrous encounter;” monsters, then, are not so much physical creatures as they are the abstract products of inevitable disparities between individuals. Avner, by piercing, tattooing, and reshaping his body, certainly exacerbated the possibility of an encounter with the monstrous, yet these alterations neither exclusively caused nor were caused by any element of monstrosity. The “monster,” so to speak, is inherent in all individuals exactly because of that which makes them individuals. If there were no differences between persons, physical or psychological, there would be no monsters; the matter at hand then becomes not so much a question of Avner’s being monstrous or not, but rather a question of the magnitude of the monstrous element that exists ubiquitously in varying degrees of extremity, and whether a certain amount of “ontological monstrosity” precludes Avner, or any individual, from being human.

Whether or not monstrosity and humanity are mutually exclusive brings about the question of what it means to be human—is humanity contingent upon adhering to a strict bodily blueprint, allowing no room for deviation from the natural standard, or is the human experience a product of the mind/body dichotomy that gives mankind unique freedom to extricate our mental sense of being from the purely physical? In *Stalking Cat*’s case, if the former held true, arguments for his induction into our *Encyclopedia*

would hold a bit more water, yet the concept of the monstrous as a deviation from the human standard has already shown itself to be outdated and obsolete. Thus the only viable alternative is the latter, which I maintain for reasons made more cogent by Asma when he examines the preternatural nature of humanity, urging us to realize that “the mind develops in an environment that is simply saturated with *feeling*. From before birth, experiences are loaded with values, positive, negative, neutral, and a thousand gradations and mixtures of these” (Asma 268). Asma posits that the mind is much more than just a biological computer that processes and responds to incoming information (268); it is a complex physiological entity that is capable of rationality, judgment, empathy, and other distinctly “human” qualities. Did Stalking Cat forego these merits simply by altering his body’s appearance? He was obviously aware of the reasons behind his actions; he believed his metamorphosis to be a means of achieving a happier state of being (“Stalking Cat”). However much his external appearance may have changed, his mental faculties were uncompromised. His choice to modify his body was a result of his weighing the “thousand gradations and mixtures” (Asma 268) of the values central to his identity as a person. That experiences of the mind hold such myriad values implies an internal clash between opposites, exemplifying the “participation of two unlike entities” (MacCormack 294) so central to our definition of the monstrous. Avner did not forsake his humanity in becoming monstrous; rather, the monstrous traits inherent in Avner and the rest of humankind exist precisely because of our humanity, and so monstrosity itself necessitates humanity. It is clear that this internal alterity is not limited to separate external interactions between individuals, but is an ongoing and indispensable process internalized in the mind of every individual, and Avner was no exception.

I hope you will all agree with me that Stalking Cat should by no means be included in this *Encyclopedia*. The mainstream understanding of what it means to be a monster has proven itself obsolete (for our purposes, at least) and become subordinated to a more modern and more relevant definition, which not only disqualifies Avner as a person from being considered wholly monstrous, but also demonstrates the cruciality of such monstrous encounters to the human experience. Because he was acting with full mental competence towards the goal of bettering his state of being, and because monstrosity is, to a degree, an integral and incorporeal part of humanity (not a corporeal manifestation of any deviation therefrom), Dennis Avner should not be included in our *Monstrous Encyclopedia of Monsters*.

## Works Cited

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