The *Ubume* Challenge: A Digital Environmental Humanities Project

A Thesis by

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May 2020

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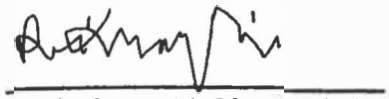

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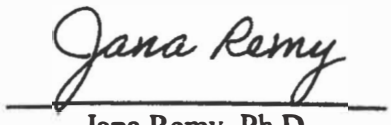

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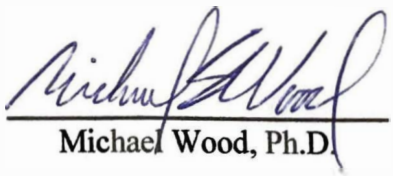

Michael Wood, Ph.D.

May 2020

The *Ubume* Challenge: A Digital Environmental Humanities Project

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my committee, Dr. Rei Magosaki, Dr. Jana Remy, and Dr. Michael Wood, not only for their time and feedback, but for their encouragement when I took on such an unusual thesis. I'd also like to thank Craig Dietrich for setting Scalar up at Chapman University, Jessica Bosinski for teaching me how to use it, and the faculty and staff who made me want to push myself and explore this new world of Digital Humanities, including: Dr. Anna Leahy, Dr. Douglas Dechow, Dr. Ian Barnard, and Morgan Read-Davidson. Finally, I'd like to thank Dr. Christopher Schaberg whose book *Searching for the Anthropocene: A Journey into the Environmental Humanities* I was fortunate enough to review and gain inspiration for this entire thesis.

ABSTRACT

The *Ubume* Challenge: A Digital Environmental Humanities Project

by Sam Risak

In 2019, the "The Momo Challenge" frightened parents in the United States into believing "Momo" would appear online where she'd lure their children into harming themselves. While this challenge is one of many recent viral hoaxes, "Momo" is not simply a product of our digital age. Known as the *ubume* ("birthing-woman"), the figure who provides the face for "Momo" has lived for centuries in Japanese folklore where *yokai* (supernatural creatures) often caution listeners against entering unchartered parts of the land. And once Japan industrialized, so too did their "unchartered lands," the *ubume* reborn to fit the cities and technologies that assumed these new breeding grounds for uncertainty. On my Scalar website, a platform designed to host media-rich content, I trace three such transmutations of the *ubume*—the *setsuwa* (spoken story), illustrated encyclopedia, and viral hoax. Literary critic Frederick Jameson provides the framework for these analyses as he describes the myth as an "imagined solution" to otherwise "unresolvable social contradictions." I take an ecocritical approach and focus on the contradictions that arise under our dominant technology-as-progress narrative, presenting my research on hidden environmental costs through a combination of text and original comics. My choice to incorporate comics reflects my aim to not only expand access beyond an academic audience but to ensure an authorial transparency that allows users to decide whether they agree with my conclusions (as opposed to computer-generated visuals many people associate with objectivity). Increased user agency is crucial if we are to uncover why certain histories are

privileged over others, particularly in our current climate where the hands shaping our digital environments remain so largely hidden.

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DIGITAL MANIFEST

I. Thesis

a. PDF Exports of each website page

II. WARC files

a. Digital Edition https://scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/index

b. To preserve this thesis and increase global footprint, the pages to this website have been archived at:

i. Internet Archive:

1. Title Page: https://web.archive.org/web/20200505040639/https://scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/index
2. Critical Statement: https://web.archive.org/web/20200511155730/https://scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/critical-statement?path=index
3. Introduction: https://web.archive.org/web/20200511160033/https:/scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/introduction?path=index
4. The *Ubume* in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū*: https://web.archive.org/web/20200511160310/https://scalar.chapm

an.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/the-ubume-in-the-konjaku-monogatarish?path=index

5. The *Ubume* in *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō:* https://web.archive.org/web/20200511160748/https://scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/the-ubume-in-the-illustrated-demons-night-parade?path=index
6. The *Ubume* in The Momo Challenge :https://web.archive.org/web/20200511161017/https://scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/the-ubume-in-the-momo-challenge?path=index
7. Works Cited: https://web.archive.org/web/20200511161058/https://scalar.chapman.edu/scalar/the-ubume-challenge-a-digital-environmental-humanities-project/works-cited?path=index

ii. Digital Commons: https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000138

III. Twitter handle

a. Tweeted at @anvcscalar to engage with scholarly community.

IV. Research Poster

a. URL to Chapman University's Graduate Research Showcase where it was presented https://www.chapman.edu/academics/graduate-education/graduate-student-research-showcase.aspx

b. JPEG of research poster

A NOTE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The *Ubume* Challenge runs on Scalar 2.0, a free open-source publishing platform. No installation is required from users; they simply go to the website and follow the "path" of the digital "book." This book begins on a cover page where users then click to "Begin with Critical Statement." From there, they can scroll to the bottom to click to "continue" or click the arrow on the right of the page to proceed to the next "chapter" or page and make their way through the book; alternatively, they can hover over the Table of Contents menu in the upper-left-hand corner to pick and choose which chapter they wish to see next. This project also utilizes hyperlinks that take users to external links or the Works Cited if they wish to see the full citation for a source mentioned in the text; a few hyperlinks also offer several "notes" with additional information that appear when users hover over select terms.

1 PDF Exports of Website

The Ubume Challenge: A Digital Environmental Humanities Project

by Sam Risak

Begin with “Critical Statement”

Critical Statement

This Scalar site traces the *ubume* back through three popular sources that span centuries—the *setsuwa* collection *Konjaku Monogatarishū*, the illustrated encyclopedia *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*, and the viral hoax "The Momo Challenge" —to contextualize a recurring folkloric figure that has most recently been appropriated in the U.S. as a creation of the digital age. The spoken stories in which the *ubume* originated served as a caveat to deter listeners from entering parts of the land that belonged to the supernatural. Yet as we industrialized on a global scale, so too did our fears, and the environments that became more worrisome to us became those which we created, both in cities and online.

Similar to our passing down of the *ubume*'s story, we have passed down the story of technology-as-savior, one that enabled our age of the Anthropocene as much as it has enabled the *ubume* to become Momo. While we may not have always understood the extent to which humans impact the planet, there has been consistent uncertainties regarding industrialization—those uncertainties just did not belong to those with the dominant platform. I have created this site to give them one.

Because my first encounter with the *ubume* was through Momo, we begin and end in the United States with Momo as the guide to signify that the representations that follow are born through a Western lens. While the *ubume* offers critical insight into numerous social and cultural factors, my focus is on the environment, and Momo in my embedded comic sequence serves as a symbol for the land, and the robots, industry. In addition to expanding access beyond an academic audience, the medium of comics helps create an authorial transparency that allows users to decide whether they agree with my conclusions as opposed to the computer-generated visuals many people assume to be objective (Drucker). Increased user agency is crucial if we are to understand why certain histories

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are privileged over others, particularly in our current climate where the hands shaping our digital environments remain so largely hidden. As I am not attempting to construct any cause-and-effect narratives, but rather, bring to light hidden stories, the comic is meant to unify sections of research that can otherwise stand on their own.

While a digital humanities project might seem a paradoxical choice for a topic that heavily critiques our reliance on technology, that critique is not a condemnation. This Scalar site attempts to reach people where they are, and we cannot turn off all our devices now any more than we can rewind our clocks to undo all of their damages. Something we can do, and something this Scalar site seeks to aid, is grow a little more aware of the extent of their existence.

This page is a note in:

- Critical Statement

Continue to “Introduction”

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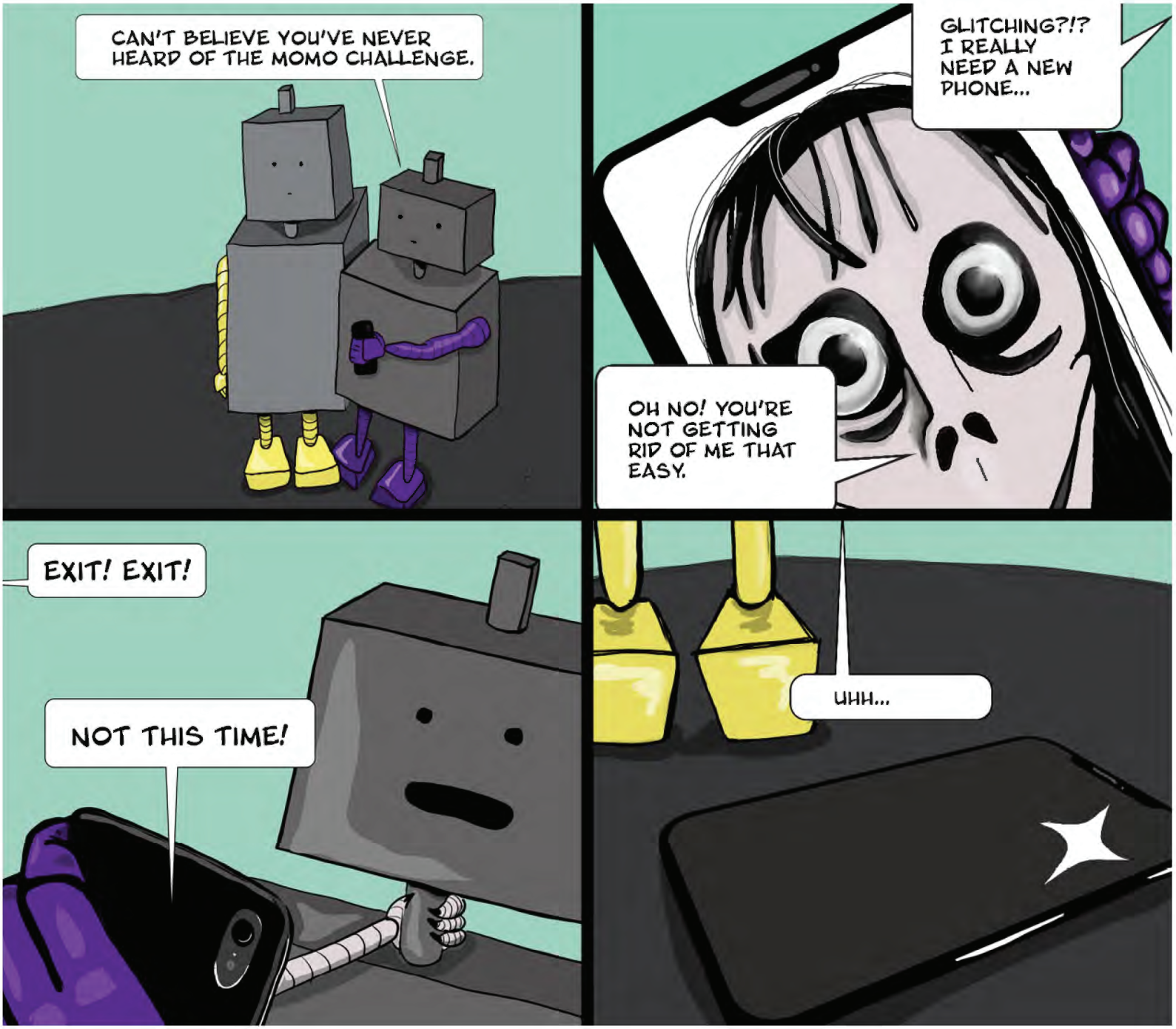
THE UBUME CHALLENGE (2/6)

Introduction



DESCRIPTION DETAILS CITATIONS SOURCE FILE

Robots meet Momo, 2019, U.S.

On February 26, 2019, Twitter user Wanda Maximoff posted "Warning! Please read, this is real. There is a

thing called ‘Momo’ that’s instructing kids to kill themselves…INFORM EVERYONE YOU CAN.” Attached to the tweet was a screenshot of what would become known as “Momo,” a frightening figure with lidless eyes, an oversized smile and flattened nose, a body made up of nothing more than breasts attached to chicken legs.

Keisuke Aiso's “Mother Bird," 2006

The figure behind the “Momo Challenge,” however, was not born in 2019. Nor was it born in 2018 when the hoax swept across Latin America. It was not even born in 2006 when artist Keisuke Aiso created “Mother Bird,” the art-horror sculpture featured in the photograph for Momo. No, this figure has roots that stretch back centuries, only known under a different name—the *ubume*.

A character in Japanese and Chinese folklore, the *ubume* translates to birthing-woman. Said to derive from a woman who died giving birth, it is not the woman herself, but her spiritual attachment to the child that becomes the *ubume*. While there are numerous iterations of the *ubume*, she is commonly presented as a woman who stands in rivers, drenched in blood from the waist down, holding what appears to be her child. If you come across her, she will ask you to hold the child, which you will soon find is no longer a child but—and this is where the versions tend to differ—a pile of leaves or a stone that grows heavier and heavier.

The *ubume* is one of many *yōkai*—or supernatural creatures—found in Japan, all of which are associated with the uncertainties of the land. Such *yōkai* have proliferated in popular culture for centuries, and recently, have also begun to feature in the critical works of several North American scholars, including Michael Dylan Foster (*Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yôkai*, 2009), Gerald Figal (*Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*, 1999), and Michelle Osterfeld Li (*Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales* , 2009). Each of these texts offers critical insight into the role the supernatural has played in Japan; however, given the scale of their subject matter and the comprehensive nature of these studies, the specifics paid to the individual *yōkai* is minimal, and when the *ubume* is mentioned, she rarely receives more than a paragraph. Given the gender implications of the *ubume*, slightly more information is offered in texts like Hank Glassman’s *The Religious Construction of Motherhood in Medieval Japan*, but again, the text covers a large topic, in which the *ubume* serves as one example of many.

Rather than situate the *ubume* amongst other *yōkai*, I situate her in three of the time periods that she appears. Given how prone to exoticization Japanese culture is in the United States, historicizing Momo—who might otherwise be dismissed as a pop culture fad—proves particularly significant, and is a task the archival endeavors of the Digital Humanities is well-suited to address. Unlike the violent stereotypes applied to many populations of color, once Japanese Americans—and Asian Americans more broadly—began to succeed

economically and assimilate to the nuclear family, they became the “model minority”—a tool for the white dominant classes to “prove” the American Dream still exists. Under this supposed embrace, racist WWII depictions and their corresponding violence faded to make room for a new image of Japan, one filled with objects like the *yōkai*-descendant Pokémon for Americans to collect. And many did so readily, our commodification of the country perhaps best signified by the invention—and prevalence—of the term "weeaboo," a (typically derogatory) name for a Western person "obsessed" with Japan.

Even as discussions of whitewashing and cultural appropriation arise in the United States, such conversations seem to hold less sway when applied to Japan, many Americans seemingly unsure as to whether one *can* be racist against Japanese Americans anymore, particularly when many participate in the commodification of their own culture. This "color-blind" perspective reflects a lack of historical awareness, one that makes such privileged Americans liable to support a society which encourages the very offenses they believe outdated. Similar to what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism*, the mainstream depiction of Japan in America is a narrative constructed to serve the dominant white power structure—a narrative that changes as the needs change. Certainly, in the pandemic COVID-19, the needs changed. In search of an outlet to target their fears, too many Americans returned to the more violent positioning of Asian Americans as “other,” the sharp rise in hate crimes making obvious the racism that was there all along.

While this project is not analyzing race relations, it is looking to make visible a piece of Japanese history. No different than most in the United States, when I first came across “The Momo Challenge,” I was not aware of any background behind the figure I was seeing; Momo blended in with numerous faces that have filled the American horror scene (many of which—*The Ring, The Grudge*, etc.—also share origins in Japanese folklore). However, once I read the “Mother Bird” sculpture had been inspired by the *ubume*, I began to wonder about the figure’s history and whether the contemporary fears she provoked bore any similarities to those she provoked in the past. As I began my research, I soon found that stories of the *ubume* have lived for centuries in Japan, as well as China, and I was particularly struck by how often they framed the *ubume* as an authentic creature, none of the sources this project analyzes (the *setsuwa* collection *Konjaku Monogatarishū*, the illustrated encyclopedia *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*, and the viral hoax “The Momo Challenge”) presenting as fiction, but as a documentation of something that already exists.

A true product of her environment, the *ubume* is reborn to fit each of these mediums, expanding from a regional to a national to an international figure. *But why?* What in particular about the *ubume* has caused us to return to her again and again? As a framework to answer this, I turned to literary critic Frederick Jameson who references anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's *The Structural Study of Myth* to argue that the myth functions as an imagined solution to "unresolvable social contradictions" (79). As “The Momo Challenge” was said to resonate with parents’ fear of technology, in particular, the ramifications it poses for their children, we see an “unresolvable social contradiction” arise in our correlation between technology and progress. While parents would not want to deny children access to the technology they are told is the way forward, we do not actually know where this “way forward” is leading, nor the environmental consequences of its trajectory. As children and younger generations are the populations to be most affected by technology and the world that inhabits it, the *ubume's* association with the land and reproduction offers parents an “imagined solution” in the distraction

It becomes clear then that Suetake's journey across the river is not done to free the town of any dangers, but to demonstrate his courage. To prevent any doubts over whether he completed the task, Suetake sticks one of his arrows on the other side of the bank, the raw materials for which—along with Suetake's "armor, a helmet, bows in a quiver" (Koriyama and Allen 60)—would have likely been "collected countrywide as part of the handicraft and special products taxes (chōyō) requisitioned from state-managed forests, mines and pastures" (Friday 63). Common people therefore not only had their land depleted of resources by figures like Suetake and Yorimitsu, but had those resources turned against them when they were used to construct weapons the military could use to enforce submission to further exploitation.

The *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū* did not create the *ubume* any more than it created Taira no Suetake, but it did pass on a narrative of the brave warrior to audiences who may never have believed it otherwise. As Li states, "people whose lifestyles and lives are threatened would find it less frightening to confront political and social struggles in terms of the extraordinary and the monstrous than to look hard at the true enemies: other people and time" (241). In a period when the warrior class was rising and many believed the world to entering a time of disorder and decay, the *ubume* offered common people a monster they could defeat, and in so doing, distracted them from seeing who and what there really was to fear.

« Continue to "The Ubume in the Gazu Hyakki Yagyō"

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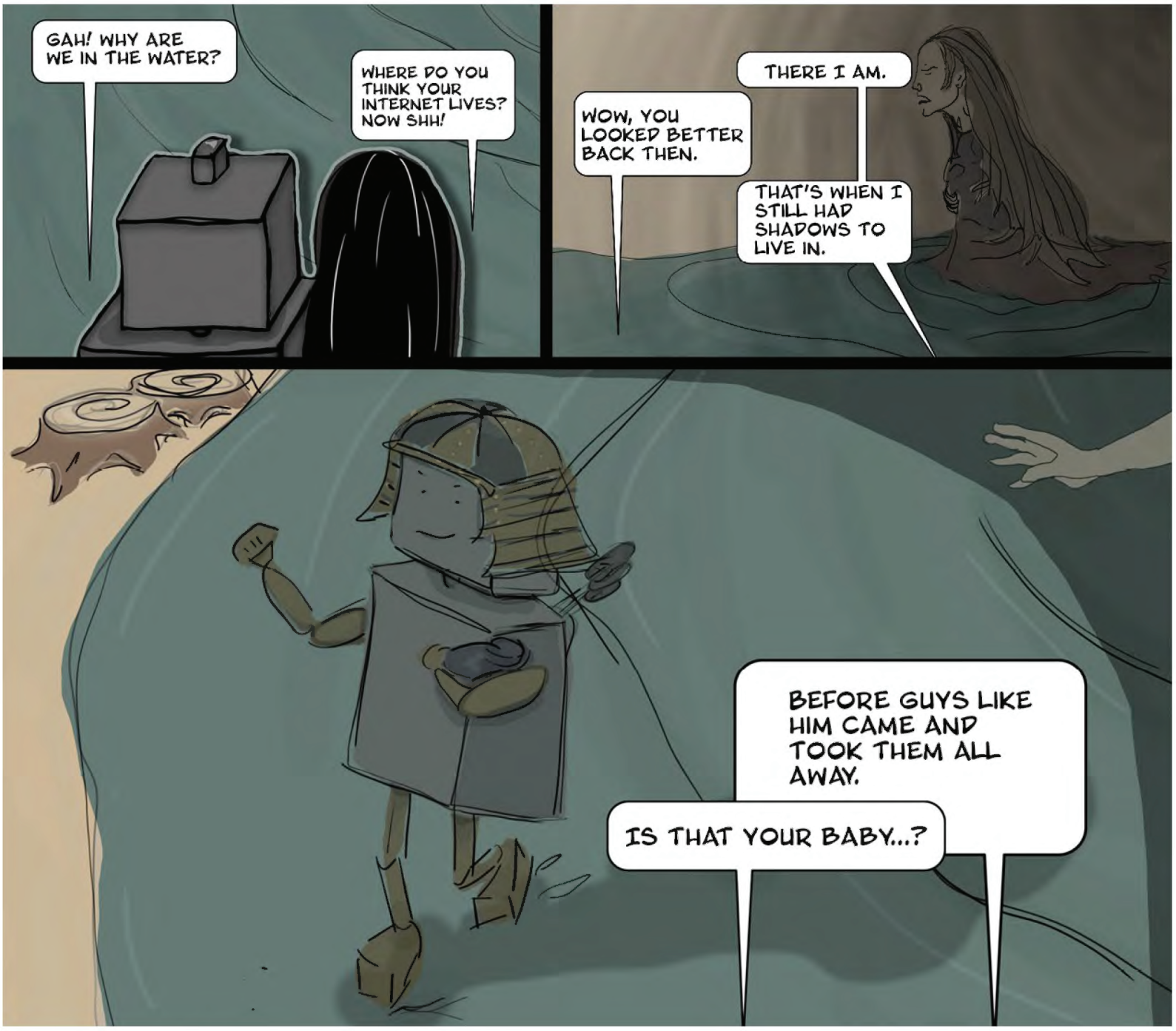
THE UBUME CHALLENGE (3/6)

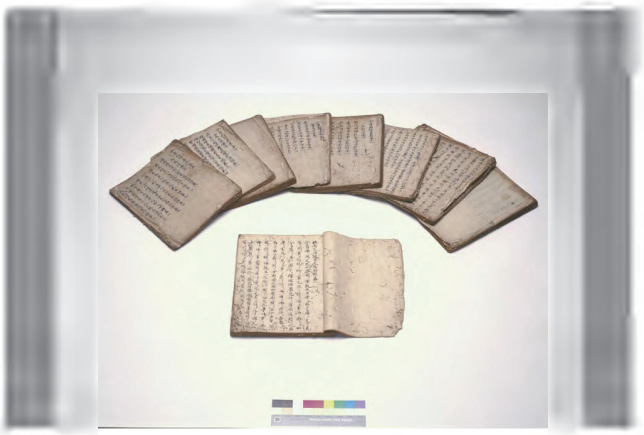
The Ubume in the Konjaku Monogatarishū



DESCRIPTION DETAILS CITATIONS SOURCE FILE

Momo takes robot back to Heian, Japan (roughly 1120)

The first written appearance of the *ubume* comes around 1120 in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* (*The Tales of Times Now Past*), a collection of *setsuwa* central to the defining the genre. Organized into books “Tales of India” (*Tenjiku*, 1-5), “Tales of China” (*Shindan*, 6-10), and “Tales of Japan” (*Honcho* 11-31), the *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū* contains roughly 1,040 tales, the majority of which appear in prior texts apart from those in “Tales of Japan.” While the identity of the compilers is unknown, due to the overtly Buddhist messages of most of the parable-style tales, they are assumed to be Buddhist monks (Li 18).



Konjaku Monogatarish , Suzuka Ed. (Date Unknown)

As many of the stories were used to enliven Buddhist sermons, initially the audience for such *setsuwa* would have been aristocrats. During the Heian period (794-1185), however, a more accessible strain of Buddhism rose in popularity known as Pure Land Buddhism. Rather than elaborate ritual or arduous study of doctrine, Pure Land stressed faith, its accessibility making it particularly appealing to the lower classes. During the time of the *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū*’s compilation, this sect of Buddhism would have believed the world to be entering Mappō—“ten thousand years of disorder, violence, and moral decay, rendering the attainment of enlightenment impossible for even very devout people” (Li 218). In this stage, the most one could wish for was rebirth in the Western Paradise or Pure Land where becoming a Buddha was relatively easy (Morton et al. 41). In response, Buddhist lessons began to shift and preach advice on how to make it through this world's treacheries rather than stressing its beauties.

Regardless of the fantastic elements within many of the parables, the *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū* claims the events it depicts to be true. The passed-down nature of the tales does create some freedom for interpretation, however, each one beginning with the phrase that translates approximately to "now it is the past" and ending with “and such then is the story as it has been handed down” (Li 27). By setting the stories in an ambiguous past, the monks were able to present them with the authority of history while shaping the figures and plots to fit their agendas, particularly because many of the figures within the tales lacked substantial documentation outside of the *setsuwa.* One such person is Taira no Suetake who had his status as legendary warrior solidified by his roles in tales as “Yorimitsu’s Retainer, Taira no Suetake, Meets an Ubume” (Reider 14-15) despite having lived more than a century prior to the *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū*'s compilation. Through the *setsuwa*, Suetake becomes known as one of the *Shitteno* or Four Guardian Kings, a term that was initially used to describe pre-Buddhist deities incorporated into the pantheon to protect Buddha’s Law, Buddhists, and Buddhist countries, and would later be applied to outstanding men of valor under a military commander (Reider 15).

The story in which Suetake and the *ubume* appear is located within Book XXVII, “Tales of Malevolent

Supernatural Creatures," the themes of which center around military honor and the supernatural. According to Komatsu Kazuhiko, from the seventh to seventeenth century, power and authority in Japan had "relied not only on the conquest of real enemies, but on the maintenance of symbolic control over surreal 'demon' enemies" (Figal 22-23). Such demonic conquest bolstered the heroism with which past warriors were regarded and offered the monks who were compiling the tales a tool to maintain favoritism with the military that was emerging as the dominant class. The other historical figure mentioned in the *ubume*'s tale, Minamoto no Yorimitsu, further supports the ties between Buddhism and the military as the general fought for Fujiwara Michinaga—a vocal adherent to Pure Land Buddhism. Michinaga was considered to be the most influential of all Fujiwaras, a family that dominated Japanese court life for centuries "without a rival in controlling the national destiny from 857 to 1160" (Morton et al 24). Indeed, out of all the aristocratic families who appear in *setsuwa*, it is the Fujiwaras who appear most (Li 150), perhaps unsurprising given *yōkai*'s tie to the land and the Fujiwara's cultivation of it.

The first generation of the Fujiwara clan, Fujiwara no Kamatari helped construct one of the most significant impositions on the land during this time—the Taika Reform. An attempt at creating a centralized authority, the reform declared all land of Japan as belonging to the emperor. It allotted rice land to farmers that would be assessed for taxes by local headsmen and landowning nobles who were appointed to the court as provincial or lesser governors. To escape such taxes, many peasants would commend their land to a temple or official who had been granted tax exemption and pay a rent far less than the tax amount required (Morton et. al. 46). This happened more and more until tax sources eventually dried up, and the centralized government broke down, the tax base falling more and more onto those least able to pay it. Yet, despite being a creation of the Fujiwaras, they did not flounder at its failure. As Japan entered a period of dispersed power overrun by regional feudal lords at war with one another, the family was able to assume government offices and maintain liaisons throughout the country (Morton et al. 46).

Fujiwara no Kamatari (Founder of the Fujiwara Clan), 645

The lack centralized structure did not bode so well for the land, however. Humans began to spread across the archipelago, engage in entrepreneurial commercial activity and increase agriculture and material output, all of which led to deforestation, land clearance, and greater power available for exploitation by the elite (Totman 101, 93). In the introduction to their translation of the *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū*, Naoshi Koriyama and Bruce Allen note this transformation:

> *"Along with the decline of the nobility's power and the spread of Buddhist teachings to the common folk in rural areas, major ecological changes were transforming nature and culture in the countryside. Forests—along with their resident gods, spirits, ogres, demons, and other supernatural beings-were being cut down and pushed away to clear the land for cultivation.*

(19 italics added)

While it is clear the dominant classes were those most responsible for the land's destruction, that is not the narrative the *setsuwa* offers. Instead, warriors were presented as protecting the people from the land, a position evident in the term *Shitteno*'s origin—the Golden Light Sutra. In the sutra, the Buddha commands the Four Heavenly Kings to protect the king who receives, respects, and spreads the teaching of the sutra: "the Four Heavenly Kings warn that if a king fails to uphold the sutra, they will abandon his kingdom, and it will suffer various natural calamities" (Sango 4). Not only does this title of *Shitteno* strengthen the tie between the military and Buddhism, but it presents nature as the antagonistic force that only they can subdue. Thus, while Suetake's position as Yorimitsu's retainer means he was likely a "warrior of ability," a person who accompanied provincial governors to prevent resistance and maximize tax collection (Friday 8-9), he is instead presented as the people's savior.

The tale itself is set within a town inside Mino Province where Yorimitsu serves as governor. When Yorimitsu takes a trip there, he hears samurai talk of a rumor in which a woman is said to appear in the river of Watari and ask whomever is crossing to hold her baby. When one of the samurai questions whether anyone around is brave enough to cross the river, Suetake asserts to be. A samurai responds: "No, you might be able to fight a thousand enemies, but you won't be able to cross that river now." When Suetake insists, the samurai declares: "No matter how brave you may be, you'll never be able to get across that river." But Suetake remains unperturbed and places a bet with the samurai, which, needless to say, he wins. Suetake crosses the river and takes the *ubume*'s baby, his calm demeanor a sharp contrast to the other samurai who were "terribly frightened" by the *ubume*, as well as the people who heard of Suetake's feat and were "deeply impressed." When Suetake arrives back, he does not even accept the men's wagers, a final point to illustrate his noble character (Koriyama and Allen 60).

Every piece of dialogue and description here is framed to Suetake's bravery. In *Ambiguous Bodies: Reading the Grotesque in Japanese Setsuwa Tales*, Michelle Osterfield Li describes how the selection of those who encounter demons often indicates privilege and power, the monsters able to be tamed or converted to serve the interests of authority (153). If we accept that the tale was written by monks who would want to maintain good standing with the military, we can shift the focus off of the "authority," which in this case would be Suetake, and look to see what else is being said. Based on the samurai's reactions and the "awful, fishy smell" ascribed to the *ubume* (Koriyama and Allen 60), it's clear she is intended to be frightening. However, it is worth noting that it is not the townspeople who complain about the *ubume*, but the samurai who would have been outsiders to this land, their primary residences being in the capital. Because supernatural creatures "lived, or appeared, at certain fixed locations" and "did not, as a rule, leave their own grounds and appear at other places" (Mori 149-150), it is likely that if humans had left the land undisturbed, they may have never encountered the *ubume* at all. When Suetake leaves the river, she does not follow, and even her child turns to a pile of leaves in his arms, the supernatural relegated to stay within its realm.

It becomes clear then that Suetake's journey across the river is not done to free the town of any dangers, but to demonstrate his courage. To prevent any doubts over whether he completed the task, Suetake sticks one of his arrows on the other side of the bank, the raw materials for which—along with Suetake's "armor, a helmet, bows in a quiver" (Koriyama and Allen 60)—would have likely been "collected countrywide as part of the handicraft and special products taxes (chōyō) requisitioned from state-managed forests, mines and pastures" (Friday 63). Common people therefore not only had their land depleted of resources by figures like Suetake and Yorimitsu, but had those resources turned against them when they were used to construct weapons the military could use to enforce submission to further exploitation.

The *Konjaku Monogatarishūshū* did not create the *ubume* any more than it created Taira no Suetake, but it did pass on a narrative of the brave warrior to audiences who may never have believed it otherwise. As Li states, "people whose lifestyles and lives are threatened would find it less frightening to confront political and social struggles in terms of the extraordinary and the monstrous than to look hard at the true enemies: other people and time" (241). In a period when the warrior class was rising and many believed the world to entering a time of disorder and decay, the *ubume* offered common people a monster they could defeat, and in so doing, distracted them from seeing who and what there really was to fear.

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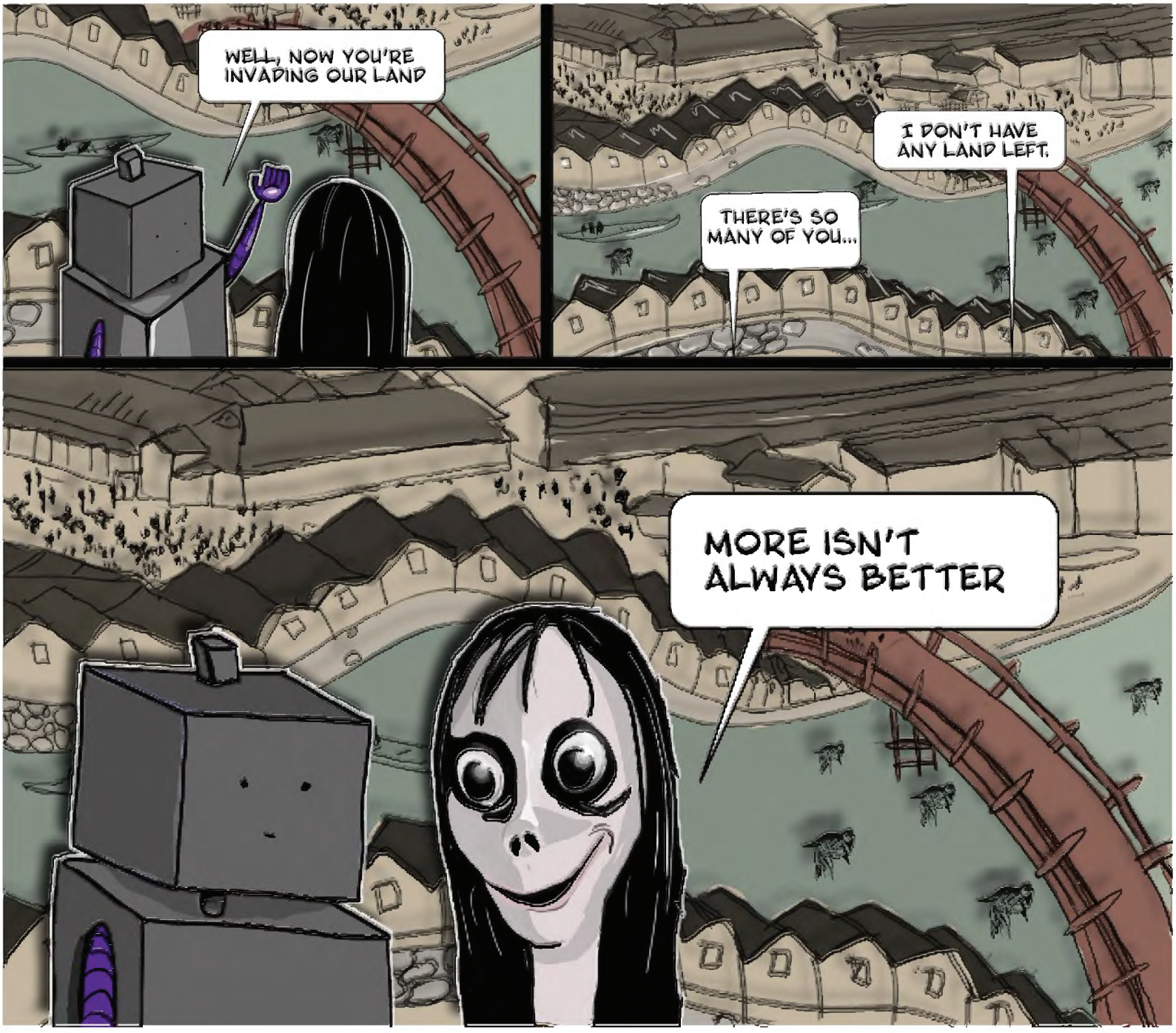
THE UBUME CHALLENGE (4/6)

The Ubume in the Gazu Hyakki Yagyō



DETAILS CITATIONS SOURCE FILE

Momo takes robot back to Edo, Japan (roughly 1776)

In 1776, Toriyama Sekien wrote the first of his *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* series (*Hundred Demons' Night Parade*), a collection of four illustrated encyclopedias. Prior to these texts, most visual depictions of *yōkai* appeared in

scrolls that only the wealthy or well-connected could view or own. Sekien took the creatures, applied the formal training in Kano painting techniques his background allowed him, and created mass-produced books, “[unleashing] an easily referenced database of the *yōkai* upon the population at large” (Yoda and Alt ix). Today, the works are largely accredited for the rise in popularity of *yōkai* from the Edo period (1603-1868) onward, and Sekien is considered to have been Japan's “most authoritative text on the subject” (Yoda and Alt viii).

Toriyama Sekien s r volume of his Gazu Hyakki Yagy series, 1776. See page 0 for entry on ubume.

The demand for Sekien's encyclopedias reflect a trend of commercialization that was occurring within Japan. When the country closed its borders, and warfare moved from daily reality to historical memory, one result was the emergence of a vibrant Genroku culture (Mansfield 37). Known for its arts, the Genroku—or early Edo period—included a burgeoning publishing industry as artists and writers like Sekien adopted woodblock printing, the affordability of which improved rates of literacy and learning. In accordance with Japan's goal to develop a cohesive national identity, many of the pieces published included almanacs, guidebooks, and encyclopedias, all of which were encouraged by the rise of neo-Confucianism.

Promoted by the founder of the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), it is the neo-Confucian notion that there is a true reality, and “through the careful examination of all things…order can be achieved both personally and politically (Foster 32-33). Ieyasu defended the strict class hierarchy he enforced in Japan with this strain of thought, promoting Confucian doctrines that supported his and other rulers' rights to exert authority over the masses (Hein 46). It is through this spread of neo-Confucianism in the unified Edo state that illustrated encyclopedias (which had a long history in China) gained traction in Japan. Inspired by the Chinese *Sansaizue*, the *Kinmōzui (Collected Illustrations to Instruct the Unenlightened*) is considered the first such illustrated encyclopedia in Japan. Given the centralized power structure of the shogun, the *Kinmōzui*'s aim to introduce “people to things they might not otherwise know about and [acquaint] them with the ‘proper’ names of thing for which they might know only a local term” (Foster 35) offered rulers a valuable method to assimilate different regional knowledge bases.

While Sekien may have used a favorite form of the shogun, he populates it with *yōkai*—figures which are by definition uncategorizable. As Michel Foucault states in *The Order of Things*, “that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance…” (xx). Hence, by focusing on *yōkai,* Sekien's encyclopedias offer an allegory that demonstrates the constructed nature of classifications, including those used to divide Japanese society. Particularly as some merchants began to accumulate wealth that surpassed their and even some samurai's social status, the structure of the shogun's hierarchy was proving

more and more faulty. Writers and artists like Sekien saw this and relied on poetic allusions, ghost stories, ancient history, and monsters (Yoda and Alt xi) to critique the hypocrisy while remaining safe from the jail time or more severe punishment such criticism of the hierarchy could result in.

Often, these artists were participants in the artistic movement know as "grotesque." According to this movement, "The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world…The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it" (Li 43). In Sekien's illustration, he blurs the bottom of the *ubume* into the river, nothing to indicate any separation between her and the water below. Such fluidity between the body and the land further illustrates the artificiality Sekien observed in what the shogun proclaimed to be predetermined social divisions.

And the more Japan industrialized, the more the boundary between "natural" and "constructed" weakened, the influence of which we can see in the *yōkai's* change in habitats. Whereas before the most frightening parts of the land may have been the dark, dense forests and woods, by 1700, most of Japan's land and resources had been exploited as much as possible: "the archipelago could sustain no more than the 30 million humans then resident, given their levels of material consumption and the technology and social organization of the day" (Totman 175). And so, rather than the undeveloped parts of the land, those that began to provoke the most fear were the cities still developing, and the *yōkai* that had "persisted for centuries throughout the archipelago, [now] appeared in Edo/Tokyo with alarming gusto and new social significance" (Figal 24).

Hyakki yagyo 百鬼夜行, painted by Itaya Keii Hironaga (板谷桂意廣長), 1880

A parallel in this integration between 'natural' and 'urban' landscape can be seen in Sekien's reference to *Hyakki Yagyō,* a myth about the one hundred *yōkai* who parade into the city of Kyoto. While the myth relied on Kyoto (where the emperor resided) as its setting, had the texts been written during Sekien's time, they likely would have chosen to feature Edo (where both the shogun and merchants resided), the city's bustling industry a better symbol for the transition the land was undergoing. By cataloging the creatures into an encyclopedia and titling it *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō,* Sekien turns what once was a rare occurrence—encountering a *yōkai* in the city—into an experience one could own.

Previously, *yōkai* had their territory, and it was one they did not leave apart from on *Hyakki Yagyō.* They therefore posed no threat to humans who did not intrude upon them (Komastu 15). However, without any land left for the *yōkai* to claim as their own, increased human interaction would be inevitable. Reminiscent to what we see in the U.S. today when alligators who end up in swimming pools or the coyotes wandering the streets of Chicago, the increased danger in this new relationship between humans and *yōkai* can be seen in Sekien's entry on the *ubume.* In it, the artist uses the label from the earlier scholarly encyclopedia *Wakan Sansaizue*,

which depicts the *ubume* according to her Chinese interpretation—as the *ubume-dori*, or *ubume*-bird. Regarded as an evil deity, in this version, it is said when the *ubume* puts on feathers, she turns into a bird, and when she takes them off, she turns into a woman: “For this reason, the bird has breasts and takes pleasure in snatching people’s children and making them its own (Shimazaki 201). However, unlike the *Wakan Sansaizue*, which shows an image of a bird for the *ubume*, Sekien illustrates her according to her Japanese form—that of a sorrowful woman standing in the river and clutching her child. The juxtaposition of the Chinese characters against what would otherwise be a traditional Japanese depiction presents the *ubume* as far more devious than the prior Japanese iterations of her; in Sekien's version, the *ubume* can swoop in to harm children at any moment if parents do not keep a watchful eye.

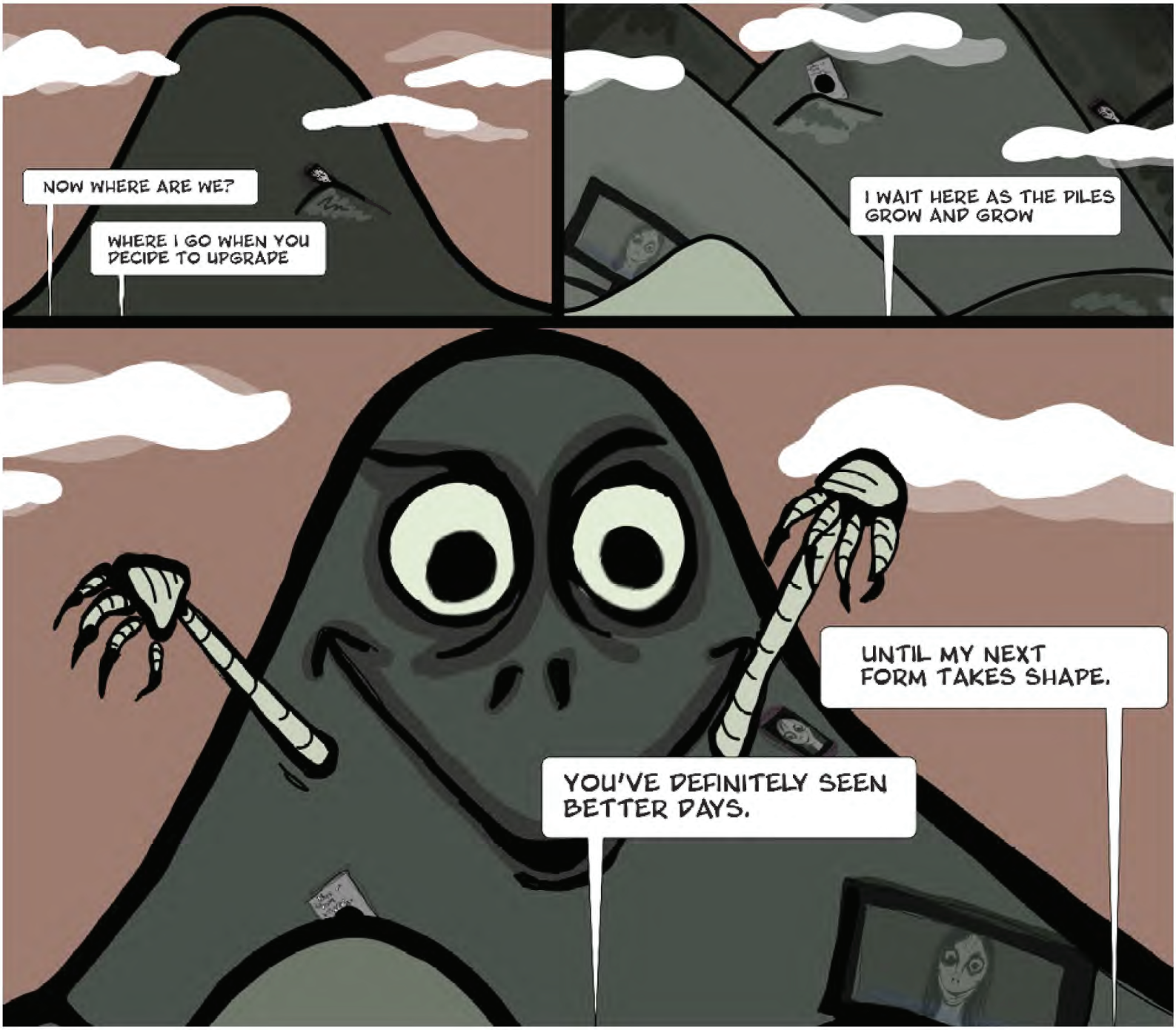
Some, however, chose to look away from such dangers. According to the *Hyakki Yagyō* myth, it's understood to be dangerous and potentially fatal for nobility to look upon the *yōkai*, and aristocratic families like the Fujiwara were portrayed as turning away afraid or upset by having been shown the creatures. A similar response can be found during Sekien's period by the elite who averted their eyes from the damage they were causing the land and its people. Because of massive land clearance, population growth, and construction boom, Japan had to substitute coal for wood in order to meet its construction and fuel demands. Coal mining not only resulted in inferior products—its "user mostly [employing] it from necessity rather than choice” (Totman 174)—it polluted the downstream rice fields, and, as it advanced, rendered potable water poisonous and fouled irrigation systems, thereby destroying rice crops as well as marine ecosystems (Totman 172). When villagers would protest the opening of new mines, they would be met with "bakuhan authorities [who] would avert their eyes to the damage, commonly siding with mine operators, who provided the government with the metal it needed" (Totman 172). With such little control over the future of the land, it is no wonder that encyclopedias identifying threats like *ubume* would prove appealing, their pages filled with dangers readers could prepare for and defend against.

During this commercial boom, Sekien and many other merchants found successes that allowed them to live on spacious parts the streets their class title may not have otherwise allowed. At the same time, however, farmers had their land poisoned, and the common people who lived in the city did so in squalor where they “[craved] all manner of diversion and [preferred] to spend the little money they had on pleasures and aesthetically pleasing possessions than to save for an uncertain future” (Mansfield 28). In such an environment, rather than face the horrors of industrialization, people turned to more familiar monsters, creatures said to reside within the untouched parts of the land that no longer existed. This yearning for the past proved profitable for Sekien whose encyclopedias may have critiqued the shogun's social orders, but abetted the creation of a new, commercially-driven order in which the artist and the *ubume* would find great demand.

« Continue to “The Ubume in the Momo Challenge”

THE UBUME CHALLENGE (5/6)

The Ubume in the Momo Challenge



DESCRIPTION DETAILS CITATIONS SOURCE FILE

Momo takes robot back to the US to the e-wa e of our present and near future.

"Such ghosts appear during the nighttime, and when they make a commotion during broad daylight, this is

truly something to fear." —*Konjaku Monogatarishū*

"As horrendous as history has been, geohistory will probably be worse, since what had remained quietly in the background up to now--the landscape that had served as the framework for all human conflicts--has just joined the fight. What was a metaphor up to now--that even stones cried out in pain in the face of the miseries humans had inflicted on them--has become literal." —Bruno Latour

In 2018, a photograph of the sculpture "Mother Bird" was uploaded onto the online platform *Creepypasta,* the same website that gave birth to Slenderman in 2009, perhaps the most infamous of all viral hoaxes. Horror effects artist and author of *Grotesque Girls,* Keisuke Aiso created his sculpture out of rubber and natural oils, and when she began to rot, Aiso disposed of her (Reiko). But that was just the beginning of Momo.

Shortly after that initial 2018 post, rumors emerged in Latin America about Momo threatening children on *WhatsApp* and *Facebook*, her appearance supposedly linked with suicide pacts. Others claimed Momo popped up in children's programs like *Peppa Pig* or game-play videos like *Fortnight* on *YouTube* . Still others said the challenge spread to Snapchat. In the United States, the rumor escalated on February 26, 2019 when it caught fire on Twitter, and later, Instagram when Kim Kardashian warned her 129 million followers about Momo and asked them to "Please monitor what your kids are watching!!!" (Sakuma).

No description available.

In response to the "Momo Challenge," local authorities advised parents to increase online supervision; schools reminded parents to be vigilant; and news agencies recommended parents warn their children about the frightening images they may find online. Shortly after, however, national media agencies reported they were unsure whether any Momo-related suicides had actually taken place. Rather than warn their children about Momo, parents were to ignore her entirely, as those who shared the viral hoax could inadvertently encourage children into participating in the trend ironically.

The Momo Challenge is one of many viral hoaxes in recent years. From eating tide pods to committing suicide for the Blue Whale Challenge, parents seem to hear about a new digital threat to their children every day. While these challenges typically have no or very little founding in reality, the fear they cause certainly does, particularly for parents who did not grow up in a digital world. In a study on online conspiracy theories, data scientist Alessandro Bessi writes how our interconnected world coupled with our unprecedented acceleration of scientific progress has "exposed the society to an increasing level of complexity to explain reality and its phenomena" (459). Because many of us are not literate enough to make sense of such complexity, it can be easier to blame boogeymen like Momo for the issues we face online.

While Momo may feel like a product of the digital age, were frightened parents to look into her background, they would find she is far from a contemporary invention. Inspired by the *ubume*, the figure that inspired the

"Mother Bird" sculpture has lived for centuries at the intersection between reproduction and fear. But who has the time for such research when children are at risk? That impulse for immediacy is what makes viral hoaxes so dangerous. By offering consumers a sense that they are resisting the corporations controlling their lives, they distract them from ever gaining such control (Campion-Vincent 5). As writer at *The Atlantic* Taylor Lorenz says in her article on the Momo Challenge, it is not Momo parents need to focus on, but the platforms themselves, corporations like *Youtube* often perpetuating the harm. The relative invisibility afforded such platforms is what obscures the threats they might pose, both online *and outside.*

In 2019 (the same year Momo gained her international notoriety), our planet saw: one million species on the brink of extinction; a crisis in the oceans driven by plastic pollution, overfishing, overheating and acidification; key natural ecosystems reduced to almost half their size; insect populations crashed; the biomass of wild animals fallen by 80 percent (Harvey). Such conditions sound impossible to ignore, and yet we have and largely continue to ignore them, leaders in our consumer culture informing what we (they) want as well as what we (they) don't want: attention paid to the impact of globalized capitalism on the climate. Because such environmental harms have generally unfolded by means of what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violent at all” (2356), corporations have largely succeeded in diverting our attentions onto topics like the economy, the effects of which we've been taught to see as immediate and significant. Only after a surge of ‘natural’ disasters in more privileged regions—like the fires that ravage California and Australia—did climate change seem to gain the spectacle necessary to attract our attention. In a survey conducted during some of the 2019 California wildfires, three-quarters of those who reported the science of climate change has become more convincing credited recent extreme weather events for changing their views ("Is the Public Willing").

If we can recognize the climate crises unfolding before us, why do we continue to perceive technological growth as the way forward? One reason, I believe, lies within the hidden infrastructure of such technology. “People think that data is in the cloud, but it’s not,” said Jayne Stowell, who oversees construction of Google’s undersea cable projects. “It’s in the ocean.” Nearly 750,000 miles of cable already connect the continents, which American tech giants have started taking control of (Satriano). These undersea cables are one of many examples of hidden digital infrastructures; our technology and planet have integrated so thoroughly, they have created an entirely new sphere—the technosphere. An accumulation of all humans’ technological objects and our interactions with them, the technosphere includes piles of e-waste, unpaid or underpaid workers in mines, toxic pollution, wasted water, and ecological destruction (Gould 4) and has become as central a fixture of the earth as the lithosphere (earth’s rocky foundations), the hydrosphere (earth’s water), and the cryosphere (frozen polar regions and high mountains) ("The Unberable Burden"). As the cloud alone uses more energy than most countries, the technosphere reminds us that the emails and Google searches we send without a second thought last far longer than our memories of them do (Gould 4). Especially when we are distracted by monsters like Momo, we cannot pay much attention to the technosphere, and the tech giants can feel safe to play the role of the hero and offer us solutions we can buy, a response we have been long conditioned to enjoy.

Underwater Internet Cable Infra ructure

Of course, buying your way out of things is not an answer for all. In the last National Climate Assessment, "older adults, children, low-income communities, and some communities of color [were said to be] often disproportionately affected by, and less resilient to, the health impacts of climate change" ("Summary Findings"). While age may assume the primary influence affecting the immunities of first two demographics, the disadvantage of the latter two is socially-constructed, and therefore, amendable by those with "biopower," Michel Foucault's term for how the sovereignty determine who "to 'make' live and 'let' die" ("Society" 1446). This biopower gives individuals the ability to shape how others live in society; whether they are pushing for affordable healthcare or the deregulation of fossil-fuel usage, we are all affected by their decisions.

As it is, Donald Trump, a person with some of the greatest biopower, responded to the climate assessment in an interview with *The Washington Post:* "As to whether or not it's man-made and whether or not the effects that you're talking about are there, I don't see it...One of the problems that a lot of people like myself have, we have very high levels of intelligence but we're not necessarily such believers" (Dawsey). Despite a production team of more than 300 federal and non-federal experts, and a review-process including external experts, the public, the Federal Government and an ad hoc committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), Trump chooses not to believe so he could continue prioritizing what most benefits him economically. And because of his biopower, no matter how much we disagree with his choices, we will still be harmed by them. Since the assessment, Trump has only made his position more clear, pulling the United States out of the Paris Climate Agreement and proposing a 2021 budget that would cut funding to the Environmental Protection Agency by 26 percent. Trump is and has long been a beneficiary to our consumer culture, a culture that cannot thrive under the regulation necessary for climate-change response.

What exactly does this need for regulation have to do with Momo? On the surface, perhaps nothing. But we can no longer continue to rely on our surface-level interpretations. Particularly given that in the early months of 2020, as this thesis is being completed, we face some of the lived consequences of that lack of regulation. As the pandemic COVID-19 strikes, a virus we have never seen before attacks the entire planet both physically and economically. We are told to stay home, to wear masks, to keep distance from one another while society as we know it falls apart. Inside this Petri dish of uncertainty, it should come of no great surprise to hear we bred another viral sensation: the *amabie*. A *yōkai* said to appear at the onset of an epidemic, like Momo, the *amabie* poses a solution in its distraction to the greater crisis. Unlike Momo, however, the *amabie* does not accomplish this through fear, but hope, a figure to pray to in a time in which our fear is tangible enough.

We need this hope, and yet, we must not allow it to distract us. The scale of the COVID-19 is one we have never before seen, and by that, I mean it is one we have never before faced. From the hate crimes against Asian Americans to the low-wage service workers forced to risk infection to the disproportionately affected black Americans, the virus has lifted the curtain on pandemics that have long infected our societies. And while

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the identities may vary slightly based on country and region, the gap between those with biopower and those considered disposable has never been made more clear. That is why we cannot simply "return to the way things were," nor can we listen to those promising that we will. No, that is a past that leads to a future of devastation. Rather than return to it, we must look to the areas we have been conditioned not to see: the countries we pollute with our e-waste, the internet freeways we install along our ocean floor, and most importantly, to the past where we will see again and again that, while the *ubume* haunting our shadows may be the easiest monster to face, those most treacherous are the ones directing our light.

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2. Introduction

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Appendix A. Research Poster

This thesis was presented at Chapman University's digitally-hosted Graduate Research Showcase. Attached is a link to the showcase to access my narrated presentation as well as a JPEG of my poster.

A.1 Link to the showcase:

https://www.chapman.edu/academics/graduate-education/graduate-student-research-showcase.aspx

A.2 JPEG of Poster: