



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research  
Programme  
Research Proposal**

**How Can Monstrous Portrayals Of Queer People In Literature Inform  
The Contemporary Politicization Of LGBTQ+ Identity In Reactionary  
British Media?**

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**April 2024**

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## **Abstract**

In the United Kingdom, a concerning surge in anti-LGBTQ hate crimes and proposed legislation targeting queer communities has coincided with increasingly reactionary media coverage. As a queer person raised in this environment, my research seeks to explore the intersection of political discourse and literary representation by examining how reactionary British media constructs narratives of queerness that invoke the long-standing tradition of queer monstrosity in literature. Through a comprehensive literature review spanning different periods, I will analyze works such as *Carmilla* and *Rebecca* to trace the evolution of queer monstrosity in literature. This historical context will inform an examination of contemporary reactionary articles, where I will identify common language, tropes, and narratives employed to depict queer individuals. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks from English literature, political science, queer theory, and media studies, this research extends beyond the UK; it aims to understand the global dynamics of media consumption and its role in political discourse. Despite occurring across different nations, surges in anti-queer sentiment consistently invoke a language of monstrosity, transcending borders and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This research seeks to highlight the detrimental impact of denigratory media coverage on marginalized communities and challenge moral panics that exploit 'queer monsters' for political gain. By advocating for critical journalism and media consumption, this research aims to promote authentic portrayals of queerness in both fiction and media, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and understanding society.

## **Introduction**

Growing up in Britain as a queer person, my earliest exposure to queer issues was through unsympathetic tabloids that normalized and proliferated harmful stereotypes. With escalating attempts to ban LGBTQ+ representation from curriculums and libraries worldwide, underlying cultural portrayals of monstrosity will be left unchallenged for future generations of queer people. This research topic was chosen to contest the legitimacy of reactionary media portraying queerness as an epidemic threat and to contribute to a more inclusive social consciousness regarding LGBTQ+ identity in Britain.

## **Research Objectives**

I anticipate the key achievement of my research project to be a comparative study contextualizing reactionary media in a literary history of negative queer representations. This research aims to mitigate monstrous representations and uncover how reactionary media exacerbates hostility towards queer issues by relying on stereotypes and detrimental narratives. By identifying the literary root of exclusionary rhetoric, this research will advocate for journalism and media consumption that critically considers the gravity of language employed to report on queer issues. This study will contribute a counter-narrative to queer moral panics, indicating the necessity for authentic portrayals of queerness in media and curricula. In

contesting their legitimacy, this research will demand that ‘queer monsters’ in media are re-evaluated, not as genuine representation, but as political tools.

## **Background**

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of representation in literature and media, particularly concerning LGBTQ+ identities. My research builds on existing literature that identifies a long history of queerness depicted through monstrosity, whether that be physical monsters or vilified roles within a narrative. This project will investigate how these monstrous portrayals intersect with the contemporary politicization of LGBTQ+ identity in reactionary British media. The interdisciplinary focus of this project will thus employ scholarship from English literature and political theory to analyze the construction of queer monstrosity and the impact of monstrous representation.

This project will build on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s ‘Monster Theory,’ which Benschhoff employs in “The Monster and the Homosexual” to theorize literary monsters as ideological ‘Others’ in society (Benschhoff 118). This queer framework is also developed in Westengard’s “Queer Gothic Literature and Culture” which elaborates on the theoretical framework of queer monstrosity as both a cautionary warning against non-normative gender expressions and a threatening force of destabilization to social order (Westengard 266). McCormack observes the category of ‘the monstrous’ transgressing the periphery of fictional representation, always operating as more than a figure and “never less than a material impression of living in the world” (McCormack 1). Whilst Adkins’ “The ‘Monstrous Other’ Speaks: Post Subjectivity and the Queering of the Normal” identifies the cultural roots of monstrous queer portrayals, deriving an ideologically motivated framework (Adkins 91), the political implications of queer monsters are generally limited in scholarship to their symbolic expression of hegemonic gender norms, typified in fictional media.

To fill this gap, my research will situate a queer reading of literature alongside a contemporary analysis of LGBTQ+ representation in non-fiction media. The impact of negative media representations of queer people, as outlined by Solomon, has profoundly detrimental effects on the public perception of the LGBTQ+ community (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes 2). Within the context of queer political discourse, the political concept of moral panic theory (Cohen 1) is relevant to the current popularity of anti-LGBTQ+ anxiety purported in the media. Within the British political context, Wise’s “New Right” or “Backlash”? Section 28, Moral Panic and “Promoting Homosexuality” (Wise 5) identifies the growing trend of anti-queer legislation within this framework of moral panic. My research aims to apply these frameworks of queer monstrosity and political moral panic to elucidate the process by which fictional portrayals of queer vilification are translated into journalistic ‘fact.’

## **Methodology**

This project draws on interdisciplinary frameworks from English literature, political science and queer theory. I will do a literature review of six novels spanning the Gothic, 20th century and

contemporary periods (Carmilla, Dracula, Rebecca, Silence of the Lambs, Troubled Blood and If We Were Villains) to trace the evolution of queer monstrosity in literature. Then, I will analyze contemporary reactionary articles from the most popular reactionary media sources in the UK (The Daily Mail, The Daily Express, The Daily Telegraph, The Times and The Sun) and identify common language, tropes and narratives. I will cross-contextualize these findings, utilizing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 'Monster Theory,' and the political lens of moral panic to compare and uncover how fictionalized narratives are adopted into journalistic vocabulary to influence audience perceptions of queer people in the real world. I will meet with my research supervisor weekly to review my findings and incorporate her feedback into my work. Due to the volume of materials I intend to use, I am familiarizing myself with the novels before the start of the research period where I will conduct my analysis. I have provided a more detailed outline of my methodology in the 'Timeline' section below.

### **Training/ Certifications Needed**

My project does not require training or certifications. I will use the time before the official commencement date to familiarize myself with the novels I will use in the analysis.

### **Research Location**

I will be in Toronto, Canada for the duration of my research period.

### **Research Ethics Board**

My research does not require ethics board approval.

## **Timeline**

1) **Literature Review** (June 17th - June 27th): I will conduct a comprehensive review of novels spanning three periods (Gothic, 20th century, and contemporary). I will perform close readings to trace the evolution of queer monstrosity in literature and close read recurring language, tropes, and patterns to create a literary history of monstrous representations.

1. Gothic Period
  - a. Carmilla (June 17th-June 19th)
  - b. Dracula (June 20th- June 22nd)
2. 20th Century
  - a. Rebecca (June 23rd- June 25th)
  - b. Silence of the Lambs (June 26th-June 28th)
3. Contemporary
  - a. Troubled Blood (June 29th-July 1st)
  - b. If we were villains (July 2nd-July 4th)

2) **Analysis of Reactionary Articles** (July 4th-July 12th:) Consulting my supervisor, I will select and conduct a literature review of 14 reactionary articles through close reading and political

media analysis. I will identify common language tropes and narratives, assembling data on recurring elements. Articles will be drawn from the five most popular reactionary media sources in the UK:

- The Daily Mail (July 2nd)
- The Daily Express (July 3rd)
- The Daily Telegraph (July 4th)
- The Times (July 5th)
- The Sun (July 6th)

I will then compile the findings from this analysis under headings that identify the key tropes, language and narratives utilized in the reactionary articles (July 7th-July 9th).

3) **Cross-Contextualization** (July 12th - July 19th): I will compare findings from both literature reviews, analyzing similarities and differences in representations to produce a comparative study. I will assess the extent to which languages and imagery from literature are adopted in reactionary media. For this analysis, I will utilize the framework of ‘Monster Theory’ outlined in the following texts:

- “Monster Theory: Reading Culture” by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.
- “The Monster Theory Reader” Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. Relevant chapters include:
  - “The Monster and the Homosexual” by Harry Benshoff.
  - “Monsters and the Moral Imagination” by Stephen T. Asma.
  - “Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity” by Jack Halberstam.

4) **Assessment of Impact on Audience Perceptions** (July 20th-July 28th): Utilizing access to journals and articles through the University of Toronto library and archives, I will analyze how reactionary language influences audience perceptions of queerness. Combining my observations with consultation from queer theory scholars, I will produce a research paper outlining the relationship between media representation language and its political influence. The specific journals will be selected after the findings of my literature review to contextualize the results. My assessment will draw from Wise’s “New Right or Backlash? Section 28, Moral Panic and Promoting Homosexuality” to use theories of political moral panic to analyze queer monstrosity in the media.

## **Resources & Support Needed**

I will be primarily using the University of Toronto Library database to access scholarship and articles that will assist with my analysis. I will utilize the City of Toronto library archives to find articles, and I have accounted for potential books or materials that require payment in my budget.

## **Potential Impact**

Despite occurring in different cultural landscapes, the current surges in anti-queer sentiment across the world consistently invoke a recurring language of monstrosity, transcending national boundaries. Particularly with the greater proliferation and consumption of media online, queer people internationally are susceptible to the spread of queer monstrosity in reactionary news coverage. As such, this research is not exclusive to the UK but rather aims to provide an understanding of global dynamics regarding media consumption and its role in political discourse. Contemporary scholarship indicates that denigratory media coverage adversely impacts perceptions of marginalized communities, but the convergence of political discourse and monstrous portrayals of queerness remains underexplored. This research is important to dismantle harmful narratives about queerness and to highlight the immense power of language and fiction in shaping and legitimizing discrimination against queer people within our political reality. My research will challenge moral panics that weaponize ‘queer monsters’ for political gain. I aim to inform critical journalism and media consumption of reactionary language and advocate for authentic portrayals of queerness in both fiction and media.

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