Strange Relations: Monstrosity, Intimacy, and Queer Possibility in *The Summer Hikaru Died*

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The international debut of Japanese horror manga series *The Summer Hikaru Died*, penned by writer and illustrator Mokumokuren, quickly drew attention and acclaim, appearing on the New York Public Library's "Best Books for Teens 2023" in the first year of its release. Its English translation found many new fans overseas, with praise for its "balance between childhood first love nostalgia and horror" (D). But the sometimes sweet, sometimes fraught, yet undeniably Queer relationship between the protagonist, Yoshiki, and the monster ("Hikaru") that assumes both the body and identity of his childhood friend (Hikaru) escapes any simple definition. We experience "Hikaru"'s monstrosity through its effect on Yoshiki, how it horrifies, enthrals, and transforms him. The series uses the inhuman "Hikaru" and his relationship with Yoshiki to explore what possibilities for intimacy and relation exist within the Queer realities that remain unintelligible, inarticulate, and therefore monstrous.

Queerness and monstrosity intertwine within *The Summer Hikaru Died*, making this manga a part of the robust tradition in which monstrosity serves as a cipher for Queerness. Through Queer monster theory, we can understand how "in a cis-heteronormative culture, queers are figured as cultural excesses, and so cohabit the same margins from which monsters emerge" (Brassington). It relates the relegation of Queer identities to the position of outsiders, and the associated reactions of mingled "rage, shunning, and fear" in response to Queer people's lifestyles (Jones and Harris 519) to the experiences of fictional monsters. The horror genre, to which *The Summer Hikaru Died* undoubtedly belongs, facilitates such explorations. As Boyle writes, "few media in mainstream culture appear willing to challenge the normalisation of sexuality. Yet [...] horror has an indisputable history of confuting norms, whether those norms are addressing human or sexual status" (169). *The Summer Hikaru Died* addresses both.

The beginning of the series establishes "Hikaru" as almost but not quite able to pass as fully human. In the first chapter, Yoshiki confronts it as not being "the

real Hikaru" (Mokumokuren 1: ch. 1), an imperfect imitation. Many other characters also detect in "Hikaru" a qualitative difference from the original, whose life and identity it has assumed. To them, the new "Hikaru" does not entirely belong – an experience that maps easily onto queer lived realities. Outwardly, it appears adequately human, but its insides are what count. The barrier of "Hikaru"'s skin, skin being "the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers" (Halberstam 163), contains all the horrors of its true nature, which constantly threaten to spill out. "Hikaru"'s monstrosity compromises this boundary every time it makes itself known. Its grotesque insides spill out to remind us, and other characters, that it is not like them: a visible, bodily difference that defines the separation between what is a monster and what is not.

Though Queer monster theory cites a connection between the outsider experiences of both monsters and Queer individuals, within queerness lie its own margins, a range of what is accepted and articulated, and what is not. Jones and Harris draw attention to the real-life issues of marginalization that exist even within what is Queer:

> Sometimes, queer bodies and desires and relationships are performed in a socially acceptable and thus intelligible manner […]. But queers also perform bodies, desires, and relationships that are less than intelligible, less than acceptable, unspeakable: butch, femme, androgynous, polyamorous, trans*, and gender creative. (519)

Eklund points out a similar conclusion, describing how, despite formations of Queer community, particularly online, the policing of identities contributes to a "pressure to conform to one of a few marginally accepted Queer identities" (80). *The Summer Hikaru Died* chooses to explore the more marginalized ways of existing, presenting characters that, while Queer, do not perform queerness in any acceptable manner. It addresses these issues through "Hikaru"'s many ambiguities, the very nature of which are wholly unintelligible. Studies of more recent works highlight monsters whose highly mutable characteristics align with how "Hikaru" is presented. Eklund discusses contemporary depictions of monstrosity in the emerging genre of "genderpunk" games, defining the "genderpunk monster" as that which "makes a virtue of change [...], without end, without perfection but not necessarily without purpose" (87). This mutability is key to "Hikaru"'s monstrosity.

Within the narrative, there is never a definite name for what "Hikaru" is. Others refer to it interchangeably, even within the same conversation, as "nounuki-sama" (the great brain snatcher) a title infrequently used by the villagers, or, perhaps

most suitably, "the thing" (Mokumokuren 3: ch. 14), unable to pin down its existence to any single defining attribute. Whenever we see "Hikaru"'s monstrosity emerging, its patterns and borders shift from panel to panel – similar enough that we understand it to be the same entity, but so inconstant that no depiction is ever identical. It imitates organic forms, with the many swirls and folds recalling, by turns, microorganisms or intestines, all the while remaining ultimately inconclusive.

This is not the only embodiment of "Hikaru"'s fluidity. Beyond the borders of human and monster, inside and outside, "Hikaru"'s liminality even compromises the borders of life and death. Though ostensibly animate, the entity known as "Hikaru" occupies its namesake's reanimated corpse, rendering it an indeterminate blend of alive and not. "Hikaru" itself later states that, for it, "There ain't much difference between bein' dead or alive [...] it's just changin' forms, y'know?" (3: ch. 15). It comprehends life and death on the same terms as its own mutability – just as accessible and, ultimately, inconsequential, to the point where killing others is an easy decision for it to make. Though the borders it blurs are unfathomably alien, through Queer monster theory, we can relate its practices of doing so back to the similarly "deformed, destructive, disavowed" practices of gender and sexuality performed by Queer individuals on the furthermost borders of identity (Jones and Harris 518). "Hikaru"'s fundamental noncompliance with human life reflects Queer noncompliance with normative life. Beyond "Hikaru"'s human shell, nothing about it completely fits into the range of human recognition, embodying Eklund's definition, and recalling other meanings of "queer" – "queer" as in "strange," that which escapes understanding.

"Hikaru" is not the only aspect of the series that is strange and unknowable. The ambiguous relationship between Yoshiki and "Hikaru" is equally Queer in both senses of the word, with the text wholly unconcerned with making either character's sexual identity or feelings towards the other easily legible. Hints throughout the text make it clear how the text wants us to see them. Throwaway statements from various characters such as Rie, an older acquaintance, who previously assumed "Hikaru" was Yoshiki's "girlfriend or somethin'" (1: ch. 6) frame the two as definitively involved. Despite this, neither "Hikaru" nor Yoshiki ever devote any thought to their own orientations or defining their relationship outright. One brief exchange between the two not too long before the original Hikaru's death illustrates the text's disinterest in labels. In this scene, Yoshiki and Hikaru discuss the troubles of another family in the village, concerning their heir's status. The boy is not "sick," as Hikaru believes, but a "homosexual," as Yoshiki

clarifies – to which Hikaru replies with complete, even comical confusion, "Home-o-sex-you-all?" (2: ch. 9), and a vague, dismissive "I dunno…" from Yoshiki redirects the conversation. So far, this is the text's only straightforward articulation of queerness: one of confusion and discomfort. Though Yoshiki and Hikaru's relationship changes later, as Hikaru is replaced, transforming from a definitive and innocent friendship to something decidedly less so, they never revisit the subject.

But the scene does not end there. Yoshiki goes on to express his frustration with the village's limitations, how it is "too small and cramped. [He] can barely breathe with how cramped it is" and longs to move to the city (2: ch. 9). He expresses these limitations both in terms of geography, as the village itself is deeply rural and contained, and in terms of worldview, a frustration that easily extends beyond the boundaries of the narrative. Yoshiki, and the text, speaking through him, resents reduction, containment. From the way the conversation develops, it becomes clear that Yoshiki's desire not to continue discussing the topic of homosexuality with Hikaru does not necessarily stem from a discomfort with his own identity, but rather a discomfort with the label itself. The label, like the village, is too cramped for who he is, and what his relationship with Hikaru will become, albeit after "Hikaru" replaces the original. At the same time, the turbulent, but powerful bond that Yoshiki and "Hikaru" later develop stands in stark contrast to the fractured, faltering "normal" relationships that populate the rest of the narrative – full of widows, widowers, and feuding broken families. Though ambiguous and occasionally uncomfortable, something about Yoshiki and "Hikaru"'s relationship simply works in a way that all others do not. *The Summer Hikaru Died* is solely interested in exploring possibilities that are more mutable, more expansive, and less palatable – just like "Hikaru" himself.

Out of "Hikaru"'s highly mutable form come new kinds of relation, expressing its feelings to Yoshiki physically in ways that, at least at first, seem completely unfamiliar. For Queer monster characters, "their queerness is intimately tied to their monstrousness" (Brassington), and the same is true for "Hikaru." The scenes that showcase its monstrosity most clearly are also the ones in which it participates in ambiguously erotic exchanges with Yoshiki that function similarly to, without ever being, sex. Just as "Hikaru" does not comprehend life in the way humans do – as Yoshiki muses, "the world ["Hikaru"] sees is… just so different" (Mokumokuren 3: ch. 16) – its affections and means of expressing them do not work as humans' do. Jones and Harris express a similar idea, in that "how [unintelligible queer individuals] make love, show love, understand love and speak

[their] love [...], when seen, is often misunderstood, feared, or shunned" (519). "Hikaru"'s kind of love functions in the same way, with even Yoshiki's reactions to it stemming from a place of confusion and terror, before beginning to accept the intimate possibilities that "Hikaru"'s monstrosity presents.

A scene in the second volume, just one emotionally charged, intimate exchange among many, illustrates this notion exactly. The text is explicit in telling us how to read these abject encounters, with the framing, attitude, and terminology of each scene reminiscent of those used to describe sex. This scene in particular sees "Hikaru" and Yoshiki sneaking off into an empty classroom, where Yoshiki proceeds to extend a tentative hand to touch "Hikaru." The gesture morphs into Yoshiki slipping two fingers into a dark, slit-like cavity in Hikaru's chest in an action that overtly resembles sexual penetration. Upon encountering "Hikaru"'s amorphous insides, he reacts with mingled disgust, fear, and eventually reluctant pleasure as he slowly realises that the merging of his body with "Hikaru"'s "[feels] so good" (Mokumokuren 2: ch. 10). The accompanying sound effects littering the page – gasps and moans, a throb in Yoshiki's brain – make the eroticism even more overt.

These acts are undeniably monstrous – unfamiliar, for all that the series depicts them through a lens we are much more familiar with. At the same time, these monstrous acts do not only imitate sex, in many ways, they surpass it entirely. Within Mokumokuren's work, "Hikaru"'s monstrosity allows for forms of connection that accomplish a more profound intimacy than any human act. The end of the third volume sees "Hikaru" achieving perhaps the height of romantic love by rendering into reality the impossible act of giving Yoshiki its "heart" for him to keep. Though "Hikaru" seems to lack a literal heart, the suggestion is clear as it reaches into its own chest, vaguely to the left, rips out a portion of his own insides, and offers it to Yoshiki, as proof of its commitment (3: ch. 16). What would be unthinkable, and certainly fatal for a human is only a brief ordeal for "Hikaru," whose monstrosity becomes the means for an unparalleled form of closeness.

Their strange relations, however, obscure one more significant border – the border between "Hikaru" and Yoshiki. The more they mingle not just their bodies, but their very existences, the more Yoshiki undergoes changes that transform him both externally, affecting how others perceive him; and internally, affecting the way he perceives the world. Yoshiki's "sex" with "Hikaru" leaves behind traces that fundamentally alter what he is. Rie, a woman with minor extrasensory abilities, warns Yoshiki about "[mixing]" with "Hikaru," where

"[Yoshiki] won't be human anymore if [he gets] too mixed in with [Hikaru]" (1: ch. 5). We see this play out when other monsters begin to manifest in Yoshiki's house, as he becomes somehow more attractive to them; as "Hikaru" claims, something about Yoshiki is "nice" to them (2: ch. 11). Though undetectable to us, and never fully explained in the manga, an intangible quality of Yoshiki's has shifted to cause this attraction, and seems as though it will continue to shift, bringing him further away from what is normal.

Yoshiki's dealings with "Hikaru" also alter the way he sees the world, coaxing out darker impulses that culminate with him stabbing "Hikaru" to kill it and keep it from potentially hurting others. While we may initially read Yoshiki's urge to protect others by killing "Hikaru" as a human instinct, the method he chooses indicates otherwise. When he stabs "Hikaru," piercing it just below its chest, the visual recalls previous, similar penetrations where "Hikaru" took Yoshiki's hand into itself as a means of sharing pleasure and closeness. The scene's deliberate setting in Yoshiki's bedroom, on his bed, with the stabbing initially resembling an embrace only further transforms the attempted murder into an act that links horror and intimacy, not unlike their previous exchanges. But this particular exchange goes a step further. The act of killing demonstrates Yoshiki's desire to change "Hikaru" as he himself has been changed, forcing "Hikaru" to switch from a state of life to one of death, again. At last, Yoshiki demonstrates an interest in the kind of change that "Hikaru" has been directing him towards, a desire to compromise borders – here between life and death – of his own volition. And as Mokumokuren's work has already outlined, mutability is the domain of the monstrous. Their reconciliation afterwards, which ends with "Hikaru" giving Yoshiki his "heart," seals for us how the murder attempt has progressed their relationship, even positively.

Gradually, Yoshiki changes into something less human, less intelligible, and more like "Hikaru" – and within the parameters of Queer monster theory, the more monstrous he becomes, the more Queer. Though other characters claim that "things won't go well for [Yoshiki]" if he continues to be and "mix" with "Hikaru" (1: ch. 6), the later developments between the two cast doubt as to whether this is entirely the case. The repulsive yet irresistible exchanges shared by "Hikaru," a sometimes human-like monster, and Yoshiki, a human becoming monstrous, achieve an intimacy so complete, it is difficult not to view parts of it as appealing. Though not necessarily healthy, or possibly even sustainable, as the series remains ongoing, the strange, border-obscuring nature of Yoshiki and "Hikaru"'s relationship fulfils both their desires. Despite the obvious dangers, the

series prompts us to consider the favourable aspects to a love as grotesque as theirs could be, one that indulges, accepts, and survives even the worst impulses. It steers us towards the possibilities that lie within the unconventional and the unfamiliar, the very margins of Queer experiences. *The Summer Hikaru Died* challenges our preconceptions of what Queer intimacy is and looks like, forcing us to question whether to be human, to exist solely within the range of intelligible identities, is what we truly want to be.

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