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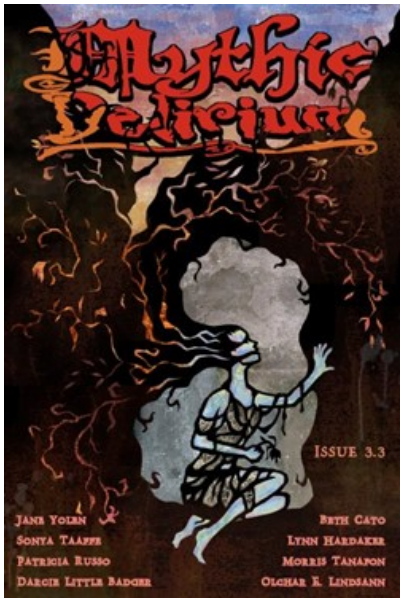
Asexuality, Indigeneity, and Monstrous Isolation in the Works of Darcie Little Badger

Review by Kathleen Brigid

Darcie Little Badger. "Nkásht íí." *Strange Horizons*, 2014.
Darcie Little Badger. "Owl vs. the Neighborhood Watch." *Strange Horizons*, 2017.
Darcie Little Badger. "The Famine King." *Mythic Delirium Magazine*, 2017.



The above image depicts the cover of a magazine named *Mythic Delirium*. The main title is written in red and orange font color. On the cover a person seems to be sitting on the ground with her hair traveling all around the cover of the book. The issue of the book is towards the middle/bottom on the right. The contributors to the magazine are named at the bottom of both sides, in an orange/red font color.

Isolation is a central aspect of many horror stories. The house on the hill, the cabin in the woods, the remote hotel—these are genre staples for a reason. It heightens the fear when the protagonist cannot call for help and must face the horror alone.

In the speculative horror short stories of Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache), the isolation portrayed is more social and emotional than physical. Little Badger is an accomplished writer, having written in a multitude of forms, including comics, prose, creative nonfiction, academic nonfiction, and a dissertation—she has a PhD in Oceanography. Her horror short stories were among her first published fiction works. "Nkásht íí," "Owl vs. the Neighborhood Watch," and "The Famine King,", all of which were published in speculative fiction magazines such as *Strange Horizons* and *Mythic Delirium,* are shining examples of her work in the horror genre. These stories recognize horrors imposed on queer and Native women, but also imagine space for asexuality and aromanticism within the kind of decolonized sexuality proposed by Qwo-Li Driskill (2004). They particularly make room for an asexual imaginary within Indigenous women's decolonial sexualities (Grant 2020, 29-31). Recurring throughout her work is the motif of a protagonist disconnected from others—because the protagonist is Native American, often mentally ill, and implied to be aromantic and asexual. The protagonists' positionalities as Indigenous and aroace women under a white-dominated settler-colonial context leave them to face the cause of the horror—often supernatural entities from Apache or other Native American lore—on their own. However, while their Indigenous and aroace identities alienate them from the hetero-patriarchal settler-colonial

communities around them, those are also the core aspects through which the protagonists find catharsis.

Little Badger is a Lipan Apache writer from Texas who identifies as asexual. She brings both aspects of her identity into her stories, and both lend a deeply felt honesty to the stories' themes. Though her recently published novels are both in the Young Adult genre, her many short stories over the past decade vividly and sympathetically express adult fears—of mental illness, disconnection, and loneliness. In "Nkásht íí," the danger revolves around ghosts, which the protagonist's great-grandmother calls "a terrible thing" (1). The main characters, Annie and Josie, are two Apache women with a very close but explicitly non-romantic bond, who have both left their hometown due to being hurt and misunderstood and now must face violent supernatural entities on the road. In "Owl vs. the Neighborhood Watch," Owl, a harbinger of death in Apache culture, keeps appearing to Nina, the protagonist, before disaster. Nina has no one to confide in about this and no one to believe her, so when she moves to a new neighborhood, she takes it upon herself to protect the people there from Owl and the danger he portends. "The Famine King" features an Anishinaabe protagonist named Irene, who keeps seeing the cannibalistic wendigo around her as the topic of big-budget movies and the voyeuristic interests of her white library clients. However, the real horror is the way this cultural voyeurism and white fascination with sensationalized depictions of her culture exacerbate her own mental illness, and the way her disconnection from her family, her culture, and the community around her leaves her with nowhere to turn for help.

The protagonists of Little Badger's horror stories often start out feeling alone, out of step with the people around them in a way deeply familiar to many aromantic and asexual adults who don't follow the "typical" family path of dating and marriage. Annie of "Nkásht íí" drifts away from her high school friends after graduation; Nina of "Owl vs. the Neighborhood Watch" pursues an academic career (like Little Badger herself) and moves from place to place on her own, following job openings; Irene of "The Famine King" thinks, about herself, "Domestic bliss was a pipe dream—who could tolerate somebody like me?" and compares herself to a branch snapped from her family tree. Their alienation also stems from the fact that they are Indigenous, interacting with largely white settler communities. Nina is disbelieved by a white doctor that Owl is sending her warnings; Irene feels consumed, with white audiences thrilled by wendigo stories but dismissive of or unnerved by her mentally ill, Indigenous self (the most frequent victims of historic wendigo accusations).

Yet, the protagonists' Native identities and strong non-romantic relationships are also what allow them to solve the problem by the end. Embracing Apache knowledge helps Annie prevent the ghost from hurting the living and Nina to understand Owl's warnings. Annie's bond with her friend Josie is compared to the strength of sweethearts even while summarily disavowing a romantic component, and the love between them holds them together in the face of the destructive ghost. Nina's decision to reach out to her mother is a critical step in understanding what Owl is telling her and what she is meant to do. Irene is supported through her deepening psychosis and feelings of consumption and objectification by a friend who moves in with her, learns to understand what she's going through, and becomes the family she wishes for. Non-romantic (re)connection is fully intertwined with cultural (re)connection. In interviews, Little Badger emphasizes the importance of the continuity of family and community in her work. "In my experience and with many Native people, family really is the reason we are where we are. There is a very strong support

system in this that includes both bio and found family" (Monday 2020). The expectation of a narrow nuclear family is not only isolating in the modern world to aromantic and asexual people, but it was also a deliberate mechanism used by the U.S. government to separate tribal communities, diminish collective tribal power, and assimilate Indigenous people into settler norms (Stremlau 2005, 277). Little Badger's work uplifts Indigenous ideals of supportive extended family and non-blood-related relatives, centering them as a source of emotional support and power for the protagonists. In emphasizing non-romantic relationships, she imagines a way in which social relations rooted in Indigenous cultural connection can support asexuals and aromantics that dominant white heteropatriarchy cannot. Her stories create a space to support and articulate Indigenous aro and ace identities. The centrality of non-romantic relationships is refreshing and, for myself as an aro-ace reader, empowering in its exploration of the isolation of asexual queerness and affirmation of the salvific power of friendships and intergenerational family. The ambivalence of both parts of the protagonists' identities shows asexuality and Indigeneity as sources of alienation from mainstream society, but also as sources of personal growth and strength to overcome the monsters.

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KATHLEEN BRIGID is a writer and graduate student from Massachusetts, who is currently pursuing a PhD in archaeology in Arizona. She writes a lot about pottery analysis. Speculative fiction is a fun way to escape to and explore other worlds and societies, and she loves a good ghost story. Her own fiction has been published in Translunar Travelers Lounge and as lovingly handmade zines. Her academic work has been presented at archaeology conferences but has yet to fully make it through the publication process. You can find her on **twitter** chatting constantly about ace/aro SFF at @venatrixlunaris.