CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Weird

MYS T E R I O U S B O D I E S

The bones were found in May 2000, in the small town of Yoshii in Okayama Prefecture. News of the discovery, according to one weekly magazine, “set off tremors throughout Japan.” The skeleton was taken to a university to determine whether it really belonged to a tsuchinoko, a legendary reptile-like creature the existence of which had never been scientifically confirmed. After thoroughly examining the specimen, a professor of biology declared that the remains were not those of a tsuchinoko but rather of a malformed grass snake. This disappointing news did not dampen spirits in Yoshii. In fact, stimulated by the near-discovery, the town was experiencing a “tsuchinoko boom.” A giant statue of the fantastic beast was set up at a neighborhood nursery school, local manufacturers began producing tsuchinoko wine and bean cakes, and a reward was offered for anybody who could actually find one of the elusive creatures.¹

Meanwhile, at a major government-sponsored research institute in Kyoto, an interdisciplinary group of scholars had begun a series of bi-monthly workshops to discuss Japan’s culture of mysterious creatures, spooky tales, and strange phenomena. Participants came from academic fields such as literature, folklore, anthropology, history, geography, religion, and art. Along with several collections of articles, one result of these meetings was the establishment of a computer database with more than...
thirteen thousand entries on supernatural creatures culled from folkloric sources. Opened to the public online in 2002, the database received 180,000 hits in its first month of operation.²

A popular fascination with the body of a mysterious creature. A government-funded academic project to investigate the history and meaning of the supernatural in Japanese cultural expression. These two distinct but related manifestations of interest in the mysterious reveal that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, those things that defy established regimes of knowledge, remaining elusive and inexplicable, continue to stir both popular and academic imagination in Japan. I open with these two examples, not only because of their prominence in the media, but also because they demonstrate the multivalence of the mysterious and the weird, notions with the capacity to transcend the logic of local and national, popular and scholarly, belief systems and economic systems. Supernatural creatures negotiate the extremes, creating interaction between local commercial interests (tsuchinoko wine) and scientific study (a professor of biology), academic rigor (a computer database with more than thirteen thousand entries) and popular fascination (180,000 hits). Whether buried within the local landscape of a small town such as Yoshii or inscribed historically into the cultural topography of Japan as a nation, mysterious bodies and supernatural creatures operate variously as objects of belief, fear, commercial production, scholarly interest, and popular passion.

Such supernatural creatures, the weird and mysterious “things” that have been a part of Japanese culture (and perhaps every other culture) for as long as history has been recorded, are the subject of this study. In contemporary Japanese discourse, they are most often denoted by the word yōkai 妖怪, variously translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order deity, or, more amorphously, as any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence. I intentionally leave the definition open-ended, for the history of yōkai is very much the history of efforts to describe and define the object being considered. Because the meaning of the word changes with each attempt to limn its parameters, at the heart of this study are questions of signification and language. How do we talk of something ambiguous, continually shifting, a constant presence that is forever absent? How do we describe the mysterious body always on the verge of discovery, the apparition already disappearing in the mist? My objective is to explore some of the ways yōkai in Japan have been understood and interpreted through time, how they have played a role in vernacular practices, and
how they have informed academic discourses that describe, explain, deny, or cherish them.

**Yōkai Discourse**

The yōkai, as has been said of the “monster” in the West, “is an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.”³ In this study, I consider a long chronological swath, from the late seventeenth century to the late twentieth century, in order to explore discourses that imbue yōkai with specific meanings during different cultural moments. By unpacking such discourses, we can uncover the hidden philosophies and unconscious ideologies that circumscribe a category of things weird and mysterious. The notion of “discourse” I employ here involves an entire sociocultural web of written and oral forms of expression, ideas, beliefs, and traditions that are enmeshed and symbiotic and just as often contradictory and antithetical. Like many of the monsters in this study, the discourse of yōkai is hybrid: it weaves together strands from other discourses—encyclopedic, scientific, literary, ethnographic, folkloric—to create a discrete discursive formation of its own.

Certain voices within this yōkai discourse are louder at certain times, but ultimately all the voices that coalesce dialogically at a given moment are “within the true” (as Foucault puts it). They are in conversation (though not necessarily explicitly or consciously) with one another; every articulation participates in the same discussion (or argument), and makes sense within the dominant episteme.⁴

To a certain extent, the discourse on yōkai is unusual not only because it incorporates voices from a diverse range of disciplines but also because its very object—that which is out of the ordinary—challenges ordinary discursive parameters. Yōkai discourse is always located at the boundaries of the other fields on which it draws. At any given moment, however, a range of “truths” is still accruing to the idea of yōkai itself, a certain pitch, as it were, in which the discourse of yōkai must speak in order to be heard.

As sociocultural contexts change, shifts in the conversation about yōkai are rarely the result of violent rupture: usually they are gradual, nuanced, overlapping, as one part of the discursive web centers on a particular idea, gathering mass until it becomes dominant. Epistemic changes are not absolute: more often than not, traditional understandings and articulations are refashioned within newly emerging ones. The mode by which yōkai discourse changes might be characterized as what archeo-
logical anthropologists call seriation, “a pattern of overlapping replication and innovation.” It is the replication or persistence of particular strands of discourse, their ability to link diverse cultural moments and reincorporate themselves differently “within the true” of the emerging episteme, that allows us to trace the mutable but somehow consistent notion of something called yōkai. While I am interested in both continuities and discontinuities, the real concentration of this book is on the areas of overlap and “in-betweenness.” Rather than chart a neat genealogy of paradigms, I explore the untidy spaces where ways of thinking clash, collide, reproduce, and converge.

It is not my intention to trace all discourse related to yōkai. Rather, within the long chronology covered in the chapters that follow, I focus on four “moments” during which yōkai discourse was especially prominent and characteristic of wider cultural concerns, and in which we can clearly see the persistence of old forms even as new forms emerged. The first of these important historical junctures occurred during the Edo, or Tokugawa, period (c. 1603–1867), particularly from the 1660s through the 1780s, when yōkai made a name for themselves in both serious encyclopedic taxonomies and playful illustrated catalogs. The second moment came during the Meiji period (1868–1912), especially in the 1880s, as yōkai underwent a radical reevaluation in light of Western scientific knowledge. The third moment encompassed the first decade of the twentieth century through the 1930s, when yōkai were refigured as nostalgic icons for a nation (and individuals) seeking a sense of self in a rapidly modernizing world. And the fourth came in the 1970s and 1980s, as Japan asserted a new identity after its rapid recovery from the devastation of World War II. To a certain extent, my aim is to sketch out the contours of each of these moments and the role played by yōkai within them. More important, by unveiling a culmination of the influences, the incremental movements as one paradigm stutter-steps into another, I uncover a landscape characterized as much by discontinuity as by overlap and interaction.

Out of this ever-shifting terrain emerge the cultural practices on which this study is based. Such practices can be ritualized and institutional, or they can simply be everyday ways of being and interacting. Reading manga, telling ghost stories, playing games, collecting things: all of these are creative cultural forms that shape and are shaped by the signs that accrue around them, the visible, readable discursive threads by which we know of their existence. And ultimately it is these written texts that serve as the accessible material trace of thoughts or actions or events. Although
one objective of this study is to read *through* written documents to get at the otherwise unknowable practices they encode, this mode of analysis must be complemented by consideration of the document itself as an object of interpretation—appearing in a specific situation, with a certain author (known or unknown) and a particular readership (known or unknown). Each text gives voice to the cultural practice under discussion but also speaks of the time, place, and ideological circumstances of its own production. And discourse is always heteroglossic: while academic, legal, or otherwise institutional texts so often become the dominant strands within a given discursive web, a whole set of nonelite, nonacademic popular texts are also part of the same web, often suggesting messages counter to the hegemonic threads. Especially by giving voice to oft-overlooked cultural products, such as games, urban legends, and popular weekly magazines, I seek to uncover the way yōkai are folded into everyday life experiences.6

THE INSTABILITY OF THE THING

Though yōkai is presently the word of choice in contemporary discourse on the subject, other terms are also invoked, such as *bakemono*, the more childish *obake*, and the more academic-sounding *kai genshō*. In late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Japan, however, yōkai remains the term most commonly associated with the academic study of these “things.” Historically, the popularity of the word is relatively new. Although it has semantic roots in China and can be found in Japan as early as the mid-Edo-period work of Toriyama Sekien (chapter 2), it did not develop into the default technical term until the Meiji-period writings of Inoue Enryō (chapter 3), who consciously invoked it to describe all manner of weird and mysterious phenomena, naming his field of study *yōkai-gaku*, literally, “yōkai-ology” or “monsterology.”7 Emblematic of the interplay between academic and popular discourses, Enryō’s technical use of the word propelled yōkai into common parlance, where it remains today. The conscious use of yōkai by Enryō, and the word’s rapid absorption into everyday speech, also reflects the absence of other words flexible enough to encompass the range of phenomena that would come to be considered under its matrix.8

The Tokugawa-period word that best approximates the broad meanings of yōkai was *bakemono*, which can be translated literally as “changing thing.” This emphasis on transformation denotes powers traditionally attributed to such creatures as foxes, for example, which could take
on different forms at will. The word *bakemono*, however, was not limited to shape-shifting things; it also signified a wide range of strangely formed, anomalous, or supernatural creatures.\(^9\) Although explicit shape-shifting abilities may not have been intrinsic to many of the things that were called *bakemono* and later *yōkai*, the notion of *mutability* provides an important key to the ontology of the mysterious. In fact, deceptive appearances and instability of form can be found long before the advent of the Tokugawa period. During the Heian period (c. 794–1185), for example, it was believed that after death Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) transformed into a mischievous and spiteful spirit, an *onryō*, and caused a number of misfortunes, only relenting once he was deified as a sacred spirit, or *goryō*.\(^{10}\) Death can change a human into something else, it seems, but even such an after-death manifestation is unstable and can be altered again—in this case from a demonic spirit to a deific one. Concepts of transmutation and transmigration lie at the core of Buddhist theology in Japan (as elsewhere), and it is not surprising that the form of the body would be understood as only a temporary lodging place in which a moveable and mutable spirit resides.

Michizane transformed into a troubled spirit after his death, but similar transmogrifications might occur even while the human in question was alive, the most notorious case being that of the living spirit (*ikiryō*) of Lady Rokujō in Murasaki Shikibu’s *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*; early eleventh century). In a series of disturbing episodes, the spirit of the still-very-much-alive Rokujō detaches itself from her body to haunt and torment her rivals—all unbeknownst to her. Even to the “changing thing” itself, corporeal appearance is deceptive; present in one place, she is also present elsewhere, simultaneously self and other, her form betraying a dangerous instability guided by an intensity of emotion beyond her control.

Although there were names for specific types of strange phenomena during the Heian period, an oft-applied term for all manner of mysterious and frightening experiences was *mono-no-ke*. The first graph of this term, *mono*, commonly denotes “thing,” but as Doris Bargen explains, during the Heian period it was “not the tangible ‘thing’ it means in modern Japanese, but its very opposite . . . something unspecifiable, without a clear form, and therefore extraordinary, strange, to be feared as an outside force.”\(^{11}\) The second character in the construction, *ke*, is the same as the *kai* in *yōkai* (妖怪) and signifies a sense of the suspicious, the uncertain, the unstable. With the “thing” itself representing an unknowable external agency, *mono-no-ke* evokes both the danger and the mystery of
this powerful and unpredictable thing; it might be creatively rendered along the lines of “the instability of the thing.”

Regarding the strange phenomena in *The Tale of Genji*, Marian Ury implores us not to overlook “the fact that, on a literal level, the mononoke belong to a class of beings which Murasaki Shikibu’s original audience thought of as actually existing and of which many of those readers must have had explicit conceptions.” I would add to Ury’s assessment that the difficulty of trying “to see the world through the eyes of people for whom supernatural creatures possess an independent and alarming reality” stems from the impossibility of transcending our own strict formulations of real and not-real.¹² That is, common contemporary understandings of “actually existing” or “reality” color our comprehension of the Heian period, when such notions were likely more fluid than our own. Mono-no-ke phenomena betrayed the instability and mutability of everyday existence, like ripples appearing suddenly in the solid-seeming surface of a dark liquid body. They were sudden, unusual, unpredictable—and therefore frightening. Though such phenomena were certainly not normal, they were always possible. Perhaps it is helpful to think of the occurrence of mono-no-ke as akin to a crime or an automobile accident—not an everyday occurrence but always a terrible, imaginable possibility capable of rupturing mundane “reality.”¹³

From the Kamakura period (1185–1333) onward, one prevalent image of mono-no-ke was the tsukumogami, common household objects with arms and legs and an animated—even riotous—life of their own. According to “Tsukumogami-ki,” a Muromachi-period (c. 1336–1573) *otogizōshi* (“companion book”) tale, “When an object reaches one hundred years, it transforms, obtaining a spirit *[seirei]*, and deceiving *[taburakasu]* people’s hearts; this is called tsukumogami.”¹⁴ The word is thought to be a play on *tsukumogami*, with *tsukumo* indicating the number ninety-nine and *gami* (kami) denoting hair; the phrase can refer to the white hair of an old woman and, by extension, old age. The premise is that, when any normal entity—a person, animal, or object—exists for long enough, a spirit takes up residence within the form. Once more, transformation is critical here, particularly evident in household objects that do not simply alter their appearance but metamorphose from inanimate inorganic objects to animate living organisms. Yōkai-ified objects were particularly copious from the Kamakura period through the Muromachi, appearing in collections of *setsuwa* (short narrative) tales and a number of illustrated formats.¹⁵

The most famous visual representation of tsukumogami is the picture
scroll known as the *Hyakkiyagyō emaki*, which comically portrays human-made objects—musical instruments, umbrellas, cooking utensils—as living things, with arms and legs, marching across the page. To be more precise, there are several related sixteenth-century versions of the picture scroll, all of which feature a similar parade of fantastic creatures and animated objects. These illustrations are infused with a sense of playfulness that turns out to be a critical, if unexpected, element of the yōkai image. Indeed, such lighthearted renditions of yōkai flourished during the Edo period and even into early Meiji, most famously in the work of the brilliant artist Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889). As revealed by the various sixteenth-century picture scrolls, as well as later versions by Kyōsai and others, tension between the fearful and the comic, the repulsive and the appealing, has always influenced the construction of yōkai. The *Hyakkiyagyō emaki* might be interpreted as secular and lighthearted equivalents of Heian-period “hell screens,” in which the demonic inhabitants and torments of hell are often portrayed with frightful seriousness. The characters of the *Hyakkiyagyō emaki*, on the contrary, are depicted with playfulness and wit, their purpose seemingly not to frighten or warn but to entertain.\(^{16}\)

**Pandemonium and Parade**

My comments here on pre-Edo-period yōkai are intended only to highlight the complexities of these constantly shifting conceptions, none of which are monolithic: at each moment in history, the construction of yōkai was shaped by specific religious, artistic, intellectual, and political contexts. The notion of the hyakkiyagyō, however, provides a metaphor that transcends historical contexts and serves as a useful optic through which to interpret many of the discourses encountered in this book. Hyakkiyagyō (alternatively pronounced “hyakkiyakō”) literally means “night procession of one hundred demons.”\(^{17}\) In addition to its use in *Hyakkiyagyō emaki*, the term is found in medieval texts, including *Okagami* (Great Mirror; c. 1119), *Konjaku monogatari shū* (Tales of Times Now Past; early twelfth century), and *Uji shūi monogatari* (Collection of Tales from Uji; early thirteenth century), where it refers to a procession of demons passing through the capital at night. It was advisable to avoid venturing out on evenings when the hyakkiyagyō was known to be on the move. Such times and places represented danger: they were forbidden, unpredictable, beyond the control of humans or culture.

The hyakkiyagyō was a temporary but terrifying irruption of an oth-
erworld into the present one, something that could not or must not be seen—in some cases, simply gazing upon the phenomenon could cause one’s death. Though not a strictly accurate translation, one English rendering of hyakkiyagyō might be “pandemonium”—that is, a state of all or many (= pan) demons. Pandemonium was originally employed by Milton in reference to the capital of hell, but on a more terrestrial level it has of course come to refer to a condition of riotous disturbance, chaos, and danger: exactly what one would encounter on a hyakkiyagyō night in Kyoto.18

The visual taboo associated with the hyakkiyagyō is particularly significant in discourses on yōkai: there is an important relationship between that which cannot be seen (because it is invisible, indescribable, or numinous) and that which must not be seen (because it is terrible to look upon, frightening, or dangerous). The demonic pandemonium of hyakkiyagyō cannot be subjected to the human gaze, indeed converts the gaze into a danger to the observer. Ironically, through expressions such as the comical Hyakkiyagyō emaki, an inversion occurs, and that which should not be gazed upon is rendered visible—and gazed upon with pleasure. The unseen (unseeable) is transformed into spectacle; the mysterious spirits of untamed nature are transmuted into familiar everyday objects; terror turns into humor; pandemonium becomes parade. This movement—between a frightening, chaotic pandemonium and a light-hearted, well-ordered parade—provides a central metaphor for this study. My point is not that there is a single, irreversible change from one to the other at a particular time but that the constant lively movement between these two positions occurs in different ways during each of the historical periods I discuss.

**TAXONOMIES OF FEAR AND TERATOLOGIES OF PLEASURE**

Another overarching theme expressed differently during each period is the “disciplining” of yōkai. Since at least the seventeenth century, efforts have been made to define, describe, name, and categorize these creatures. In his classic preface to The Order of Things, Michel Foucault comments on Jorge Luis Borges’s “certain Chinese encyclopedia” that divides animals into seemingly arbitrary categories, such as “embalmed,” “tame,” “innumerable,” or “having just broken the water pitcher.” This incomprehensible way of ordering, Foucault says, demonstrates “the exotic charm of another system of thought” and “the limitation of our own.” While heralding the “wonderment of this taxonomy,” however, he also
notes that the encyclopedia “distinguishes carefully between the very real animals . . . and those that reside solely in the imagination,” putting “them into categories of their own” (“sirens,” “fabulous”), a move that “localizes their powers of contagion.”

In the various classification systems designed to order yōkai, we often do find them gathered into such categories: designations that always already presume a set of normative boundaries—real and imagined, truth and fiction—and a cultural imaginary in which such distinctions have meaning. But there are also spaces in the discourse of yōkai of mutual contagion, moments during which such boundaries are not so clearly distinguished and the division between fantastic and real is not recognizable (or desirable) as a marker of difference. In fact, the eventual creation of a separate category for yōkai marks a significant epistemological shift.

Whether they are mixed together with other “animals” or put in a private taxonomy of their own, the attempt to find a place for yōkai is an eerily consistent theme throughout yōkai discourse. Ordering a subject this elusive provides a profound challenge for the taxonomical impulse: to systematize and make comprehensible something that, almost by definition, cannot be captured. It represents a drive to render structure from chaos, to discipline the pandemonium and transform it into parade. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, as Harriet Ritvo points out, “monsters in the aggregate inevitably resisted definitive systematic integration, no matter how earnestly attempted. Capacious, motley, irredeemably vernacular, the category ‘monster’ proved invulnerable to expert analysis.” As with the modern case of the tsuchinoko, however, often the very resistance of yōkai to classification makes efforts to organize and define them all the more robust—on both an earnestly scientific level and a more playful or commercial one. In some cases yōkai were an indigenous part of existing (or developing) classificatory systems, and in other cases they were set apart in their own distinct teratologies, but efforts to establish taxonomies were made during each period I investigate in the chapters that follow. Not surprisingly, the form of the taxonomy and the principles of classification reflect the sociohistorical context of the moment.

Scholars commonly stress the role of fear in the understanding of yōkai. Komatsu Kazuhiko, for example, notes concisely, “Transcendent phenomena/presences associated with fear—these are ‘yōkai.’” Accordingly the classificatory impulse of each historical period may well be associated with fear and the desire (or necessity) to fashion from a perilous landscape something concrete, a way of speaking of the dangers
of an unknown environment. The birth of yōkai is the birth of a particular kind of language with a grammar and vocabulary for articulating a basic human emotion.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes fear as “a complex feeling of which two strains, alarm and anxiety, are clearly distinguishable. Alarm is triggered by an obtrusive event in the environment, and an animal’s instinctive response is to combat it or run. Anxiety, on the other hand, is a diffuse sense of dread and presupposes an ability to anticipate.”\textsuperscript{22} Akin to this notion of anxiety, the unseen pandemonium of the Heian-period hyakkiyagyō inspires an amorphous, unarticulated apprehension of what might be lurking out there in the darkness. The naming of yōkai identifies the threat, specifying the nature of the danger, shining a light on the “obtrusive event.” The “diffuse sense of dread” is sharpened into a focused alarm, and the individual can react appropriately. Whether this reaction is fight or flight—or some third possibility—at least the power to respond, the agency to determine one’s own fate, returns to the subject. As a mechanism for contending with the unknown and its potential dangers, the concretization of fear into the icon of an individual yōkai is a satisfying way of contending with chaos. Accordingly, it is not surprising that yōkai taxonomies often include an inventory of the characteristics for each yōkai in question, an enumeration of just what sort of threat one is facing.\textsuperscript{23}

In one sense, then, the creation of yōkai is actually a rational process. The translation of vague unreasoned fears into carefully individuated monsters reveals an imaginative form of ratiocination, a process similar to the production of metaphor. Indeed, the particular form assumed by a yōkai may be considered a “conceptual metaphor,” a culturally and historically specific embodiment of a vague sense of fear.\textsuperscript{24} Isolating and ordering these metaphors makes them less frightening: they can be put in their place. Not surprisingly, in contemporary Japan the question \textit{What are yōkai?} often elicits not a definition but a list of examples. And ultimately, a list may be the only possible answer: the meaning of yōkai, their very existence, comes only with naming, listing, and organizing and the implicit interpretation such practices demand. With the movement from pandemonium to parade, these alarming monsters sculpted out of the anxiety of darkness take on distinct characteristics and a life of their own.

Nor is the articulation of their manifold forms confined to philosophical or scientific attempts at taxonomy. Popular art, games, and other playful cultural practices are similar to formal academic typologies in their methods of disciplining yōkai, revealing a profound link between
fear and fun, horror and humor. As with the comical creatures of the
*Hyakkiyagyō emaki*, frightening yōkai can become characters of mirth
and entertainment: that which cannot be gazed upon is readily trans-
formed into spectacle. A yōkai may signify something wild and fright-
ening, but removed from its natural environment, it becomes sanitized
and safe enough to be handled by children. Such different conceptions,
however, are never mutually exclusive: the same yōkai can exist simul-
taneously as both a serious danger and a plaything, as an object of fear
and an object of amusement. Belief and the toying with (and commodi-
 fica tion of) belief are rarely far apart.

**THE AMBIGUITY OF BELIEF**

Accordingly, questions of belief implicitly inform yōkai discourse. It has
been noted that anthropologists have often tended to take beliefs at face
value and have “talked about them as if their elucidation were less prob-
lematical than the interpretations to be put on their contents.” In the
examination of the beliefs of another culture or another time, an appreci-
ation of the quality of those beliefs—their complexities, nuances, and
inconsistencies—is too easily sacrificed for a holistic system or a satis-
fying narrative. From the outset, then, I note a profound ambiguity with
regard to the ontological status of yōkai. During the Edo period, for ex-
ample, when the existence of a traditional creature might be authenti-
cated by an encyclopedia, new yōkai were simultaneously being invented,
played with, and to some extent, believed in. With the advent of Meiji,
belief in yōkai was explicitly criticized, but even a rationalist like Inoue
Enryō recognized the possibility of what he called a “degree of belief”
within the observer. Even in the early twenty-first century, when “tra-
ditional” yōkai may have all but dropped out of the discourse of belief
per se, new yōkai emerge to take their place and adopt many of their
characteristics. At any given time, then, belief in yōkai is never a simple
matter of yes or no but an unstable variable contingent on many other
variables.

Even within the individual subject, belief is often ambiguously figured.
The idea of “in-between believing” has recently been taken up by
philosophers of mind like Eric Schwitzgebel, who makes “the case that
philosophers and cognitive scientists interested in belief would profit
greatly from an account of belief that allows us to talk intelligently about
such in-between states of believing.” In twenty-first-century American
culture, we can clearly observe in-betweenness in the way, for example,
the question of whether one believes in ghosts or UFOs or Bigfoot often elicits an answer more complex than a simple affirmative or negative. A person may refuse to profess certainty about something but also refuse to deny its possibility. Scientific data may be invoked to “prove” certain things are real. Alternatively, students of cryptozoology, who seek “cryptids” or “hidden animals” (e.g., Sasquatch and Nessie), often consider anecdotal and legendary accounts as seriously as scientific findings. Technology and superstition are not mutually exclusive: even today, many American airports avoid the number thirteen when labeling their gates. And in contemporary Japan too, it is certainly not just the devoutly religious or “superstitious” who select paper fortunes (omikuji) at shrines and temples on New Year’s Day or avoid the number four because of its homonymic association with death.

I am interested not so much in stressing the persistence into the present of nonevidentiary beliefs—though this too is important—but rather in calling attention to the essential ambiguity of belief in yōkai. In many cases, these creatures survive in the cultural imagination because of their very ability to pivot easily between the credible and the incredible. At times their existence is accepted unquestioningly, and at times it is denied avidly, but in most cases it is within the ambiguous ontological space between these two extremes that yōkai thrive. As scholars of the cognitive processes of belief have noted:

In the competition among ideas for a place, so to speak, in the human mind, those ideas that strike an optimal cognitive balance between the intuitive and the counterintuitive are most likely to be given attention, to be remembered, and to be passed on to succeeding generations. Gods, spirits, and ghosts, for instance, are often depicted as anthropomorphic in various ways, and their conformance to our expectations respecting human capacities, purposes, and behavior renders them plausible. But it is the counterintuitive capacities and qualities assigned to them—their invisibility, their ability to pass through material barriers, and so forth—that render them memorable.

Again, I would emphasize the instability of the thing as a defining characteristic, or at least a defining orientation, of yōkai. Flirting with both the “intuitive and the counterintuitive,” yōkai allow room for doubt. In fact, both of the graphs that signify yōkai, 妖 and 怪, carry the meaning of “suspicious” or “doubtful.” But concomitant to the notion that something is doubtful or suspicious is a sense of possibility. While the semantic doubling of graphs denoting “doubt” or “suspicion” doubly emphasizes their meaning, perhaps
it also inversely casts doubt and suspicion on the very certainty of doubt and suspicion. That is, the word yōkai can also be read as a sign indicating an instability of the “real,” therefore invoking a sense of possibility; rather than fostering skepticism and disbelief, the word suggests a realm in which the imagination and the metaphors it creates are given some freedom. Certainly the world of play—the late-night telling of ghost tales, divination games played in a geisha house, the reading of spooky manga—allows this imagination to enchant the everyday landscape.

Often yōkai function through the ironic imagination, a concept that helps us think about, for example, the fact that enthusiasts of Sherlock Holmes are aware of his fictionality but persist in treating him as a real person—even to the point of publishing biographies. “Modern enchantments,” the cultural historian Michael Saler explains, “are enjoyed as constructs in which one can become immersed but not submerged. Rationalist skepticism is held in abeyance, yet complete belief is undercut by an ironic awareness that one is holding skepticism at bay.” In contrast to naive imagination, ironic imagination describes a phenomenon associated with modernity; indeed, this is when it is most striking, when rationality and skepticism provide stark contrasts to “naive” beliefs in the “irrational.”

At its most essential level, however, the ironic imagination also reflects the capacity of the human mind to simultaneously negotiate two (or more) different landscapes, the very mechanism that allows us to speak of any fictional character as if he or she is a living person with real-world agency. While notions of cognitive dissonance preclude the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory points of view, we can also imagine cognitive resonance, whereby seemingly irreconcilable beliefs do not cancel each other out but actually prove to be, if not quite harmonious, at least productively resonant with each other. In the case of yōkai, such cognitive resonance allows belief and doubt, two sides of the yōkai coin, to happily cohabit the same space. It is no coincidence that a phrase arising frequently in yōkai discourse, hanshin-hangi, means exactly this: “half belief, half doubt.” Not surprisingly, belief and doubt play out differently during the different periods I discuss. In a general sense, there may be movement from the naive to the ironic imagination, but the positivism of modernity does not always preclude the naive—some modern intellectuals express as much naive belief with regard to science as the people they are “educating” do with regard to yōkai.

Since the Edo period, yōkai have for the most part been treated as somehow distinct from—though related to—more sacred manifestations
of belief known as *kami*. During the Tokugawa period, when popular kami, such as the seven deities known as Shichifukujin, the comically rendered Daruma, and the fox-related Inari, gathered cult followings, they were generally treated as something different from yōkai. To be sure, the distinction between yōkai and kami is a fuzzy one at best. A water spirit, for instance, may be simultaneously worshipped as a kami by families for whom the river provides ample irrigation and feared as a yōkai by families downriver who experience drought. As we will see, Yanagita Kunio famously characterizes yōkai as “fallen” kami.\(^{32}\) And much more recently, Komatsu Kazuhiko has suggested that worship by humans may be the defining characteristic of the yōkai-kami distinction: yōkai are unworshipped (*matsurareteinai*) kami, and kami are worshipped (*matsurareteiru*) yōkai.\(^ {33}\) Not only do we find once more a continuum between the undisciplined pandemonic world of yōkai and the (somewhat) more ordered pantheon of the kami, but we also find that human mediation determines the identity of the supernatural entity in question.

Moreover, tempting as it is to categorize yōkai (like Western “monsters”) as perpetrators of evil, in this regard too they are ambiguous. Certainly many yōkai are mischievous and even murderous, but at least since the Edo period, bad behavior does not seem to be a defining characteristic. The example of the yōkai/kami water spirit is instructive: in the zero-sum game of human survival, an act that benefits one person may very well hurt another. Yōkai defy definitive categorization—they are ambiguously positioned beyond (or between) good and evil.\(^ {34}\)

**THE NATURE OF THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE AFFECT OF MYSTERY**

As so much of the discourse on yōkai is bound up with the desire to articulate the inexpressible, it is important to clarify two of the English words that inevitably appear in the chapters that follow: *supernatural* and *mysterious*. *Supernatural* implies a dichotomy between the *natural* and something that somehow transcends nature; the premise for the supernatural is that there must be rules of nature against which its transcendent qualities can be evaluated. The limits of such categories, however, can be evaluated only through a cultural-historical lens. To most readers of this book, for example, it will seem “natural” for a creature such as a fox to be treated as an empirically viable entity—diagrammed by natural historians, described by biologists, listed in encyclopedias. But what of an encyclopedic entry that, along with a description of the fox’s