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# Chapter 9

# Sucking Vulnerability: Neoliberalism, the Chupacabras, and the Post-Cold War Years

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*Today the monster lived in the maze of city streets, in the urban jungle. The streets were the labyrinths; the Minotaur was now the ChupaCabra[s]!*
—Rudolfo Anaya, *The Curse of the ChupaCabra*

## Que Miedo: Our Love Affair with Monsters

Monsters are everywhere. As immortal entities, they are older than capitalism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and homophobia. Nevertheless, monsters can be some of these oppressive systems most ferocious allies. We humans have created them, yet monsters prey on our most primal fears and hopes. They surround our existence, haunt us, and dwell in our imagination. To the point that we can trace communities' histories by the pantheon of monsters they have created. More importantly, these human-made entities are never random or naïve, but rather they are sophisticated social constructions, built from semiotic raw materials and assembled with specific scopes and objectives. They may be fictitious, but they confront our real world anxieties and remind us of our mortality. Monsters represent the cultural soundtrack of the everyday.

For Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies,* myths are "systems of communication," or particular types of speech that are framed within specific times and cultural contexts (Barthes 2001, 109). For him myths are effective because they presume the existence of a "signifying consciousness" that allows individuals and communities to decode their significance (Barthes 2001, 110). In this case, myths can be interpreted as part of a cultural recycling process of significations and

meanings, regrouped for a specific objective. For Emile Durkheim, in order "to be able to call certain facts supernatural, one must already have an awareness that there is a natural order of things" (Durkheim 1995, 24). In other words, in order to create a fantasy and phantasmagoric world, the individual, the community, and the state must master and understand the real world. Mircea Eliade, in his book *Myth and Reality*, extends this line of thought by arguing that myths are particularly important because they are social "living documents." For him, legends and folk tales can be interpreted as "true history," because independent of the accuracy of the events described by them, they "always deal with realities" and the ephemeral nature of our human existence (Eliade 1998, 6).

In his book *Monster Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that monsters emerge "as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" and that each of these creatures "signifies something other than itself" (Cohen 1996, 4). For Cohen, these creatures must be understood as "epistemological device[s]" that can provide information on how communities deploy imagination and fantasy in order to deal with social and economic realities at specific times (Cohen 1996, ix). Furthermore, Cohen argues that monsters haunt humans, as they constantly keep asking, "why we have created them" (Cohen 1996, 20). These legends, myths, and folk tales, exemplify what Américo Paredes identifies as border folk productions that are embedded with "sabidurías populares" or community vernacular knowledge (Saldívar 2006, 56). These cultural productions give us information about what a community has experienced and the mechanisms they utilized in order to survive and make sense of their struggles.

One of those creatures is the Chupacabras,[1] or the goatsucker, a monster that began terrorizing farmers, barrios, and towns on both sides of the US-Mexico Border, and Puerto Rico during the 1990s, a creature created from the hybrid mix of the real and the imaginary. The Chupacabras, as a millennial child (1980–2000), and as a member of Generation Y, provides a unique opportunity to understand the intersections between the "real" and the imaginary. I argue that the Chupacabras is more than just a naive livestock-blood-sucking creature, but rather, it represents a sophisticated entity that carries within it the violent struggles lived by communities of color, because of the local impact of global neoliberal policies, as manifested by late capitalism, during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

This chapter is divided in three parts; in the first one I argue that the Chupacabras is an uncanny manifestation of the effects of a system

of exploitation and the life-draining practices experienced from the clash of the North and the South. This blood-sucking creature turns into flesh the monstrous atrocities and unnatural violence inflicted on Latina/o communities on both sides of the border, as they have been forced to accommodate a global project of market expansion, including, but not limited to, forced migration, land expropriation, wage dependency, poverty, and gender/sexual violence. In other words, I analyze the Chupacabras as a 'real' entity that manifests the daunting and precarious realities experienced during that period, by the Chicana/o Latina/o communities because of the implementation of transnational policies against the welfare state during the 1980s and the global expansionist effects of NAFTA.

In the following sections, I show how through the process of expropriation and re-signification of the discourses around the uncanny and the phantasmagoric, in this case the Chupacabras, this monster can become both (1) a medium for oppression and also be reconstructed (2) as a tool to enact emancipatory social change. In the second part of this article, I explore how, within the anxieties of the post-Cold War period, the Chupacabras was utilized by the mainstream to reinforce notions of anti-immigrant otherness and the exclusion of brown bodies. I analyze how mass media and some academic circles have used the Chupacabras to (re)-present Latina/o and Chicana/o communities as inferior, deviant, lazy, uncivilized, and violent. In the third section of this chapter, I will focus on how Chicana/os are shifting and re-signifying the meanings attached to this creature in order to promote change and circulate knowledge about how to survive the multiple social monsters of today. In this case, the Chupacabras shows to be very real, as it deals with real, systematic, and institutionalized violence. I show how Chicana/ os are 'capturing' the Chupacabras in order to transfer knowledge about the struggles of the postmodern, postindustrial cities such as Los Angeles, teaching how to navigate the various power structures oppressing the barrio, and finally how to reenact ancient practices of self-healing and self-valorization.

## NAFTA and the Creation of Phantom Workers

The period of the mid 1990s was a particularly daunting period for Chicana/os and Latinos in the United States. The years after the end of the Cold War defined the emergence of a new wave of anti-immigrant, anti-raza sentiment (e.g., California Proposition 187). A period that made evident the consequences created by the implementation

of conservative government social policies, championed by Ronald Reagan's era of austerity, which in particular, disproportionally affected communities of color. This was a global phenomenon. For example, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2002) in their article *Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrant, and Millennial Capitalism*, describe how during those early 1990s, there was a significant increase in the number of zombie encounters and witch hunts in South Africa, during the period they called the "millennium capitalism" of the late twentieth century. Although located on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, their work provides us with a similar model to understand what was happening in Mexico and in Chicana/o Latino communities in the United States, showing that all of them were experiencing the impact of late capitalist practices at the same time. In this case, the Chupacabras can be understood as a by-product of global 'life-sucking' economic policies, that in the case of Mexico, will be exemplified through the signing of NAFTA and in the United States by the war against the welfare state and anti-immigrant policies.

Comaroff and Comaroff, from a socio-economic standpoint, argue that the emergence of new kinds of uncanny creatures during the "cusp of the millennium," in their case zombies, as well as the hunting and killing of "witches" in South Africa, provides us with a visible foot-print of the effects of neo-liberalism, especially the "global story of [the] changing relationships of labor to capital, of production to consumption" (783) as well as the long-term effects created by the prevalence of "anxieties about unemployment," (790) the forced proletarianization of rural areas (793), and the translocation of labor through imposed migration. As we see, these events similarly represent the reality of Mexico during those years, as the NAFTA agreement was implemented. For example, for NAFTA to be signed, the Mexican government changed their constitution in order to allow the privatization of communal land, forcing the displacement of large farming communities. This was accompanied by the deregulation of import restrictions on grains, the subsequent overflow of US-subsidized corn, the increase in unemployment, the dependency on wages, and the disparity of the wealth gap (Anderson, Cavanagh, and Lee 2005, 94). In the United States, for example, since the 1980s, wealth disparity and distribution between the rich and poor has increased. The State of Working America report issued by the Economic Policy Institute illustrates that the rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer, creating an unequal nation with economic disparity not seen since the Great Depression (Mishel

et al. 2012). These policies did not provide a better deal for Mexico either. The poverty gap increased during those years and between 1993 and 2000, "Mexico lost 1.3 million agricultural jobs [. . . as little farmers] and peasants struggle to complete with large-scale U.S. Producers" (Mishel et al. 2012). At least for those suffering the effects of these policies, the reality of a monster that was draining their lives away was undeniable. During the 1990s, it was not just that goats, chickens, and farm animals were fading away and vanishing, but rather entire communities were under attack. The Chupacabras, as a signifier of neoliberalism was leaving behind a trail of destruction as well as many other uncanny creatures that allow us to follow and make visible the phantasmagoric history of capitalism.

Ironically, at the same time that these neoliberal policies were threatening these communities, their implementation was sold to the masses as a long-term investment for the relief of marginalized communities, when in reality they were perpetuating marginalization. It is no coincidence that Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the president of Mexico at that time, prophesized that NAFTA would allow Mexico to became a 'First World Nation' almost magically. It was this "supernatural" quality given to capitalism that justified the compromises on human rights, women, indigenous peoples, immigrant rights, labor unions, etc., in such a way that economic reforms were presented as an imperative necessity of the sustaining of the national project and state unity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, 783). At a base level, monsters and the phantasmagoric allow for the out-of-this world atrocious experiences in daily life to become a collective spectacle that comes to represent the social relations and realities imposed over the community. Therefore, as a collective entity, the Chupacabras calls attention to the atrocities experienced by small farmers and those at the vulnerable and peripheral edges of society.

However, the Chupacabras was not a unilateral social instrument used only by marginalized communities to manifest the effects of Late Capitalism. On the contrary, the mainstream saw in this monster another propaganda tool against Chicana/o and Latinos, one that enforced the notions of otherness, deviancy, criminality, and the intellectual inferiority of brown bodies. This is part of the conundrum of monsters; they cannot be domesticated and are constantly shifting meanings.

In the next section, I first discuss two case studies where the Chupacabras has been used to manifest anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o Chicana/o sentiments. It will demonstrate how not even

the realms of the phantasmagoric are exempt from the discourses of oppression and the perpetuation of power disparity and inequity. Nevertheless, Chicana/os have also strategically re-signified the Chupacabras to adapt to their realities and modern day challenges as instrument to create social change.

## The Myth of the Life-Sucking Immigrant

In November 1994, California voters passed Proposition 187, also known as the *Save Our State* (SOS) initiative, which established a screening system to prevent undocumented immigrants in California access to health care, public education, and many other social services. Proposition 187 is particularly important because it represents a direct intervention and a fracture between States and the Federal Government in regard to immigration policy, as it represents the first occurrence of state-proposed immigration legislation, a matter previously delegated only to the federal government. Furthermore, similar initiatives were later reproduced in other states, more recently in such cases as Arizona SB 1070, and Alabama HB 56. It was only four months after the passing of Proposition 187 when the first reported attacks of the Chupacabras took place.

Urban theorist and historian Mike Davis believes that the Chupacabras in California is deeply interconnected to anti-immigrant sentiments and the direct attacks on immigrant communities living in California during the early 1990s. For Davis, the Chupacabras came into existence as a by-product of the anxieties created in immigrants as they were confronted by an increasingly hostile environment that rejects and imposes new levels of violence on them, as an "avatar of poor people's deepest fears and an exuberant, tongue-in-cheek emblem of Latino cultural populism" (Davis 1999, 268). In this case, the creature emerges in the urban setting because of the contradictions created by the forced trans-location of spaces and communities within capitalism. As Davis argues, by the imposed migration of "new" types of peasants into mega-polis cities, many historical and cultural links are made invisible and profoundly policed. As he explains, the postmodern city, in this case Los Angeles, has become a new type of dangerous jungle, one that sometimes is even more dangerous and desolate than a real forest. Furthermore, he argues that for rural immigrants, "the Chupacabras has brought the reassurance of familiar monstrosity [and the] telluric symbol of the power of the countryside over the city" (Davis 1999, 268). Here, the Chupacabras gives a name to a transnational monster, now in the "urban" space.

The Chupacabras creates familiarity within capitalist cultural, social, and economic disturbance.

In this case, the Chupacabras can be understood as a Latina/o Chicana/o cultural technology that questions the rigorous formality imposed by modernity, as the state tries to regulate immigrant mobility, presence, and voice. Concurrently, in the Chupacabras stories, state governments are helpless as the creature moves, attacks, and appear freely anywhere. Therefore, the Chupacabras creates a space of subordination, rebelliousness, irony, and insolence that emerges from the uncanny, one that is almost ridiculous—very humorous, sassy, and deadly scary—but for the most part outside state control. Nevertheless, new meanings loaded with anti-immigrant and post–Cold War anxieties were attached to the creature.

It is in this context, and after long public debates, on September 30, 1996, President Clinton signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, known also as IIRAIRA or IIRIRA. This law cut numerous public services for undocumented immigrants in the United States, established a series of penalties and restrictions for adjustments of status and removal relief, in addition to creating multiple layers of criminality and unlawful presence, that made many individuals eligible for deportation. This law has been particularly controversial because it was applied retroactively and it authorized the Department of Homeland Security to use 'secret evidence' against immigrants if considered relevant (Inda 2005, 89–97). Just three months after, on January 12, 1997, *Fox Network* aired the eleventh episode of the sci-fi TV show *X-Files*, (fourth season) titled *El Mundo Gira* (The World Turns). 22.37 million viewers watched the episode that night in the United States alone. In this episode, agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) investigate the mysterious death of an undocumented immigrant, Maria Dorantes. She has been found dead after a strange flash of lightning in the sky and a yellow rain came to her migrant workers camp in the San Joaquin Valley, CA. Her face has been partially destroyed by an abnormal fungal infection. Two brothers, Eladio and Soledad Buente, were both in love with Maria.

As in most *X-Files* episodes, the show's tension is created around the fight between two theories about her death, as reflected by the two main characters: the product of a passionate crime (Scully), or something more sinister, an alien attack (Mulder). Scully's reasoning completely dismisses Mulder's point of view when she jokingly says to him "two men, one woman, troubles! Mulder, what we've walked into here is a Mexican Soap Opera!" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). Her

categorization of the murder as a Telenovela plot makes it less real and less important.

Since Dorantes is found dead next to a goat, the immigrant community attributes Maria's death to the Chupacabras. The main suspect is Eladio Buente, who was seen with Maria just before her death. His brother Soledad is searching for him in order to get revenge for the death of his dear Maria. While Mulder and Scully search to solve the crime, they receive the help of a US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agent Conrad Lozano, played by Ruben Blades, a real life singer, writer, and subsequently a presidential candidate in Panama in 1998.

As the show evolves, we discover that Eladio Buente carries a generic condition that generates an immunodeficiency enzyme, which weakens people's natural defense system against common fungal infections, similar to the HIV/AIDS virus. People who come in contact with Eladio or objects touched by him, (including vegetables and fruits) die almost instantly from the infection. Several people die after encountering Eladio, and many more run away from him as word has spread among immigrants that he is, in fact, the Chupacabras. The end of the show brings both brothers, Eladio and Soledad, face to face and leaves Lozano dead. Two distinct ends leave the viewer unsure about what really happened with the Buente brothers.

The episode is full of anti-immigrant sentiments that frame Latina/o immigrants as primitive, uneducated, violent, and extremely dangerous for America. Even in those instances when the show tries to redeem its position, it does not succeed. On the contrary, the show becomes engulfed in xenophobic arguments. In one instance, Scully says to Mulder, "the aliens in this story are not the villains, they are the victims" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). However, because of the show's rhetoric, those immigrants again become victims of the show's own prejudices and racism. As the main characters explain, it is very clear, that "nobody cares" about these infected-beings, since "the majority of them are illegal immigrants" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). They do not care for the foreigners because they are not seen as full humans, but rather as caricatures, as expendable cheap phantom workers, or monsters.

Early on, Agent Lozano (Ruben Blades) explains the Chupacabras to Mulder,

> These people [...] lives are small. So, they have to build these fantasies [...] to keep going, to feel alive. Because, they are strangers here! They feel hated and unwanted. So, whenever their emotions become

> inflated, they resort to violence. Since they cannot go to the law, they make these fantastic tales. Call it whatever you want! (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997).

Through this discourse around the Chupacabras, the show promotes the idea that the Chupacabras, and other Latina/o Chicana/o myths, are premeditated excuses for immigrants to not follow the law and letting their passions run wild. In the show, the Chupacabras is used as a mirror to reflect American fears about the evident Latina/os growing demographic presence, materializing a demonized alien, a foreigner that is evil, insatiable, driven by lust, primitive, and incapable of assimilating into American culture. As the show explains both of them, the real Chupacabras and the immigrant are the same thing, fused together in one body. As Lozano explains to Mulder, "for most people they are aliens in two senses of the word" and the distinction between these two disappears to become one. Furthermore, when Eladio watches himself in a mirror he screams "No soy un hombre . . . soy el Chupacabras," [I am not a man . . . I am the Chupacabras] (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). There is no resolution, since the human has disappeared and the monster has prevailed. Here, the alien, the immigrant, the brown body in mainstream imagination is a threat.

The episode is about the notion that immigrants are dangerous, that they cross the border carrying with them diseases, including social ones. They are presented as extremely infectious, where anyone can be contaminated, even those reaching out to help them. What is more, this is not just any kind of disease, but rather "a new strain . . . [one, that is] very dangerous" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). One that humanity has never seen before, and consequently it requires unique and exceptional measurements. Especially because unauthorized immigrants, like the Chupacabras, cannot be cured, captured, changed, or domesticated. The fact that the Chupacabras carry a disease that attacks the immune system, just as AIDS does, is particularly important as a reflection on the imaginary life-threatening nature of immigrant existence in America.

As misconstrued by the show, immigrant bodies create deadly vulnerability in the same way as the AIDS-causing virus. In this episode, the Chupacabras, as a signifier for Latina/os and Chicana/os, carries within it the seeds that pose a threat to the body politic. It is not coincidental that AIDS was connected to Haitian immigration in the popular imagination during the 1980s in the United States. This disease, especially at the beginning, was deeply marked by gender, sexual orientation, and racial myths in the social imagination. The show

proposes that in order to save civilization (America), these immigrants need to be eliminated, or at least controlled. There is no other solution as Latina/os Chicana/os 'resist' assimilation. Furthermore, the show argues that the real problem for these Chupacabras/immigrants is intrinsic to their nature, cannot be cured and therefore their descendants will carry the disease as well.

At the end of the show, the viewer is terrified by the realization that the infection is never contained, and these supposed dangerous aliens are "still free and carrying a very contagious fungus" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). The threat is always there and they can attack at any moment. Furthermore, on many occasions during the show, the infected aliens are presented walking around food warehouses, fruit packing factories, livestock trucks, farms, drugstores, restaurants, and construction sites. For example, there is the Latina nanny that meets with her infected cousin at night when nobody is at home, putting the owners and the babies at risk. There are the cashier in the supermarket, the barber, and the day worker contractor; all of them died because of close contact with the infected immigrants, as innocent bystander victims, oblivious to the danger around them. The Chupacabras is an itinerant Mexican/Latino serial killer always waiting to attack. In the show, immigrants are depicted as uncivilized beings, incapable of following reason, civility, or law. As agent Lonzano explains, they only understand the norm that "blood must cleanse blood" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997), where killing for revenge is acceptable.

Part of the problem of containing the illness brought by the Chupacabras is that as they (Scully and Mulder, or the mainstream culture represented in them) try to prevent this disease from spreading, both of them are faced with a huge impediment: undocumented immigrants "have a way to almost be invisible" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). Therefore, it is almost impossible to identify and capture the Chupacabras, as well as "illegal aliens" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). As explained by Lozano to Mulder, illegal aliens do not even have real names. They do not want to be identifiable. These Chupacabras move in the underground, with the help of a network of criminality and impunity. Furthermore, when society thinks that these aliens have been contained, deported, then "more Chupacabras came" (*X-Files*, January 12, 1997). The show presents a dark future, because our border remains porous and vulnerable, where not even the Federal Government in Washington DC can, or wants to do anything. At the beginning of the show, Scully is very concerned about capturing Eladio before he infects a major city. However, at the end of the show,

as the infected brothers disappear and allegedly escape to Mexico, Scully stops worrying about them, as if she did not care anymore, since the threat was not imminent to an American city, suggesting the lives of Mexicans are expendable.

As Katherine Kinney exposes in her article, *X-Files and the Borders of the Post-Cold War World* (Kinney 2001–2002, 65), what we have here in this episode is the result of the post-Cold War period that describes the border as one of the places where Cold War fears are enacted. For Kinney, in those years a new enemy is recreated to replace the previous one. The battleground has shrunk within the United States' territories, in this case, concentrated on the US-Mexico border. As a result, the 1990s are characterized by a new schizophrenic fixation with the border; one that responds not only to socio-political factors but mostly economic motivations, as the red fear is diminished and military surplus is redirected. During this period, the border emerges as the new space where the other meets the American-self, where what was once global, turns local and personal. The contradictions between borders that are idealized as open and apparently without economic/market barriers, such as the one proposed by NAFTA, is confronted with the reality of the fear for the Other, where immigrants are construed as threats to the nation-state's myth of homogeneity. Kinney, talking within the context of the *X-files* TV show, argues that as post-Cold War paranoia is relocated to 'home,' new forms of violence are created and manifested in the mass media. She explains,

> Much of the post-Cold War paranoia and politics have taken a violently conservative turn, one often marked by a resurgence of openly racist and nativist ideologies, emblematized not only by the desire to seal off the U.S./Mexico border, but by the Oklahoma City bombing, Waco and the recent killing sprees by men with white supremacist and anti-Semitic ties. (Kinney 2001–2002, 55)

For Kinney, a new enemy, the immigrant, is redefined as one that is closer to home, where the issue of race is presented as "the oldest and most pervasive site of the uncanny, the center of the potentially terrifying coalesce between the strange and familiar" (Kinney 2001–2002, 59). Race becomes a point where the fear of difference coalesces, and merges with the discourses of national unity and progress. Furthermore, race becomes the ground where social inequity is normalized and naturalized by the discourses of otherness. As Kinney explains, even when the TV show tries to redeem immigrants and

expose their exploited status as victims, the show fails to recognize the complicity of the global labor market and late capitalist trade policies. It never creates a space to discuss why and how these immigrants are transformed into *aliens* by a system that forces them out of their land by its privatization, exploits their labor, deletes their history, and questions their humanity.

## The Chupacabras: Healing the Monkey on Our Back

In order to explore the emancipating meanings that can be associated to the Chupacabra, it is important to first analyze what other scholars have unveiled about this creature, in particular, the relationships that exist between this entity and the enactment of colonial powers, in Puerto Rico, United States and Latin America during the last decades of the last century. For example, Robert Jordan in his 2008 master thesis, *The Chupacabra: Icon of Resistance to U.S. Imperialism*, from the University of Texas in Dallas, explains how the Chupacabras work for Latin America as "a form of cultural resistance [...] use[d] to maintain social bonds and gain control over growing fears surrounding the perceived destructive effects of 'toxic' US politi-cal and economic imperialism" (Jordan 2008, 2). Jordan is not alone in this assessment. Lauren Derby, referring to the first sightings of the creature in her historic article titled, "Imperial Secrets: Vampires and Nationhood in Puerto Rico," argues that the Chupacabras work as a "popular commentary on modernity and its risks as they are perceived in Puerto Rico" (Derby 2008, 292). In this sense, the Chupacabras turns colonial anxieties into flesh, a blood-draining creature that materializes as the perceived enemy, where predator/ hunter is identi-fied and renamed by the prey within a colonized territory.

Furthermore, Reinaldo Román (2007), in the epilogue of his book *Governing Spirits: Religion, Miracles and Spectacles in Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1898–1956*, explores the Chupacabras from the governmental and bureaucratic point of view. He is not interested in how the Chupacabras came to be, but rather about the relationships created between this creature and the State. He utilizes Ann Stoler's notion of "hierarchies of credibility" as a framework to analyze power negotiations in Puerto Rico (Stoler 1992, 151). Román argues that Puerto Rico's unique relationship with colonial and capitalist powers requires a unique approach. For him the relevance of the Chupacabras

reside in the social interventions created between citizens and the management class, and the frustration and anxieties shaped by their occupied colonial status.

For Román, the Chupacabras unveils the multiple tensions that coexist in Puerto Rico, as the island and its habitants navigate their own relationships with the United States, as Commonwealth subjects, and as a colonial territory. He explores the multiple contradictions and failure of the Puerto Rican bureaucratic state in its handling of the Chupacabras. He exposes the opportunistic elements expressed by several elected officials, which tried to utilize the Chupacabras to achieve a populist image, and therefore the support of rural communities. As Román points out, the ambiguity of the Chupacabras creates a space that enacts Puerto Rican anxieties about their identity, as its citizens decide between becoming an independent nation, keeping their current commonwealth status, or becoming another state of the United States.

## The Chupacabras: Healing the Monkey on Our Back

Probably one of the most interesting recent aspects of the Chupacabras, is the experience of how Chicana/os have been able to rewrite a new narrative in order to deal with the effects of political and social violence in their lives today. In these cases, Chicana/os subversively utilize the Chupacabras to represent and expose other kinds of social diseases and monsters, as well as propose solutions and alternatives that recognize their cultural uniqueness and historical past.

One of these interventions or *movidas* comes from Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya in his 2006 book, *The Curse of the ChupaCabra*. Here, Anaya reconstitutes the Chupacabras[2] as a modern manifestation of another social-evil. In Anaya's fictional narration, the Chupacabras reflects the effect of a pervasive system of greed on society and, in this case, exposes the effects that greed and drug trafficking have had on the Chicana/o community. The Chupacabras is free, but it responds to the evil doing of humans. In this case, the creature navigates a space between human captivity and its uncontrollable desire for killing. It moves between the global and the local, from the jungles into the city. The novel is set in the present day. It follows a detective-adventure format and tracks the adventures and tragedies of a young single female assistant professor from Cal State Los Angeles named Rosa, and her close group of students and friends. She has just "finished her PhD at Santa Barbara" (Anaya 2006, 7) in 2006, two years before the events in the novel, in Chicana literature

with an emphasis in Chicana/o folklore, myths and legends. The novel is deeply rooted in the late twentieth century's Chicana/o history and made consistent references and allusions to the Chicana/o experience, to Chicana/o scholars, artist figures, the social movements of the late 1960s, as well as Chicana/o social-cultural practices and community places. The novel normalizes the Chicana/o experience as an integral part of the American Southwest, particularly California.

As a reflection of the Chicana/o transnational experience, the main adventures develop between the jungle or "selva" (Anaya 2006, 7) of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico and the urban jungles of Los Angeles, CA. However, the itinerant journal chasing or escaping from the Chupacabras includes other places such as the high desert of the Navajo Nation, Rosa's hometown of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and even the international waters of the Pacific, between the United States and Mexico. As the characters navigate all these multiple settings, the author unveils different components of the Chicana/o experience, their struggles, victories, and socio-political ties.

For Anaya, the role played by myths and legends is crucial and rooted in people's realities, as he says, "better than Frankenstein or the werewolf…[the Chupacabras] is a real Latino monster…La Llorona and the Cucúi were getting old. What was needed to reflect the fear and concerns of the people was a new blood-thirsty beast, the ChupaCabra" (Anaya 2006, 166). Furthermore, he writes "today the monster lived in the maze of city streets, in the urban jungle. The streets were the labyrinths; the Minotaur was now the ChupaCabra[s]!" (139) As he explains, as the reality of oppression remains consistent over time in the life of many Latinos/Chicanos, monsters in the social imagination change and adapt to reflect new pains and anxieties. New phantasmagoric symbols are needed to better represent the complexity, in this case of the barrio reality, and struggles of today.

Rosa's adventures are an excuse to discuss a deeper argument, one where the Chupacabras becomes almost irrelevant, about Chicana/o Latino social, economic, and political alienation. He writes, "there are monsters in the city. The urban jungle, rage, violence, drugs" (Anaya 2006, 45). This type of Chupacabras indeed sucks the life out of animals and humans. Furthermore, for Anaya, the Chupacabras signals Chicana/os vulnerability in today's society, particularly around drugs, a vulnerability that has been created artificially. In the novel, the Chupacabras kills its victims not by sucking their blood, but rather, by sucking out their brains.

As Anaya explains, the Chupacabras "destroys the brains of those who follow him" (Anaya 2006, 25). He points out, "homies use crack. It burns their brains. Meth does the same . . . After a while you see them wandering on the streets. Till they drop" (Anaya 2006, 47). The metaphorical connection is clear; drugs are killing people, but it is not a new phenomenon. The use of drugs has been around for quite a long time and is a recurring disease targeting vulnerable communities of color. As he says, "in the 1950s to have a monkey on your back meant to be hooked on heroin. Now those hooked on drugs had the ChupaCabra[s]on their back." (Anaya 2006, 128). In the novel, the Chupacabras is presented as hunting and keeping people captive in a deadly system of subjugation. What is even more terrifying is that for those most vulnerable, the youth (Anaya 2006, 158), there is almost no way out. As he says, "kids on drugs have lost the argument," (Anaya 2006, 184) and the Chupacabras has them. This pessimistic approach is as scary as the idea of the existence of the bloodsucking creature running free in the streets of Los Angeles. In this case, greed has become flesh in the form of a new beast, one that feeds on people of color's vulnerability (Anaya 2006, 87).

In the novel, the existence of the Chupacabras is not dismissed as myth or legend. On the contrary, Anaya argues that Chupacabras are *very real*, as the creature leaves a trail of dead bodies from where he passes. As he says, "a demon rose from the emaciated bodies of the workers, a beast rising from piles of drugs. With vicious claws and bloody fangs, it crushed the young beneath its cloven feet" (Anaya 2006, 129). As a real evil in a modern world, drugs are killing real vulnerable people. The culture of creating profit from sucking the brains and the souls of those more vulnerable is the real work of people (Anaya 2006, 88). The Chupacabra is real and is running free in our neighborhoods (Anaya 2006, 168) killing many every minute.

Anaya's deep understanding of Chicana/o history allows him to link the present with the past, in a way that today's Chicana/o condition is not perceived in isolation but rather as a long subsection of events that carry on even to this day. He clearly understands the Chicana/o's struggle for survival has been defined by greed and domination. For Anaya, controlling the Chupacabras is a metaphoric matter of dealing with "money and power" (Anaya 2006, 158) today, as it was yesterday. Furthermore, Anaya utilizes the Chupacabras to connect ancient indigenous beliefs in order to deal with today's drug problems. Cocaine addiction is presented in many ways as a malediction or a curse. Drugs have become the new form of "'witch'

powder" (Anaya 2006, 89) meant to destroy and curse individuals. The act of using a dollar bill to snort cocaine allows Anaya to connect both . . . the curse of a witch and the notion of profiting, with only one outcome, death.

In Anaya's eyes, what makes the systematic annihilation of a community by drugs so particularly outrageous is the fact that those that can do something are turning their backs. As he cries, "an entire generation was being enslaved while governments in power paid lip service to the devastation" (Anaya 2006, 128). Anaya's strategic move of unveiling the presence of the Chupacabras is essential in order to survive and fight back. Rosa's struggle against the creature is the struggle of an entire community for their right to live. Drug trafficking is framed in the context of local and transnational poverty, urban segregation, poor access to education, police profiling, and the judicial/prison system. Without a doubt, in the novel, the Chupacabras represents the threat of drug consumption and the condition of poverty in the Chicana/o community. However, as Anaya proposes, the Chupacabras "is something bigger" (Anaya 2006, 29). It also includes the creation of policies of subjugation that favor the emergence and perpetuation of oppression and social inequality that allows vulnerability to be normalized. Since the Chupacabras does not exist in isolation, in order to destroy it, it is imperative to understand where it comes from, and follow the process back to where it was allowed to emerge.

In the novel, it is the social normalization of greed (Anaya 2006, 88) that allows for the devastating growth of a culture of drugs. "Those in power held control over the lives of the oppressed . . . much of the drug problem revolved around power. Those in power needed to keep an oppressed underclass" (Anaya 2006, 165). This Chicano author proposes throughout the novel that global displacement, forced migration, capital exploitation, government corruption, and poverty are the main ingredients that have created the Chupacabras. As Anaya explains, the current system of harm has created the conditions where "now [days] the families [are] fragmented, torn apart by poverty, torn apart by social forces far beyond their control. And there [is] a new monster, the ChupaCabra[s], and the stories of its horror [are] spreading" (Anaya 2006, 70). These problems are amplified by the fact as this system of harm creates deep ruptures in the network of healing available to these communities in order to sustain the grief created by oppression, in a vicious cycle. In many ways, the Chupacabras works as an opportunistic disease that kills Chicana/os by sucking out their brains, but it does not work alone. In the novel, the Chupacabras

also represents the loss of consciousness and the detachment from Chicana/o's cultural roots created by today's profit system that allows many social diseases to infect their community.

As proposed by Anaya, in order to kill the Chupacabras, it is imperative to help Chicana/os to understand the forces around them and to recognize their long-term toxic effects. Creating a consciousness about the reality of the Chupacabras, as experienced by the community, is an essential part of the project of emancipation proposed by Anaya in his novel. Rosa, the main character in the story, suffers a transformation as the unfolding events take place. The Rosa we encounter at the beginning of the novel is not the same as the Rosa we find at the end. Her understanding as an academic and as a social activist is deeply reshaped as she is confronted repeatedly with her own mortality and the struggles of her students. At the end of the novel, Rosa is able to save her life and prevents a ship from delivering its drug cargo (and the Chupacabras) into the United States. Paradoxically, she is unable to stop the Chupacabras. The reader is left with the reality that the creature is free and ready to attack again at any moment. For Anaya, the system of harm has not been defeated and it is already searching for new ways to engage in creating destruction. The Chupacabras, and what he stands for, is a real monster, one coming from the outside, one that is killing Latina/o Chicana/o communities. In this sense, the Chupacabras proves to be a very real thing.

## Responding to Great Violence with an Even Greater Imagination

The Chupacabras is itself more than a blood-sucking creature. It represents a complex system of meanings, values, and practices that responds to the equally complex reality of the lives of people. It is the product of the clash between the North and the South. An apparently dismissible creature with a preference for the blood of goats, chickens, and life stock animals, is in reality a very complicated and sophisticated entity. The violence of late capitalism is the other face behind the Chupacabras. The atrocities produced by a system of greed at the crossroads of a new millennium require an even more complex system of uncanny signifiers to accommodate a new set of hyper-realities. In his attacks, the Chupacabras constructs and reconstructs the narratives of violence that have been scripted into brown communities. This blood-sucking creature enacts collective agency and it displays fear.

In many ways, this creature unifies and amplifies violence, as it calls the attention to what is happening at the periphery, in the slums, in the forgotten lands of poor farmers affected by the neoliberal policies such as those of NAFTA. The Chupacabras is history turned into uncanny flesh, one that is tangible but also intangible, always changing and adapting to the new oppressive realities. As a response to an oppressive system that presents itself as omnipresent, these creatures equally cannot be captured, domesticated, or killed. Clearly, the boundaries of the "real" and the "imaginary" are blurry, capricious, exchangeable, complementary, and sometimes flat out fictitious, but cannot be dismissed.

The Chupacabras emerges as a polysemic signifier, one inscribed with colonial discourses of power. The relationship between institutionalized violence along the United States–Mexico border and the world of the uncanny, the phantasmagoric, and the imaginary as sites of cultural, social, and economic negotiations extends beyond this figure. This is not the last time we will hear about the Chupacabras; he is still running free, attacking, and preying on vulnerability. He is out there already shifting and evolving, planning his next attack. The next time you hear a report of his wrongdoings, please think twice . . . who is the real monster in that story?

## Notes

1. The Chupacabras, or Goatsucker, is a vampire-like creature of cryptic status. The name, Chupacabras, comes from its distinctive way of killing its prey, by sucking their blood. The Chupacabras tends to feed predominantly on livestock. The creature is described as a reptilian dog-like quadruped, capable of standing on two legs when it runs or is scared. It is believed to be approximately 3–4 feet tall and people have reported seeing it hopping around as it moves. It is described to have oval eyes, spikes on its back, claws, and fangs that it uses to drain the blood of its victims. Reports describe a creature that combines reptile-like skin, hair, and in rare cases, feathers. Some more fantastic descriptions of the Chupacabras depict it with glowing red eyes, and note the presence of a sulfuric stench after it attacks. The Chupacabras differentiates from other types of vampire creatures by its ability to drain not just blood but also the organs of its victims. The first official sightings of the Chupacabras were reported in March 1995 on the island of Puerto Rico, soon after other sightings were reported in Texas, California, Mexico, and Latin America. Today, the Chupacabras has been sighted on the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, in places like Spain, Portugal, Central Russia, and the Philippines.

2. Notice that Rudolfo Anaya uses the form "ChupaCabra." He capitalizes the second half of the term (*Cabra)*, perhaps in part, as a way to reinforce the compound nature of the word. English mass media and academic circles have used the Spanish single version "Chupacabra" as well as the plural version "Chupacabras" for the most part equally. However, in the Spanish media, the plural, "Chupacabras," is the most popular form and is the predominately used variation. I argue that the singular form *chupacabra,* used almost exclusively by the English-speaking media, stems from an incorrect interpretation of the English translation "goat sucker" back into Spanish as a singular term. The term ChupaCabra (singular and with a capital C in the middle) will be used only in those cases in which Rudolfo Anaya's novel is quoted directly in order to respect the integrity and cohesion with the author.

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