

LIBERANOS DE TODO
MAL/BUT DELIVER
US FROM EVIL

Latina/o Monsters Theory
and the Outlining of our
Phantasmagoric landscapes

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At first, they made me think
that I was a monster,
then they “made” me a monster,
and at the end... I saved them,
but I remain a monster.

Monsters are unique historic and epistemic cultural products. According to Stephen T. Asma, the word “monster derives from the Latin word *monstrum*, which in turn derives from the root *monere* (to warn). To be a monster is to be an omen” (13), a portent. However, according to David Wardle the term comes from Cicero’s verb *monstra*, to show or to demonstrate (75). In this sense, monsters work both as omens and signs. They are never culturally silent, as they “speak” aloud about the conditions and communities from which they emerged and lived. For the most part, monsters terrorize, repulse, scare, and haunt our existence, but they also fascinate and attract us. They can bring out the best and the worst of human beings.

Monsters and phantasmagoric creatures populate our Latina/o culture(s), our landscapes (physical and imaginary) and our histories. They exist everywhere, both in the tangible and intangible parts of our worlds. Monsters have accompanied our existence as faithful reminders of our fragile realities. In many ways, monsters are central to our consciousness as Latina/os, not just because we have grown up with their terrifying stories told to us by

our families and friends, but also as racialized subjects. Latina/os in the United States have been construed as monsters, as subjects of terror, as the Other. Being a Latina/o in the United States carries the burdens of the legacies of racism (and orientalism) that permeate all aspects of our social lives in regard to the access to resources for health care, housing, education, job security, etc., to the point of “premature death” (Gilmore 28).

I argue that the duality of studying/analyzing monsters while simultaneously being construed as social monsters is what differentiates Latina/o Monsters Theory (LMT) from mainstream traditional monster theory, as it allows for a unique standpoint in which to approach the imaginary. In this chapter, I explore both of these realities. In the first part, *Monsters*, and the *Exorcising of Knowledge*, I present the basics of monster theory, and the work done by Latina/os in expanding the analysis of these complex entities. I am particularly interested in exploring the nuanced approaches and interventions created by Latina/o feminist, queer, and race scholars in this field. This section will explore the epistemic, knowledge value, of monsters in the Latina/o community. The second section in this chapter, *Monstrous Encounters and Crisis Monsters*, will outline the trajectory of U.S. Latina/o monsters; in particular how they have been defined by what I call *monstrous colonial encounters*, or moments of crisis created by political and socio-economical transformations. I call these encounters monstrous because they are characterized by violence, cruelty, and the creation or perpetuation of vulnerability. I define these encounters as “colonial”, because they preserve the legacies of European colonial disparity of power and distribution of resources and knowledge. In this section, I discuss five main monstrous encounters. The main objective of this chapter is to present monsters as important entities to understand the Latina/o experience of oppression, and the possibilities the imaginary provides to envision alternative worlds outside racial and colonial models of subjugation.

Monsters, and the Exorcising of Knowledge

The process of colonial subjugation of a community happens at the physical, emotional, aesthetical, intellectual, spiritual, and imaginary levels. The control of the transit and the processes of validation of knowledge about a community and its histories are central parts of the process of colonization. As Michael Foucault has observed, our society works within a system of knowledge hierarchy where some types of knowledge are “subjugated” (7), disqualified, or defined as inadequate and naïve (7) while others are reproduced, and utilized to define progress, civility, and the sense of what it means to be human. Being a minority or a subjugated community, as Latina/os in the United States, means to develop a unique relationship to this hierarchy of knowledge. Many of our community knowledge[s] have been defined as invalid, backward, or useless for the “development” of the nation. Therefore, the process of assimilation has implied the “suppression” of those knowledge[s]. This occurred, for example, through the control of school curriculum, language, history narratives, and more recently, by the banning of books dealing with the Latina/o experience in the American Southwest. Simultaneously, false and/or misleading knowledge about the Latina/o community is created and disseminated. Latina/os have been portrayed as lazy, noisy, welfare “vampires,” hypersexual, and violent. In other words, knowledge has been created to construe Latina/os as social monsters that must be controlled, reeducated, segregated, or “deported” into invisibility. It is in this epistemic context that imagination can provide an invaluable source for the transfer and dissemination of in-situ knowledge about these communities, to envision a “different” world and to propose social and economic changes that recognize their experiences. The world of the imagination, allows for the opening of

possibilities beyond the “norms” of what is possible and the assumptions about what it means to be a Latina/o. Furthermore, the imaginary provides a venue to create new knowledge about the world and the self.

In this sense, the Latina/o monsters are materializations of what Rossana Reguillo calls “critical social knowledge” (40), which in these cases have been inscribed strategically within the flexible spaces of the vernacular. I say strategically, precisely because vernacular productions that have been disqualified as valuable or “serious” knowledge can travel for the most part, outside the “interest” of the mainstream. Labeled as “superstitions” or “folk myths,” these monsters and popular legends can navigate undetected outside the gaze that polices and maintains the social hierarchy of knowledge. In a high-level of refinement the Latina/o community maneuvers the process of knowledge “subjugation” (Foucault 7), that has been imposed on them in order to construct a venue, the imaginary, to transport knowledge useful for their survival. Using Walter Mignolo’s arguments in *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, we can call these subversive epistemic maneuvers as truly “subaltern modernities” (13), or sophisticated productions generated by oppressed communities in order to deal with the effects of their subjugated status. Furthermore, these monsters are not alone as they form part of a larger network of other epistemic oral productions such as corridos, jokes, and legends that exemplify what Américo Paredes studied and referred to as “sabidurías populares” (Saldívar 56) or popular/vernacular knowledge (Paredes I).

For Stephen T. Asma, a “monster is more than an odious creature of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*” (13), as important and crucial as many of the other categories we have constructed in our societies, such as aesthetics, religion, literature, and politics. For Asma, monsters have been used to construct, control, and regulate many of these domains (13). He writes, a

[m]onster ... is a product of and a regular inhabitant of the imagination, but the imagination is a driving force behind our entire perception of the world. If we find monsters in our world, it is sometimes because they are really there and sometimes because we have brought them with us (14)

This argument highlights the intimate connection between the real and the imaginary, a connection that mutually feeds each other and cannot always be differentiated. This is why Jacques Lacan rejects the argument that the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic are separate (Gallop 162), as he understands how interconnected they actually are. This is precisely the argument behind underpinning Emile Durkheim’s explanation that “to be able to call certain facts supernatural, one must already have an awareness that there is a natural order of things” (24). In other words, our imagination responds to the real, as the real is affected by our imagination. Monsters, as outrageous and out of this world as they may appear, are intimated and defined by the real, as well as the context from which they were created.

Monstrous Encounters and Crisis Monsters

In his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us how a “monster is born only ... as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment of a time, a feeling, and a place ... The monstrous body is pure culture” (4). Monsters are cultural products that, much like legends and myths, hold cultural knowledge. They are records of collective

memory encrypted within a cultural and socio-political context. A monster is foremost history turned into uncanny flesh that is mobile. They remind us, as Cohen describes, of “times of crisis” (6), or as Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui explain, monster narratives “offer a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time”(1). In other words, we can reveal the history of a community by the different monsters that have inhabited and haunted their cultural territories over time. In this sense, monsters are quite valuable for the study of a community, and in the case of Latina/os, they can help us to understand the effects of systematic oppression and discrimination, as well as the many coping and resilience mechanisms developed by this community over time.

Monsters are never naïve; on the contrary, they are very sophisticated productions that not only materialize social anxieties and fears, but also call attention to the effects of subjugation upon a community. For Avery Gordon, phantasmagoric entities such as ghosts are symbols of something that is missing or of something that remains to be resolved (139). They have the ability to expand our expectations of the future, precisely because they remind us about our haunted past. For Gordon “to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects” (190), deeply interconnected to the past, in the case of the Latina/o community a past defined by violence and subjugation. Ghosts and monsters tie us to a past, to the social conditions that allowed for their emergence, and their existence in the first place. They certainly are both evidence and an omen at the same time.

By weaving these concepts of being “haunted” by our past, and the emergence of monsters during “times of crisis” proposed by Gordon and Cohen, I argue that the Latina/o monster experience in the United States, especially for those in the American Southwest, has been defined by five main monstrous encounters: (1) the Spanish conquest experience; (2) nineteenth century U.S. expansionism; (3) the twentieth century’s interwar period; (4) the World Trade Organisation (WTO) era; and more recently, (5) the millennium neo anti-immigrant nativist movements. I argue that each one of these “crisis” periods is characterized by unique transformations on the landscape of the imaginary, precisely because they demarked monstrous transformations in the socio-economic everyday life of Latina/o communities with new layers of out-of-this-world cruelty and violence. Each one of these periods has its own monsters. These monsters are multilateral, as they work as projections (monsterizations) of the Latina/o community, and simultaneously as a materialization of the monstrous conditions experienced by Latina/os. In many ways these monsters are an uncanny ideology that “haunts” the imaginaries of our history. Because of limitations of space, and the introductory scope of this chapter, I will not expansively describe each of these periods. However, I will try to give the readers sufficient information to understand the monstrous forms that characterize and differentiate each one of these periods, as well as the pantheon of monsters that they fostered. I argue inspired by Cathryn J. Merla Watson’s words that our Latina/o history is “haunted by an invisible net of histor[ies] and embodied memor[ies], specters of colonialism and misogynist transnational imaginaries” (236). What follows is a brief description of some of these monsters.

The Spanish Conquest Experience: Keeping the Cry for Our People

The Spanish Conquest is a period in the Latina/o history defined by out-of-this-world apocalyptic transformations, the genesis of our “modern” mestizo Latina/o monstrous history. This period of extreme crisis was built on the premise of the cultural supremacy of European settlers in the Americas. The horrors of forced acculturation, sexual policing and rape, biological warfare, and the imposition of foreign religious, social and economical

norms called for the emergence of unique monsters that haunt us until today, as ‘reminders’ of the horror of cultural genocide and colonial violence. La Llorona or Weeping Woman with its pre-Columbian conquest and postcolonial imperial connections, expansions, and evolutions, signifies an entity that represents this period. It is because of its great geographic dissemination within the Americas, its vast variations but simultaneous consistency at the core of the legend, that we can conclude the emergence of La Llorona during the conquest/colonial era (Perez 17) as a mix of indigenous and Spanish elements, as a mestizo product. The earliest account related to La Llorona in Mexico and the American Southwest has been linked with the Aztec goddesses Cihuacoatl, an ancient Mexica-Aztec mother goddess. In particular, La Llorona has been connected to one of the eight omens believed to occur in Tenochtitlan (Mexico City today), before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in 1519, and presented by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in his *Historia genera de las cosas de la Nueva España*.¹ In his account, a woman was heard weeping and crying throughout the city and by Lake Tetzoco, “O my children, we are about to go forever. Oh my children, where am I to take you?” (Perez, 17).

One of the tales about the Llorona depict an indigenous woman in a relationship with a Spanish man, who killed their children by drowning them in water (in a river, lake, or the ocean) after betrayal. She will become La Llorona. In many cases La Llorona has been connected to La Malinche, the indigenous Nahuatl slave given to Hernán Cortez. For centuries, La Malinche has been represented negatively and erroneously as a traitor, and in part responsible for the defeat of the Aztecs. Chicanas and third world feminists of color in the U.S. have challenged this reading, and have re-signified La Malinche as the “mother” of a mestizo race, as a symbol of resilience of women to their mistreatment and abuse by patriarchy. Foremost, her desperate weeping has been interpreted as crying for the “ongoing colonial project” (Perez 19) that connects the Americas, the South and the North, their past and present. It is in this context that La Llorona is called the “eternal mother who refuses to give up on her children” (Perez 36), always weeping and looking for them. For Mark Glazer, La Llorona cries for her “children [that] are lost because of their assimilation into the dominant culture or because of violence and prejudice” (77). La Llorona calls for a community emancipated from the haunting effects of our oppressive condition. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba explains, La Llorona through her cry gives a community “voice lessons” (292) to express its despair and cry for justice.

Nineteenth Century U.S. Expansionism: The Dangerous Bandido

The ideology of exceptionalism, as exhibited by Manifest Destiny and its continental expansions, defined in particular the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States. This ideology (and the tensions about race) framed the Mexican/United States war and the implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This period is particularly important for those studying monsters in the Latina/o-U.S. context because it is deeply defined by the “construction” of Others, in this case Mexicans and Mexican Americans, as monsters, despite their categorization as ‘whites.’ Framing these communities as violent uncivilized savages, as dangerous subjects, was one of the crucial technologies used to justify exclusion and segregation. One example of these social “freak” monsters can be illustrated by the case of Joaquin Murrieta, a bandit famous in California during the California Gold Rush that followed the Mexican/American war. I chose the legend around Murrieta purposely to demonstrate how the construction of a Mexican bandit worked as a tool to present them as monstrous outlaws. Despite the controversy over whether he was a real historical figure, his

legend follows many of the characteristics associated with monsters. First, he is presented as a dangerous figure to society, one that threatens social order and attacks “good citizens.” In addition, the state not only sponsored the hunting of Murrieta, but it institutionalized the California State Rangers led by a former Texas Ranger, Captain Harry Love. Furthermore, after Murrieta’s alleged capture and execution, a monster-freak spectacle was created around this severed head, and people in the state of California were able to pay \$1 in order to see his head in a jar at traveling fairs. His dual monsterization and mythification help us to navigate the double representation of Mexicans in the United States, in particular in the Southwest during this period. For example, it is believed that the legend of Murrieta contributed to the creation of the fictional character of El Zorro by Johnston McCulley. The ties between the legend of Murrieta and his Mexican immigrant status, the previous conflict between the United States and Mexico, and the turbulent racial and class relationship between Anglos and Mexicans are evident not only in the narration of the legend, but in the politics of his existence, and the spectacle of monstrosity created around him and the people he represented. Murrieta exemplifies a valuable cultural tool to study a period demarcated by the transformation of Mexicans into Americans, from landholders and state runners into farmhands, wage-dependent poor workers and barrio-segregated second tier citizens. Murrieta as a monster materialized the ideologies of subjugation of the period.

The Twentieth Century Interwar Period and World War II: Monsters Within

In the context of Monster Latina/o Theory, the period after World War I and during World War II in the United States is important because it witnessed the emergence of a different type of social monster. In this case, Latina/os are presented, not only as foreign invaders (as in the case of Joaquin Murrieta) but rather as in-house monsters, blood suckers of social services, incapable of being educated, unwilling (by their nature) to assimilate into the American melting pot and consequently, “harmful” to the progress of the nation and democratic civilization. The notion of Latina/os as social failures, unclean and violent achieved new proportions during this period. It is precisely during this era that in 1924 the U.S. Border Patrol was established.

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 marked the beginning of the Great Depression, and the subsequent forced relocation of 500,000 to 2 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans to Mexico (Balderrama and Rodríguez 265). The fictitious argument used to justify the forced removal of these communities during the Great Depression, as Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez explain, was that they “were on [welfare] relief or were public charges” (Balderrama and Rodríguez 99) which was not true. This argument was not the only one used to control, demonize, and monsterize this community in the Southwest during this period. In other areas, like San Antonio, Texas, the rhetoric of poor sanitation and cleanliness, used previously against Chinese immigrants, was used against Mexican Americans, in particular by using the typology of the Chili Queens, or tamale and chili female street vendors that were famous landmarks of the city. As Jeffrey M. Pilcher describes, in 1937, the San Antonio city health officials started an official campaign against these vendors (Pilcher 173) by presenting them as unsanitary examples of the dirty Mexicans, who needed to be controlled, reformed, and contained (Castañeda 223). This monsterization followed a long tradition that began several decades before these food vendors were reconstructed through exotification, over-sexualization and the xenophobic statements. Nevertheless there was something new: as Pilcher writes, “the chili queens thus helped create a stereotype of dusky,

sharp-witted women, waiting to be tamed by Anglo men.” Here, race and class are used to construct undesirable “fictional” subjects for containment, where gender and sexuality are controlled and intersected.

However, it is the pachuco/Zoot Suiter that, in my opinion, exemplified the social monsters of this era. Despite the fact that the famous Sleepy Lagoon (1944) and Zoot Suit Riots of Los Angeles (1943) happened during World War II, the construction of these monsters was a process that started several years before. Consequently, I do not frame the pachuco/zoot suiters simply as war monsters, but rather as monsters whose genesis happened in the years leading up to the war. Certainly, it is during the Sleepy Lagoon murder case that the pachuco is presented ‘publically’ by state authorities as a bloodthirsty violent monster, with the previous help of the newspapers and the media. For example, Deputy Sheriff Edward Duran Ayres, head of the Foreign Relation Bureau of Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department testifying to the court about the pachuco monster, argued that “all he knows and feels is a desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon ... his desire is to kill, or at least let blood” (Obregón Pagán 162). It is in this context, that Mauricio Mazón in his book *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* explained the process of monsterization that took place during the Sleepy Lagoon trial. For Mazón, the refusal of the judge to allow the incriminated Mexican American youths to shave, shower, or change clothes during the trial was no different from “carnival freak shows and the display of deformities, aberrations, and the paraphernalia of criminals” (Mazón 28). This was possible, as Mazón explains, because during those turbulent war years “the boundaries between the real enemy and imaginary enemies were fluid” (Mazón 28). As in the case of Murietta, the spectacle of the pachuco was necessary to assert their monstrosity in the collective imagination.

Here, the process of epistemic subjugation enacted by the re-signification of social monsters as manifested in the murder trial is particularly important. Mazón writes,

The most immediate impact of the [Sleepy Lagoon] case was that it introduced a new way of thinking about zoot-suiters. They were bizarre creatures, somewhat fantastic, subterranean, clearly identifiable by their garb and argot, yet elusive and of uncertain origins. They represented a social anomaly; still they provoked anomalous behavior from the law-abiding citizen ... [They] saw them as a sinister group capable of inflicting great moral and physical harm on society

(Mazón 29)

As he presents it, the monsterization of pachuco/zoot suiters was a fictional/imaginary project within the real context of xenophobia and racism, meant to consolidate and perpetuate social inequalities. Here the monster becomes a tangible space of intersection between social fear, racial anxieties, and economic subjugation. The demonization of the pachuco/zoot suiter, as a social monster combines both ideology and aesthetics, within a judicial system purposely created to contain and domesticate subjects. The core of this particular type of Latina/o monster has remained almost immutable during the rest of the twentieth Century and the first decade of the twenty-first, despite the changes experienced in its social form and body, the ideological core has remain consistent.

The Twentieth Century Free Trade-WTO Era: Blood Sucking Vulnerability

Karl Marx described capitalism as a “vampire thirst for the living blood of labour” (Marx 367), a particular entity that “lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx 342). At the same time, Fredric Jameson called our attention to how during the last decades of the twentieth century the world experienced an “original space of some new ‘world system’ of multinational or late capitalism” (Jameson 50), with unprecedented global spread and strength (Hardt and Weeks 164). These two realities defined the monsters that emerged during this period.

Certainty, one of the characteristics of late capitalism is the creation of transnational market blocs through the signing of multilateral ‘free’ trade agreements between nations. Centralized and organized following colonial paths of exploitation, these free trade blocs regulate the transit of goods, services, labor, taxation, intellectual property rights, and access to markets. As of 2015, most nations in the world are members of the World Trade Organization,² the governing entity for international trade. Latina/os in the United States have been deeply affected by the changes generated by late capitalism, in particular changes that came in the form of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, Mexico and the United States, which came into effect on January 1, 1994, not coincidentally the same day that the insurgent Zapatista Army went public in Southern Mexico.

The last decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new type of blood-sucking creature, one that exemplified the characteristics of late capitalism, El Chupacabras, the goatsucker. This creature manifested the atrocities of this period, and the effects of a system based on sucking vulnerability (Calvo-Quirós “Chupacabras” 98). This is a Latina/o monster that materialized the horrendous transformations experienced by these communities, as well as the anxieties and fears projected upon them in the post cold war years. Like the decentralization and outsourcing practices of late capitalism that make it almost impossible to locate it, equally the Goatsucker cannot be captured or domesticated. The Chupacabras is the monster of forced migration, proletarianization of rural areas, wage dependency, land privatization, unemployment, and the destruction of welfare safeguards for the poor in what Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff call “Millennium Capitalism” (779). In this sense, the Chupacabras is a millennial child. Let us review the context of this blood-sucking creature.

The tryouts of late capitalism were first implemented within the borderlands and the colonies of today’s empires. In the case of North America, these experiments first affected, in particular, Puerto Rico and Mexico, as a process of mass decentralization and privatization defined the 1990s. This monstrous process happened on two levels. First by the reinforcement and re-signification of old colonial laws, such as the Jonas Act (1917), that forced Puerto Rico to only purchase goods from American-made ships with an “American” crew. These colonial laws exponentially continued to increase the prices and restrictions on local business growth.

Secondly, this late capitalism process happened through the implementation of new neoliberal regulations and privatizations. This included, as in the case of Puerto Rico, the sale of telecommunications (1992/1998) and the government shipping company (1995), as well as the implementation of the Executive Reorganization Act of 1993 that restructured key components of local government including public finances, industry, agricultural activities and social services. The dismantling of several fiscal protections for corporations investing in Puerto Rico was also manifested in this process. The end of fiscal breaks, such as section 936 of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code during this period, proved particularly devastating

as it promoted the exodus of pharmaceutical companies, one of the most important sources of revenue and jobs for the island.

It is precisely in this context that the Chupacabras emerged in Puerto Rico, as they witnessed a slow but consistent bleeding-out of their resources and revenues. During the following decades, Puerto Rico as a colonial territory of the U.S., experienced as a consequence of these policies, an overwhelmingly high rate of unemployment and poverty as well as a mass exodus, especially of youth, to the continental United States. By 2015, the “vampire” effects of this slow and chronic colonial death have left the island in a virtual zombie-like stage with a deficit of almost \$72 Billion.

On the other hand for Mexico, the decade leading to the 1990s was defined by similar changes meant to facilitate the implementation of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA). These changes included the privatization of *ejidos* or communal landholdings by indigenous communities; the deregulation of import restrictions on grains, particularly of U.S. subsidized corn; and the mass privatization of the government’s own infrastructure and services (Calvo-Quirós “Sucking Vulnerability” 97). As in the case of Puerto Rico, the effects of these massive changes did not translate to equal advances for its inhabitants. On the contrary, between 1993 and 2000 “Mexico lost 1.3 million agricultural jobs [...] as little farmers and peasants struggle to compete with large-scale U.S. Producers” (Anderson 94), leaving the poor more dependent upon wage income (World Bank 172). As I explained before,

Clearly, for those on the losing end, the experience of land dispossession, forced migration, and the loss of their sources for maintaining their families and preserving their culture, could have been perceived as the effects of a monster that was attacking them, one that little by little, was sucking their lives away. In those days, just as today, there were more than just livestock animals dying and succumbing, there were also communal histories, and traditions at stake

(Calvo-Quirós “Sucking Vulnerability” 215)

The Chupacabras exemplifies the effect of neoliberalism in Latina/o communities as well as the anxieties generated by a post-cold war United States. This monster’s form and its characteristics are not random: for those experiencing the effects of mass socio-economic transformations, the realm of the imaginary, provides a useful venue to materialize the hyper-real devastations of exploitation and the implementation of a “new ‘world system’” (Jameson 50). As the free trade market territories expanded simultaneously, the habitat and dominion of the Chupacabras increased. Today the Chupacabras can be found as far away as Asia and Russia.

The Neo Anti-Immigrant Nationalist Movements: Slow Dead and La Santa Muerte in the New Millenium

New increased levels of xenophobic violence, the reiteration of anti-immigrant and nativist sentiments have characterized the first decade of the twenty-first century, in particular against Latina/os, Arabs, and Muslims in the United States. As the U.S. (primarily the middle and upper middle classes) started to experience the negative effects of neoliberal policies in their lives, including the erosion of many of their safety-nets such as job security, house ownership, and the questioning of many of their racially based privileges, they turned their anxieties and fears toward more vulnerable communities, part of what I call the terrorizing technologies of distraction of capitalism.

The out-of-this-world violence experienced by marginalized communities did not happen in a vacuum. On the contrary, this was the result of the long-standing legacies of colonialism, the effects of neoliberal policies (e.g. the end of the welfare state, employment outsourcing, the privatization of education, massive incarceration, police brutality, etc.) and the constraints amplified by the “Great Recession”. For example, the conjunction of these factors and long lasting War On Drugs had devastating effects for those communities located along the U.S.-Mexico border, as they experienced the increased slaughter of civilians, state-sponsored trafficking of guns from the U.S. to Mexico and Central America (e.g. Operation Wide Receiver, and Operation Fast and Furious), and the impunity of police corruption. Death, whether coming fast and furiously by violence or long and slowly from the low-intensity war experienced by marginalized communities, has become an everyday experience along the border and the intercities. It is in this context that the devotions to La Santa Muerte (as discussed by Desirée Martin in another chapter in this volume), Jesús Malverde, and Saint Toribio Romo have increased in recent decades. For example, Toribio Romo, an official Catholic saint, has been appearing and assisting migrants as they cross the deadly Sonora Dessert from Mexico to the U.S., especially as immigration policies (e.g. Operation Gate Keeper) have forced displaced workers to leave the usual San Diego and Texas paths of transit for the more deadly routes of Arizona (see Figure 33.1)

The inter-city has become a zombie-like entity, a nightmare-city that is simultaneously dead and alive, depleted of services and investments for its survival, where gentrification has created unconnected hipster-oases within the urban desert. Even before the sub-prime mortgage crisis, Latino and black barrios experienced the effects of racial steering, poor urban planning, inflated loan rates, pollution, and police surveillance. In this context, La Santa Muerte’s increased veneration in Mexico and the United States has been exemplified by the deadly effects of social violence on Latina/os as a predominantly working class urban phenomenal. If the veneration of the Santa Muerte is an example today of a “crisis cult,”



Figure 33.1 Deadly Vulnerability: A child playing innocently with a mural of the Santa Muerte in the background, San Antonio Tultitlán, Mexico City (photo by Daniel Hernandez)

it is because the values of life, and of life as a human right are in crisis, as are the lives of marginalized poor communities which are “valuated” only through a vampire’s notions of labor, and the normalization of race categorizations. Indeed, as Achille Mbembe asserts, we are living in times where we are experiencing the “subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics)” (39) to the point that “vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40). Certainty, as the nation debates the political correctness of “Black lives matter,” Mbembe’s assertion that “the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state” (17) is as real as ever. The proliferation of La Santa Muerte among the disposed and the working class is not coincidental, as the experience of death by violence has become the norm of the new millennium. La Santa Muerte is the saint of a millennium where death reigns.

Conclusion

Certainty, monsters have been faithful companions of the Latina/o existence, as well as our consciousness and history of violence. They have scared us, tortured our psyche, and haunted our lives. But foremost they have consistently reminded us about our vulnerabilities and trajectories of oppression. We ourselves have been turned into monsters and freak-shows through the social normalization of race, prejudice and ignorance. Furthermore, each monster’s genesis, modus operandi, habitat, preferences and characteristics have showed us the intrinsic interrelations that exist between the real and the imaginary. Monsters have provided a method to unpack the effects of violence and a forced early death upon our communities. Their study has shown how marginalized communities truly understand their oppressed conditions, and utilize the imagination and the fantastic as tools for emancipation, liberation and to envision a different world, one outside the constraints of a vampire-like system that feeds on their vulnerability. For communities of color the imaginary is about the real, as the real transforms how they envision their futures. Monsters denounce violence, but they are also tools to defeat the oppressor and ultimately to combat or negotiate violence. Fortunately, because many of these monsters are unnatural racialized fictions, they cannot live forever. The more we know about them, the easier it is to eradicate them. Until then, we keep fighting and exorcising our society.

Notes

- 1 Based on the written accounts of Fray Bernardino de Shagún, wrote between 1540-1585, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, know today as the Florentine Codex.
- 2 The WTO officially started on January 1, 1995, a year after the signing of the Marrakech Agreement (1994).

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