Published as _*Perspective* in *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*
(ISSN 2366-4142)

Envisioning Vengeance: Rebellious Indigeneity, Gender and Genre in Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona*

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Keywords

Feminism, affect, coloniality, Indigeneity, Latin American Studies, horror

Publication Date

Issue 5, October 31, 2023

How to Cite

Marena Fleites Lear. "Envisioning Vengeance: Rebellious Indigeneity, Gender and Genre in Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona*." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 5 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2018.1364>.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2018.1364

On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture
Issue 5 (2023): Indigeneities
www.on-culture.org
https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2018.1364

Envisioning Vengeance: Rebellious Indigeneity, Gender and Genre in Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona*

_Abstract

This essay analyzes the 2019 Guatemalan film *La Llorona*, directed by Jayro Bustamante, in order to question the representational and affective function of monstrosity in genre cinema, asking, in particular, how it recruits Indigenous epistemology to reorient bodies away from colonial logic. As opposed to classic north American horror films, which often link non-Western spiritual practices to the unleashing of evil forces, *La Llorona* revises the genre by locating that evil in the character representing the genocidal authoritarian state, the vanquishing of which requires the use of an Indigenous spiritual practice that involves bodily possession. I argue that the film shifts the objectifying gaze from the Indigenous as Other to the white patriarchal state as the true source of monstrosity. In this way, the film stages a cathartic reckoning with a historical trauma as it also interpellates a white and Indigenous female coalition. In addition, by utilizing classic horror genre techniques and rewriting them for a local context, the film encourages an embodied response in the viewer that engages with the uncanny resonances of a national trauma.

Throughout the western hemisphere in recent years, there has been a notable increase in fictional texts (novels, television, movies) by Black, Indigenous, and artists of color—many of whom identify as queer and/or women—that fall within the category of the "speculative," i.e. fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Some examples include the novels *La Mucama de Oricunlé* by the Dominican writer Rita Indiana, and *Los Hijos de la Diosa Huracán* by the Cuban-American writer Daina Chaviano; the Brazilian film *As Boas Maneiras*, directed by Marco Dutra and Juliana Rojas; the U.S. *Black Panther* films, directed by Ryan Coogler; the Mexican film *Selva Trágica*, directed by Yulene Olaizola; and many others.[1] All these examples either directly or indirectly address the legacies of colonialism and slavery, drawing upon genre conventions like time travel, magic, and reanimation, and exploring the possibilities of posthuman bodies like cyborgs, human-animal hybrids, and the undead for expressing these historical phenomena and their resonances in the present. Given its broad impact and cultural importance, film as a medium is unique in its ability to critique essentialist notions of race, gender, sexuality, and social identity through these posthuman representations. Classic horror is a cinematic genre particularly concerned with soliciting strong affective responses from its audience through depictions of monstrous non- and post-humans, making it well equipped to transmit emotional charges based on historical traumas. While these traumas have often been

ignored by official narratives, such as those expressed in written documentation and political speech, horror cinemas can provide audiences access to them in ways that circumvent dominant representations. In sociohistorical conditions that seek to negate the histories of certain groups, audiovisual productions can thus function as indispensable tools for recuperating stories that have been silenced.

Here I will examine the Guatemalan film *La Llorona*[2] and its contributions to the horror genre, focusing on how its depiction of monstrosity reworks a global genre into a local context in order to connect more effectively with Guatemalan audiences while also achieving a wider viewership. *La Llorona*, written and directed by Jayro Bustamante, was strategically marketed as a horror film in order to get audiences to the theater, and it was later released through the online horror media platform Shudder. It reinterprets the myth of La Llorona (well known throughout Central and South America as the vengeful, weeping woman crying for the death of her children) as the motherland of Guatemala crying for her people and seeking justice for the genocide against Mayan Indigenous groups in the 1980s. "The idea was to create in the 'fiction' world a kind of space to have justice," Bustamante notes in an interview after the film's release. "Even if it was a fiction, we wanted to make a kind of catharsis."[3] My interest lies in considering how the film engages with a real history of violence through the monstrous feminine figure of La Llorona using horror film techniques. I argue that the film modifies the classic horror genre by shifting the objectifying gaze from the Indigenous as Other to the white, patriarchal state as the true source of monstrosity. In this way, the film stages a cathartic reckoning with a historical trauma as it also interpellates a white and Indigenous female coalition for the purposes of seeking justice.

In her monograph *From Amazons to Zombies: Monsters in Latin America*, Persephone Braham traces the development of multiple monsters in cultural imaginaries throughout the region and links the centrality of theories of monstrosity to the construction and representation of Latin America itself. Braham pinpoints the origins of the feminine monstrous in her study of Aristotle's writing on monsters and underscores that "Aristotle's monsters are the product of errors in 'generation' or reproduction; woman, by failing to be born male, is a monstrous though necessary accident. Woman is inherently abnormal because she lacks that which defines the male."[4] Men, for Aristotle, are the only ones capable of active creation, and this

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justifies their subjection of the female Other. Braham traces the genealogy of the monstrous from these origins to its uses in the conquest and subsequent colonization of the Americas, which required an imagined monstrous external Other to validate the stability of the European subject. Braham writes:

> In the Age of Discovery as in previous moments of encounter, this discourse supported the endeavor of conquest by portraying others as hybrid human-animal monsters, often in female form, incapable of the civilized language that would allow for negotiation, and condemned to a justifiably violent subjugation.[5]

The fearsome monstrosity of the Indigenous populations was mapped onto the unknown wildness of the land itself, and later the enslaved Africans were likewise assimilated to the category of "savage, irrational Other," perceived as inferior to the rational and civilized European man which dominated the category of 'Human' under the terms of the Judeo-Christian matrix, as Sylvia Wynter observes.[6] Thus, marked as barbarous, monstrous, and often feminized Others, Indigenous, African, and Afro-descendent peoples of the Americas came to be overdetermined by their ties to nature and the body, in perceived opposition to the rational disembodiment of the Cartesian subject. The legacy of this colonial epistemology is a violent one, one which has left indelible traces passed on for centuries. The decolonizing of this epistemology demands the deconstruction of networks of power that have organized bodies according to sexuality, gender, and race. But beyond merely unveiling the systems of power that have marked these bodies, how can those inhabiting the still-remaining colonial wound begin to imagine otherwise, beyond the limits of its binary systems? For female Indigenous subjects in particular, what possibilities lie in reimagining the monster?

La Llorona directly engages with this history of racialized oppression by using supernatural elements to connect the past with the present, and by using a monstrous figure as a vessel for enacting revenge against past injustices perpetrated on Indigenous people. The titular character of Bustamante's film is a figure of folklore found in different iterations throughout Latin America; here, she surfaces as a Mayan woman seeking revenge for the murder of her children at the hands of the Guatemalan military. *La Llorona* begins with a fictional dramatization of the 2013 trial of Jose Efraín Rios Montt, the military dictator of Guatemala between 1982 and 1983. Paralleling real events, the film depicts the court's conviction of the dictator's actions

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as genocidal crimes against humanity, and the subsequent overturning of that ruling by the Constitutional Court of Guatemala. Rios Montt's retrial began in January 2015, but the court ruled that because he suffered from dementia he could not be sentenced, and Rios Montt died a few months later before the trial could be completed. The film's fictional stand-in for Rios Montt is a character named Enrique Monteverde. The film depicts Monteverde's life in the days after his conviction is overturned, when he is forced into house arrest, with his wife Carmen, daughter Natalia, granddaughter Sara, and a bodyguard for their protection, as protesters crowd around his estate chanting and shouting angrily. Instead of suffering a gradual descent into dementia like his nonfictional counterpart, Monteverde becomes haunted by the spirit of La Llorona. The haunting and emotional disintegration of the Monteverde family within the confines of their home, surrounded by political protestors, provides the central narrative action of the film, and slowly builds tension as the film approaches a dramatic climax. Whereas conventional horror cinema usually first presents characters that invite sympathy with the spectator in order to make their haunting more terrifying, here Enrique Monteverde is not provided any backstory or specific character traits that would endear him to any viewer: we know solely that he is elderly, relatively wealthy, and awaiting trial. The only depth provided is for the female characters, who nevertheless only become sympathetic in proportion to their gradually increasing acknowledgement of the patriarch's crimes. Monteverde and his wife, for their part, are shown maintaining racist and contemptuous attitudes toward their Indigenous household staff. Given this unsympathetic portrayal of the Monteverde family, the impact of La Llorona's haunting presence is at first only slightly unsettling rather than terrifying. In what follows, I will closely analyze the film's representation of Indigeneity in relation to its horror aesthetics to better understand its political statements as aligned with its genre revisions.

The use of Indigenous language and traditional clothing serve to distinguish the domestic servants from the Monteverde family and to align them with the Mayan women who testify against Monteverde in court. Carmen's dismissive attitude toward both the servants and the witnesses is representative of the racist and hierarchical structures dominant in Guatemalan society, which makes the later use of her body as a vessel for the spirit's revenge an effective political gesture. The household staff is made up of Indigenous Kaqchikel speakers (ethnic Mayans), who—in contrast to the

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oblivious Monteverdes—soon become aware of the nature of the house's ghost and promptly leave the family's employ. Valeriana, the loyal head servant, is the only one to remain, and she sends for other domestic servants from her own home village to replace those who left. Alma is the only one to respond, and she arrives in the Monteverde household, a young woman with long black hair and traditional Mayan dress. At first she appears meek and harmless, if strangely silent, but as the film progresses it becomes clear that Alma is the embodiment of the tormented spirit La Llorona who increases the disquiet experienced by the Monteverde family. The film centers on the women of the household: Carmen, Natalia, and Sara, as well as Valeriana and Alma, the two Indigenous maids. We watch as Carmen gradually transforms from staunch defender of her husband to a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown, as the haunting presence grows and begins to take over her body and unravel her mind. Natalia, initially isolated from her father's evil deeds, begins to question his involvement in the genocide and sexual violence, and eventually learns that Valeriana is her half-sister: Monteverde's daughter with an Indigenous woman. In the film's climactic scene, Alma/La Llorona acquires full possession of Carmen's body and forces her to relive the drowning of Alma's two children at the hands of Monteverde and his men. Carmen pleads with Monteverde in Alma's voice, then the camera shows Monteverde holding a gun and we hear a gunshot, followed by Carmen's slow turn to see Alma laying on the ground with a gunshot wound in her forehead, her dark hair spread out in the river water. The murder of Alma and her two children is what prompts Carmen to strangle Monteverde within this vision/timewarp/bodily possession (1:25:15–1:27:22), and the viewer is then led to believe she has killed him in reality, given that the next scene is the dictator's funeral. The murder of the former dictator is the moment of emotional catharsis that Bustamante creates for his film's Guatemalan audience, which has been denied a tangible form of legal justice for the crimes perpetrated by Montt's regime. It is also a form of contesting denials of past violence that operates immediately on the spectator's body through the scene's affective impact. As scholars Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Peterson assert in their discussion of "haunting aesthetics" in Latin American literature and cinema, the embrace of metaphor and suspense tactics in cinema, as opposed to a realist aesthetic, "operate[s] with an indirect, deliberately unrealistic approach that acknowledges the difficulty of narrativizing the

past" and in addition "its emphasis on the aftereffects of violence establishes affective links between past and present as well as the availability of this past to be repaired by a discursive act of justice."[7] La Llorona's possession of Carmen's body creates a link between events that occurred in the past (1982–1983) and the diegetic present (2013) and reinscribes the prior instance of racist violence on the white bodies of Carmen and Sara (who begins to asphyxiate as if she is one of the drowning children during the murder scene). The subsequent murder of Monteverde at the hands of Carmen is a clearly allegorical act, but nevertheless one that creates a visceral recognition of violence against the Indigenous, and at the same time demands the intervention of white women in the pursuit of justice.

Like much of recent Guatemalan artistic production, this film is haunted by the violent events of the last half of the 20th century, but it distinguishes itself through its women-centered narrative and its direct engagement with the horror genre via a folkloric figure of cultural importance. Rios Montt's bloody regime was short, but his was just the last of a long series of right-wing military dictatorships that began with General Ydigoras Fuentes in the late 1950s. Guatemala's nation-building project had the twin goals of eradicating communism and becoming a modern nation, and Indigenous people were cast as enemies to be eliminated in the pursuit of both goals, as they were deemed susceptible to siding with communist guerrillas as well as opposed to modernization. As Latin American literary scholar Jean Franco explains,

> the urgency of modernization transposed racism into a different key and turned the indigenous from an exploited labor force into a negative and undesirable mass. The doctrine of developmentalism widely disseminated after the Second World War emphasized the independent self-determined individual. By contrast, the basis of indigenous life was the community, which for the modernizing intellectual was an anachronism. During the civil wars of the 1980s, the Guatemalan military targeted the indigenous, whose extermination or forced assimilation was deemed essential to the thorough overhaul of the state in the name of modernization.[8]

The genocide carried out against these groups also had a distinctly gendered dimension, given the systematic practice of rape and torture of women and the brutal killing of children, as has been well documented in the Guatemalan report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), *Memoria del silencio*.[9] Indigenous women were seen as the means of reproducing the very ethnic difference that the neoliberal state wanted to eliminate, and their children were therefore the seeds of that difference. Franco notes, "rape was a calculated act that targeted monolingual

women *wearing traditional dress and speaking indigenous languages*, for women as bearers of tradition must be incapacitated or destroyed in the cause of creating a new Guatemala cleared of the guerrillas and ethnic difference."[10] Thus, Mayan women and children were cast as the monstrous Other by the Guatemalan state, the evil to be purged. This history undergirds the story of *La Llorona*, in which women and children drive the narrative and distinct Mayan ethnic identities are foregrounded. While Alma is at first presented as the film's threatening monster, by the end of the film she becomes the means through which a coalition of the Monteverde women and Valeriana come together to defeat and expel the real monster—the murderous, white, male Monteverde. In this construction of an interethnic female coalition, spiritual knowledge is positioned as essential for resisting patriarchal and colonial logics.

While this alignment of the spiritual and supernatural with Indigeneity constitutes a spectacle for the film audience, it also reinforces the disconnect between those in power and those Mayan groups who suffered the worst effects from the Civil War: the Monteverde family is unable to fully conceptualize the effects of the violence until they are literally made to feel it. The use of Indigenous language is one mechanism for emphasizing this disconnect. The first time we hear Indigenous language being spoken in the film, it is early on, when the Monteverde family is preparing for the trial. It is nighttime, and Valeriana, the maid, prays to her ancestors while lighting candles and speaking in Kaqchikel[11]. She demonstrates a syncretic religious practice that incorporates both Mayan symbols as well as making the Christian sign of the cross, praying for the protection of the household and the banishment of evil. Soon afterwards, Monteverde is awakened from sleep by the sound of crying and running water, causing him to grab his gun and stalk the house in search of the intruder, whereupon he almost shoots his own wife by accident. The household staff are later gathered together to be questioned by the family about their knowledge of this event, and Kaqchikel is spoken again as the Indigenous servants speculate amongst themselves about the identity of the mysterious intruder. They seem to grasp her identity as La Llorona immediately as well as her proximity to the house ("it was her" says one, "did he hear her far or near?" asks another, and when the first one answers "close to his ear," the second one responds, "then she is not near") (12:43–12:55). The film provides subtitles here for the audience, but the Monteverde family themselves are not able to understand the Indigenous language,

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and Valeriana deflects when entreated to translate. Thus, within the first fifteen minutes of the film, we are given to understand that the Indigenous characters have a special affinity with spiritual and supernatural forces, and a kind of access that the white characters do not have and are incapable of comprehending fully. The emphasis on ethnic difference through language and dress constitutes a defiant confrontation of anti-Indigenous sentiments, which seek to erase that difference and build an ethnically homogeneous nation.

The second element that Franco identifies as an important marker of Indigeneity is traditional dress, and it is used in the film to illustrate Indigenous female strength and unity. The courtroom scene contains noteworthy costuming, color, and lighting, particularly when a Mayan woman gives testimony about the violence inflicted upon her by Monteverde's soldiers. Creating a stark contrast with the drained white, grey, dark blue, and black colors worn by the Monteverde women, the (unnamed) woman who testifies is dressed in traditional clothing with beautiful, riotous colors, and a blue semitransparent veil with gold embroidery. Her veiled face takes up most of the screen in a close-up that begins the scene, which then continues in a long take as she speaks, the camera very slowly zooming out. According to the Latin American literary scholar Monica Albizúrez Gil's personal correspondence with the film's costume designer Sofía Latán, this is a traditional dress of the Nebaj village, located within the department of El Quiché, part of the Ixil area where the majority of the genocide was carried out, and "consequently, this choice 'was an homage to the ancestral women' who suffered violence during the armed conflict."[12] The woman speaks in her native language with a Spanish interpreter, testifying to the burning of her village and the sexual assault perpetrated by soldiers, and finishes her testimony by lifting her veil, declaring "I am not ashamed to come and tell you what I lived through, I hope that you are not ashamed to do justice" (18.38–19.03). This enormously symbolic act of lifting the veil coupled with the exhortation that the legal system be unashamed.

> implies that there has been concealment on the part of the judicial system in relation to the crimes of the armed conflict against indigenous women (impunity/amnesty) and, at the same time, opens the possibility of recuperating or recovering that nation in the act of justice, which would be a condemnatory sentence and reparations.[13]

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As the camera moves back, the Indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú and the white anthropologist Alejandra Colom are revealed to be sitting directly behind the woman testifying. The presence of these two important real-life political figures indicates a "metadiscursive narrative" which results in "the validation of an ethnic and political alliance in the cultural memory […] of the trial."[14] While the fictional trial emphasizes the importance of testimony as a way of giving voice to the oppressed, it also reinforces the role of the white intellectual as ally.[15] The courtroom scene thus anticipates the ethnic and political alliance enacted in the climactic scene that results in the death of the dictator. The path towards justice envisioned by the film is one in which the oppressed Mayans are given voice and their experiences are validated, undergirded by ethnic and class alliances led by women. Ultimately, retribution is not only sought by the Indigenous, but by all the female characters who to varying degrees have been wronged by the dictatorship: a coalition is needed to bring together forces strong enough to defeat the twin evils of state-sanctioned violence and misogyny, embodied by the character of Enrique Monteverde.

The connection between Indigenous people and the supernatural is a trope of Hollywood genre films, but here it takes on a unique dimension by becoming a means to exert Indigenous agency against patriarchal state oppression. As Native North American scholars such as Philip J. Deloria, Joanna Hearne, and Michelle Raheja have noted, Hollywood films often position indigenous lifeways as an exotic deviation from the white, Eurocentric norm. Stereotypical representations of 'Indianness' highlight cultural difference either derogatorily, showing Native worldviews to be anachronistic and alien to modernity, or in the best of cases romanticized with little regard for authenticity. In many cases Native Americans in Hollywood serve the purpose of reifying the myth of white dominance, wherein the 'white savior' is the rightful inheritor and preserver of Native knowledge, given the perceived inevitable extinction of Native cultures. The image of the isolated and wise old medicine man or shaman usually serves to help along a white character on their spiritual journey (as in for example Darren Aronofsky's 2006 film *The Fountain*[16]), but never shown to be a vital part of a thriving community that acknowledges the present connections between people, land, and spirit. Much recent scholarship has analyzed the use of 'spectrality' in Indigenous filmmaking to emphasize these connections, and to counter stereotypes of the 'vanishing Indian' by highlighting the

continuance of ancestral knowledge in the present.[17] An example of the latter form of representation might be *Before Tomorrow*[18], a 2009 film produced by the Igloolik-based women's collective Arnait Video Productions (based in Nunavut, Canada), which retells an ancient story as a means for passing on important Inuit tribal knowledge and history to viewers. Using digital video to revitalize older traditions of oral storytelling, *Before Tomorrow* is a story told by the wise-woman Ningiuq of the death of her community through disease, wrought by the colonial encounter. Although it is a story of the death of an Inuit community, the ghosts that populate it are a potent symbol of resistance against colonial narratives of erasure. In the film, the central character Ningiuq passes on her knowledge to her grandson, not a white settler protagonist, and at the same time she demonstrates traditional skills such as the use of the seal-oil lamp and the use of Inuktitut language to the film viewers, in direct defiance of the prevalent notion of Indigenous extinction. As Dianne Chisholm argues, by reappearing amongst living characters to share traditional knowledge, "the ghosts of *Before Tomorrow* overshadow the spectral images of Inuit life that occupy colonial archives as documentary evidence of a deceased or surpassed existence."[19] While it might seem counterintuitive to employ ghosts in the service of resisting colonial erasure, insisting on the presence of absent loved ones in the context of the Guatemalan process of historical reckoning is an essential strategy when for many years the evidence of their murders was suppressed or ignored. In addition, the official archival evidence of death and violence reifies a narrative of Indigenous victimhood, while different forms of storytelling such as *La Llorona* can make use of genre techniques to present images of Indigenous resilience and strength.

Although made in a different context than *Before Tomorrow* and adding the element of horror, *La Llorona* similarly engages the myth of the vanishing native through its cinematic ghost. It likewise references the "spectres produced by a violent encounter with colonialism that 'ghosted' Aboriginal peoples [...] through exterminating practices," as Gerry Turcotte notes in relation to Australian Aboriginal films that also feature ghosts.[20] Given the history of violent attempts to erase Indigenous Mayans in Guatemala, the specter of La Llorona can be figured as "both insurrection and resurrection" of the dead, a supernatural symbol with a political imperative.[21] In Bustamante's film, the Mayan people are positioned as key to not only understanding present political and social reality, but laying claim to a future in

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which perpetrators of violence against their communities must face consequences. The film is also a form of witnessing that blends documentary elements with fiction in order to emphasize the persisting aftereffects of past violence. Alma is almost immediately cast as a type of witness when she first appears amidst the crowd of protestors, slowly weaving her way through Indigenous, mestizo, and ladino people chanting and holding signs with pictures of their 'disappeared' loved ones. She comes to a stop just outside a line of guards in riot gear, next to someone holding a sign that says "se busca genocida" (wanted: genocidal killer), and looks up, accusation plainly written in her eyes, to meet the gaze of Monteverde, who watches her through an upstairs window (33:45). The sign in this shot also contains an image that imitates prints and drawings of the real Rios Montt, including graffiti painted in Guatemala City in 2015 protesting the court verdict. Gazing directly at the camera, Alma appears like an angel of vengeance to confront Monteverde, and by extension, the film viewer. The film asks the spectator to reflect on their own position in relation to these historical events and their level of complicity in the extermination of thousands of people.

Bustamante's choice to utilize horror genre conventions in a film that reckons with a history of gendered and racial violence is particularly noteworthy given this genre's complex relation to gender, sexuality, and race. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have analyzed the ways in which classic horror films (predominantly European and U.S.-made, and directed by men) allowed viewers to experience the destruction of oppressive patriarchal and heterosexual norms, even as they were reasserted by the end of the film. Many scholars of the monstrous and the Gothic in cinema and literature have similarly pointed out the double function of the monster as both a disciplinary and a subversive figure. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal study on the Gothic, she refers to it as "an aesthetic of pleasurable fear," referring to the combination of desire and fear in relation to an Other that the Gothic inspires.[22] Often this pleasurable fear is motivated by a monstrous female figure, as occurs in *La Llorona* when Alma lures Monteverde to her through the sound of her voice, and appears to him wearing a wet white dress that clings to her body as she combs her long, wet hair. Jack Halberstam builds upon Sedgwick's work by suggesting that this aesthetic "makes pleasure possible only by fixing horror elsewhere, in an obviously and literally foreign body, and by then articulating the need to expel the foreign

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body" which reasserts the power of the supposedly 'normal' and disciplined sexuality of the reader.[23] In canonical Gothic works, the focus on monstrous sexuality tends to subsume histories of class, race, and nationalism. This can be illustrated by the emblematic Gothic novel, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in which the vampire Count Dracula leaves his distant foreign abode to come to England, becoming a sexual threat to the English female protagonist Lucy Westenra. Halberstam argues that Count Dracula

> merges Jewishness and monstrosity and represents this hybrid monster as a threat to Englishness and English womanhood in particular. In the Jew, then, Gothic fiction finds a monster versatile enough to represent fears about race, nation, and sexuality, a monster who combines in one body fears of the foreign and the perverse.[24]

The vampire is ultimately vanquished through the scientific and rational prowess of Dr Van Helsing, who claims that the only way to ensure the complete destruction of the vampire is to bury it in the dirt of its home country (Romania), thus reifying the necessity of securing boundaries around a distinctly non-Jewish national identity through the defense and control of white womanhood and 'normal' sexuality. Just as the Jews in 19th century Europe were subject to internal colonization, so were Guatemalan Indigenous populations in the late 20th century. Yet, *La Llorona* turns the Gothic horror genre on its head: whereas traditional Gothic texts contain a monstrous figure that threatens the security and unity of the domestic sphere (a metonymy for the nation), here the monster (the ghostly figure of Alma) provides the means through which the family can come together to expel the one who represents the real evil: General Monteverde. This becomes a symbolic gesture of reincorporating the 'foreign' within the national body in a female white and Indigenous alliance. The seeming external threat that invades the domestic sphere thus reveals and exorcizes the internal threat that was already present.

The film's insistence on seeking an Indigenous and white female alliance to combat patriarchal violence is also a decolonial gesture, which seeks to disrupt oppositional categories of tradition versus modernity, past versus present, and Indigenous versus white. This binary logic is a remnant of coloniality, which scholars such as María Lugones have identified as a repressive epistemological framework that has for centuries systematically denied agency and subjectivity to Indigenous and enslaved people, reducing them to "less than human primitives, satanically possessed,

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infantile, aggressively sexual, and in need of transformation."[25] This logic unfortunately persists in much of recent cinema, a pertinent example being the film *The Curse of La Llorona*, directed by Michael Chaves, released in the U.S. the same year as Bustamante's film and centered on the same folk legend.[26] *The Curse*, rather than attempt to problematize the monstrous figure, takes its monstrosity at face value and La Llorona becomes nothing more than a horrifying bogeyman attempting to kill the children of the white female protagonist. In addition, in a similar gesture to the aforementioned *Dracula*, there is a suggestion that the monster arrives in the U.S. from Mexico in the form of a Mexican immigrant woman, mirroring the novel's xenophobia and positioning Mexican immigration as threatening to U.S. white motherhood. By contrast, Bustamante's film uses the monster at its center as a site through which to critique systems of power, connect the past to the present, and redress wrongs committed against women. It also embraces the heterogeneity of Guatemalan society as a valuable asset in the struggle against patriarchal violence.

As Alma's name suggests—the Spanish word "alma" translates to "soul"—she is the soul of the body politic, the conscience of the nation. Given that her body is that of an Indigenous woman, the film highlights the importance of Indigenous culture to the past and present of Guatemala. Whereas the bodies of Indigenous women were violated by Rios Montt's soldiers, here an Indigenous woman penetrates the dictator's house, ostensibly a place of privacy and security. Much like the water element that she is associated with, she overflows the boundaries that would keep her constrained within the roles of servant or seductress, and she embodies both the threat of death as well as lifegiving possibilities. At first, she appears threatening in her interactions with Sara, the granddaughter, as when Natalia finds her holding Sara's head under water in the sink, but then Sara reveals that Alma is teaching her how to hold her breath under water. We later learn that Alma's children were drowned by soldiers, so her efforts with Sara are revealed to be benign, aimed at helping Sara to avoid the same fate. This duality and ambiguity is an essential part of the La Llorona mythology. Gloria Anzaldúa traces a genealogy of La Llorona back to the precolombian goddess Coatlicue, the Serpent deity, one of whose descendents is Cihuacoatl, the patron of midwives. Cihuacoatl covers herself in chalk, dresses herself in white, and wanders at night, wailing and foretelling the coming of war. Cihuacoatl and Tonantsi were both aspects of Coatlicue, the former the darker aspect

https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2018.1364

and the latter the lighter aspect, but according to Anzaldúa, "the male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and under-world (dark) aspects."[27] Thus split from her darker aspect, Cihuacoatl, Tonantsi became the "good mother," the one associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Spanish further severed these two aspects, solidifying the virgin-whore dichotomy by oversexualizing Cihuacoatl, associating her with the seductive La Llorona who in turn became associated with La Malinche, the much-maligned native woman who was enslaved by Hernán Cortés and forced to serve as translator, guide, and intermediary. Anzaldúa, Helena María Viramontes, Sandra Cisneros, and many other Chicanx and Latinx artists have attempted to revise this simplified and misogynistic portrayal of La Llorona as the "bad mother" and recuperate her for feminist and other political purposes. As Ana María Carbonell argues, "this binary opposition, representing women as either safely passive or dangerously active, undercuts the principle of duality embedded within La Llorona in the shape of Coatlicue, a principle that by its very definition not only allows for, but encourages female agency. Coatlicue encourages resistance by pitting the desire for survival against the act of destruction."[28] Alma's character can thus be understood to recuperate the monstrous qualities of feminine deities in order to underscore Indigenous women's capacity for agency in the face of oppression. She is threatening but just, and not clearly legible as simply 'good' or 'bad.'

La Llorona is not the first film to interrogate the Guatemalan civil war and the resulting violence disproportionately perpetrated on Indigenous communities—both *Nuestras Madres*, directed by César Díaz, and the documentary *El Buen Cristiano*, directed by Izabel Acevedo, deal explicitly or implicitly with the trial of Rios Montt, and contain as a focal point issues of memory and transitional justice.[29] Yet, *La Llorona* stands out for its use of a widely recognizable folkloric figure in combination with its use of horror conventions, which are revised to accommodate its specific local context. While never directly mentioning it, the film makes felt the haunting traces of the Civil War, as well as gives us a visual representation of an embodiment of haunting/the haunted in the character of Alma. By making literal the monstrosity of past injustices, Bustamante gives the spectator a different kind of access to history

that creates space for an alternative reality in which vengeance can be achieved. For female audiences familiar with the story's grounding in historical events, the film has a particular potency, and offers a means for recuperating a sense of Guatemalan identity that centers Indigeneity and embraces feminine duality without opposition. While not a straightforward political manifesto calling for reparations, the film nevertheless carries political weight by invoking a sense of history that is not always accessible through documentary or archival forms. By reimagining the monster, one can perhaps begin to imagine a future devoid of monstrosity.

_Endnotes

1 *La mucama de Omicunlé*, directed by Rita Indiana Hernández (2015; Cáceres: Editorial Periférica); *Los hijos de la Diosa Huracán*, directed by Daína Chaviano (2019; Barcelona: Grijalbo); *As Boas Maneiras*, directed by Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra (2018; New York: Icarus Films Home Video); *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler (2018; New York: Marvel Studios); *Selva Trágica*, directed by Yulene Olaizola (2020; Mexico City: Malacosa Cine).

2 *La Llorona*, directed by Jayro Bustamante (2019; El Ministerio de Cultura Y Deportes de Guatemala).

3 Matt Grobar, "'La Llorona' Director Jayro Bustamante Embraces Genre Elements to Frame Impact of Guatemalan Genocide—Contenders International," in *Deadline*, January 10, 2021, <https://deadline.com/2021/01/la-llorona-director-jayro-bustamante-embraces-genre-elements-to-frame-impact-of-guatemalan-genocide-contenders-international-1234668080/>.

4 Persephone Braham, *From Amazons to Zombies: Monsters in Latin America* (Lanham, Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2015), 4.

5 Braham, *From Amazons to Zombies*, 9.

6 Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, here: 266. Doi: 10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.

7 Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen, eds., *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 8.

8 Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2013), 8.

9 According to the CEH there were 9,411 female victims of human rights violations between the years of 1962–1996, during the internal armed conflict. There were 1,465 documented cases of rape, and in 25% of these cases, victims were arbitrarily executed. 89% of the documented rape victims were Mayan, 10% were Latina, and 1% belonged to other groups. Two-thirds were adult women (between 18–60 years old), a third were girls (newborns to seventeen years old), and 3% were elderly. Daniel Rothenberg, *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 54.

10 Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 83–84, emphasis added.

11 Also spelled Kachiquel, this is a language spoken by the third largest Mayan ethnic group in Guatemala.

[12] Mónica Albizúrez Gil, "El film La Llorona de Jayro Bustamante: memoria cultural y género en la justicia transicional guatemalteca," *Cuadernos del CILHA* 24 (2021): 1–25, here: 9. Doi: 10.48162/rev.34.015, translation by the author.

[13] Albizúrez Gil, "El film La Llorona de Jayro Bustamante," 11, translation by the author.

[14] Albizúrez Gil, "El film La Llorona de Jayro Bustamante," 11, translation by the author.

[15] This is not unproblematic, as Albizúrez Gil points out, and as is also reinforced by Rigoberta Menchú's own contentious autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Vol. 2 (London/New York: Verso Press, 2010), which was transcribed by the non-indigenous Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. The process of speaking for subaltern groups is fraught, as has been noted by Global South feminist scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

[16] *The Fountain*, directed by Darren Aronofsky (2007; Burbank: Warner Bros. Entertainment).

[17] See for example Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010) and Joanna Hearne, *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

[18] *Before Tomorrow*, directed by Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu (2009; Igloolik: Igloolik Isuma Productions).

[19] Dianne Chisholm, "The Enduring Afterlife of 'Before Tomorrow': Inuit Survivance and the Spectral Cinema of Arnait Video Productions," *Études/Inuit/Studies* 40, no. 1 (2016): 211–227, here: 214.

[20] Gerry Turcotte, "Spectrality in Indigenous Women's Cinema: Tracey Moffatt and Beck Cole," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43, no. 1 (2008): 7–21, here: 9.

[21] Turcotte, "Spectrality in Indigenous Women's Cinema," 9.

[22] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York/London: Methuen, 1986), vi.

[23] Judith/Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1995), 13.

[24] Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 14.

[25] María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 747.

[26] *The Curse of La Llorona*, directed by Michael Chaves (2019; Burbank: Warner Bros. Pictures).

[27] Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012 [1987]).

[28] Ana María Carbonell, "From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros," *MELUS* 24, no. 2, (1999): 53–74, here: 56.

[29] *Nuestras Madres*, directed by César Díaz (2019; Paris: Pyramide Productions); *El Buen Cristiano*, directed by Izabel Acevedo (2018; Mexico City: Foprocine). These directors, along with directors such as Sergio Ramírez, Camila Urrutía, and documentary filmmaker Ana Bustamante, are part of a growing canon of internationally recognized Guatemalan filmmakers that are drawing attention to a new Guatemalan cinema.