Monsters and Baroque, Anti-Classical Aesthetics

Susan M. Campbell

Within the realm of classical aesthetics, the monster stands out as a figure that will not or cannot enjoy acceptance. "Perfection" is the classical ideal of form and behavior and so the monster, a being that differs in some way from the prescribed norm is an anti-classical or baroque figure. Omar Calabrese, in his book *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times*, describes society's fascination with monsters as an indication of its fears, its dread of instability. He recalls past times, "the late Roman epoch, the late middle ages, the romantic era, and the period of expressionism" (CALABRESE, 1985, p. 91), as sharing with current times in a fixation on the monstrous. It is, of course, the function of culture to assign positive, negative or neutral values to phenomena. In most cases that which deviates from the prescribed norm is assigned a negative value. Calabrese characterizes a society's conception of what is monstrous as a gauge of its system of moral values. It can also be said that the number of elements in a society that are considered monstrous indicate that society's level of fear of instability and desire to recover control. In this paper I analyze the prescriptive depiction of deformed elements in society as monstrous and therefore threatening as well as answers in the form of cultural production by those demonized groups that survive in the targeted spaces they maintain in society.

Calabrese separates monstrosity into two types: the deformed and the formless. The deformed monster shows, through outward appearance, an inner evil. The formless monster is considered more threatening according to Calabrese. He explains with examples from contemporary cinema[1] that the threat posed by a formless monster rests in its ability to escape the totalizing gaze of its adversary. The victims in horror films who fight to exterminate a shape-changing monster find themselves at the disadvantage of being unable to know exactly what they are dealing

[1] Calabrese uses examples from films that were released only a couple years before the time his book was published in 1985.

with. They can never completely identify their enemy. This instability increases the anxiety effect of the film.

Roberto González Echevarría echoes Calabrese's notions of the construction of monsters as beings that differ from the constructed norm. He discusses the topic in terms of heterogeneity and impossibility. Societies construct acceptable and unacceptable combinations of traits that subjects can display. González Echevarría mentions Octavio Paz's linking of "the strangeness of the Baroque to the oddity of the Creole" (GONZALEZ ECHEVARRIA, 1993, p. 164) and gives the example of writer and woman as a strange combination of traits on which Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz bases her textual activity (166). I would argue that, in addition to a certain "strangeness", this monstrous combination of traits afforded her a quite limited space in which to function as, in 17th Century Mexico, Sor Juana could not display her status as a woman writer openly. Her gender and her activities were discursively impossible for her time and so she was forced to act in secrecy.

Per Schelde describes popular monster stories in the forms of folk tales and science fiction films as expressions of a fear of technology and progress. In folktales, traditionally told and heard by people of the lowest echelons of society, the classical model itself becomes monstrous. Examples of progress are often depicted as dangerous and threatening in folktales and especially in science fiction films. Per Schelde explains these tales as ways of the humble to strike out against a power structure in which they are disadvantaged. Schelde states that "basic to folktales is the fact that they are protesting a reality which the people who created them have, in effect, no power to influence" (SCHELDE 1993, p.8). Therefore, the dynamic works both ways, as top-down social prescription and as popular reaction to discrimination.

Social prescription as governmental policy discourse constructs a classical model of citizenship and thus treats those who do not follow it as monstrous. One can see that the more "Latino/a" (im)migrants conform to U.S. Anglo cultural norms the easier it is to create the perception of this nation as a true land of opportunity. Large scale shape-changing — or assimilation — from "Latin American (im)migrant" to successful and well adjusted new American provides reinforcement for the hegemonic discourse of U.S. societal structure as racially, ethnically and economically unbiased. Recent news exposure of the "Latino/a" minority group has

focused on its demographic growth to the status of most numerous minority as well as to its increasing affluence. Linda Chavez, Staff Director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights under the Reagan administration, fellow at the Manhattan Institute and would-be Secretary of Labor under the George W. Bush administration, wrote a book called *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation* in which she hails the progress made by Hispanics who have assimilated to Anglo-American culture. She claims,

> [t]here is much reason for optimism about the progress of Hispanics in the United States. Cuban immigrants have achieved social and economic parity with other Americans in one generation. Cuban Americans differ little from other Americans in earnings or education, being well represented in professional and business occupations and among other high-wage earners (CHAVEZ, 1991, p.139).

What this excerpt is telling is that Chavez focuses on Cuban Americans who possess a quite atypical set of circumstances among immigrants to the United States. The affluence of the first wave of Cuban immigrants to Miami allowed them to change their surroundings to a greater degree than other, less powerful groups. It is more true to say that Miami assimilated to the Cubans than the other way around. Chavez does not discuss the issue in this way but rather mentions business acumen as a possible reason for their prosperity and that within a short period of time they reached average U.S. standards of middle-class wealth. She fails to mention that many were from wealthy backgrounds and had access to higher education when they arrived and received special loans to start up businesses. Partially due to a desire to discredit the Castro government by displaying Miami Cuban affluence, the U.S. government dealt with the first wave of Cuban exiles in a way unique from most other immigrants. It can be argued that the amount of shape-changing or assimilation that newly arrived Cuban exiles had to undergo to become successful Americans is less than the changes required of other (im)migrant groups.

Chavez proposes a formula of classical (im)migration success. She heralds the progress of earlier immigrants — Germans, Italians and Poles among others — who, on the whole, have assimilated into Anglo-American culture.

> They learned the language, acquired education and skills, and adapted their own customs and traditions to fit into an American context. Assimilation proved an effective model for members of these ethnic groups, who now rank among the most successful Americans (CHAVEZ, 1991, p.2).

Those who do not follow this model are pathologized. Those who maintain their own home cultures and keep speaking their original language are portrayed as deformed monsters, ethnic and cultural others, set apart from the classical model of success. Given Linda Chavez's position within the Republican Party and conservative American Hispanism, her argument makes sense. Those who will not or cannot assimilate do in fact threaten the Republican agenda on public spending. The reputation of her plan for assimilation rests on (im)migrants' smooth transition from cultural other to part of the mainstream through policies of low expenditure on welfare and bilingual eduaction programs. The economic success of the assimilated can be translated into a discourse about the United States as a welcoming and generous rewarder of hard work.

Chavez's description of the progress of "Hispanic" immigrants carries with it a tone of self-congratulation for the opportunities available in the U.S. system. According to Chavez's estimation, becoming "an American" virtually guarantees a higher economic standard of living over one's country of origin. She uses selective statistics on immigration to better the image of the United States as a nation of economic promise and racial/ethnic fairness. In a chapter titled "The Puerto Rican Exception", she paints a grim picture of immigrant life in the U.S. when Hispanics choose[2] not to "join the mainstream" (CHAVEZ, 1991, p.139). She lists frightening statistics on poverty, female-headed households, divorce rates and welfare dependency. Chavez concludes that what the Puerto Rican community in New York needs is a stronger commitment to marriage and a stronger work ethic.

It would appear through Chavez's lens on the Puerto Rican community in New York that their monstrous social problems are self-inflicted. With their relatively high level of education, it would seem laziness and a disregard for family values are what separate Puerto Ricans from prosperity. As Chavez would have it, if only they would assimilate to the prescribed norm, they too could reach for the opportunities U.S.

[2] Chavez describes assimilation resulting in prosperity and non-assimilation resulting in poverty as a personal choice.

society makes available for all, regardless of race, creed or color. The monster in these societies is one who is incapable of conforming, or refuses to conform, to the classical model, the norm.

From the perspective of Hispanics in the U.S., the behaviors Linda Chavez depicts as monstrous can bee looked at as survival tactics to preserve one's own home culture. Non-assimilation can take the form of insistence on speaking Spanish or on holding true to one's own music. Listening to Salsa, for example, can be a means to preserve one's sense of cultural identity. The salsa music phenomenon of the 1960s sparks debate as to how it negotiates this discourse of assimilation (or shape-changing) and of deformation (or showing itself as different from a classical model). The *North American* music industry incorporates new, foreign influences that will catch the interest and buying power of the listening public. This was the case with salsa music in the 1960s (and has been at cetain moments since then). These exotic elements like salsa are blended with familiar rhythms and melodies in an appealing way to please the tastes of certain target markets. Equally pleasing visuals adorn the packaging to evoke the image of a specific kind of Latin, one that fulfills the audience's expectations and can be consumed easily. In this way, "Latin music" has become popular in its new, generic form in the North American market.

This dynamic of incorporation of other elements into the proper sphere functions to "domesticate" them, to rid them of any threatening or monstrous quality. Jerry Massucci, president of the Fania record label, the pioneer source of recorded "Latin" music in the United States, copyrighted the term "salsa" in the late 1960s for the label's exclusive use. It must be noted that "salsa" cannot be placed in the same category as bomba or danza, for example, which have specific and characteristic rhythm structures. What is termed "salsa" can include a vast array of musical styles like son, guajira, merengue, bolero, mambo, etc. Any of these musical forms or any combination of them could be called "salsa", in the context of the New York City music industry or the current context of global marketing. Fania marketed "salsa" music and manufactured a demand for this upbeat style. Francis Aparicio, in her book *Listening to Salsa,* discusses musicians' reaction to the term.

> Rafael Cortijo in the past and many progressive Latinas/os nowadays have rejected this term for its colonizing and capitalist associations. As Jorge Duany has observed, the fact that the salsa label 'has even been extended to the music of any Latin country' is evidence of its homogenizing effects (DUANY, 1984, p.92).

The act of homogenizing music from any Latin country as "salsa" facilitates the consumption of the rhythm in the United States. Various musical forms are assimilated into one easily understood and appropriated category. Aparicio sees this marketing strategy as a political move. "That salsa emerges as an umbrella term for an undifferentiated view of a diverse gamut of Latin musical genres unveils the capitalist efforts to erase Latin cultural specificity and to depoliticize much of its social and historical opposition" (APARICIO, 1981, p.92).

Much of the opposition among those who fall into the category "Latino" comes out of political action related to specific identity categories facing the U.S. American mainstream culture. The Chicano Movement and the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party are only two examples of politically active groups that challenge(d) and question(ed) the place allotted for them within U.S. society. There has not yet existed a twentieth century pan-Latino struggle for rights in this nation. These facts notwithstanding, there may be benefits for "Latinos/as" to the generalizing term "salsa". A miscategorization or misunderstanding of the music they produce can free them from the depoliticizing space that Aparicio mentions. An attempt to classify and, thus, make "salsa" music and "salsa" culture more acceptable and so less monstrous may be thwarted by constant experimentation and improvisation, that is, shape-changing. This time Calabrese's trope on monstrosity can be seen as rebelliousness rather than acquiescence to the mainstream. By constantly changing form, salsa musicians can rely on the lack of comprehension of society as a whole to continue serving the needs of those in the know. On the level of reception, a musician may express a message that is unclear to a generalized audience while conveying something specific to those in the know. An example might be the use of current Puerto Rican slang in Spanish or in Spanglish that could pass unnoticed by all but those who speak the idiom. Mayra Santos Febrés, in her article "Salsa as Translocation", discusses the freedom and containment of salsa music improvisation within the New York City "Latin" music scene. She describes the fight for freedom from corporate control through improvisation.

> [Salsa] does not search for the formation of any structures of power but attempts to mark out new spaces for improvisation, for those acts of violence inherent in questioning, pushing against, and threatening the limits of any structure (SANTOS FEBRES, 1997, p.179).

She highlights containment on economic terms in recognition of the role production companies like Fania Records play in dissemination of music on a mass scale. She says, "Nowadays, improvisation has to conform to the rules of market economy: it has to generate profits" (SANTOS FEBRES, 1997, p.177). Santos Febrés speaks to the strength and capacity of popular music forms to challenge power structures, to question the validity of the classical model. At the same time, she recognizes the limits of that power. Musicians may employ improvisation in an attempt to escape totalizing consumption within a mass market. Improvisation, however, is a tactic that works on a local level. Music that reaches a larger audience must undergo evaluation by producers whose main concern is marketability. After that, once any song is recorded and sold, the rhythm structure has stagnated; it is immobile and the quality of reception to that music is no longer in the hands of its maker.

Given this, most "salsa" songs that reach a mass audience have been leached of much of their politically adversarial content. It is possible to say that music played locally by unknowns is what contains more of a critical message. Yet, some of the message gets through. Per Schelde's characterization of the purpose of folk tales as a defense of the poor can also be said of this sort of local cultural production by Puerto Ricans in New York City. Like folk tales, some music performed by Puerto Ricans in the metropolis can be understood as defenses against a structure in which the poor see themselves as powerless. In the first half of the twentieth century, Puerto Ricans living in New York City often painted the living conditions in that metropolis as a monstrous deformation of those on the island. A number of songs from this period depict New York as a cold and alienating place that Puerto Ricans are forced to suffer in order to succeed economically. These portrayals of an ugly, cold and mean New York City exemplify aggression toward the powerful as seen in Per Schelde's characterization of folktales as written defenses by the popular classes against a power structure that they cannot control. One possible benefit to this discourse is a rejection of the mainstream message, that they who have not assimilated are monsters. Through the songs, Puerto Ricans have been able to claim legitimacy and question mainstream American culture.

Other older forms of Caribbean music have used survival tactics that correspond to Calabrese's notion of formless or shape-changing monsters. These musical forms disguise their Afro-Caribbean elements in two ways in order to escape sanction. The first is bomba, a percussion-heavy music of strong, African rhythms[3]. Most of the time it has been played by those who identify themselves as Afro-Puerto Rican for others who hold that same self-definition[4]. This participatory art form began as a type of slave celebration that often took the form of clandestine Yoruba religious ceremonies or of veiled conspirations for escapes or revolts against the *hacendado.*

So, long before salsa was to serve the Puerto Rican popular classes as a tool for forging a cultural identity of opposition, bomba performed a similar role for slaves on the island. It provided a relatively safe, separate space in which to be African, to step outside of the slave structure that surrounded them by remembering back to the music and the dances of Africa. By separating themselves in this way, they were able to escape the classical model that depicted them as monsters. They could construct, if only momentarily, an alternative model for behavior and being. In the way that Lydia Milagros Gonzalez tells it, this cultural escape brought forth notions of real escape, of political and physical opposition. This dynamic was subtle though, the bombas were held far from the plantation house and the participants counted on the misunderstanding of those in power as to what exactly they were doing. Their invisibility, or shapelessness, allowed them to survive.

During the three years after slavery's abolition in Puerto Rico, ex-slaves formed "Casinos de Artesanos" which were social and professional clubs where they celebrated bombas as well as reinforced the recognition of blacks' and mulattos' contribution to culture and society on the island.

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[3] Jorge Duany provides a detailed description of bomba rhythm. "It is characterized by melodic repetition and complex rhythm, by an antiphonal structure and the use of the pentatonic scale; by duple meter and the predominance of percussion. The *bomba* uses the onomatopoeic and rhythmic values of the human voice, and the texts are usually composed of nonsensical vocables designed to follow and emphasize the rhythm. (Duany, 191)

[4] There is an exception to this rule; that is that bomba has sometimes been played and danced for people of a variety of ethnic identities at public street festivals.

"Se descubrían a sí mismos, como entidad social, merecedores de un lugar de respeto e igualdad en esa sociedad de la cual también eran sus productores y constructores, mediante su trabajo" (MILAGROS GONZALEZ, 1995, p.351). It seems like quite a leap in valorization of one's own social identity to begin working as a slave and end considering that same work, now paid, as the source of one's importance to the social whole. This was a moment of relative power for the weak which is evidenced as bomba appropriates an acceptable place.

The behavior that had previously posed a threat to slaving society later becomes less monstrous and so more visible. The dynamic of creating a separate, alternative model for behavior and being changes. In this context, they work within the classical, European colonial structure and claim legitimacy as children of Africa. The "casinos" existed in permanent physical spaces and were known publicly as centers of Afro-Puerto Rican pride. Still, of course, the pride that "casino" members took in their own cultural heritage did not extend to the rest of Puerto Rican society. Dancing bomba was and is still considered "a sign of lowly status, a confession of degrading ancestry" (DUANY, 1984, p. 192). The level of sanction imposed on Caribbeans of African descent varied and, as it became lighter, they were able to show themselves in the light without fear of reprisal.

Danza[5], a Puerto Rican musical form closely linked to European culture and valued highly for its similarity to classical music, does include some elements of African musical tradition. The black and mulatto musicians who played bomba and plena for themselves and their own social circles were the same people who were paid to play danza at clubs and dances for a whiter, richer audience. The African elements in Danza seem to be hard to detect, or those Puerto Rican fans of Danza would be hard-pressed to admit the African elements in a music that is prided to be the most European musical style of the New World. Still, these elements are there.

> En la danza, se combina el ritmo y el tambor, con el instrumento de metal llamado bombardino. Al así hacerlo, subyace en la música toda la riqueza de la tradición rítmica africana, pero *enmascarándola* para que sonara aceptable a los sectores sociales a que iba dirigido. (MILAGROS GONZALEZ, 1995, p. 352) (emphasis mine)

[5] The European elements of danza are those most cited in its description. "La Danza es la máxima expresión de la cultura puertorriqueña. Es la forma musical del Nuevo Mundo que más asemeja a la música clásica europea por su riqueza melódica y armónica así como por su forma y caracter". (http://www.LaDanza.com/danza.htm)

Here, the survival of African culture makes a successful advance by extending itself into a white milieu without any possible sanctioning forces being able to detect it. The African elements thought monstrous by the white elites pass unnoticed and therefore safe, since their forms changed.

The act of painting another group as monstrous betrays a sense of insecurity or instability. State power structures that sanction difference show their vulnerability to the survival of that difference. In retaliation or in self-defense, marginalized groups claim a small, temporary space for themselves by at times changing shape through improvisation, other times openly showing their baroque difference and other times returning the accusation of monstrosity toward the center.

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