

Genocide and the Plague of Fantasies in *La Llorona* and *Sueño en otro idioma*

⊙ Geoffrey KANTARIS

University of Cambridge

Abstract: This paper examines how two contemporary Latin American films—Jayro Bustamante’s *La Llorona* and Ernesto Contreras’s *Sueño en otro idioma*—engage with physical and cultural genocide through distinct deployments of fantasy elements that reflect the evolution of horror and magic-realist genres in Latin American cinema. The films repurpose fantastical elements through horror and mythopoetic narrative in order to confront the legacies of colonial trauma. Building on Slavoj Žižek’s concept of the plague of fantasies, the paper examines how *La Llorona* mobilizes the Mesoamerican folk figure of La Llorona to connect contemporary genocide in Guatemala with its historical necropolitical origins, while *Sueño en otro idioma* examines cultural genocide through the extinction of an indigenous language in Mexico. Both films demonstrate how fantasy can function in destabilizing ways in postcolonial contexts, offering distorted glimpses of horrors that resist direct representation. Through close analysis of these works, the paper reveals how contemporary Latin American cinema deploys fantasy elements, including magic realist conventions, to provide a fundamental challenge to colonial epistemologies, by exposing the phantasmatic underpinnings of colonial violence and its contemporary reverberations.

Keywords: Latin American cinema, magic realism, genocide, colonial trauma, fantasy, indigenous languages, necropolitics

CLC: I106

Document Code: A

Article ID: 2096-4374(2024)02-0073-18

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202402007

This paper explores the relationship between crime and fantasy in two Latin American films that deal with the themes of physical and cultural (linguistic) genocide in Guatemala and Mexico.¹ Building on Slavoj Žižek’s concept of the plague of fantasies, I examine how the films mobilize elements of horror, myth, and folklore to create narratives that register the phantasmatic echo of these crimes in the human psyche, both individual and collective. While both films engage with

supernatural or fantastical elements, they do so in notably different ways that may be seen to reflect the evolution of the influence of magic realism in Latin American cinema. Traditional magic realism deployed a normalization of supernatural events in order to call into question both the perception and construction of the real through colonial epistemological frameworks. These films, however, deploy the fantastic through distinct generic frameworks—horror and mythopoetic narrative respectively—precisely in order to confront historical traumata that are the powerful reverberations of colonial legacy. Nevertheless, in both cases we are firmly in the terrain of films that investigate the origin of a collective crime, or trauma, that can have profound psychological, as well as material, effects. My paper takes as its point of departure the well-known figure of Mesoamerican mythology, “La Llorona,” a ghostly woman who haunts the house of a former dictator accused of genocide in Guatemala. This undead figure, imbued with colonial power dynamics, embodies traumatic historical legacies that, deployed within the horror genre, connect contemporary genocide in Guatemala with its historical necropolitical origins. These ideas will be explored via the 2019 Guatemalan horror film *La Llorona*, directed by Jayro Bustamante, which reimagines the myth of this ghostly woman through the lens of the Mayan genocide of the 1980s. The second film, Ernesto Contreras’s 2017 Mexican film *Sueño en otro idioma*, examines cultural genocide, and epistemicide, through the extinction of the (fictional) indigenous Mexican language of Zikril. The film traces contemporary language loss to the legacy of the colonial-era suppression of heterodox identities and sexualities through the mutually parasitic relationship between guilt and enjoyment (*jouissance*). This slow genocidal crime is displaced onto a love triangle and an internalized feud between the last two speakers of Zikril. A distinctive characteristic of the portrayal of crime in both films is the extent to which it is overdetermined by a “plague of fantasies” that mediate and regulate fear, anxiety and the limits of sexuality, although this works rather differently in both films, as I shall explore.²

La Llorona and *Sueño en otro idioma* situate us at the spectral core of the relationship between crime and fantasy—the myths, fables, and imaginaries of crimes stretched out over time, and killings or disappearances that are suppressed or censored. For the most part they do not so much depict a crime as explore its phantasmatic reverberations in individual psyches and collective historical trauma. Therefore, my aim is to offer something of an *Ur-schema* for the links between crime—probably the worst crime that human beings can devise, namely genocide—and the role of fantasy in the elaboration of imaginary narratives. Put more schematically, we are investigating, through the films I shall be addressing, the relationship between crime and plot, between trauma and drama.

The Plague of Fantasies and *La Llorona*

My title alludes to the psychological scheme addressed by Žižek in his book *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), the title of which he took from a text by Petrarch, the *Secretum*. In the original text, a fictitious Augustine dialogues with Petrarch, and tells him that the corrupt body accumulates sensations that press and weigh on the soul, and as they do not originate in the soul, they overwhelm it. In consequence, a “plague of fantasies” harasses, wounds, and tears at the faculty of thought, and with their fatal complexity these fantasies obstruct the path of clear and

luminous—or spiritual—meditation. For Žižek, fantasy structures our everyday social reality in a fundamental way, providing phantasmatic support for ideology while simultaneously masking the obscene underside of ideology. This applies even to seemingly stable Symbolic structures like organized religion, which rely on fantasy (miracles, resurrection, virgin births) to maintain their authority and manage excessive forms of *jouissance* that would threaten to disrupt the social order. However, in postcolonial contexts such as those depicted in these films, fantasy often functions in more destabilizing ways than appears, at first sight, to be the case in Žižek's primary frame of reference (e.g. US popular culture, Hollywood film, and *auteurist* cinema largely from the Global North). Rather than simply masking the obscene underside of ideology, folkloric and mythical elements, including ghost stories, frequently serve to transform and refract the unrepresentable Real of colonial trauma. These fantasies, while still shaped by ideological apparatuses, offer distorted glimpses of the horrors that resist direct representation—be they genocide, cultural erasure, or the violent suppression of indigenous identities. In this way, fantasy becomes a site where the unspeakable is simultaneously obscured and obliquely addressed, creating a complex interplay between concealment and revelation. In our case, we might intuit that the plague of fantasies in Petrarch's sense has become externalized, presses upon the collective psyche, and takes on a ghostly form. That ghost has a name, one that condenses and concentrates the plague of fantasies at that point where the human voice regresses to its origins in the inarticulate howl of the wounded animal, of the female who has lost her young. The name of the ghost in this case is La Llorona.

As is well known, the legend of La Llorona is a Mesoamerican folk tale of a woman who, out of jealousy and spite, supposedly drowns her two children in a river, and then, out of grief and pain, drowns herself. She becomes an undead phantasm of unresolved trauma, eternally roaming the earth in search of her dead children. La Llorona is initially recognized by her sobbing and moaning, and it is said that if she is heard very close, she is really far away, but if she is heard from far away, it means she is near. Meeting her can bring all kinds of misfortunes and even death. As for her appearance, she is characterized by her long hair, her veil, and her white dress, which give her a ghostly appearance.



Figure 1: Images of La Llorona and Siguanaba

It is not known whether La Llorona is of pre-Hispanic origin, or whether the myth arose as a fusion of Catholic and indigenous imagery. There is a similar legend in Mesoamerican mythology of a specter called Siguanaba, who appears to violent or unfaithful men in the form of a half-naked, long-haired woman, seen from behind (Figure 1), although when she shows her face, it is that of a horse or a skull. She casts a curse on the men who spy on her, causing them to go mad, fall ill, or die. The name “Siguanaba” is from the Quiché language, but the horse face is evidently a syncretic element from colonial times. In any case, La Llorona and Siguanaba seem to be two related legends that have their origin in, and symbolically express, the traumas and violence of Conquest.

The iconography of La Llorona presents elements that we could designate as slippery, elusive part-objects that awaken and at the same time frustrate fantasy, paradoxical objects that incite desire at the same time as they bind desire to a deadly drive. First there is the semi-transparent veil which, as is well known, connotes a play of revelation and concealment. Then there is the white dress that seems to suggest both the purity of the bride at a wedding, and a death shroud. Her excessively long hair, a part-object evoking absolute sexual difference, is in fact pure dead matter, even in the living, an excrescence of the skin that is said to grow even on corpses. There is also the opposition between the fantasy aroused by the mysterious woman seen from behind, and the skull or horse face that is revealed when she turns her head, puncturing the fantasy and subjecting it to a terrifying vision of the Real. This is a primal act which Michael Taussig calls “defacement” in *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, the substitution of the face for the anus, or perhaps of face for vagina, which is also the origin of the *Unheimlich* according to Freud: that which, socially, should remain hidden is revealed, a “familiar” secret that was repressed and has now returned. Finally, let us not forget the fundamental characteristic of La Llorona, folded into her striking name: her voice, but a voice that is broken down into inarticulate sobs and moans. Voice is always an immaterial, elusive part-object that arouses desire and extinguishes it in the same vocalization. Žižek, drawing on Lacanian theory, describes the voice as a spectral apparition, an “undead” object that persists beyond the body and functions as a vehicle for unbearable *jouissance* (Plague 92). La Llorona’s voice, in this sense, becomes not just a sound but an object-cause of desire, embodying the excess of colonial trauma that cannot be integrated into (symbolic) reality.³ The voice of La Llorona is neither human nor animal, it is neither of a living nor dead creature: when it is far away it is close, but above all it connotes the total collapse of desire and death, the death that produces desire, and the desire that provokes death. That is why it is better to run when you hear her, especially if you hear her from afar.

In his 2019 film *La Llorona*, Guatemalan director Jayro Bustamante uses legend to craft a horror film about the Mayan genocide that occurred in Guatemala between 1981 and 1983, at least in its most violent manifestation, and especially during the military dictatorship of Efraín Ríos Montt from March 1982 to August 1983. The genocide was carried out as one of the bloodiest episodes of the long Civil War in Guatemala that began in 1960 and ended only in 1996. It is estimated that 200,000 Guatemalans died as a consequence of the war, and there were at least 40,000 “disappeared” victims. The main action of the film is set during and after the trial against Ríos Montt for genocide and crimes against humanity that took place between March and May 2013. Although he was found guilty, the sentence was annulled by the Constitutional Court ten days after the verdict.

In Bustamante’s film, Ríos Montt is called General Enrique Monteverde, a name change that

gives the director and writer the freedom to condense time and to elaborate a little on the family relationships between the general and the three generations of women who surround him: his wife Carmen, his legitimate daughter Natalia, another presumed illegitimate daughter of the Kaqchikel ethnic group, Valeriana, and his granddaughter Sara. The fact that the film focuses mainly on the women surrounding Monteverde, and at whose hands he will ultimately find his demise, is highly significant given the prevalence of rape and sexual slavery used as tools of war during the Guatemalan genocide (Yoc Cosajay 157–162), together with the extremely high rates of contemporary femicide that can be traced back to the impunity surrounding sexual crimes during the armed conflict, and which have ongoing effects within Guatemalan society today (Musalo and Bookey 265–266).

In fact, the film contains a powerful dramatization of the court case against Ríos Montt, featuring the testimony of indigenous women during the genocide trial. There is also a cameo appearance, in person, of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú, who listens along with us to the harrowing account of murder and sexual violence that a veiled Ixil woman gives in her native tongue (see Figure 2). It is worth highlighting a couple of points about the court sequences that have to do with the intermeshing of crime and fantasy in this film, even though the role of fantasy in the court sequences may not seem particularly evident at first sight, given that it is the least supernatural section and the part that sticks closest to the historical facts. However, Bustamante plants some seeds here that seem highly significant.



Figure 2: A veiled Ixil woman (María Marcos) gives testimony in the trial against Monteverde in *La Llorona*. Rigoberta Menchú appears bottom left.

First of all, it is crucial to note that, in the courtroom, the film does not resort to the use of subtitles to translate the Ixil woman's testimony. Most viewers are unlikely to understand Mayan languages, and the film obliges us to listen to the pure sound and tone, the hesitant and cracked voice of the woman's testimony, for around forty seconds until the interpreter's translation begins. In this way, the film forces us into an act of imagination. On the one hand, it insists on this woman's experience as fundamentally untranslatable, and the film refuses, at least here, to speak for her. This is to say that the film refuses to reproduce the illusion of subaltern transparency, of a subject penetrated by the gaze of the spectator and by the institutional gaze of the court. The woman herself seems to underline this point when she uses the Spanish word "justicia" to end her testimony. In this way she refuses to recognize *ladino* justice as her own and that of her peers,

forgotten by (neo-)colonial justice for more than thirty years.

A second crucial point is the choreography of the semi-transparent veil worn by almost all the Maya-Ixil women in court. The veil is a basic element of cinematic narrative, because it almost always serves as a synecdoche for the screen in film, that paradoxical object that produces the illusion of transparency precisely by covering and obscuring the real. The women intentionally play with this paradox by using the veil as an element in the production of the truth effects that sustain the order of *ladino* “justice.” The arbitrariness of these veridical effects is emphasized almost immediately after the judgement, when the Constitutional Court annuls the sentence against Monteverde. And it is no coincidence that it is at this moment that the plague of fantasies begins, a “plague” that will lead us towards another, less institutional, concept of justice. During the entire sequence of the woman’s testimony, starting from a close-up of her face and veil, the camera undertakes an extremely slow, almost imperceptible, zoom out. The effect of this, together with the dark lighting of the courtroom scene, is twofold: at first, we are obliged to focus intently on the woman speaking through her brightly colored veil, even though we most likely do not understand her words, emphasizing the paradoxes surrounding this act of testimonio, rendering it both intensely present and intensely veiled at the same time. But as the camera zooms out, more and more of the sea of faces of those in attendance, including Menchú, is imperceptibly revealed, giving a growing sense of the enormity and power that this woman’s fragile words produce, located at the epicenter of the social and political vortex generated by the crimes committed during the genocidal war against the Mayan population. The scene thus evokes the power of testimony while at the same time resisting the transparency and legibility of Ixil language and cultural identity, as well as of the enormity of the individual and collective trauma, within a *ladino* judicial system that, as we shortly discover, remains ultimately deaf to its victims.

As for the figure of La Llorona in the film, some elements of the classic legend are changed, because legends are not static stories: they evolve, they are a basic way of interpreting reality. Bustamante explicitly states in interviews that he intended to strip the legend of its accrued misogyny and make La Llorona into an avenger who weeps for a far more powerful cause than the infidelity of a man (Pérez). In this film’s version, La Llorona did not drown her children. On the contrary, the mother and the two children were victims of one of the genocidal killings, something we learn near the end of the film. La Llorona is an indigenous Kaqchikel woman named Alma, played by María Mercedes Coroy. She infiltrates the general’s house in the days after the trial as a maid after all the servants, with the exception of Valeriana, resign from their posts and leave the house out of fear, due to the distant sobs of La Llorona heard at night in the house.⁴

Let us consider the sequence where Alma arrives at the house for the first time among the demonstrators who have gathered in the street outside, protesting against Monteverde’s pardon. The *mise-en-scène* is crucial because it sets up a series of reversals and parallels that will structure key aspects of La Llorona’s characterization throughout the film and begin to play on the uncanny conflation of fantasy and crime that lies at the heart of the film’s deployment of the horror genre. Throughout much of the film, the family cooped up inside the house are put under a form of continual psychological pressure by the crowds of people outside demonstrating by day and all through the night, often accompanied by the sound of shouting or chanting. In

this particular sequence, Monteverde approaches a veiled window, puts on his glasses—almost always a synecdoche for the cinematic gaze—and looks out on the crowds below, many of whom are holding up blown-up photographs of the victims and the “disappeared” of the conflict. As the camera adopts a POV shot of the crowd, partially obscured, a distinct, long-haired feminine figure shrouded in white, snakes her way silently amongst the protesters until she comes to stand immediately in front of the line of shielded security guards, seemingly unnoticed by them, and directly below the veiled window. On the audio track, we hear a soft but swelling cacophony of discordant music mixed with the electronically distorted cries of the demonstrating crowd. Suddenly, Alma looks directly up into the camera, and by implication directly at Monteverde, “seeing” him despite the veil, her face totally impassive (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Alma (María Mercedes Coroy) staring up at Monteverde looking down at the crowd of demonstrators through a semi-veiled window in *La Llorona*.

This sequence’s focus on Alma’s uncanny staring, which recurs several times throughout the film with slight variations, establishing what we might call *La Llorona*’s gaze. This is not, however, simply an instance of seeing or being-seen that would fit within classic psychoanalytic theories about scopophilia and voyeurism in cinema; rather it represents a more complex dialectical negation between the two gazes, one which Jacques Lacan famously describes as causing castration anxiety when they meet (73). In this instance, *La Llorona*’s gaze is not that of an object to be looked at or consumed by Monteverde; rather it represents something far more threatening: a subjective perception of that border beyond which the Real would penetrate and destabilize his own carefully constructed fantasy world from within. The gaze of the other demands recognition even as it reenacts, for Monteverde, a form of scotomization or blinding, being a point of impossibility in the visual field that he cannot confront directly. It thus constitutes an alluring stop-gap, a lethal fascination as the orbit of desire around an encounter with something beyond representation or symbolization: “a Thing, *das Ding* [...] the absolute void, the lethal abyss which swallows the subject” (Žižek, *Plague* 105). More concretely, Alma’s uncanny gaze evokes the intrusion of the repressed trauma of genocide precisely at the point of voyeuristic instability, that point of extreme psychic danger where the voyeur begins to discern his own fantasy as an obscene form of enjoyment. It is significant that Alma is framed with a crowd of distorted, vaguely phantasmatic figures behind her—figures whom his granddaughter Sara will later come to recognize as “reaparecidos” from the photographs printed on flyers thrown (wrapped around rocks) into the house and shattering the glass-screen of the windows overlooking them.⁵

From this moment on, the film begins to mobilize many elements of the horror genre: the syncretism of Christian and indigenous or “pagan” beliefs and rituals; black magic; supernatural occurrences; somnambulism; the sense of threat looming over the innocent girl of the house, Sara; the appearance of ghosts and a plague of frogs; terrifying nightmares; and the reappearance of the disappeared victims. Then, the question arises as to why a genre that manipulates such stylized and recognizable elements of commercial cinema has been chosen to make a political commentary about a topic as serious and unsuitable for turning into lurid spectacle as the Mayan genocide in Guatemala.

First of all, I want to clarify that the film is very well made: it achieves a successful balance between the stylized elements of conventional horror and the presentation of the much more shocking terror of genocide. Political terror reaches such magnitudes that it effectively subverts the stereotypes of the genre, wrenching them from their conventional context and compelling them to carry a political significance that they almost never manage to have in commercial cinema, except in the form of allegory. And allegory is precisely what is not at stake here. Nor does the film perform the mobilization of affect as a subversive element that manages to destabilize racism, patriarchal power, the class structure of Guatemalan society, or the colonial epistemology of the West. It is not Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, which purports to suppress the spectator’s reasoning so that affect can run directly, like a contagion or a plague, from one body to another.

Something else is at work here, something that punctures the surface of reality, and which can be explored through examination of one of the night-time somnambulist episodes portrayed in the film. In this particular sequence, the general wakes up in the middle of the night, after hearing a noise of someone entering the family swimming pool in the back garden. He goes downstairs to see who it is, and spies Alma through a back window swimming with her eyes shut, eerily lit in a deep blue light. He hides as she emerges, dripping in her white nightgown, seemingly sleepwalking as we hear ghostly inarticulate voices and soft wailing on the audio track. Monteverde follows Alma secretly through the maids’ bedroom, the floor of which is mysteriously flooded in several inches of water, adding to the oneiric, unsettling atmosphere of the sequence. Creeping up to the entrance of the bathroom, he spies on the naked Alma, who is sitting on the edge of the bath, shot from behind with her long hair covering half her back, compulsively rinsing and squeezing out her white nightgown while she slowly turns her head to stare at, or through, him (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Alma (María Mercedes Coroy) compulsively rinsing her nightgown in *La Llorona*.

This sequence stages very precisely the obscure nexus between crime and fantasy that is the deep subject of these films. On a perfectly comprehensible “Freudian” level, *La Llorona* is posited in the film as an embodiment or materialization of Monteverde’s guilt: his unconscious returning to haunt him. But this explanation is too simplistic, given the overdetermination of this sequence with a complex interplay of desire, drive, compulsive action, sexuality, and dread.⁶ In this sense her returned gaze—the desired and feared gaze of the other that the voyeur must disavow—is more akin to what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, something that both attracts and repels because, like the original legend of *La Llorona*, it evokes that which the subject seeks in the Other but can never fully grasp. For *La Llorona* is the spectral embodiment of what is always already lacking in the Real (frustrated desire, death, her murdered children, the compulsive wringing out of grief):

Recollect what we learned about the gaze, the most characteristic term for apprehending the proper function of the *objet a*. This *a* is presented precisely, in the field of the mirage of the narcissistic function of desire, as the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier. It is at this point of lack that the subject has to recognize himself. (Lacan 270)

It is highly significant that when Carmen suddenly erupts into the maids’ bedroom and turns on the light, the structure of this lethal fantasy collapses brutally, awakening the general (and us) from this cinematic dream. We (and Carmen, and all the women of the household who gather around the bedroom door) see the general for what he is: a dirty old man, his pajamas tented by an erection. It is crucial to recognize that his erection is caused, not by the view of a naked Alma-Llorona, nor by any conventional conceit of sexual “pleasure.” It is, rather, the manifestation of obscene enjoyment as undead drive, this compulsive circling of fantasy around the dark void of crime, the total possession and annihilation of the other, but which, like a moth inevitably and fatally drawn to a candle, also represents the annihilation of the self.

As Žižek writes in the Preface to *The Plague of Fantasies*: “What precedes fantasy is not reality but a hole in reality, its point of impossibility filled in with fantasy. Lacan’s name for this point is, of course, the *objet petit a*. The twisted topology of this object, [...] is the true focus of *The Plague of Fantasies*” (xiv). We do not need to go further into Lacanian terminology to talk about the obscure object of desire, the black hole that we cannot perceive directly but that exerts an unbearable pressure on the structure of our social reality, represented perfectly in that mythological figure of colonial trauma and fantasy, *La Llorona*. It is quite obvious in any case: Carmen tells her daughter that all women drive her husband crazy, “hasta las indias” (“even Indian women”). He has surrounded himself with submissive women, he has made his son-in-law, Natalia’s husband, disappear to “protect” her from leftist ideas. At the trial, he defends himself by saying “Usted bien sabe que mi intención fue crear una identidad nacional en este país” (“You know full well that my sole aim was to create a national identity for this country”)—and someone in the audience shouts out “¡genocida!” (“genocidal murderer!”) as he utters these words. Monteverde is the very figure of the persevering/perverse father (*le père sévère/pervers qui persévère*): his crimes have the strict structure of his fantasies, each reinforcing the other in a perverse symbiosis. When Carmen

abruptly switches on the light, the voyeur is suddenly robbed of his (fantasized) possession of the gaze-as-power: he is “re-vealed,” the protective veil of fantasy is lifted/rendered visible, and the figure of the severe father instantly dissolves to reveal the ob-scene of ideology itself, the perverse libidinal engine that converts raw crime into ideological fantasy.

I dare say that what is ultimately of most interest in the film is not so much the analysis of the *Ur-Vater*, the Freudian primordial father revealed to be the obscene superego supplement, but the form of speculative justice that the film projects into the absence of state justice, into the absence of a stabilizing juridical or social order. Alma, La Llorona, the ghost of genocide, seems like a catalyst that releases the haunting of fantasies. She begins to invade Carmen’s dreams, making her the protagonist of her own film, and it is through her hands that the final catharsis takes place.

The grafting of the horror genre onto necropolitical critique is effective in this film because what generates the plague of fantasies is not ultimately La Llorona herself: she is but a symptom, and her retributive justice, while encoded through the genre of psychological horror, is ultimately experienced as warranted. The true origin of the plague of fantasies unleashed by La Llorona’s ghostly presence clearly lies in the necropolitical power wielded by figures such as General Monteverde. As Achille Mbembe argues, necropolitics operates, under neo-colonial regimes, through the creation of “*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (“Necropolitics” 40). The Mayan genocide depicted in the film exemplifies this power to relegate entire populations to a spectral half-life, suspended between the status of subject and object. In *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe explores how colonial power is inextricably bound up with a “closing of the spirit”—a foreclosing of certain forms of fantasy and imagination that is “in large measure the product of deliberate instrumentalization” by colonial and racist power structures (2). This foreclosure, however, does not eliminate fantasy altogether; rather, it imposes a rigid ideological fantasy that structures colonial reality. In this sense, Alma/La Llorona acts as a catalyst to prise back open this colonially closed spirit, unleashing the repressed ghosts and alternative fantasies that haunt the genocidal imaginary. The horror she brings is thus not supernatural, but rather a confrontation with the necropolitical Real and the abyssal inhumanity at its core—a Real that the dominant colonial-fetishistic fantasy attempts to disavow but can never fully eliminate.

It should by now be clear that the horror genre functions in *La Llorona* not merely as a stylistic mode, but as a conceptual and political framework for exploring the deeper necropolitical structures that underpin the Guatemalan genocide. As the film progresses, the ghostly presence of La Llorona becomes increasingly entangled with the psychological unravelling of the Monteverde family, exposing how the violence of state power is the destabilizing vortex at the core of the family’s (and hence white Guatemala’s) racial and class fantasies. Ultimately, the film’s uncanny hybridization of horror tropes and historical trauma gestures towards a speculative form of justice that cannot be contained within the juridical framework of the state, but which erupts from the spectral interstices of collective psychological trauma. The film’s dramatic climax stages this confrontation in uncompromising terms: as Monteverde’s crimes return to haunt him in increasingly vivid and disturbing visions, his wife Carmen is also drawn into a vortex of guilt and complicity, culminating in a powerful POV visionary sequence where she witnesses,

through the eyes of Alma, the brutal drowning of her children at the hands of soldiers, and then her own murder by Monteverde himself. This phantasmatic projection of the repressed narrative of genocide—rendered as a meta-cinematic fantasy for the viewer—finally compels Carmen to take justice into her own hands.⁷ In the film’s culmination, replete with black magic and attempted exorcism, the plague of fantasies unleashed by *La Llorona* is not so much resolved as converted into a form of speculative justice, one that traverses the dark fantasies sustaining the necropolitical order by confronting them with their own lethal, spectral underside in an attempt to reckon with the trauma foreclosed by the failure of institutional justice. Ultimately, by confronting its audience with the uncomfortable fantasy structures of genocidal violence, the film paves the way, it is to be hoped, for a reopening of the spirit, and for the imaginative labor of mourning.

Sueño en otro idioma

We now move from the horror genre to a mode of filmmaking more explicitly influenced by magic realism. Where *La Llorona* deploys horror tropes, to freight, as we have seen, a profound critique of contemporary genocidal crime deeply embedded in the collective trauma of colonial conquest and subjugation, *Sueño en otro idioma* draws on magic realist traditions of questioning the epistemological framing of reality itself through its portrayal of indigenous epistemologies, languages and storytelling traditions. Both approaches serve to expose the phantasmatic structures underlying colonial and postcolonial power relations, and while the crime at the heart of *Sueño en otro idioma* is of a more epistemic nature, it is equally imbued with the colonial *Urszene* of the violent subjugation of indigenous peoples, ideologically promoted and sustained by missionary pedagogy. A primitive colonial “biopolitics” is clearly at work in the missionary enterprise, albeit operating within a context not bounded by the state, but clearly bound up with the internalized psychic effects of colonial power’s attempts to discipline and regulate the indigenous body and subject.⁸ Although the crime at the heart of *Sueño en otro idioma* is more symbolic and linguistic than the overt physical violence depicted in *La Llorona*, it is no less tied to the colonial-Christian legacy of linguistic and cultural genocide in Latin America, and Mexico in particular.

The film, directed by Ernesto Contreras with a script penned by his brother Carlos Contreras, concerns a Mexican anthropologist, named Martín, who has a university scholarship to create a recorded archive of an (invented) indigenous language, Zikril, that is on the verge of disappearing. At the beginning of the film, it is believed that only three people still speak Zikril as their mother tongue, and shortly after Martín arrives, one of these dies, leaving only two old men, Isauro and Evaristo. Isauro speaks almost no Spanish, making it difficult for Martín to engage with him, but a more serious problem is the fact that Evaristo and Isauro have been in a fifty-year-old feud on account of a love entanglement and violent quarrel in their youth. Although the conflict was ostensibly over a woman, the story in fact centers on the love/hate conflict between Isauro and Evaristo, a relationship that is physically consummated in a homoerotic night-time sequence set in the forest by a camp fire. After Evaristo’s girlfriend, María, spies on the two boys making love near the beach one day, Evaristo is consumed by shame, partly attributed to the imbibing

of Christian values at mass in the local church, and partly to María's refusal to formalize their relationship if he continues to see Isauro. Isauro also attends Spanish literacy classes at the church, taught by the same priest, who imparts Christian notions of original sin and the evils of the flesh to his congregation. The love triangle and simmering conflict between the last two Zikril speakers thus acts as a displaced arena where the colonial crime of linguistic erasure plays out through compulsive phantasmatic repetitions and blockages. Interestingly, Contreras embeds this conflict within a rich symbolic framework of myth, ritual, and dream that gestures towards the need to traverse the colonial fantasies obstructing access to repressed cultural traumas. Like *La Llorona*, the film ultimately opens up a speculative space for reckoning with these lingering colonial hauntings.

The symbolic crime at the heart of *Sueño en otro idioma* is thus overdetermined by a complex nexus of colonial power, internalized shame, and the plague of fantasies unleashed by the violent suppression of non-normative or shamed sexualities and identities, while the love between Isauro and Evaristo, foreclosed by the neo-missionary discourse of sin and damnation, becomes a festering wound that prevents the transmission of Zikril to future generations (Figure 5). In staging the intimate entanglement between the biopolitical regulation of indigenous bodies/subjects, and the necropolitical consignment of their languages and cultures to the realm of the living dead, it is curious that the film chooses to wrap these powerful themes within a mythopoetic, even "magic realist" filmic language, whereby the (invented) language of Zikril is imbued with magical powers to communicate with animals and spirits. Zikril is depicted as being as much a language of the natural world, or rather a language that mediates liminal states between nature and culture, the spiritual and the human, as a language that serves to transmit Zikril culture, knowledge, and belief.

From the very opening of the film, when Martín meets two of the last three speakers, doña Jacinta and Isauro, the two Zikril take Martín into the rainforest to show him the secret power of a language the origins of which are intricately woven into the Zikril creation myth. Doña Jacinta recounts the story to Martín as the three characters are walking through the rich, verdant undergrowth dotted with ancient monoliths:

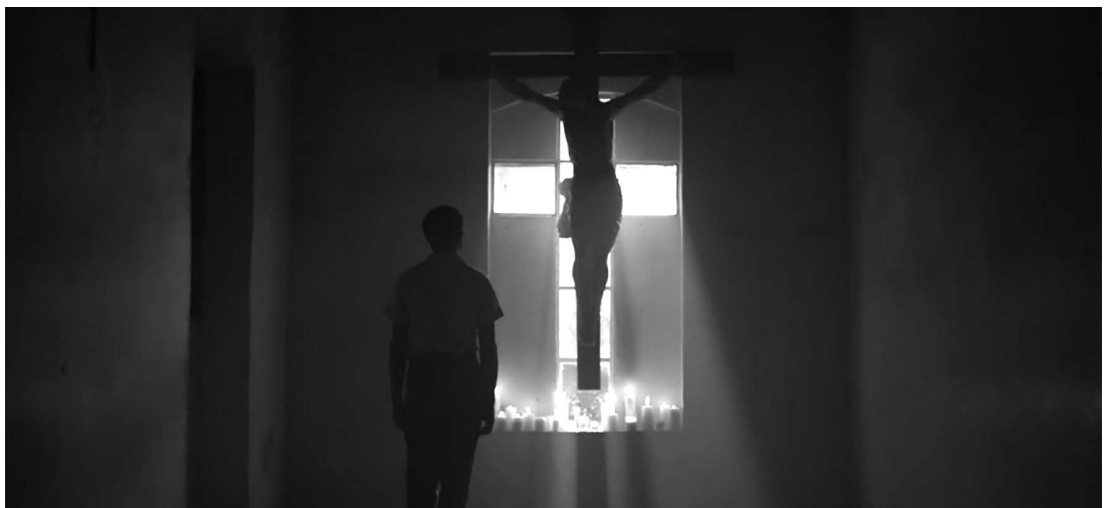


Figure 5: The young Evaristo (Juan Pablo de Santiago) facing his demons.

En el principio, una mujer pájaro se enamoró del primer hombre que caminaba sobre la tierra. Y él se enamoró de ella. Pero como no hablaban la misma lengua, no podían consumar su amor. La mujer pájaro, entonces, decidió enseñarle a hablar el zikril, la lengua de todos los seres de la jungla... De esa unión nacimos todos nosotros, y desde entonces, hombres y animales hablamos el mismo idioma.

In the beginning, a Bird-Woman fell in love with the first Man to walk the Earth. And he fell in love with her. But since they did not speak the same language, they could not consummate their love. So, the Bird-Woman decided to teach the Man to speak Zikril, the language of all the creatures of the jungle... We are all the fruit of this union, and since then, human and animal alike, we all speak the same language. (My trans.)

Isauro and doña Jacinta proceed to call out a greeting in Zikril, which is almost immediately responded to by a chorus of birds and other animals, as Martín looks on in amazement. On a basic level, this sequence can be read as confirming the film's interpretation of linguistic erasure as a form of epistemicide that severs indigenous peoples from their ancestral knowledge systems and ways of being in the world. That much is obvious, but we have to grapple with the film's encoding of this theme within magic realist tropes that appear to essentialize Zikril culture and language as timeless and natural, persisting beyond death in a magical realm referred to in the film as "el Encanto" (the Enchantment), and imbuing its speakers with magical abilities, like those of Dr. Dolittle, to communicate with animals, trees, and the wind as embodiments of Zikril ancestral spirits.

Some strains of conventional ecocriticism can tend towards the kind of essentialism that appears at first glance to inform this film's depiction of indigenous epistemologies as an emanation of the natural world, albeit that essentialism is folded into a more sophisticated terminology of phenomenological immanence. In the preoccupation with jettisoning the human as a separate category, folding it into interconnected ecological meshworks, politics and theory sometimes get jettisoned along with the bathwater of human-nature binarism. Of course, more politically minded critics such as Timothy Morton, in his book *Ecology without Nature* (2007), have controversially argued that it is in fact Nature, as a transcendental category beyond politics, history, and language, that contemporary ecocritical discourse must jettison. But what are we to make of the intervention of *Sueño en otro idioma*, with its evocation of Zikril as a mytho-poetic language of the rainforest, as one that appears to reject the Saussurian conception of language as a self-referential system which is ontologically and tragically sundered from the world that it ostensibly names? Perhaps we can unpack, or at least re-frame, such essentialist conceptions by projecting them into the plague of fantasies that this film, like *La Llorona*, awakens, and in particular to the way fantasy becomes manifest within the context of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity. This film perhaps forces us to confront the radical instability of ecological fantasies of reparation and plenitude, helping us to traverse them by confronting them with the very power structures they seek to disavow. It is crucial to remember that "traversing the fantasy" is not a renunciation of fantasy, but an ability to reground and reframe it within a wider context of complicity and power.

The Christian-inflected guilt that haunts Evaristo, preventing him from accepting his sexuality, suggests the way in which fantasies—here fantasies of perversion and self-hatred—can function as psychic obstacles, warping the very structure of desire until it is coerced into the ideological binary of monotheistic law and its transgression. Internalized colonial fantasies of sin and shame create a perpetual cycle of desire, repression, and guilt, where the transgressive nature of desire itself becomes the motor for the proliferation of (religious) ideology. The repression of Isauro and Evaristo's relationship under the weight of guilt represents a concrete example of a plague of fantasies that violently foreclose alternative modes of being and loving. Evaristo's inability to embrace queer desire beyond its demonization within Judaeo-Christian patriarchal regulation mirrors the larger cultural inability to countenance the Zikril language and epistemology. The film thus posits a connection between linguistic and sexual liberation, suggesting that both require a confrontation with and traversal of the fantasies that structure colonial subjectivity.

In the film, this process passes homosexual desire through a classic triangular “homosocial” structure (of the type examined extensively by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Between Men* [1985]). But this superficial pattern (Evaristo must disavow his love for Isauro, rendering it abject in order to attain a socially acceptable union with María) is radically destabilized by the fact that the disavowal is *also* a rejection of Zikril identity and language (and in fact the displaced “homosocial” relationship between the men is never achieved via this route). The monolingual Isauro, with whom Evaristo has not spoken for fifty years until Martín attempts to reunite the men in order to create a repository of Zikril language and culture, is rendered abject, becoming a somewhat ridiculous figure of loneliness and isolation representing the last remnants of Zikril identity on the verge of extinction. Interestingly, Martín manages to gain access to the bitter and hostile Evaristo by creating yet another triangle: he initiates an intimate relationship with Evaristo's granddaughter Lluvia, a young woman who is teaching English by radio to help prepare would-be migrants from the region to the USA.

When Martín first meets Lluvia at the radio station, and in subsequent conversations, she expresses no interest in her Zikril heritage or language (which she does not speak), since she herself dreams of emigrating to the USA and is focused on improving her English. Nevertheless, Martín gradually wins her over to the cause, and she negotiates a deal with her grandfather whereby he will agree to be interviewed by Martín, at the same table as Isauro, in exchange for a television set, itself a device for the projection of fantasy as an ideological formation or (to use a different terminology) libidinal economy. We are thus presented with a further triadic structure: that of Zikril, Spanish, and English, each functioning as a placeholder, alternately, for the projection of fantasy, loss, desire, and abjection. In fact we can perhaps understand the equivocal role of fantasy in this film (as both generator of genocidal demons and compensation-fiction for epistemic loss) precisely as a structural element in the shifting power relations represented by the three iconic spaces of rainforest (indigeneity, Zikril), church (coloniality, Spanish), and television (globalization, English).



Figure 6: The reconciled Evaristo (Eligio Meléndez, left) and Isauro (Manuel Poncelis, right) “watching” their former selves playing in the sea.

Each element of these repeating triangles can represent, in a radically unstable manner, both a fantasy of plenitude and a nightmare of alienation and loss. Martín unwittingly echoes the triangulation of homosexual desire via a heterosexual relationship (in his case, with Lluvia), that had initially been the cause of Evaristo and Isauro’s alienation (via María), and hence a factor in the disintegration of Zikril culture, community, and identity. Superficially, at least, Martín appears to be reversing the arrow of this disintegration, potentially reuniting the last two speakers of Zikril, undoing temporal splitting (Figure 6), and healing their alienation in order to revive Zikril, even if only for a brief period, against the disintegrating pull of Spanish and now English. His highly unethical intervention ultimately backfires, of course, and unwittingly hastens the final extinction of the language through the very process of “archiving” it, an academic process that itself is deeply complicit with the colonial dynamics of epistemicide.⁹

Ultimately, these repeating triadic structures (Evaristo–Isauro–María, Martín–Lluvia–Evaristo/Isauro, Zikril–Spanish–English, rainforest–church–television) can be understood as attempts to symbolize, or “knot” together, the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real in various unstable configurations. Each element in these triads shifts, unstably, between representing fantasy, loss, and the eruption of the Real. Through such repeating formations, the film represents a complex negotiation, respectively, between the idealized projections of indigeneity together with colonial fantasies of the primitive; the structures of language, law, and social order imposed by colonial and postcolonial regimes; and the traumatic underlayer of violence, desire, and loss that distorts both indigenous and non-indigenous realities. The knotting at work in the film should not be understood as an attempt at reconciliation or equilibrium. Rather, it is a dynamic process of negotiation and tension that makes visible the complex interplay of these elements in the context of postcolonial trauma and cultural loss. The fantasy of magical indigeneity serves both to reveal and conceal the traumatic Real of epistemicide. Zikril is after all a language concocted purely for the purposes of the film, making it (intentionally, I believe) difficult to read as a pure fantasy of ecological or prelapsarian plenitude, and it is overwhelmingly framed by the reality of its impending extinction.

The Imaginary or magical realist representations of Zikril and “el Encanto” (the Zikril afterlife of magical spirits “en una fiesta permanente” [“in everlasting revelry”]) are undermined by the

slow violence of the language and culture's extinction: epistemicide and genocide constitute a lethal "death drive" operating at the heart of colonial and neocolonial projects (what Mbembe, as we have seen, terms "necropolitics"). The Symbolic of colonial Christianity and academic anthropology is disrupted by eruptions of the Real (*jouissance*, the violence of jealousy, abjection) that they cannot fully contain, and which end up shattering the very linguistic plenitude Martín had hoped to repair. When Evaristo rejects Isauro once more after their supposed reconciliation, Isauro, in a fit of rage, sneaks into Evaristo and Lluvia's house in the dead of night, gathers all the photographs and mementos of the deceased María, and burns them in a bucket outside the front door. In turn, Evaristo marches over to Isauro's shack, ties up the door so he cannot get out, douses it in petrol and sets fire to the flimsy wooden construction (Isauro is only just saved by the frantic interventions of Martín and Lluvia).

Over all of this, the Real of colonial trauma exerts pressure on both the imaginary construction of indigeneity and the symbolic structures of postcolonial Mexican society, in turn further destabilized by the lure and pull of globalization and English as a language of geopolitical power and control. The film thus serves not to represent some authentic indigeneity and fantasy of reparative linguistic restitution, but to make visible the gaps and inconsistencies in both the colonial *and* decolonial fantasies it enacts. It stages what Žižek refers to as the "parallax view": the irreducible gap between different perspectives that cannot be synthesized into a higher *Aufhebung* (sublation; 4). Instead of an impossible sublation, the film pushes its spectators, like the academic anthropologist and linguist, towards the need to "traverse the fantasy," which includes the fantasy of academic rationalization. By inhabiting contradictory and overlapping fantastical spaces (colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial), while assuming their gaps and inconsistencies, the film forces us to push through the fantasies of both magical indigeneity and postcolonial modernity, revealing the ideologies and desires that shape our understanding of cultural difference and postcolonial subjectivity. The film's knotting does not resolve these tensions, but makes them palpable, inviting us to confront the complex, often contradictory ways in which fantasy structures our engagement with cultural difference and colonial legacy. As Žižek emphasizes, traversing the fantasy does not mean moving beyond fantasy altogether, but rather, like Martín, recognizing our complicity in the phantasmatic structures that shape postcolonial reality.

We have seen two visions of physical and cultural genocide, along with two attempts to imagine, not simple solutions or reparations, but the very possibility of traversing the fantasies which structure even the darkest recesses of the human psyche. Their distinct approaches to the fantastic—through horror and magic realism respectively—demonstrate how contemporary Latin American cinema has displaced the fantasy elements at work within traditional magic realism onto a more explicitly political challenge to colonial epistemologies. Both films use fantasy elements not simply to normalize the supernatural, but to expose the phantasmatic underpinnings of colonial violence and its contemporary reverberations. Both films offer powerful cinematic explorations of genocide's lingering traumas in postcolonial Latin America, revealing how these forms of violence are deeply rooted in colonial necropolitics and the systematic foreclosure of indigenous subjectivities. Crucially, both films deploy fantasy elements as means to approach a kernel of

colonial and postcolonial violence that resists direct symbolization. This strategy opens up the possibility, for the spectator, of “traversing the fantasy” in a Žižekian sense, confronting viewers with the gaps and inconsistencies in both colonial and decolonial imaginaries. By inhabiting these contradictory fantastical spaces, while at the same time exposing the pervasiveness of fantasy in structuring reality and providing support for ideology as explored in Žižek’s concept of the plague of fantasies, the films push spectators towards recognizing their own complicity in postcolonial power structures and fantasies of prelapsarian indigeneity.

Moreover, these works open up speculative spaces for justice and reckoning with colonial hauntings that cannot be contained within institutional frameworks. *La Llorona* offers a powerful vision of non-institutional justice, confronting the fantasies sustaining the necropolitical order with their own lethal, spectral underside. *Sueño en otro idioma* provides shifting, unstable triangulations of desire, linguistic sovereignty, and religious fantasy that force us to confront the ideological mappings of “belief” alongside fantasies of restorative plenitude. The ghostly presence of La Llorona and the magical properties of Zikril serve not as simplistic forms of restitution *vis-à-vis* (post-)colonial epistemicide, but as catalysts for confronting those repressed historical traumas beyond legal or academic paradigms. Throughout *Sueño en otro idioma*, language promises the revelation of a secret, the secret offered by the dream of “another language” (whether it be Zikril, Spanish, or English), which is to say another way of dreaming, another way of interpreting the complexity of social experience and the fantasies that structure it. But this “truth” is one that is infinitely deferred. As Martín watches Isauro’s ghost advancing towards the assembled Zikril spirits, inviting him to join “el Encanto,” Isauro turns to Martín and speaks to him in Zikril, insistently repeating a phrase that Martín cannot understand, “jaide upive, upiveje, upive, banats upive.” While we are given an approximate translation eventually by Evaristo, these words act as something like the “truth” behind the plague of fantasies: a truth that fantasy appears to proffer and then at once withdraw. And this is because language is not the expression of an individual psyche, but a medium through which float memories, affects, and uncanny forms of connection. If the “truth” signifies anything, it is simply “amigo, mi mejor amigo,” the basic truth of friendship across cultural and linguistic difference: the only truth that can cut through the plague of fantasies that drives so much destruction and devastation.

Ultimately, these films demonstrate cinema’s unique potential to make visible the complex interplay of fantasy, trauma, and power in postcolonial contexts. By weaving together language, fantasy, and death in unstable configurations, they invite viewers to confront the phantasmatic structures that shape our engagement with cultural difference and colonial legacy. In doing so, they offer not just critiques of historical injustice, but pathways for reimagining postcolonial subjectivity beyond the confines of inherited colonial fantasies.

Notes

1. This paper builds on a version due to appear in Spanish in *Diálogos con lo fantástico en el policial latinoamericano*, edited by Sabine Schmitz, Daniel A. Verdú Schumann, and Dante Barrientos, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2025.
2. I wish to thank my former PhD student Javier Pérez Osorio, for bringing the film *Sueño en otro idioma* to my attention, and for the long and fruitful discussions we had about its queer dynamics. See Pérez Osorio, which

has greatly influenced my own work.

3. For further analysis of the role of voice and disarticulated sound in the legend of La Llorona as well as in Jayro Bustamante's film, see Bloch-Robin.
4. For an insightful analysis of the class dynamics surrounding the servants, and their relationship to (in) visibility, in *La Llorona*, see Julie Amiot-Guilouet, "La revancha de los invisibles: en torno al papel de los empleados en *La Llorona*."
5. Compare Homi Bhabha's complex adumbration of "colonial desire" (44–45), of which this sequence in the film could be a textbook example.
6. For further analysis of the role of threshold spaces such as doors and windows, together with their relationship to "spectral flows" (between reality and fantasy, for example) see Thibaudeau, pp. 138–140. He also discusses insightfully the meta-framing at work in the film.
7. For an exploration of the confrontation of different notions of "justice" in the film, including the inversion of the trial in the final "exorcism" (and execution) of the dictator at the hands of the women of the household, see Ramos Alquezar, pp. 99–101.
8. I am of course aware that Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, developed in relation to modern European statehood, only fits imperfectly in a (neo-)colonial, religious context supposedly superseded by the modern European state's claim to the *bios*. However, Foucault himself explains that biopolitics clearly inherits its soul-making enterprise from prior Christian modalities (Foucault 23), and Mbembe (2003) insists that postcolonial necropolitics needs to be understood in such theoretically messy terms.
9. This very dynamic is at work, notoriously, in the Mayan "sacred text" *Popol Vuh*, where the mythopoetic accounts of origin only accede to writing—to the scriptural—as the very condition of the epistemicide that its (evangelized) scribes recount.

Works Cited

- Amiot-Guilouet, Julie. "La revancha de los invisibles: en torno al papel de los empleados en *La Llorona*." *Pandora, Laboratoire d'études romanes*, vol. 16, 2021, pp. 149–162.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bloch-Robin, Marianne. "La voz recobrada de los silenciados en *La Llorona* de Jayro Bustamante." *Pandora, Laboratoire d'études romanes*, vol. 16, 2021, pp. 165–181.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1975. Vintage Books, 1995.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Karnac, 2004.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois, Duke UP, 2017.
- . "Necropolitics." Translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.
- Musalo, Karen, and Blaine Bookey. "Crimes without Punishment: An Update on Violence against Women and Impunity in Guatemala." *UC Law Journal of Race and Economic Justice*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, pp. 265–292.
- Pérez, Javier. "La Llorona: una entrevista fantasma con Jayro Bustamante." *Cine PREMIERE*, 29 July 2021, cinepremiere.com.mx/la-llorona-una-entrevista-fantasma-con-jayro-bustamante.html.
- Pérez Osorio, Javier. *Queer Tropical Frames: New Representations of Queerness in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*. 2024. University of Cambridge, Unpublished PhD dissertation.
- Ramos Alquezar, Sergio. "Justicia espectral: violencia política y género fantástico en el cine latinoamericano actual." *Pandora, Laboratoire d'études romanes*, vol. 16, 2021, pp. 89–107.
- Thibaudeau, Pascale. "Umbrales, franqueamientos y flujos espectrales en *La Llorona* de Jayro Bustamante." *Pandora, Laboratoire d'études romanes*, vol. 16, 2021, pp. 135–148.
- Yoc Cosajay, Aura Marina. "Violencia sexual a mujeres indígenas durante el conflicto armado interno y el genocidio en Guatemala." *Caravelle (1988-)*, no. 102, 2014, pp. 157–162.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Parallax View*. Short Circuits. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006.
- . *The Plague of Fantasies*. Wo Es War. Verso, 1997.