

The Western Hemisphere's Original Freaks: Indigenous Peoples and Doctrines of Dispossession

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It is known that before Columbus's accidental landing on a small island in the Caribbean Sea in October 1492, Europeans believed that the farthest edges of the world were inhabited by a wild assortment of monstrous races.¹ It is equally known that grotesque descriptions were employed by Spanish clerics to discredit the metaphysical concepts of Mayas, Mexicas (Aztecs), and other native peoples of the Americas. In 1525 the Dominican official Tomas Ortiz proclaimed that Indians ate human flesh, engaged in sodomy, went naked, and had no respect for love, virginity, or the truth. He reported that Indians "[w]ere incapable of learning. . . . God has never created a race more full of vice and composed without the least mixture of kindness or culture. . . . The Indians are more stupid than asses and refuse to improve in anything."² He went on to become commissioner of the Inquisition a year later (Herbermann 262).

This was not all, however. Neta Crawford also cites Franciscan bishop Juan de Quevedo, who stated, "If any people ever deserved to be treated harshly, it is the Indians, who resemble ferocious beasts more than rational creatures" (148). As if that were not enough, she goes on to quote royal historian Oviedo, who added that indigenous heads were different from European ones:

They were not, in fact, heads at all, but rather hard and thick helmets, so that the most important piece of advice the Christians gave when fighting in hand to hand combat with them was not to strike them on the head, because they broke the swords. And just as their heads were hard, so their understanding was bestial and evilly inclined. (148–49).

Freakish Encounters

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As if this were not already abusive enough, Dominican missionary Domingo de Betanzos, who participated in the so-called Spiritual Conquest, evangelizing indigenous subjects throughout New Spain, charged in 1533 that Indians were beasts destined for extinction.

We could only hope that this low point in human respect for otherness would have been circumscribed to the early decades of the 1500s as an inevitable result of a military invasion with a medieval frame of mind. Unfortunately, these rhetorical semantics never truly went away. If we jump to the present, we find a different yet scarily similar kind of reaction among Guatemala's elite and other Eurocentric Latin American ruling sectors. When Maya human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú began pressing for charges of genocide against military leaders in the late 1990s, similar retrograde readings and ways of seeing that virtually framed her as a freak surfaced abruptly but massively. This process skidded quickly in the direction of innuendo and hearsay. Anthropologist Diane Nelson documented the wide array of monstrous jokes directed at Menchú in an entire chapter of her book *A Finger in the Wound* (1999). It can be said that this behavioral pattern offered mestizo urban social sectors some consolation in the face of rapid changes in gender and ethnic relations and the irrational fear that this acceleration would continue indefinitely and truly threaten their material well-being. But why continue the same model that recalled the early sixteenth century? We can only presuppose that this phantasmatically powerful rhetoric marks a nodal point around which otherness was reorganized in the New World, and around which it cohered.

For Crawford, what was at stake in these subjective misrepresentations was the legality of the Conquest (149). For me, what matters is how these abject, violent representations or racialized subjugations have shaped indigenous subjectivities since the early sixteenth century all the way into the present. Rethinking freakdom from a decolonial perspective implies rethinking how the subalternized and racialized other is represented from a conquering Eurocentric perspective convinced of its right and might while addressing a Eurocentric audience. In this article, then, I will explore how these colonial and colonized representations of indigenous peoples as freaks articulate a stigma that not only accounts for generating overall disability among the Western Hemisphere's indigenous subjects in societal, educational, and professional contexts, but has also exercised a continuous violence against indigenous subjects from the Spanish invasion to the present. To this end, I will revisit some of the famous early scenes of Spanish and indigenous contact depicted by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1496–1584), a soldier in Cortés's army, in his now classic testimony of the Mexican and Guatemalan invasion, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (*The Conquest of New Spain*), written toward the end of his life in Antigua, Guatemala, in the early 1580s and first published in Spain in 1632.

I base some of my premises on Chickasaw scholar Jodi A. Byrd's argumentations, as when she states in *The Transit of Empire* that

[t]he traces of indigenous savagery and "Indianness" . . . stand a priori prior to theorizations of origin, history, freedom, constraint, and difference. These traces of "Indianness" are vitally important to understanding how power and domination have been articulated and practiced by empire, and yet because they are traces, they have often remained deactivated as a point of critical inquiry as theory has transited across disciplines and schools. (xvii–xviii)

Byrd goes on to claim that these ontological concerns that interpellate Indianness as savagery have been naturalized by Western-centered hegemony in the Americas. As such, they are renewed continuously so that, by virtue of this never-ending iteration, they de-realize the other, leaving indigenous subjects "nowhere and everywhere" (xix) within ontological conceptualizations that not only articulate Eurocentric premises as "natural" but also have constructed social imaginaries that persist today in which the notion of the indigenous subject as a freak is permanently embedded.

I try, therefore, to underscore the fact that the study of the representation of these subjectivities exemplifies the same attitudes that—having emerged in the early sixteenth century—continue to see indigenous peoples as "naturally" abhorrent or inferior—natural freaks—while eliding both their vulnerability and the historical explanations behind this uncanny gaze. This of course happens because those displaced indigenous histories produced and reproduced shame in the making of race as a direct result of Spanish imperial power. In turn, the resulting culture was modified by the newly imposed premises of Eurocentric modernity—Enlightenment thinking—that adjusted to those newer racial theories that emerged in the nineteenth century, fusing and perpetrating the same undifferentiated myths and prejudices constructed during the first cycle of modernization launched from the Iberian Peninsula in the 1500s.

In the sense outlined above, it is important to remember Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's claim that "violence and alibi coexist in a chiasmus rather than as a critical pair" (*Aesthetic* 125). In effect, this silencing of the everyday violence performed and perpetrated by Western elites upon most of the rest of the world often impedes Western-centered subjects' intellectual understanding of the relationship between racialized freakdom and violence. Argentine-born philosopher Enrique Dussel, in his genealogy of the modern world-system, emphasizes the original violence created by the modernity/coloniality phenomenon, while reframing the importance of the first Iberian mo-

dernity mentioned in the previous paragraph to understand not only the nature of coloniality itself but also its relationship to violence in the discovery of the non-European subject. Dussel implies that in Portuguese contact with Africans and Spanish contact with indigenous subjects, there was both a negation of alterity and the launching of a transatlantic slave trade. Thus, the construction in Latin America was the manufacturing of the first peripheral societies of modernity. He also states that conquistador Hernán Cortés expressed what he labels the *ego conquiro*, a will to conquer and enslave that he associates with masculine sexuality as source of aggression. Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres also associates the crisis of masculinist sexuality with coloniality. He argues that machismo is the consequence of Dussel's *ego conquiro*. For him, this syndrome includes the feminization of the enemy as an expression of symbolic domination, and dependency on exploiting female labor and their bodies. Maldonado-Torres adds that this happened as the West became entangled "with forms of domination and subordination that were central to maintaining colonial control . . . in the Americas" (xx). In this respect, we should also consider Erving Goffman's stigma theory, which examines how human traits deemed "different" come to be considered deviant, marking with shame and humiliation those subjects so labeled, who in turn begin to fear discrediting, discrimination, or outright violence from the perceived majority. Without saying so, Goffman defined the nature of freakdom.

Indeed, throughout Western modernity, the English word *freak* has been used to name either subjects with genetic abnormalities or those who altered their own bodies through any of a diverse range of techniques, such as tattooing, bodily perforations to insert jewelry, or surgical implants. I state that the term is an English one, as there is no easy translation to other languages, and most of them have simply adopted the Anglicism, as is the case with Spanish, Portuguese, and French. The most common Spanish translation, *bicho raro* (literally, a strange creature, yet implying a weirdo), simply does not capture what freakdom is. Indeed, Spaniards have given up translating the term and simply use *friki* to name the phenomenon. Regarding tattooing, however, we should also remember Byrd's claim that the signifier *tattoo*

bears its trace at the nexus between Western systems of knowledge production that seek to solidify its onto-epistemological meaning into "discovery," "mastery," and "savagery," and the Pacific ontologies of genealogy, kinship, and embodied relationships. (9)

What Byrd labels as Pacific ontologies in reference to indigenous peoples of the Pacific Rim (Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia) could easily be

associated with the Mayas and other indigenous peoples of the Americas (who most likely had pre-Columbian relations with cultures of the Pacific Rim) as well.

Needless to say, the first definition of *freak*—genetic abnormalities—points in the direction of disability studies, whereas the second—body alteration—does so in terms of cultural exercise of agency. In the first sense, it reminds us that that all bodies are socially constructed, that social attitudes and institutions determine the representation of the body's reality, in Tobin Siebers's words, far more than biological fact does ("Disability in Theory" 737). Stigmatized bodies presuppose the existence of the idea of an able-bodied standard as a regulatory schema, whereas, as we have learned from disability theory, this process of defining bodies as in perpetual transition, always suffering modification, decline, or failure, just like all other matter, whether organic or inorganic, human or nonhuman, coincides with an indigenous vision.³ "Able-bodiedness is a temporary identity at best" (*Disability Theory* 5), claims Siebers, meaning that disability is never static nor fixed. All bodies are freakish, and this is not solely the province of humans.⁴ In the case of genetic abnormalities or altered bodies, we also have to consider the terms *monstrous* and *monstrosity*, terms dating approximately from the 1550s, derived from the French *monstruosité*. This latter issue of monstrous or monstrosity points to the 1970s discussions in Latin American studies regarding the figure of Caliban, the monstrous character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Cuban poet and critic Roberto Fernández Retamar attempted to present this Shakespearean "cannibal" figure as a pivotal beginning for a somewhat essentialized Latin American *mestizo* identity in 1971, which would have had thus defined the majority of Latin America's population—all mestizos—as freaks. Still, Fernández Retamar's text paved the way for a discussion on the possibilities of elaborating a post-Western ideology.⁵ It is this latter issue that truly matters for me. Thus, in the ensuing analysis, I will favor the second of the definitions, related to the social alteration of bodies. It is also important to note in this sense Byrd's rejoinder to Spivak's claim that Caliban was a cipher of sorts, stating that, rather, Caliban should be visualized as an originary "cacophony," a fount of competing discourses, much in the way I will read Gonzalo Guerrero in Díaz del Castillo's narrative. Through this example, Byrd articulates her central assertion, which sees "colonial discourses not only as vertical impositions between colonizer and colonized but also as horizontal interrelations between different colonized peoples within the same geographical space" (63).

Needless to say, it is true that Spaniards confronted a world unknown to them upon cultural contact. To their provincial and medieval eyes, the images of goddesses sporting loincloths, male priests forcing themselves into the flayed skin of sacrificed women, shamans wearing the blouse of a seductive goddess to cure a scorpion sting, and many of the other rituals of the Mexica

and other Mesoamerican indigenous groups that historian Pete Sigal describes in *The Flower and the Scorpion* not only altered and extended their comprehension and conception of gender and sexual categories but also, seen from their fanatical symbolic perspective on Catholicism and analogous Western paradigms—as well as read through their political sense of entitlement in the spirit of the Reconquista (reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from Muslims)—led to their perceiving those fertility rites joining carnality to power as heinous displays of freakdom. Most certainly as monstrous manifestations of the devil, much along the lines of Hieronymus Bosch's famous *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, presently in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Sigal uses indigenous concepts such as *tlazolli*, “filth” or “trash,” to avoid imposing Eurocentric views of freakdom on Mexica practices, since those were not Nahua categories. Nevertheless, it was the nature of such imagery that led scholars such as Lewis Hanke to make statements such as “the wealth of ideas and legends developed . . . during the Middle Ages was transferred at once to America; this medieval influence was especially marked during the early years” (3). Scholars such as Danna Levin Rojo, however, claim that the medieval hypothesis has resulted in a general disregard of native traditions such as the Nahua fertility rituals tapping the regenerative power of trash that Sigal studied. The specificity of those rituals required the excess that Spaniards decried so much. As a consequence, these rites figure heavily in colonial investigations of what Spanish churchmen considered “idolatry”—also understood as a sort of freakdom—leading to the truly atrocious mid-seventeenth-century “treatise on the heathen superstitions” written by the priest Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, guardian of faith and morals, named “Minister of Indians,” who from 1613–14 arbitrarily declared for himself the attributes of a Grand Inquisitor and performed autos-de-fé with indigenous and Afro-descendant subjects.

As we consider this complex and overcharged cultural legacy, we should evoke Avery Gordon's allegation that the power relations characterizing all societies are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply (3). She adds, “To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it” (7). Suggesting an alternative approach, she claims that haunting can be used to describe the screaming presence of that which appears not to be contemporaneous. She goes on to argue that “ghostly matters” are signifiers of what is missing and what must be examined, and turns to literature because it is a field that is not restrained by disciplinary conventions, calling our attention to that which lingers like an open wound, as is the case of the impact of racism. Witness the previous example cited of Menchú. Needless to say, there is a relational significance between freakdom and haunting, even when it is established only by virtue of its monstrosity.

It is thinking according to the logic of that initial Spanish colonial gaze that the usage of the trope *freak* becomes useful, even when we conceive of

it as a catachresis. It helps to visualize how peninsular identities—both in metropolitan Spain and in the colonies—emerged as unequivocally encoded by race. This phenomenon operated more in the sense of the second strain previously mentioned—bodily transformation—because this was associated with both culture and the exercise of agency. It cut both ways. Indigenous subjects could be perceived as “freaks,” but Spanish subjects could also “become savage” and transform themselves into freaks if they so wished.

Indeed, it is that very notion of becoming savage that Byrd calls “the transit of empire,” a phrase that serves as the title of her book. She understands this as the spatial site that was effaced so that “competing oppressions” (xxvi) could then propagate themselves as a “multicultural cosmopole” (10) within that same space to build an empire on top of indigenous lands. These actions were then replicated by transforming the colonized or about-to-be-colonized into “Indians” through continual reiterations of pioneer logics, whether in the Pacific, Central America, or the Middle East. Finally, they also identified the traces of that same “Indianness” to justify this process, thus conceptualizing themselves as the legal occupiers of the land after they had erased indigenous peoples. Indeed, when many thinkers have conceived of what Ernst Bloch labeled a “utopian impulse” for the Americas as “expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become” (5), this implies *de facto* the complete erasure of indigenous subjects—or freak subjects of any kind, for that matter.⁶ Such was, by way of example, the positivist, racialized depiction of Central American subjects by nineteenth-century US justifiers of occupying those fertile lands, such as geographer E. G. Squier and historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, who created alternative social imaginaries without any presence of “brown people” in the region.⁷ In Byrd’s case, she wants to disrupt this reifying narrative by employing a “mnemonic” methodology to read the cacophonies emerging along the horizon of colonized voices. Though clearly not the same, I “see” her mnemonics along the lines of affect and performativity, which, in my understanding, create the memory devices that her trope invokes by generating a relationship of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility, as in the case of Gonzalo Guerrero, whose stance I am about to explore in this article.

Paraphrasing Ann Laura Stoler, who is writing about Dutch nineteenth-century colonialism, racial thinking was not subsequent to the imperial order but constitutive of it, a thinking that had a concrete impact on the lives of hemispheric indigenous peoples forever (*Carnal* 144). It was already part of their mental baggage, as Lucien Febvre, who cofounded with Ernst Bloch the *Annales* school in 1929, labeled this murky corpus of visceral responses, anxieties, and reflexes.⁸ They were generated by what Stoler named in turn the “crafted differences” that “were not clear at all,” thus gaining “their strategic force, not from the fixity of their essentialisms,

but from the internal malleability assigned to the changing features of racial essence” (*Carnal* 144).⁹

As far as the trope *freak* itself is concerned, Andrea Poppiti claims, citing Robert Bogdan’s *Freak Show*, that the term was used throughout the nineteenth century to represent people with physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies to attract paying customers, a domain of abjected bodies, in Butler’s terminology, which leads Poppiti to question whether this renders bodies legible or livable.¹⁰ In my reading, however, and in the logic previously outlined, I would stretch this back further to claim that those modes of social discipline—if we can label a freak description of an indigenous subject thus—are first provided by Bernal Díaz del Castillo—a figure that haunts, to use Gordon’s term, the Spanish invasion of Mesoamerica—by means of a Spanish subject, Gonzalo Guerrero, who shipwrecked along the Yucatán Peninsula. He was rescued by local Mayas, and then chose to become one of them.

As historian Matthew Restall informs us, there were four Spanish expeditions to Yucatan (6). The first, though unplanned, was perhaps the most meaningful from the perspective of this article. The 1511 expedition, under the command of Juan de Valdivia (180n7), shipwrecked after it ran aground on a reef. A small boat full of survivors made it to the coast. All were captured by Mayas and enslaved. Only two men survived that Spaniards knew of, though this was never fully proven: Gonzalo Guerrero and Jerónimo de Aguilar. However, taking it as a given that indeed they were the only two survivors, Bernal Díaz del Castillo will use them for the basis of Cortés’s narrative, on which I will elaborate further on in this article.

The second expedition, in 1517, was led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba. They were repelled by Mayas. After trying to land a second time near Campeche—Can Pech or Kaan Pech in Maya, meaning a place of snakes and ticks, a jurisdiction formed in the twelfth century after the disintegration of the League of Mayapán that is now the capital of the state of the same name—they retreated back to Cuba. A third expedition under Juan de Grijalva’s command landed at the island of Cozumel in 1518. These men crossed a good part of the peninsula before returning to Cuba. Unknowingly, they introduced smallpox as well. This terrible disease then swept the indigenous population of the peninsula. Grijalva assumed the lands he had visited belonged to a vaster empire further inland. Those rumors came to Hernán Cortés, who led the fourth expedition, his first stop in the conquest of Mexico. They sailed on February 10, 1519.¹¹

Upon disembarking in Cozumel, Díaz del Castillo claims that all indigenous subjects had fled, so they found none. The Spaniards under Alvarado’s command, the first ones to disembark, took forty hens and stole “diademas e ídolos y cuentas y pinjantillos de oro bajo” (a species of diadem, small idols, corals, with all manner of trinkets made of an inferior sort of gold) (56) from

a temple of worship, thus establishing the rapacious nature of their enterprise. Cortés himself, who landed a bit later, gave back these objects to appease the locals, who finally returned to their homes. That's when Cortés found out about the Spaniards living among Mayas, allegedly two days' march from where they were. Cortés heard reports of bearded men living on the mainland through his Maya translator/slave Melchorejo, who had originally been kidnapped by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba on Hernández's expedition to the area.¹² These bearded men were in fact Aguilar and Guerrero, the only assumed survivors from the ill-fated Valdivia expedition. In Díaz del Castillo's narrative, Cortés sent letters to the caciques requesting the prisoners' release, along with ransoms of green glass beads resembling jade. Díaz del Castillo claims that Aguilar, who lived not far from Cozumel, possibly at Xamanha, received the message and ransom. As Martyr and Gómara also relate, he begged his master, Taxmar, for his freedom and was granted it.

Now we turn to that other singular figure, Gonzalo Guerrero. Like Jerónimo de Aguilar and all other Spaniards from the first expedition, he too was enslaved after Mayas captured the survivors of the shipwreck. Unlike the others, Guerrero may have been the only one to earn his freedom and later became a war leader for Nachan Can, Lord of Chactemal (in Maya, *Chaktemal*; *Chaak* means Great Lord of the Water; *Temhal*, to appease, mollify), located near present-day Chetumal.¹³ After marrying Nachan Can's daughter *Zazil Há*, Guerrero raised presumably the first three mestizo children in Mexico and the mainland Americas.¹⁴ Díaz del Castillo claims he gathered all this information on Guerrero from Aguilar himself. The chronicler describes in chapter 29 how, when Aguilar's expedition arrives in Cozumel from Cuba in 1519, Guerrero argues why he will *not* rejoin Spanish culture:

Caminó el Aguilar a donde estaba su compañero, que se decía Gonzalo Guerrero, en otro pueblo cinco leguas de allí, y como le leyó las cartas, Gonzalo Guerrero le respondió: Hermano Aguilar, yo soy casado y tengo tres hijos, y tiénneme por cacique y capitán cuando hay guerras. Id vos con Dios, que *yo tengo labrada la cara y horadadas las orejas*. Qué dirán de mí cuando me vean esos españoles ir de esta manera. Y ya veis estos mis hijitos cuán bonitos son. (*La Historia verdadera* 78; my emphasis)

([Aguilar] went in quest of his comrade, Gonzalo Guerrero, and made him acquainted with all the circumstances; when Guerrero made the following reply: Brother Aguilar,—I have united myself here to one of the

females of this country, by whom I have three children; and am, during wartime, as good as cazique or chief. Go! and may God be with you: for myself, I could not appear again among my countrymen. My face has already been disfigured, according to the Indian custom, and my ears have been pierced: what would my countrymen say if they saw me in this attire? Only look at my three children, what lovely little creatures they are.” *Memoirs of the Conquistador*, 59-60).

This classical—and possibly apocryphal—fragment, one of the best-known passages of Díaz del Castillo’s text and the first one supposedly documenting Western/Maya cultural transpositions, clearly presupposes freakdom as an exercise of agency. Guerrero chose—as far as we know—to inscribe his new chosen identity on his skin by tattooing his face and piercing his ears. It marked his new belonging to Maya culture, his will to remain within it, and possibly even to fight against Western invaders who happened to be his own people.¹⁵ Indeed, Cervantes reproduces roughly the same scene in a different fashion, without destabilizing the freakish nature of Guerrero:

I sent him your grace’s letter and asked him by the interpreter to come since the opportunity was so favorable, and I dallied waiting for him longer than I wished. He did not come and I believe from shame because he has his nostrils, lips, and ears pierced and his face painted (pintado) and his hands tattooed (labradas) according to the custom of the country, in which only the valiant may have their hands tattooed. Indeed, I believe he failed to come on account of the vice he had committed with the woman and his love for his children (Tozzer 236).

In the first version, Guerrero, while reestablishing a dialogue with Spaniards, whom he had not seen for ten years, is the subject of enunciation, affectively appealing on behalf of his family. This nevertheless separates him individually in the narrative from the Maya collective as a whole, which is depicted as a blur, a brown mass dressed in “ruinous blankets and trusses” (*Memoirs of the Conquistador* 61). Guerrero also recognizes that he looks like a freak by his own choice. Guerrero’s plea to stay on behalf of his family is an implicit counter-discourse that also unravels the master discourse of return to the home country (and military service against his chosen family). This gesture in turn implies that Guerrero’s looks are indeed a metonymy for the Mayas and, by extension, all indigenous peoples. As Díaz del Castillo frames

Guerrero's utterance, the latter is implicitly claiming that all Mayas are freaks, while he himself has also chosen to become one. His stand thus reinscribes the European embodied identity as the standard by which freakdom will be measured—the able-bodied standard as a regulatory schema, in disability studies' terms—even as he also stands by it and for it.

Indeed, Rolando J. Romero asserts that “the account of Guerrero's life is sketchy and riddled with discrepancies because he never directly tells his story” (2), even though Díaz del Castillo wants us to believe that he did, to Aguilar. Like the Mayas', Guerrero's utterances are hauntingly absent. Western historians are thus forced to credit Aguilar with the account of the shipwreck and the ensuing account of his and Guerrero's survival among Yucatán's Mayas. Using this same logic, Romero adds that Guerrero does not have textual ontological presence precisely because of the absence of a verified source of his actually stating what Aguilar claims he said. Guerrero is dispossessed of his own subjectivity, which transforms him into a haunted figure indeed, one constituted exclusively by dominant discursive practices, Spanish in this case. He is a phantasmal presence who appears to be in his self-assigned place, simply to stabilize the discursive claim of a European body present in this situation. He cannot talk back, defend his choice, or explain it. This absence implies that freaks lack self-representation due to an enunciative silence, a language void attributed to the singular nonpresence of Guerrero's utterances. As Romero puts it, “the discussions focused on his person only lead to a void filled with the meaning that writers project onto him” (3).

It is this latter attitude that we have in the second version, that of Cervantes as translated by Tozzer. Indeed, Romero speculates on the possibilities that either Aguilar sent Guerrero Cortés's letter without realizing that he was too far away to receive it in time or else to join the Spaniards before the date on which they planned to sail away, and Aguilar then assumed Guerrero simply did not want to do it, or perhaps that Aguilar felt remorse for not having waited for Guerrero and justified his actions by telling Cortés that Guerrero would not have wanted to join them anyway because he had a Maya family and his body was tattooed (11–12).

Romero claims categorically that the conversation between Guerrero and Aguilar represented by Díaz del Castillo never took place (12), as he is concerned with the use of invented discourses to make historical claims justifying imperial behavior.¹⁶ My interest continues to be the nature of the representation of Guerrero as a freak, regardless of whether that representation was fact or fiction. He does look like a Maya subject, thus becoming emblematic of a preconceived notion never articulated in the text: all Mayas are freaks. Guerrero is labeled an “apostate,” a “renegade,” a “traitor,” and many other epithets that Romero cites, including the names of the Spanish chroniclers who made each of these statements. They are an ancillary presence to make Iberian imperialism possible. Yet, at the same time, they are signs evincing

that Guerrero remains immersed in a haunting domain of turmoil and trouble that points in the direction of savage irrationality, a state or condition different from those Spanish enunciations constituting him to mark themselves apart. It would seem to me that, Guerrero is mediated more by affects, moods, and feelings than by epithets.

This affective process is more what Nealon describes as “the uncapturable life-force of the rebellious” (267) to explain Derrida’s affective stance, while adding that a departure from this position enabled Butler later to link the performative to an idea of “doing justice to someone” (270).¹⁷ In this logic, Guerrero’s freakdom becomes an event in language, yet in the language of those others rejecting that singular performativity that, in Derrida’s terms, would still remain as a trace or supplement—as sensory entanglements in terms of affect—continually haunting the edges of Spain’s claims of legitimacy in the invasion of the Americas.

Performativity, after all, disturbs phenomenality. Both affect and performativity subvert not only the (freak) subject, but also the gaze othering that freak subject. The subordination of this subject—named Guerrero, in our study—remains, then, but for a different reason. The question of authenticity stops being relevant here. The freak’s performativity and its affect as a display of psychosomatic structures or economies constitute alternative regimes of truth to that of discursive veracity, much along the lines of those nonrepresentative moments of sensation that Deleuze feels in Bacon’s freakish paintings.¹⁸ This is what freakdom accomplishes when looked at in this way, and it may very well explain the continuous haunting presence of Guerrero to this day, in contrast to that of Aguilar, who paradoxically endures only as the “other” of Guerrero, the one who chose to return to the fold. Indeed, little mention is made of him as the key translator for Cortés. He spoke in Maya to Malintzin, or Doña Marina, known in Mexico as “La Malinche.” Having previously been held as a slave in Tabasco, she spoke both Maya and Nahua, the Mexica or Aztec official language. Thus, Aguilar’s translation skills were as critical as Malintzin’s in enabling the conquest of Mexico. Yet in the official history, she is “the” translator, and his role is effaced.

Let us now turn, then, to this other character, Jerónimo de Aguilar. Díaz del Castillo’s text informs readers that he lived about five leagues from Guerrero, a fact disputed by other sources, as previously pointed out. In Díaz del Castillo’s version, Aguilar states that he chose to rejoin the Spaniards because he was chaste and had not lost his Catholic faith. He even claimed that he never had sex with indigenous women, something Restall disproves (181n8). Romero mentions that Aguilar was so absorbed into Maya culture that “he did not speak Spanish well, was not able to take Spanish food, and dressed and acted like a Mayan to such a point that he was not recognized by Cortés’ peo-

ple” (15). In short, he was a freak himself as well. He squatted when Cortés addressed him, a Maya custom at the time. Tozzer adds information on this matter. In his version, Cortés lends him some clothes, but “Aguilar did not consider this a great favor, for he had so long been accustomed to go naked that he could not bear the clothing Cortés had put on him” (Tozzer 236). In this same version, when Cortés orders some food for him, he notices that Aguilar eats very little. Upon asking him why, Aguilar says that he has been eating Maya (“Indian” in the text) food for so long that “his stomach might refuse that of the Spaniards, and the quantity being small, although it were poison, it would do him no harm” (235–36). In Díaz del Castillo’s text, as Aguilar returns to the Spaniards, the author informs readers that he looks like an “Indian”:

Andrés de Tapia como los vio que eran indios, porque Aguilar ni más ni menos era que indio, luego envió a decir a Cortés con un español que siete indios de Cozumel son los que allí llegaron en la canoa. (*La historia verdadera* 78).

(Andreas de Tapia, who also took Aguilar for an Indian, for he had every appearance of one, sent to inform Cortes that the seven Indians who had arrived were inhabitants of Cozumel. *Memoirs of the Conquistador*, 64)

It is only when Aguilar speaks to Tapia that the latter knows he is Spanish. It is language that confers him his identity, not bodily appearance or clothing. And broken language at that. Lockhart’s version adds, “It was not until they had come up to them and heard the Spaniard pronounce the words—God, holy Virgin, Sevilla, in broken Spanish, and ran up to Tapia to embrace him, that they recognized this strange-looking fellow” (64). Still, he becomes a legible, bounded body versus the illegible, uncontrolled one that Guerrero remains. Tapia then brings Aguilar to Cortés. Everyone knows that a Spaniard living among Indians has arrived, but the text informs us that they all ask, “¿Qué es del español?” (*La Historia verdadera* 79) (which among them was the Spaniard?, *Memoirs of the Conquistador* 64), even though he is walking next to Tapia, because no one recognizes him as one. In the English version of Díaz del Castillo,

so much did his countenance resemble that of an Indian. His complexion was naturally of a brownish cast, added to which his hair had been shorn

like that of an Indian slave: he carried a paddle across his shoulder, had one of his legs covered with an old tattered stocking; the other, which was not much better, being tied around his waist. An old ragged cloak hung over his shoulders, his maltatas was in a much worse condition. (*Memoirs of the Conquistador* 65)

Aguilar thus destabilizes the hierarchy of normal (European) versus freak (indigenous) bodies. Cortés himself falls for it, the text informs us, and also asks Tapia whatever became of the Spaniard. Aguilar then replies, “Yo soy” (*La Historia verdadera* 79) (I am he). Then, prior to any conversation, Cortés orders that Aguilar be provided Spanish clothes: “Luego le mandó dar de vestir camisa, jubón, zaragüelles y caperuza y alpargatas, que otros vestidos no había” (9) (gave him a shirt, a coat, a pair of trousers, a cap and shoes, from our stores. *Memoirs of the Conquistador* 65).¹⁹ It is only when Cortés’s gaze recognizes Aguilar as a Spaniard that he proceeds to ask him his name, the story of his life, and how he ended up in Yucatán. This gesture further entrenches Indianness as the “real” freakdom from which all Eurocentric groups must be distanced. In this process, Aguilar’s identity comes to be located in his clothing, as he has not yet bathed, shaved, or performed any other gesture that would modify his body from how he first arrived there. The “actual” body is not the issue, nor what conveys the sense of freakdom. Rather, it is the link to clothing. This also implies a kind of performativity as sociopolitical action. The body becomes rhetorical, and, as Christopher Nealon has explained,

the idea of the body as rhetorical re-situates “performativity” twice, we might say: first, by locating its political force in its medium, the body, rather than in the separation between utterance and structure, langue and parole, and second, by highlighting the power of the body as rhetorical rather than linguistic. (270)

It is Aguilar’s broken utterances to a large extent that first retransform him into a Spaniard, not his body. The transformation becomes complete with the Spanish clothes that establish a phantasm of control. Again, not his body, properly speaking. Thus, in this simple gesture, Cortés performs the first elision of the lived experience of the body in the New World. Likewise, it is Maya utterances that transform bodies that look identical to Aguilar’s into “savage Indians,” the bodily representation of the freak by means of her/his utterances. In both cases, language sustains the body, for good or ill indeed, as Butler claims in *Excitable Speech*, because it is “by being interpellated within

the terms of language that the first social existence of the body first becomes possible” (5). Language accounts for both the negative and positive valences of racialism. We have here an instance in which we evince the first politicization of indigenous bodies, the beginning of a process of disempowerment leading to the depredations of the racial regime that marginalized, enslaved, and preyed upon them, and ultimately made them extinct on the Caribbean islands. The figures of the expressive body indeed become the metonym for a new configuration of performativity, again in Nealon’s terms (269).

According to this logic, bodily freakdom configures identity because bodily freakdom is performative. Prior to Aguilar’s return, Cortés and his men gaze at a group of Mayas performing a religious ceremony. Díaz del Castillo describes the ceremony, and his description in chapter 17 uncannily resembles that of a Catholic mass, with prayers to “abominable idols” in much the same way Spaniards prayed, “a species of resin, which very much resembled our incense” being burned to them (it was *copal pom*, which is now used in all Catholic churches in Mesoamerica), and a priest wearing “a wide cloak” preaching to them at “the very top of the temple.” Cortés limited himself to destroying their idols and placing a small statue of the Virgin Mary in their place, and all became well. As behooved performativity, the conventions governing Cortés’s perception of reality and his enactment of religious norms had real consequences for Mayas (their idols were broken), but this did not make the enactment of Spanish and Maya subjectivities any less constructed. Mayas, as freaks, remained in this reading a *corporeal style*, yet the subjects who enacted those conventions were condemned as freaks for ideological reasons. Cortés’s *ego conquiero* is also a rehearsed act.

The statements in the previous paragraph make it easier to comprehend why Aguilar was able to exercise agency to transform himself into a freak in Spanish eyes, and then back into a Spaniard, without further consequences. Mayas, and all other indigenous peoples of the Americas, had no such choice because they could not utter Spanish sounds. Aguilar’s utterances served as the ontological grounds on which Cortés and his crew confirmed that Mayas were indeed freaks, and enacted them as such, leading to the “derealization of the Other,” as Butler calls it, meaning that those othered—indigenous subjects in this case—were neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral, in Byrd’s understanding (xviii).²⁰

Romero claims that “Aguilar is able to reinscribe himself within the Spanish code because of narrative strategies that vouch for his religious and cultural ‘purity’ while living among the Mayans” (15). There is also the fib that he was celibate. Romero argues that purity should not be associated solely with religion or chastity, but with culture as well, given that in the early sixteenth century, religion and culture were one and the same in Spain. He notes in this regard that Guerrero, and all Mayas, are labeled “infidels” (16), and teases out the subtle

and blatant coercions of this binary. While I do not disagree on this matter, the issue of agency on Aguilar's part remains, whereas on the part of Guerrero we are left only with the freak: a subject mired in the domain of an unthinkable, unlivable body (from a Eurocentric perspective) constituted through the abjection displayed by the gaze of the so-called normal beings, who fail to see the human while readily seeing—and judging—the freak, who remains a Derridean impossible utterance. Paraphrasing Butler, it is akin to what she labels a “zone of uninhabitability” (*Bodies* 3) that enact, in Butler's words, “the defining limit of the subject's domain.” We have to use that abjected domain to question the conjoined cacophony of freakdom and Indianness, and rearticulate their symbolic legitimacy through affect and performativity, if not their intelligibility, due to the absence of enabling utterances or discourses to perform the latter.

Indeed, in the narratives studied, after labeling Guerrero a traitor, he became responsible for all the problems the Spaniards encountered in Yucatán. Citing Tozzer, Romero informs us that “Guerrero is blamed for the armed resistance of the Mayans since the arrival of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba in 1517 until Gonzalo's death in 1536” (17). And yet there is no proof or evidence that Guerrero had anything to do with any of those acts, nor that he advised Mayas—outside of his own village of residence—in any capacity. Romero states:

According to Aguilar, Guerrero had become a captain and was held in high regard as a warrior. Chamberlain writes that “. . . it is almost certain that the cacique of Chetumal, with Guerrero at his right hand, was the leader of the opposition within his combined province of Uayamil-Chetumal” (Yucatán 116). Tozzer also believes “that Guerrero was mainly responsible for the constant difficulties encountered by Alonso de Avila in the southeast.” (8)

Furthermore,

Díaz del Castillo also writes that Guerrero was responsible for the defeat of the first explorers, whom the Mayans repel both in Cabo Catoche in north-eastern Yucatán, and in Champoton in the southwest of the peninsula. All these accounts would then point to Guerrero's influence throughout what is now Yucatán, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. (17)

Romero sees this as speculation, adding that it was probably simpler for Spaniards to blame one of their own (18). I see it as a further manifestation of the othering of racism, one operating as a biological agent teeming with

vital and often unruly forces. Guerrero had to be the “head freak” because he was a Spaniard. According to Cortés’s logic of the *ego conquiro*, Spanish soldiers could be defeated only by another Spaniard, another European subject, and not by those abject figures Cortés saw as less-than-human freaks, thus enabling the gradual social construction of Indianness as a negative valence. The act of saying something in an indigenous language became a physical performance motivated by freakdom. It denied social recognition to indigenous bodies. This performative model Cortés set in motion applied to discursivity, of course, but also to a host of other identitary markers—some visibly inscribed on the body, some not—thus transforming freakdom into the haunting image of racism, with Guerrero as the phantasmal presence, the inevitable revenge of the newly constituted “wretched of the Earth” who refused to go away.

Prior to concluding, I would like to quote Ann Rigney’s analysis of the discursive role of remembrance, even if what she has in mind is a different role than the one I’m stating in this paper. She says:

When the various approaches to literary works (as product, as agent) are taken together, then a double picture emerges of their role in cultural remembrance. Firstly, literary works resemble monuments in that they provide fixed points of reference. They are “textual monuments” which can be reprinted time and again in new editions even as the environment around them changes (Rigney, “Portable”). . . . At the same time as they may enjoy this monumentality, however, literary works continuously morph into the many other cultural products that recall, adapt, and revise them in both overt and indirect ways. (349)

Reading Guerrero by way of Rigney’s quote, we can better explain why even Pedro de Alvarado, Cortés’s second-in-command, who could not recognize Aguilar as a Spaniard in 1519, could claim in May 1536 that while leading a charge around the Honduran town of Buena Esperanza, Gonzalo Guerrero, “dressed in scanty native clothing and covered with war paint in Maya style,” was killed by an arquebus ball (Chamberlain 57). Romero himself signals the unlikelihood of this uncanny tale (20), adding that if Aguilar could barely speak Spanish in 1519, it was less likely that Guerrero could be recognized as a Spaniard by either side seventeen years later, having by then lived among Mayas for nearly twenty-five years, had he indeed survived that long, his body more exposed to the tropical sun and further decorated as a Maya warrior, and further aged. Besides, as Romero adds, he had already been declared dead

before in Yucatán (20–21).

In my reading, Guerrero first became the trope of a worthy enemy for the Spaniards, the sole figure that stood between them and the golden triumph of conquest. A worthy enemy according to the standards of chivalric novels. Emptied of that original referential substance and preserved as a phantasmal figure, Guerrero was transformed into a symbol of an active punishment of those same Spaniards, the sole agent capable of imposing ruin and death on them for perpetrating the indigenous genocide. Guerrero was a referential figure for indigenous peoples who came later. They were descendants of the millions who died during the conquest. He also was one for Spaniards who felt guilty of what they had done, and who also feared eternal damnation. In this second instance, Guerrero thus became a subliminal symbol, if repressed, of the Spanish decodification of their own guilt. A haunting menace. Spaniards saw him everywhere and killed him many times, yet Guerrero still reappeared, undead. He became an unearthly freak, the absent presence of both those who killed and those who died. He was interchangeably a figure of monstrosity and the signifier of an avenger naming racism as a foundational disease. Later he would even become useful material for modern Mesoamericans trying to reconstruct themselves as they attempted to understand their own freakish genocidal origins, newer postcolonial genocides, and the monstrous intimacies entangling everyone in mestizohood. In this sense, the figure of the freak still marks a limit where the human becomes less than human, a liminal space where there is a mix of the human with something else, as means to representing that unnamable founding trauma of racism as genocide, and their collapse into a single understanding, one in which Guerrero becomes a nodal point of that entanglement.

This may be why, since the twentieth century, Guerrero has become a positive symbol of “going native.” The freakish superhero who joined the cause of the just struggle of the racialized and dispossessed against empire, proving along the way how Gordon’s notion of haunting can be used to describe that “screaming presence” of a Guerrero who is no longer present yet continues to serve as a signifier of the unexamined genocides of the sixteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries as well as of the missing solidarity of Eurocentric subjects with their indigenous others. Freakdom can combine phantasmal figures and historic elements to further a political agenda.

Notes

1. See “Miscegenation” by Ilona Katzew in *Lexikon of the Hispanic Baroque*.
2. See Neta C. Crawford’s *Argument and Change in World Politics*, p. 148.

3. There is a vast body of disability studies by now. Without question, *Disability Theory* (2008) by Tobin Siebers is one of the most important contributions, but there are many others. I have also leaned on *Accessible Citizenship* (2014) by my colleague Julie Minich, and have been interested in numerous articles derived from Butler's theory of gendered bodies, such as "Critical Divides" (2002) by Ellen Samuels. Indigenous theory is equally growing in numbers and quality. For this article, I borrow primarily from Jody Byrd's *The Transit of Empire*, as previously indicated.
4. This line of thought, indigenous theorists' major contribution to critical theory, has recently begun to be adopted by Western scholars influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, such as Bruno Latour and Rosi Braidotti. Latin American scholars such as Marisol de la Cadena and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have also made inroads in this area. More recently, other scholars, such as Jane Bennett, have moved in this direction as well, yet without recognizing the indigenous contribution, while also domesticating this perspective within Eurocentric parameters.
5. An issue mentioned in his subsequent essay "Nuestra América y Occidente" (1974, in *Para el perfil definitivo del hombre*; "Our America and the West," 1986). Still, the substitution of Ariel by Caliban seems to underscore the influence of Europe, since they are both Shakespearean characters, thereby, as Spivak has pointed out, enforcing a "foreclosure" of indigenous presence in the debate on Latin American identity (Spivak, *Critique* 118).
6. Kim Beauchesne and Alessandra Santos add to Bloch's claim that this utopian impulse "is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole," traits that would essentialize its premises and reify indigenes permanently. See *Utopian Impulse in Latin America*, p. 5.
7. See Ileana Rodríguez's discussion of this issue. She dedicates a chapter to E. G. Squier's writings on Central America.
8. Febvre labeled it an *ouillage mental* as part of what he called an *histoire des mentalités collectives*, an idea included later in *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle* (1942).
9. Stoler quotes herself from "Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth."
10. For Poppiti, see "The Exploration of Humanism through Prejudice: 19th Century Freak Shows and the Images of the 'Human' Body." Butler's references are from *Bodies That Matter*.
11. Díaz del Castillo gives this date, claiming that eleven ships sailed, nine under Cortés's command and two under Pedro de Alvarado's. He sailed in one of them.
12. Romero adds that the accounts of Gómara, Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, and Antonio de Herrera place the first reference to the captives with the arrival of Cortés in Cozumel. See "Texts, Pre-texts, Con-texts." I am less concerned with historical veracity than with the representation of Guerrero by Díaz del Castillo as a freak, and its textual implications.
13. Interestingly, it was in this same area that the so-called Caste War (1847–1902), the first-ever indigenous decolonial war in Mesoamerica, began.

14. He would later fight with the Mayas against the Spaniards to prevent the conquest of Yucatán.
15. Rolando J. Romero states that “the Chronicles themselves vary in regards to this conversation between the two survivors. According to Díaz del Castillo, Aguilar talked to Guerrero personally. According to Gómara, Aguilar merely sent Guerrero a note, but he does not state whether he waited for a response. According to Cortés, Aguilar told him that it had been impossible to communicate with the other survivors because they were spread out over a large territory (Martínez Marín 407). Landa simply writes that Aguilar told Cortés that he had not been able to get in touch with Guerrero on such short notice” (10). I am less concerned with historical veracity than with the discursive implications of this representation of otherness.
16. Romero states that Díaz del Castillo invented the conversation, and offers as discursive evidence the fact that what he first placed in Guerrero’s mouth in chapter 27, quoted in this article, he repeats verbatim in chapter 29 in the mouth of Aguilar (12).
17. We should not forget in this context that Jodi Byrd claimed that Derrida began *Writing and Difference* with a quotation from Flaubert stating that “it might be that we are all tattooed savages since Sophocles” (7).
18. *Francis Bacon*.
19. This is a significantly poor translation. The original actually states, “he then ordered that he be given a shirt, a doublet, baggy trousers that form part of the traditional dress of Valencia and Murcia, a cap, and sandals, because they had no other clothing” (my translation).
20. For Butler, see *Precarious Life*, pp. 33–34.

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