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Towards a Space of Inclusion: The Legendary Monster Universe in *Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows*

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Outcasts, misfits, weird and supernatural creatures, the legendary monster universe is a space filled with beings that refuse to accommodate to society's norms and expectations.[1] They embody differences and operate outside the boundaries of being human (Cohen 12). The legendary monsters in this universe operate as a means to overcome our fears and desires through the stories and tales they inhabit. They are the guardians and holders of those undesired emotions and anxieties waiting to be told and acknowledged to understand our humanity. However, "this 'vacation' to where the wild things are ultimately help us return to our lives of quiet repression" (Asma 443). The legendary monster fulfills its purpose only through a momentary time, and the person must return after this brief encounter with relief of social pressures to the order of things in the Ordinary World—that place that reality and humans inhabit without fantasy, monsters or magic. However, we should ask, what happens when these lines are more blurred and permeable than we understand them? What if their connection to our world, the Ordinary World, is far more flexible and divergent than we imagine as they take part in the lives of people of color? What if our relationship with them is far more symbiotic than one-sided as we engage with them through the myths, legends, and folklore that gives them a presence in our lives?

These legendary monsters can break free from their constraints in the legendary monster universe they inhabit and be unwilling to submit to attempts at categorization and localization, attempts at control, and both located at borders (Cohen) and refuse the enforcement of geographical boundaries. They are more nomadic than we expect, moving from one place to another,

from their place of origin into the stories of other locations and cultures.

The legendary monster universe extends its reach to disprove or contest such attempts, moving towards the human realm and questioning unequal power systems through, for example, the reimagination of Hispanic myths and legends in children's fantasy literature. This universe validates Hispanic cultures and illustrates their identities and heritages. At the same time, it empowers children of color, such as how Ryan Calejo's *Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows* does so by creating a space of inclusion for Hispanic children. The legendary monster universe *Charlie Hernández* creates exposes and repairs the broken connections between people in a multi-cultural[2] community, and its legendary monsters work as mediums for relatability, affirmation, and empowerment of Hispanic communities' experiences.

Ryan Calejo's book provides an example of a legendary monster universe that, by re-imagining Hispanic myths and legends from across the Spanish-speaking world, highlights these opportunities for children of color to see their communities and experiences illustrated, validated, and empowered. *Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows* provides this through the story of Charlie Hernández, a boy whose life was great until a fire destroyed his house and his parents mysteriously disappeared. As he grew up hearing stories about legendary monsters from his abuela, one day, he finds himself beginning to manifest strange bodily changes such as horns, feathers across his body, and a pincer for a hand, which he wonders might have to do with the hero of legends called *el cambiador* (the morphling). Nevertheless, if his life was already complicated enough, things were about to become more complex as he found himself in the middle of a war between the League of Shadows (*La Liga de las Sombras*) and *La Mano Peluda*. In *Charlie Hernández*, the legendary monster universe is represented through The League or *La Liga,* which is "a coalition of good sombras and... [who] had been engaged in a millennia-long struggle against La Mano Peluda—The Hairy Hand—a cabal of evil sombras intent on expanding their domination from the Land of the Dead into the Land of the Living" (Calejo 196). Charlie's destiny is to fight alongside La Liga as the morphling, a shapeshifting hero from a prophecy from Hispanic legends, meant to defeat *La Mano Peluda* and *La Cuca*, an evil witch.

This legendary monster universe in *Charlie Hernández*, nourished from monstrous creatures of Hispanic myths and

legends, is composed of creatures with roles far more significant than simple tools for entertainment, as they represent the cultures they embody and the communities and belief systems in them. Furthermore, scholarship has not sufficiently addressed how legendary monsters are an invitation to acknowledge our deficiencies and (re)incorporate them rather than a means for brief engagement with those hidden desires and to keep them aside as we return to an ordinary life.

The legendary monsters in *Charlie Hernández* assemble bridges and build paths to cross from one place to another—one culture to the other or from one belief to another— over the wreckage of demolished borders that were erected to divide and alienate those who are different and othered, for those positioned in a place of "otherness"[3]. As imperfect as legendary monsters may be—as reflections of our cultures, like our faces in the moving mass of the ocean—they reveal the missing parts of our lives and hold truths about who we are. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen poses, they ask their creators, *why? Why have we been created, and why are we here?* More importantly, as he states:

> These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them. (Cohen 20)

They hold the meanings of life and the secrets kept in the dark by systems of power that create social norms dictating whether being different is right or wrong. Thus, this chapter questions how *Charlie Hernández* is able to use its legendary monster universe from Hispanic myths and legends to illustrate Hispanic cultures and heritages. How does the presence of a legendary monster universe provide a means to validate and empower Hispanic cultures through Charlie's encounters with this space? Finally, what is required for the legendary monster universe to be a space of inclusion, and how does it compare to the Ordinary World that Charlie and the readers live in? The legendary monster universe, I anticipate, is a location where differences manifest for young Hispanic children such as Charlie in a flexible and welcoming way that the Ordinary World does not permit, even in spaces of fantasy literature. This is a space where Charlie and readers of color can, with all its perils at the probability of being eaten or killed by a

monster, acknowledge their identities without being the villains themselves, enabling healing and empowerment.

In order to address these queries about the legendary monster universe in *Charlie Hernández*, this chapter is divided into three sections. I start by considering the "charting of the legendary monster universe in *Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows,*" in which I explore the legendary monster universe, its relation to the Ordinary World—that space where humans live without knowledge of monsters—and the spatial dimension that composes the legendary monster universe. This part seeks to build a foundation for the following section, "Illustrating Hispanic Cultures," which addresses how the illustration of Hispanic myths and legends in *Charlie Hernández* represents a cultural heritage that builds inclusivity for stories about cultures in a fantasy literature field that so far has left aside these stories and communities. It considers the connections to cultural traditions, heritage, and legacies that permeate through a shared collective of memories and experiences of Hispanics in or outside the United States.

Followed by this analysis of how Hispanic cultures are illustrated in *Charlie Hernández*, I raise the argument on how the legendary monster universe positions Charlie and an assumed readership of color that relates to him into the potential for validation and empowerment of Hispanic identity and cross-cultural experience. This section highlights the possibilities of the legendary monster universe becoming a source of power and endorsement for bonds across cultures and experiences rather than homogenous societies.

Charlie Hernández charts a map that brings down the walls that distance us from each other and promotes learning to live symbiotically. The borders of this monstrous space partake in acceptance of everything different as their borders are in movement and expansion—called borders just for the sake of understanding its difference from other spaces but—it is a place in constant touch and intersection with others. The legendary monster universe accepts everything weird, strange and freaky, of anything othered and lends its power to shatter the limitations set in the Ordinary World, the human realm. Again, with all its imperfections and own workings, this space must seen through its connection and constant interaction with the Ordinary World and should be acknowledged, for monsters always return (Cohen 4).

Charting the Legendary Monster Universe in *Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows*

Our universe is composed of space and time, constantly expanding and changing. It does not sustain clear boundaries, comprising millions of different growing and dying systems and worlds. A universe functions in constant expansion and is inaccessible to an absolute comprehension and knowledge of its workings. Only theories are available about its existence and components. Thus, a universe inhabited by legendary monsters, composed of those creatures that embody difference, works similarly to our universe; continually expanding, constantly increasing, and not much to our surprise, with no borders to contain it as it stretches beyond the limits of what is normal. The legendary monsters' universe is influenced by what its residents are, embodiments of cultures, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues in his "Monster Culture (Seven Thesis)." The monsters in this universe are born only at this "metaphoric crossroad, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and dependence. The monstrous body is pure culture" (Cohen 4). Suppose the monsters are pure culture, as Cohen states. In that case, this universe in which they breathe and live their lives is composed of what they are, eternal reflections of all those anxieties and desires from cultures that the Ordinary World repudiates and tries to deny in themselves. What constitutes the legendary monster universe, then?

The legendary monster universe is defined by what is not. It is not the Ordinary World, the space "reality" inhabits. It is not the space of no fantasy or magic, not the space where human racialized perceptions of space and place take the same place or affect people in the same way as the Ordinary World. Fantasy spaces in literature have been used to "othering" people of color, but recent re-imaginations of fantasy spaces have contested this power dynamic. As an example, bell hooks, in her exploration of critical fictions in narratives of struggles, addresses how imagination is a means to confront such struggles of the realities of people of color and how spaces outside the imagination are restrictive and violent. She says, "In that hostile space outside, nothing has changed: racism, class exploitation, and sexist domination prevail. Deprivation intensifies, despair abounds, and suffering lingers" (67). The space that forms the Ordinary World, that "hostile space outside" of the imagination, composes what

the legendary monster tries to obliterate, with its mere existence, that rigidity and bounds that the Ordinary World fosters. Experiences of race, class, and gender aiming at categorizing and labeling, impossible for those who are different, shift and morph from what they were in the Ordinary World as monsters avoid easy categorization (Cohen). In this regard, the legendary monster universe constitutes a statement on division, on borders erected and frontiers marked between the possible and impossible. Gloria Anzaldúa frames this as she poses:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. [...] in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." (25)

Borders become the means through which to identify those who belong and those who do not adhere to the social norms and expectations, and thus becoming a racialized space itself. It is a universe of unparalleled distinctions and divergences, where making differences and merging cultures and races is its foundation. Thus, in *Charlie Hernández*, the legendary monster universe makes possible the visualization of cultural heritages of Hispanic communities in children's fantasy literature. Likewise, it validates and empowers their mestizo identities[4] and experiences through a potentially liberatory space as it subverts the unequal power systems of self and other that ground the Ordinary World.

The legendary monster universe, therefore, is a space in communication and contact with the human one: the Ordinary World. *Charlie Hernández*'s borrowing monsters from Hispanic myths and legends—ranging from La Lloronato La Luz Mala and El Sombreron—and situating them in the U.S. context expresses a movement of the communities in the Ordinary World, one that in turn reflects back to the legendary monster universe.[5] The folk stories from Latin American geographies, their history, cultural traditions, and local knowledges shift locations along with the people. The traditional stories of legendary monsters give life and make new homes, in a fusion with new spaces, at their destination, the U.S. This points to the categorization and interaction spaces have with people, cultures, and societies, creating what George Lipsitz calls "spatial imaginaries" which are rooted in the links

between space, power, and race (Lipsitz 11). Lipsitz observes that "the lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension" (12). This offers an essential frame for thinking about *Charlie Hernández's* deployment of legendary monsters to highlight common spaces from the Ordinary World—school, the cemetery, the mall, and the Everglades—grounded in interactions with perceptions of unequal power and the "spatial imaginaries" Lipsitz explores. According to Charlie, the mall they arrive at, in search of clues about his sudden monstrous transformation, was "a knot of low concrete buildings that sat right on the edge of civilization, between a thriving multicultural neighborhood and 734 square miles of marshy swampland known as the Florida Everglades" (Calejo 112). Locations such as this, and Charlie's school, have their own social, cultural, and racial linkages through which people interact with them based on those spaces. These racial dynamics taking place affect the Ordinary World and demonstrate an unequal power dynamic that does not allow characters to express their cultural and ethnic differences freely. Thus, not everyone has the same access to spaces of power, but the legendary monster universe does have a predisposition to welcome those closer to "otherness." The legendary monster universe generates a liberation from the social confines in which these marginalized communities are trapped, while it also is the cage that separates them from those in power.

It is not that this space is absent of its power hierarchies but that in its innate difference from the Ordinary World, an encounter with this space permits a validation and empowerment that is denied in the human world. The legendary monster universe provides a space for free expression of a cultural background, thus, becoming a potentially liberatory space, an unbound space in which intersections and interactions with cultures take place in reflection and acknowledgment of the pressures towards racial and cultural homogeneity of our spaces. Charlie shares with us how these legendary monster stories come from diverse places and not only represent one culture. Instead, how Hispanic myths and legends are a conglomerate of histories, languages, cultures, and colonial history of their own, coming together to connect peoples that identify through the collective of legendary monsters. This particularity of *Charlie Hernández* highlights the multi-cultural interactions of these myths and their influence on the creation of the legendary monster universe. Charlie's exposition on the

geographical origins of the legendary monsters contrasts with their encounters in the U.S., such as La Llorona and La Luz Mala at the swamps of the Florida Everglades and El Sombreron at Charlie's school in Florida. Charlie shares:

> The myths came from all over the Spanish-speaking world. From Madrid to Quito, Mexico City to Buenos Aires. Most of them were hundreds of years old, almost as old as the cultures that have inspired them. Some had spread quickly around the globe, spread like wildfire. Others never even left the tiny rural towns where they'd first been told. (Calejo 1)

Bypassing the boundaries of time and space, as our universe does, the legendary monster universe of Hispanic folklore in *Charlie Hernández* shifts locality or perceptions of a static residence in one place and time. These stories originate in a diversity of spaces and places, with their own stories and connections to local knowledges. However, the stories find new spaces of existence and encounters by traveling to new places, such as the U.S. As they are creations of their own culture, it seems important how they do not possess the exact generalized and demonized representation of a culture (Cohen 15) that monsters created by Anglo-European or Anglo-American civilizations bear to "enforce strict notions of otherness" (Cohen 15). These legendary monsters become illustrations of their culture and represent them outside the same rules of monstrous "othering" racial disparities contributing to the location's social inequalities and social injustice. The legendary monster universe, however, in its transmigration to the U.S. context, from Latin American spaces to Florida in *Charlie Hernández*, provides an opportunity to enhance the potential to challenge the meant-to-be-impenetrable walls of an intended homogeneous racial and cultural society—one in which one race for one culture within one location, space, or nation.

This challenge or contestation to unequal power relationships from the Ordinary World, in *Charlie Hernández*, is promoted first through the possibility of illustrating Hispanic cultures through its legendary monsters. Storytelling and intergenerational relationships, though never perfect or fully encompassing of everything in a culture, opposes the silences and absences of Hispanic cultures in children's fantasy literature. Moreover, as we analyze Maria Sachiko Cesire's exploration of the idea of "White Magic," she considered there is an expectation of whiteness in Anglo-American cultural spaces, which is often invisible to even

those committed to diversity (Cesire 182). In recent discussions of Latino traditional literature, Victoria Ortiz-Castro and Lynn Atkinson addressed this concern by posing how engagement with Latino folklore aids in dissolving borders and broadening perspectives about the world and these communities. They argue for the capacity of these traditional stories to mirror the "cross-cultural merging and mixing of peoples" (556). These stories based on Hispanic folklore, as *Charlie Hernández* does, can share the cultural experiences that make up Latinx and Hispanic peoples—it shares their version or section of the legendary monster universe. As a space of marginality in relation to the Ordinary World, the legendary monster universe is where everything weird and abnormal is tossed in it, and intertwined with folkloric stories, they resonate and express Hispanic cultures. Thus, it garners a space of inclusion within its universe. In its movement to the U.S., these legendary monsters shift from that position of marginality to one of providing links to power to those marginalized at the new locations.

Illustrating Hispanic Cultures

Charlie Hernández engages its readers by referencing oral traditions and standard practices of sharing folk tales, myths, and legends that are relatable to a culturally specific community, those from Latinx or Hispanic communities. The stories shared with Charlie by his grandmother creates waves of resonance for those that likewise have participated in the storytelling experience about weird and scary monsters. To frame this intergenerational story sharing, Michael Dylan Foster states in *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in the Popular Culture World* that folklore is present in "the processes through which expressive culture is transmitted from person to person, from culture to culture, from one generation to the next" (23).[6] The movement across time adds to the spatial shifts and contributes to the links of relatability these legendary monsters have to people across Hispanic cultures at diverse locations and generations of people. Following this time and space movement—the transgenerational and migratory practices of Hispanic myths and legends—can be understood through what Cohen poses as the monster's "double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves" (13). What pertains us here is precisely this service of the monster. *Charlie Hernández* poses a legendary monster's narrative

in a universe that illustrates, validates, and empowers Hispanic cultures or identities. Thus, the resonance for family settings, childhood memories, and transgenerational relationships creates moments representing cultural traditions or experiences within Hispanic heritage and identity.

The relatability of these elements creates a sense of community between Charlie and his readers, who, across geographical boundaries and cultural bonds, can find connections with each other. In *Charlie Hernández*, the grandmother is the previous knowledge carrier of this cultural heritage, passing it to the newer generation, Charlie. Charlie explains how he has garnered his knowledge of legendary Hispanic monsters, a fact he restates across the story.

> When I was little, we used to hang out in the kitchen on lazy Saturday afternoons, me in my Power Rangers pj's and chancletas, my abuela telling her favorite tales from memory, making the epic battles and ghoulish monsters come to life with every gesture of her brown and wrinkled hands. (Calejo 2)

The memories of these moments of sharing stories about legendary monsters elicit experiences about culture and traditions, particularly by mentioning Power Rangers, chancletas, and references to his grandmother's brown and wrinkled hands. The legendary monsters become the mediums through which memories surface and perceptions of "familiarity" to experiences with Hispanic culture occurs. Though created to self-validate the institutionalization of self and other in order to subjugate marginalized communities (Cohen 11), the purposes the legendary monsters have *in Charlie Hernández*—their service to communities—shifts as they enable illustration and connections to a past, present, and future with others in the community. Charlie's reminiscence of his time with his abuela and her legendary monsters' stories, those "tales of enormous, horned, snakelike sea creatures, of two-headed vampire dogs with glowing red eyes, of terrifying man-eating ghouls that stalk the night, searching for naughty children to kidnap" (Calejo 1) bring out ideas of kinship and family bonds relatable to those close to the stories or those new to them. This experience of storytelling associates cultural heritage with collective experiences that resonate across generations in a given culture, in this case, the Hispanic one, and towards others. The geography of the legendary monster universe becomes viable and accessible in *Charlie Hernández* to Hispanic

readers because of its composition of resonance or call to the memories of those reading it towards the Hispanic myths and legends.

Legendary monsters attract attention to specific cultures, such as *la calaca*[7] to Mexican celebrations of *Día de los Muertos* or *La Sihuanaba*[8] to the pre-Columbian Aztec culture. Each speaks about the cultural relations between family and a collective of people. This is possible due to the use of folklore materials in *Charlie Hernández*, as C. W. Sullivan III explains in "Folklore and Fantastic Literature," to frame this usage in fantasy literature.

> fantasy and science fiction authors use traditional materials, from individual motifs to entire folk narratives, to allow their readers to recognize, in elemental and perhaps subconscious ways, the reality and cultural depth of the impossible worlds these authors have created. (279)

The Hispanic monsters in *Charlie Hernández* serve as the bridge for this recognition process, for they garner the attention of an active audience whose reading experience summons meaningful resonances to them (Foster 25). Addressing each of the monster's origins in a remembrance narration and Charlie's surprise over their existence highlights relationships with the storytelling of these stories, the socio-cultural engagement, family relations, and the broad reach they have across re-imaginations of these Hispanic legendary monsters and their universe. An example of this relationship can be seen in the following moment when Charlie encounters his first legendary monster, *la calaca*.

> Yet another creature my abuela had told me about!
> I vividly remember the stories, too—tales of walking, talking skeletons. Sometimes they were friendly, jovial spirits who would, on special occasions, sneak out of the underworld to celebrate with the living—like the Day of the Death in Mexico. Other times they were grim reapers sent to fetch those whose time on earth was up. (Calejo 75-76)

By referencing not just the generational oral transmission of stories but also the culturally specific reference such as *Día de los Muertos*, *la calaca* offers a relatable character that moves between versions and communities not limited by time and space or culture. The legendary monster's narratives, through an experience of oral traditions as seen here, elicits memories of experiences within a culture—and outside of it as it goes beyond one culture—showing

how cultural heritage takes place in family interactions and folklore traditions that entertain and build cultural bonds.

La calaca, and other legendary monsters such as *La Mano Peluda*, *La Cuca* (or its other names such as *Cuco* or *Cucu*), and *La Llorona,* become cultural promoters of Hispanic cultures and an opportunity to see mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors[9] (Bishop) that address the multiple realities of Hispanic communities. In close relation to how legendary monsters can deploy culturally specific representations, experiences, and heritages, David Bowles' poem "Lullaby" in *They Call Me Güero* is a great example to contrast with *Charlie Hernández*. This poem highlights the liberatory gesture (hooks 55) possible in fantasy literature, particularly monsters. Bowles' poem begins by stating the role of the figure of the abuela in sharing these folk tales. At the same time, it connects to Charlie's own experience of introduction to legendary monster stories and their transgenerational transmission.

> Like lots of border kids,
> my first song was a lullaby
> that my abuela sang
> to warn me and to mystify (Bowles 9)

The stories are shared through a cultural legacy, the lullabies, which are meant to entertain and warn children of the dangers that await them beyond the safety of their homes and their families. Bowles' poem sheds light on the relationship between folklore and Hispanic communities' historical and cultural experiences, focusing on the border experience. The legendary monsters from folk narratives empower the stories of Latinx and Hispanic experiences and cultural heritage found in *Charlie Hernández* by exposing the thrilling and fantastic vibes of this legendary monster universe they portray.

Charlie Hernández, similar to Bowles's poem, addresses dangers and realities through the use of monsters as the means to inculcate a sense of warning. This warning is a means to protect children before anything happens, a way to validate a reality and empower them, such as those living in the border towns; between two cultures. It contemplates the realities Anzaldúa exposes, in which "Refugees in a homeland that does not want them, many find a welcome hand holding out only suffering, pain, and ignoble death" (34). Bowles' poem addresses such sufferings by

introducing *el cuco or cucu* through the voice of the mother when she states her warning:

> And serenaded to me—
> Duermete mi niño [Go to sleep, my baby
> duérmete ya sleep for me right now
> porque viene el Cucu to keep Cucu from coming
> y te comerá. and swallowing you down.]
> So I learned the dangers
> of this crazy, mixed-up place—
> there are monsters lurking,
> but family lore can keep you safe. (9)

Bowles' poem notes the communities that live in these border spaces and acknowledges the diversity in them, the mixedness of cultures, languages, and experiences every day, along with violence and danger. In a similar stance, *Charlie Hernández* portrays this when Charlie wonders about the existence of legendary monsters after seeing *mukis*[10] for the first time: "I thought those were just myths my grandmother used to tell me... stories to scare little kids from wandering into mines alone. How can they actually exist?" (Calejo 74). Both *el cucu* from Bowles's poem and the encounter with the *mukis* in *Charlie Hernández* instruct on the dangers these beings have for children and their resembling characters or situations in the real world, the world of the readers, and Charlie's. But it is also their mystical and monstrous trait as allegories for real-world dangers that empowers the readers at moments of crisis, such as how Charlie's knowledge of legendary monstrous beings aids him in his encounters. Moments such as these are portrayed when Charlie faces *La Sihuanaba*: "But somehow, like a flash of lightning, my abuela's words came back to me: *The few who have seen La Sihuanaba face-to-face and lived to tell the story claimed that she fled from them when they reached for their crucifix or bit down on a machete* (Calejo 151). The legendary monsters here, instead of only being antagonists or villains, become sources of power by Charlie knowing them. He has learned how to defeat them, but they are also helpers, such as when *La Llorona* and Gregory—*la calaca*—arrive to help him fight *La Cuca* (Calejo 292). The legendary monster universe becomes a source of power in which knowledge of these legendary monsters means safety in the Ordinary World, but only for those who heed their warning.

What I aim at with these examples is to pose a connection between the legendary monsters portrayed and the oral traditions

through which they not only illustrate Hispanic cultures but also validate and empower their experiences. Literature that addresses Hispanic culture and traditions poses an image of their cultural heritage. The legendary monster universe, therefore, affirms their communities and identities. Ortiz-Castro and Smolen state this aspect of Hispanic or Latinx literature and their ability to

> affirm Latino children's heritage by providing them with opportunities to see the world of their ancestors represented in books. It thereby empowers them with a strong sense of self-identity and pride in their cultures. In fact, Latino traditional literature is an excellent vehicle for dissolving borders and broadening perspectives of the world for all students. (556)

Engaging with these re-imaginations of Hispanic myths and legends builds a legendary monster universe that resonates with readers and provides a space for including Latinx and Hispanic children in a world that, though it claims to be diverse, global, and multicultural, still predominantly silences their cultural history, heritage, and experiences. The legendary monster universe counters the perceptions of a homogeneous society and broadens the realities of the "thriving multicultural neighborhood" (Calejo 112) from which Charlie himself comes from. This affirmation of the Hispanic identities and its potential for broadening perspectives (Ortiz-Castro and Smolen 556) responds to arguments against the silencing, absence, and denial of access to fantasy literature for children of color. Furthermore, it contests the one-sided representation of communities of color as "othered" subjects or monstrous beings; the "Dark Other"[11] Ebony Elizabeth Thomas frames. But when characters of color, such as Charlie, are given roles of heroes and protagonists within a space of fantasy grounded in their culture, they contest such "othering" and are instead empowered. Here, Charlie's identity gains a foundation for developing empowerment through his encounters with the legendary monsters, supported by his knowledge of Hispanic myths and legends and his relationship with the cultures. These experiences affirm his cultural heritage and illustrate the Hispanic cultures he is in connection with as Hispanic or Latino.

Validation and Empowerment

Cultural heritage, history, and legacies are part of the many ways culture is expressed, and the legendary monster universe is the

means through which they find expression to counter the established perceptions of them. The legendary monsters that inhabit this space provide tools to validate an identity that has been denied and empower those without power. It stands up to the lack of illustration of Hispanic cultures in fantasy spaces of literature because following Anzaldúa:

> is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and for this, it is proudly defiant. (100)

The validation and empowerment of Charlie and readers of color are possible due to the counterstance Anzaldúa points out. *Charlie Hernández* does that by existing against previous representations and illustrations of Hispanic cultures and the villainization of people of color. Thus, as it "asserts a level of understanding about the world" (Christie 2), a new one, in which the Hispanic legendary monsters in *Charlie Hernández*, as socially and culturally constructed beings, create a space that points to the mixed and multi-cultural world of Hispanic communities both as a collective of people and as individuals. The legendary monster universe, from which its monstrous creatures emerge, charts the possibilities of the fantasy or folkloric world in *Charlie Hernández* to include the complex Hispanic realities and identities in their heterogeneous and multiple forms as it is inclusive, validating, and empowering of their experiences.

Turning towards Charlie's background, born in Puebla, Mexico, to a father of Mexican and Portuguese heritage and a Cuban mother, Charlie has only known the U.S. as his home since he was one year old. This information is enough to consider or imagine the possible struggles he must face in the U.S., as his interactions with Alice, the bully, show. Alice is constantly racist against Charlie, as shown here: "Alice gave me a big, wicked grin. "Honestly, is dressing like that considered cool where it is you're really from?" (Calejo 21) At this moment of confrontation, Charlie's belonging to the U.S. identity and his geography, based on the racially spatial imaginary George Lipsitz frames, is questioned by asking where he is from (the place). The spaces in which Charlie interacts currently, in the Ordinary World, such as school, sets limits to his identity as a Hispanic kid and as an American. For, as Anzaldúa states,

"Chicanos and other people of color [...] are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness" (85). The duality of Charlie is contested, and there is an assumed cultural belonging, from Alice's part, to racialized and ethnically coded locations or geographies such as Mexico, the border, Latin America, etc. The questioning of Charlie's belonging to the U.S. puts the social and racial structures of the Ordinary World in conflict with the legendary monster universe and its ability to expand and reach beyond boundaries. It comes into conflict with Charlie's multiple identities, which places him in different spaces and brings tumult to his bonds to his identity as Hispanic, Latino, American, and a legendary monster.

Interactions between Charlie and his classmates, such as Alice, demonstrate realities in which others perceive spaces in relation to race and culture impacting Hispanic communities or minorities. It highlights the presence of race on understanding about belonging at a location or space, both at a micro level (Charlie's school) and a macro level (the U.S.). Charlie reflects on this particular incident as he responds to Alice's comment:

> "I'm from here," I reminded her for what felt like the zillionth time. This whole thing started back in first grade when we'd been partners for a cultural heritage project and she learned that I was born in Puebla, Mexico. (My dad's family is Mexican and Portuguese, and my mom's is Cuban.) I'd tried to explain to her that my parents had moved here when I was only one, so America was the only country I'd ever called home, but she didn't seem to get that. It sucked that some people would never accept me just based on my parents' nationalities and the color of my skin. (Calejo 21)

This instance sets the stage for the legendary monster universe to become an inclusive space of the complexities of Charlie's multiple identities in the Ordinary World and his cross-cultural upbringing. The Ordinary World, reflected through interactions with Alice, understands cultures in a monolithic stance. One location means one culture, and one culture does not include diverse races. Furthermore, the legendary monster universe metaphorically acknowledges the cultural identity struggles in *Charlie Hernández* as it follows Charlie's identity conflict as the morphling or *el cambiador*, a shape-shifting hero.

It was far from a magically pleasing surprise for Charlie when his body started manifesting as the morphling. Instead, his "life [had taken] another detour into Freaksville" (Calejo 7). His

transformation manifests first with the appearance of a pair of horns, followed by feathers across his body, and finally, a hand becoming a pincer. Throughout these changes, his conception of human and non-human shifts, but his sense of cultural relatedness intensifies as he immerses himself in the legendary monster stories his abuela told him. Thus, for Charlie to come to terms with what he is experiencing, the awakening into the morphling, he references back to the cultural heritage his identity as Hispanic holds. His connection to Hispanic cultures becomes a moment of empowerment and validation of that surfacing cultural identity. This is demonstrated when he notes:

> Obviously, with a pair of horns growing out of my head, I couldn't help but think back to my abuela's myths—especially the one about the Morphling. In those stories, the young hero would always defeat his nemesis—an evil, narcissistic, twice-cursed witch—by manifesting some kind of animal trait. (Calejo 5)

This shapeshifter-like creature, the morphling, is the reasonable explanation he conceives. It demonstrates the significance of cultural heritage for him to understand the world and his experiences. He begins to return to a way of perceiving and understanding the world outside Anglo-American or Western-centered perceptions of differences, as Gloria Anzaldúa explains:

> There is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures' magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift. (Anzaldúa 41)

From the position of Hispanic myths and legends, the legendary monster universe is not only the space through which he can understand what is happening to him but also the space that permits him to acknowledge that being different is not something to hide or be ashamed of. It is empowering rather than simply something "othering" him. The legendary monster universe of which Charlie becomes part as the morphling is a space through which, as Bishop states about diverse literature, they "help [readers] understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connection to all other humans" (1). In *Charlie Hernández*, Charlie's connection to other humans is based on fear, fear over

the responses to his difference that others might have, such as his experience with Alice proves. He must overcome such fears to acknowledge the possibilities of freedom these changes have for him. Thus, Charlie's struggle by becoming a morphling parallels with the identity conflicts that Latinx and Hispanic or minority groups go through in the Ordinary World due to pushes to homogeneous societies, assimilation to the culture of a white majority, and the invisibility of one's multicultural identity.

Charlie's transformation makes him see his changes as movements to something not human, prompting a defensive response to reinstate his humanity. He states to his friend Violet in a defensive state:

> I can't believe I'm having this conversation right now. I can't believe I have to defend my humanity of all things! "Listen. This," I said gesturing at the feathers, "todo esto—feels like a nightmare. And it's definitely not something I've been dealing with all my life. Believe me." (Calejo 55)

What is posed here is Charlie's denial of his awakening as *el cambiador* and reluctance to the possibility of it happening. For him, engaging with the space of the monstrous is another thing making him more different than he already is. In *Charlie Hernández*, the legendary monster universe is a space where for its inclusivity to work, there must be first a confrontation to the assimilated ideas that being different is bad or wrong. It pushes Charlie to acknowledge the identities that were buried down and reflect on who and what he is in relation to the world, and alter his own conceptions of otherness.

Charlie's transformation is a liberatory gesture (hooks 55) from the social constraints of a white supremacist power structure in the Ordinary World, reflected through the character of Alice, the bully. At first, these interactions of discrimination show Charlie's vulnerability, taking him out of his comfort zone in an assimilated environment. However, considering the morphling he is to become, or rather, that he had always been, this creature is actually "a hero that manifests animal traits and uses them and the witch's own vanity to defeat her and save the village" (Calejo 235). The morphling is not only a supernatural being but also a hero, thus, making Charlie a hero. The recognition of differences as something intrinsic and related to heroism in the morphling in Charlie's memories of legendary monster stories forms the core of his acceptance as *el cambiador* and its guide to empowerment. *Charlie Hernández* defies spaces that encourage homogeneous

conditions of being, racially exclusionary conditions, founded in the silence of non-western knowledges that Hispanic myths and legends provide.

The legendary monster universe in *Charlie Hernández* is a space of inclusion through which the presence of Charlie as the morphling breaks apart notions about the monster as only policing the boundaries of what should or should not be done (Cohen 12). Instead, it repairs the injuries or traumas caused by forced boundaries between social anxieties and desires in cultures. By the end of *Charlie Hernández*, we see this acceptance and healing process of the traumas caused by the boundaries between the legendary monster universe and the Ordinary World. Charlie acknowledges his fears to be seen differently when one of his friends states the following after Charlie's defeat of *La Cuca*: "[...] "Dude, so you're like...like some kind of super freak then, huh?"." (Calejo 309) Charlie then responds and reflects:

> "Basically," I said, and realized I wasn't even the least bit embarrassed to admit it. Funny part was, just a couple of hours ago, I'd been too ashamed to tell him about my manifestations, too ashamed to let him see what I was becoming. But I wasn't anymore. See, at first (and like most people, probably), I'd assumed my manifestations were turning me into some kind of weirdo. A freak. But what I didn't know at the time, what I couldn't possibly have known, was that it would be that same "weirdo-ness" (if that's even a real world) that would soon save my life—not to mention the lives of everyone I cared about. (Calejo 309)

Instead of a separation between the legendary monster universe and the Ordinary World, they both exist in contact with each other through Charlie's ambiguous state as the morphling, able to shift positions between the spaces. What makes him "weird" and different is the same things that compose the legendary monster universe and what the Ordinary one lacks. Therefore, his existence puts together the missing pieces from the legendary monster universe into the restructuration of the Ordinary World. This process allows the Ordinary World to become a space that accepts all that he is and for whom he is, thus, affirming, validating, and empowering his identity.

Charlie Hernández reflects the contrast to this position of people of color or minorities as those beyond the borders of the Ordinary World. The legendary monster universe is in contact and interaction with Charlie and people of color through the cultural

heritages they engage in and their encounters with these legendary creatures. Thus, these encounters push for the acquisition of power if we decode the messages these legendary monsters have for us. This is what Charlie realizes at the end of his battle with *La Cuca*:

> [...] I'd realized that the things about yourself that make you feel awkward or different or drive you completely crazy are the same things that make you *you*. And you can't run away from who you are. You can't cry it away; you can't even wish it away. But once you accept yourself—everything about yourself (especially the weird parts)—you'll finally be free to be you. And that's a powerful thing. A very powerful thing.
> And I guess you could say that I'd finally accepted me. (Calejo 310)

Charlie's acceptance of who—or what—he is is a statement of being that opens the door to what makes him different from others, as well as to the connections he forms within his community and beyond. It states how cultural heritages create links to a community of different people across generations, genders, and experiences but whose union is based on those differences as fragments of a whole rather than justifications for alienation. He is making clear through his words that those aspects he thought would differentiate him from others and alienate him are his biggest strength. Charlie's self-reflection is evidence of the empowerment he gains through the legendary monster universe, as it uncovered the blurred lines of relations between the Ordinary World and the legendary monster universe.

Charlie embodies this intersection and connection and the power it holds to accept the workings of the world, of the universe, as an expanding system of different components sustaining each other in a symbiotic partnership. The legendary monster universe foments and promotes a flexible system of being that includes everything weird, existences in alterity, and freaky beings, whose presence in the Ordinary World are denied by social norms. The legendary monster universe and its inhabitants, as ambiguous and expanding, is where the monster holds the greatest strength, that of making those in the Ordinary World face what they have tried so hard to hide: anxieties, emotions, differences, and anything that indicates you are your own self within a collective of people.

Towards a Space of Inclusion

Gloria Anzaldúa addresses in *Borderlands/La Frontera* the need to tolerate ambiguity. She states *la mestiza*, that state of being of mixedness (cultural, racial, and all-encompassing of the experiences of those between cultures), "has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within" (Anzaldúa 101). The legendary monster universe, this space where the wild things are (Asma 443), is ever-shifting, ambiguous, and ever-changing. This particular space, which alludes to difference and cross-cultural engagements rather than the monolithic cultures western hegemonies aspire to, makes the legendary monsters in *Charlie Hernández* a medium for including Hispanic identities and cultures. The legendary monster universe is a contested space where difference and otherness are woven together, always finding new means of expressing themselves through its monsters and the cross-cultural resonances they allude.

Therefore, the Ordinary World Charlie engages in the story alone cannot permit connections between a mestizo identity, cross-cultural realities of people of color, and racially and culturally liberated spaces. The imagined space of a monolithic culture (centered in American and European Western knowledges) is subverted by the presence of Hispanic legendary monsters within the local space of the U.S. context while also addressing the monster's place of origin, such as *calacas* and *mukis* found in a Florida cemetery, *El Sombreron* at a Florida school, and *La Sihuanaba* near a mall as figures from Central America. In addition, *La Luz Mala* from Argentina and *La Llorona* from Mexico were found across the Florida Everglades swampland. The fantasy world, or this legendary monster universe, becomes a mestizo location, a space of cross-cultural interaction in a way that the Ordinary World has failed to both Charlie and an assumed readership of color. Charlie, then, a being whose existence was already multi-cultural in the Ordinary World, finds power and validation for his identity enabled by the legendary monster universe without relinquishing his humanity.

Charlie Hernández's portrayal of Hispanic myths and legends through an engagement with its monsters forms paths of connection to Hispanic cultures. It illustrates their resonances to a perception of "real" or "authentic" folklore. It builds up familiarity

and relatability between the legendary monsters, the cultures addressed, and the social, cultural, and historical experiences of being Hispanic or Latinx in the U.S. context. These possibilities in Calejo's book contest the pessimistic reality of people of color illustrated in fantasy literature as Thomas frames.

> When readers who are White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied enter the fantastic dream, they are empowered and afforded a sense of transcendence that can be elusive within the real world. If this is the case, the readers and hearers of fantastic tales who have been endarkened and Othered by the dominant culture can never be plausible conquering heroes nor prizes to be won in the fantastic. (Thomas 23)

Charlie becomes a plausible conquering hero, using not only his monstrous abilities but his wits and cleverness to defeat the nemesis of the morphling (Calejo 5), just as Hercules made use of his demigod strength to kill the lion of Nemea and Odysseus outsmarted Polyphemus to survive. The empowerment and transcendence present in the real world for the White reader and character, as they are already in a position of power, is elusive for the reader or character of color. However, by creating a legendary monster universe that illustrates Charlie's cultural heritage, it validates his experiences as a Hispanic and empowers his cross-cultural and multiple identities. The expansion of this space includes rather than excludes. The legendary monster universe is a space of inclusion and empowerment as it (re)connects the links severed between people, their histories, and their cultures

Notes

1. Social norms and expectations are rooted in the informal and unwritten rules that societies follow based on an established perception of what is right or wrong. According to UNICEF, social norms define acceptable and appropriate actions in a collective to guide human behavior. These rules and guides are socially constructed and serve the inclusion of people into a given group and foment the exclusion of those that do not follow them. Those that deviate from following these unwritten rules, are often times considered outcasts or discriminated against. Examples of social norms are dress codes according to gender, social status or condition, etiquette based on hierarchy, and gender norms among others

(https://www.unicef.org/media/111061/file/Social-norms-definitions-2021.pdf).

2. For the purpose of this chapter, my use of the multi-cultural, with a hyphen, is meant to state the realities of Latinx communities as composed of multiple cultures and histories that compose an understanding of what is Latinx culture. Thus, addressing a multiplicity of cultures with connections in colonial history, language, experiences of struggle, and systems of power while also being cultures with distinctions and developments—historical, cultural, political, and economic—of their own.

3. In his *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Tzvetan Todorov explores the concept of the "self" and the "other." He states there cannot be an "other" without a "self" and no "self" without the "other" and how the idea of the other is both within us, as we are "others" and "others" are also "I"'s. My idea of otherness is framed through Todorov's argument that the "other" is formed when according to one point of view, "all of them are out there and I alone am in here," in which those "others" are separate and distinct from myself. This definition of otherness relates to how monsters are conceived or created, in that space of divergence they inhabit and which people of color are put into, in that "otherness."

4. Gloria Anzaldúa addresses in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* how building a new consciousness based on mestizaje (mixing of races) opens opportunities to accept and tolerate ambiguity in communities and spaces. According to her, the mestiza identity and consciousness is a future in which we will live "on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity" (19).

5. The legend of La Llorona is one with a strong presence in U.S. popular culture as recent films such as *The Curse of La Llorona* demonstrate, a movie from the franchise of *The Conjuring* movies. The legend of La Llorona tells of a woman who killed her children in a fit of rage over his husband's adultery. However, after realizing what she had done, her grief over killing her children led her to commit suicide in the same river she drowned her children. In *Charlie Hernández*, Charlie discovers who she is when "All of a sudden, everything made sense. The random bouts of crying. The photos with the kids. Her overprotective, bordering-on-psychotic maternal instincts" (Calejo 132). She is described as a woman that due to her actions, she lurks by rivers, in representation of the river where she drowned her children, and kidnaps children, appearing as a crying woman. La Luz Mala originates from Argentina and is a legend or

myth intended to keep people from the dangers of the swamps. It's described as wasps of light floating in the air that entrances people and take them deeper into the perils of the swamp. According to Charlie, as his grandmother told him, they are: "wispy, glowing orbs with mesmerizing powers [...] strings of tiny lights that lured unsuspecting people into the dangers of the swamp" (Calejo 116). El sombrero is, as Charlie states, the Central American boogeyman. As described by Charlie, "he's basically a goblin in a big hat and cowboy boots! He likes to ride horses and braid their tails. He also serenades girls with his guitarra." However, "once they fall in love with him, he puts dirt in their food so they can't eat or sleep until they eventually die" (Calejo 110).

6. In his introduction to *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, Michael Dylan Foster argues for and proposes a delineation of the term folkloresque as a heuristic tool (Foster 4) for exploring popular culture. This concept explores the folklore phenomenon as it appears or is deployed in popular culture for consumption. According to Foster, the folkloresque is "an inclusive concept for the productive analysis of the ways motifs, folk ideas, and images operate within the production of commercial products" (8). He implies that folklore participates within the creation and reception of popular culture as a commercial product to be consumed. These folk motifs and connections to folklore present in popular culture are derived from traditional folklore that has been, as Foster notes, borrowed and used in this popular culture products' creation a sensation or "taste" of what folklore is and does.

7. La calaca is a skeleton creature who is commonly seen in representations of Día de los Muertos. According to Charlie, la calaca is portrayed in "tales of walking, talking skeletons. Sometimes they were friendly, jovial spirits who would, on special occasions, sneak out of the underworld to celebrate with the living—like the Day of the Dead in Mexico. Other times they were grim reapers sent to fetch those whose time on earth was up (Calejo 75-76). In Charlie Hernández, la calaca that Charlie meets is named Gregory, working as the groundskeeper of a cemetery and guarding an entrance to the place of the dead. Calacas, according to a tale about an orphan boy named Juancho Ramirez, are traders by nature.

8. Originating from stories about pre-Columbian times, the story of La Sihuanaba is about a peasant girl that became queen but betrayed her king and was cursed. Charlie describes this creature as having a "skin pasty white, its hands withered and ancient. But from the neck up [...] It had the face of a horse. [...] like a dead horse... a long-dead horse. Its

muzzle was broad and bony, covered with lumps, bumps, knobs, and pus-gushing bruises. Its bulging black eyes seemed to look everywhere and nowhere all at once. A steeply slanting forehead stretched down to where there should've been a nose but wasn't. Instead, I could see tufts of ratty black hair growing out of the gaping cavity, as well as everywhere else on this hideous thing's head—under its chin, along its jaw, behind the pointy cones of its ears. Its lipless mouth formed a permanent scowl. A scowl overrun with jagged, razor-sharp teeth (Calejo 144-145).

9. In "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," Rudine Sims Bishop argues through this metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, for representation of underrepresented children in literature. According to her, young readers of color should be able to see their reflections, their backgrounds or cultures, and enter spaces of literature as white children have been able to do.

10. According to Charlie, mukis are cave dwelling dwarves. In Charlie Hernández & The League of Shadows, they are described as follows:

> [...] On the platforms, hundreds of tiny little men in miners' uniforms swung hammers, worked crosscut saws, and fit hinges to rectangular wooden boxes twice their size.
>
> Some of the men were brawny with long white beards and no necks. Others had hairy, reddish faces and feet so big they waddled when they walked. The brawny ones hacked away at minerals embedded in the cave walls, while the hairy-faced ones collected the fragments along a complicated system of bubbling cauldrons, forging the minerals into what looked like carpenter nails. (73)

These creatures, from Charlie's knowledge, are able to turn plain rocks into gold ore with their touch.

11. In *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, Thomas argues for a Theory of the Dark Fantastic in which the imagination and fantasy spaces have been predominantly white and those of color are positioned as "Dark Others," the othered or monstrous subjects. According to Thomas, "the Dark Other occupies the same space in reality that the monster occupies in fantasy..." (20)

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