

The Opinion Pages | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Why Latino Children Are Scared of Donald Trump

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A pinata depicting Donald J. Trump in Reynosa, Mexico.
Credit Daniel Becerril/Reuters



Héctor Tobar

LYNWOOD, Calif. — MANY monsters and ghosts haunt the dreams of Latino children. There is “La Llorona,” who is said to moan for her dead children. And more recently, the Chupacabra, which sucks the blood from farm animals and maybe a boy or a girl if he or she doesn’t behave.

- 5 Now we can add a new boogeyman to the repertoire of scary Latino bedtime stories. His name is The Donald.

Ever since he began his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination with a

vicious screed against Mexican immigrants, Donald J. Trump has become a figure of dread and comic-book meanness to the Latino community. He's a villain in a flaccid pompadour, spewing threats and insults that have filtered down into the bosom of many a Latino family, to be heard by children gathered by the television set or at the dinner table.

In Lynwood, a working-class and mostly Latino suburb of Los Angeles, it isn't hard to find children who have heard of El Señor Trump.

Hugo, a 7-year-old not much taller than a New York City fireplug, is the son of Mexican immigrants. Too young to understand what Mr. Trump meant when he called immigrants from Mexico "rapists," Hugo boiled The Donald's message down to three words: "Mexicans are ugly."

It made young Hugo "sad" to hear someone call his parents ugly, he said. And if he could meet Mr. Trump, he'd tell him, "Bad luck for you."

When Mr. Trump takes to a stage and declares Mexican immigrants to be murderers, his rhetorical daggers strike at the collective Latino psyche. We're offended, we're wounded and we're angry.

"I'm afraid someone is going to hurt him," my 10-year-old daughter pronounced recently. And now it is possible to do so, symbolically speaking — Trump piñatas are selling like hot tamales over the border in Tijuana.

In families like Hugo's, Mr. Trump's campaign speaks to a child's greatest fear: the possibility that he might be separated from his parents. Hugo was born in the United States, but his mother and father came here from Mexico 10 years ago.

"We tell him we don't have the same papers he does," Hugo's father told me. "We have to explain that there are people like Donald Trump and Arpaio" — referring to Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County, Ariz. — "who are against it."

Sheriff Arpaio, who joined Mr. Trump at an Arizona rally in July, is famous for his aggressive pursuit of undocumented immigrants. I like to think of him as our Cucuy (a kidnapping boogeyman also known as El Cuco). The Fox News host Bill O'Reilly is El Cadejo (an angry being with sharp canines), and the conservative pundit Ann Coulter is a Llorona screaming "¡Adiós, América!" — the title of her recent anti-Mexico polemic, which refers to the country as "a third world hellhole."

But it's The Donald who is on the airwaves the most these days. His unapologetic

40 xenophobia has helped to push his presidential campaign to the top of the fractured Republican field. Like certain politicians in the Weimar Republic, he's found a largely defenseless group to pick on — who also happen to be reviled by a bankable minority of the electorate.

Even the young hear The Donald's taunts in their brains.

45 "He said that Mexican people are bad people, that they want to sell drugs," a 9-year-old, Alexandra Rubalcava, told me. "He wants to kick out the Mexican people from America and just leave the American people. I think that's pretty much rude. Every one should be fair, and we should all be treated the right way."

Alexandra's father brought her and her two sisters for an excursion to the Plaza 50 México, a Lynwood mall that celebrates Mexican identity with replicas of Olmec sculptures, a statue of Pancho Villa and the facade of a colonial church. I asked Alexandra what was it about the Mexican people that made her proud.

"They work very hard even though they don't get paid," she said.

Mr. Rubalcava, a laborer, asked that I not publish his first name. He said he was 55 afraid of getting in trouble with his employer. His daughter has no such fears. She told me that if she could speak to Mr. Trump, she would say: "You're being unfair to Mexicans. Because what if you were Mexican and someone else was you? And they're basically kicking you out of the world. How would you feel?"

In just nine short years, Alexandra will be ready to vote. Something tells me she 60 won't be voting for the Republican slate. Not many Latino people in Lynwood will.

"The thing is, he hasn't even apologized, even though all these companies canceled their contracts with him," Arturo, a 27-year-old father and chef, told me, in Spanish. "How could somebody like that think he can be president?"

Others see a deep insecurity at work in Mr. Trump's attacks.

65 "We Latinos are becoming more powerful, and he doesn't like it," said Irene Huerta, a 24-year-old college student. "While he's calling us names, more Latinos are going to school and wanting to excel. I know I do."

In other words, Mr. Trump has put another chip on our shoulders. That's what happens when you attack an entire people: You add a new chapter to their story of 70 overcoming obstacles. My family and friends will remember the summer of 2015 as

the season The Donald entered our lives, via a Telemundo news report, or in links shared on social media.

“My brother showed me the video,” Damaris told me by the merry-go-round at Plaza México. “He’s talking wrong about all the Mexicans.”

75 A 10-year-old like Damaris watches The Donald descending an escalator in Trump Tower. Or standing at the border in Texas in a white hat that proclaimed “Make America Great Again.” Even if she doesn’t understand what he’s saying, she can feel her parents, her older brother turning angry and looking worried.

80 At that moment, The Donald has unwittingly taught the girl the same valuable message that’s at the heart of many scary monster tales: Be on guard, because there are people out there who might harm you.

But in the end, fear not, niños. Monsters are really just myth. And you can always make one into a piñata, and beat it until its paper shell breaks and candy falls out.



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