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LA LLORONA, PICANTE PERO SABROSO: THE MEXICAN HORROR LEGEND
AS A STORY OF SURVIVAL AND A RECLAMATION OF THE MONSTER

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty in the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Camille Maria Acosta

May 2021

LA LLORONA; PICANTE PERO SABROSO: THE MEXICAN HORROR LEGEND
AS A STORY OF SURVIVAL AND A RECLAMATION OF THE MONSTER

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Associate Provost for Research and Graduate Education

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Irma and Toby Acosta who are the strongest people I know and who inspire me every day to break boundaries with my narrative. I also dedicate this thesis to my brother, Chris Acosta who is the personification of happiness and hope for a brighter future. I would also like to dedicate this work to the strong Latinas in my family who helped raised me with a fury, passion, and dedication to achieve greatness. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this research to my Grandma Lucy and Grandma Licha, who hardened their cocoons of Latina existence to help me become a butterfly.

This is and always has been for you.

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For centuries, the relationship between Mexico and its infatuation with scary stories has been profoundly complex, but why? Perhaps it is the easiest way to communicate a Mexican culture, although proud and resilient, riddled with haunting narratives. For myself personally, the Mexican horror narrative La Llorona has served as a lens for conversation and communication that is unique and important.

In this thesis, I explore how Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike use the legend of La Llorona as a unique form of communication through personifying what truly haunts us. From using the narrative as a tool for entertainment, cautionary tales, historical knowledge, and even to unintentionally pass on intergenerational trauma, this Latinx horror legend serves a variety of purposes for each individual that tells it.

My central research questions included the following: how does the legend of La Llorona manifest in emotionally diverse ways among the people and families I interviewed; in what ways is La Llorona used as a tool of communication within the Mexican and Mexican American households of my interviewees; and what are the commentaries on the legend of La Llorona that are hidden in the subtext?

My research consisted of interviews and conversations with Mexicans and Mexican Americans who have had a personal experience and connection with the legend of La Llorona. The informants and their words are discussed in three chapters: Chapter

One addresses children ages thirteen to fifteen, Chapter Two describes young adults ages twenty-five and twenty-nine, and Chapter Three focuses on older adults.

The results of this research include bringing a culture's narratives of hurt and healing to light through the reclamation of “the monster.” La Llorona has proven that she is so much more than the monster that the Western world makes her out to be. Through explorations of gender, emotionality, *machismo*, *marianismo*, and the dichotomy of human and monster, my research demonstrates how this legend is a form of subtextual communication for the Mexican and Mexican Americans I interviewed.

Introduction

The powerful world of narrative and storytelling is one that never ceases to amaze me. A narrative's ability to transport both its listener and teller to magical realms or create safe spaces for those seeking a sense of escape and comfort is a beautiful, beautiful thing. With the year 2020 bringing about some of the most challenging times any of us have ever experienced, I for one have found my ability to let go through speaking my story. Personally, stories have been an invaluable aspect of my existence for as long as I can remember, and I can easily argue that they have saved my life. Growing up as a *Chicana* in the southwestern border town of El Paso, Texas was an experience I have cherished, held close, and all in all worn with pride. My father, born of Mexican descent, immigrated with his parents and six siblings to El Paso from Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico, which created a challenging bridge between two lands for a very young boy. My mother was born and raised in the warm, desert city and blossomed within a Mexican American household filled with tough love and a tongue split between two worlds. Both of these individuals without a doubt have shaped and molded strong and colorful lives for themselves. Although they are modest souls, I will always continue to credit my parents for helping me write and illustrate my twenty-five-year-old coming-of-age story filled with love, borders, and as always homemade tortillas. I have always viewed my cultural roots as something synonymous with a folk narrative, a story worth telling and one deserving of transmission much like all of our stories are. Elliot Oring elaborates on the term in a similar fashion, claiming, "All in all, a narrative is a medium for communicating experience" (1986:122). Interestingly enough, the earliest and fondest memories I have of a narrative was an experience filled with Latinx horror.

For centuries, the relationship between Mexico and its infatuation with the horror story has been profoundly complex and all too intriguing. From frightening urban legends like “El Cucuy,” the traditional Mexican folk song “*La Bruja*” (“The Witch”), and even the more recent premiere of the film *Tigers Are Not Afraid* in 2017, horror seems to be an excellent genre for Mexican and Mexican American storytelling, but why? Perhaps it is the easiest way to communicate a Mexican culture, although proud and resilient, riddled with haunting narratives. Timothy H. Evans elaborates on this aspect of projecting modern day fears through a horror lens by claiming horror and horror literature alike, “is predicated upon feelings of insecurity brought about by cultural change, by the idea that our families and communities, our familiar beliefs and cultural forms, are increasingly under assault by forces beyond our control” (2005:100). Mexicans have had a fascination with horror and the afterlife since the birth of their people, from the Aztecs to the Chicanos. Death may follow us through immigration into an unwelcoming country. Death accompanies us for warm food and celebration of loved ones during *Dia de los Muertos*. As contradictory as this partnership may seem, there is no question that the mysticism of the scary hereafter shapes this culture into what it is today. Because our history is riddled with complicated circumstances of death, loss, and fear, a narrative that illustrates the terrifying instances or “monsters” Mexicans may face on a daily basis could provide relatability and help us learn how to defeat those monsters, or perhaps even reclaim them as tools of communication. For myself personally, the Mexican horror narrative “*La Llorona*” (“The Weeping Woman”) has served as a lens for a conversation that is unique and important to all.

My Mexican horror narrative experience growing up as a Chicana in El Paso, Texas manifests within the ever-popular legend of La Llorona, introduced to me by my father Cristobal Acosta (Thatha). My father, being an immigrant from Mexico, was surrounded by the legend growing up and felt it necessary to pass on this narrative to my brother and me at a very young age. This legend of course is highly popular in many Latinx cultures and in turn is distributed in many versions and variants. However, within my immediate Mexican American household, the version I was told speaks of a Latinx woman whose marriage failed her, thus leading her to murder her children in the river before taking her own life. Now for all eternity, she is doomed to wander the river for little *niños* to reclaim as her own. This emotional horror legend has stuck with me for twenty-five years on this earth, and I am not alone. This knowledge of the traditional legend is almost second nature for Latinx individuals specifically of Mexican descent. This narrative is taught to us as little ones, illustrated within children's books, and even used as a muse in popular Latinx ballads. I have always wondered what specifically draws our people toward such a dark and deathly tale and why La Llorona constantly haunts us both literally and metaphorically. Thus, my Folk Studies Master's Thesis was born.

In this thesis, I explore how the Mexican and Mexican American informants I interviewed use the legend of La Llorona as a unique form of communication through personifying what truly haunts them. From using the narrative as a tool for entertainment, cautionary tales, historical knowledge, and even to unintentionally pass on intergenerational trauma, this Latinx horror legend serves a variety of purposes for each individual that tells it. Diving deep into the world of horror storytelling in multiple

variants, I examine the purpose of the legend of La Llorona to its various tellers, the ways it is transmitted, its storytelling contexts, and its delicate balance with fiction and reality.

Literature Review

In order to fully comprehend the legend of La Llorona and her symbolism in the world of folklore and narrative, I dive into some preexisting research on the legend itself as well as the character of La Llorona through a folklore lens in order to gather more information on the multitudes of ways our “monsteresque” leading lady is perceived. Works such as Linda Dégh’s *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (2001), Rudolfo Anaya’s “La Llorona, El Kookooee, and Sexuality” (1992), Michael Kearney’s “La Llorona as a Social Symbol” (1969), Patricia Maria Trujillo’s “Becoming La Llorona” (2006), Robert A. Barakat’s “Wailing Women of Folklore” (1969), Jeannie Banks Thomas’s chapters in *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* (2007), Bernadette Calafell’s *Monstrosity: Performance and Race in Contemporary Culture* (2015), and Domino Renee Perez’s *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (2008) are stepping stones toward deconstructing the mirroring effect of the Mexican experience and the horror story identity. Latinx folklorists and educators such as Américo Paredes, Rudolfo Anaya, and Domino Renee Perez; Mexican horror story creatives such as Guillermo del Toro and Norma Elia Cantú; and finally the legend of La Llorona and narratives of my personal friends and family will display this brilliantly scary relationship at play. However, in order to truly understand these interviews, folklore legend scholarship provides a useful starting point.

To begin interpretation of this narrative it is important to acknowledge the first step in which we will break down the meaning and social context of our legend, the

basics of definition. Folklorist Linda Dégh explores the multitudes of definition possible for legend in her work *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Of course it is not simple to define a legend, so I will focus on two definitions that stood out to me.

Folklorist Carl-Herman Tillhagen, cited in Dégh, defines legend as follows:

The legend is in its form and other essentials a fixed and unified narrative built of one or more motifs communicating a belief-content. It should be available in at least two versions that have been collected from different places. (Dégh 2001:42)

What I was drawn to about this definition was the inclusion of multiple motifs as well as the ability to exist in multiple versions from various places. The second definition that I feel captures legend nicely was from folklorist Günther Kapfhammer, also cited in Dégh:

Legends are worldly stories; they formulate the pessimistic view of the world differently than the tale. Legends are not protocols of the hereafter, and thus are not stories “to shudder” at but are reports of projections: the dead return, documenting that the living cannot resolve the problem of death and cannot get rid of the feeling of remorse at being unable to lay the dead to rest. The legend – a historical document or not? The legend is rooted in a historically authenticized or believed to be documentable event that manifests as a specific reflection of human experience and becomes a means for argumentation. (Dégh 2001:37)

There are some fascinating points made throughout Kapfhammer’s definition such as projections of societal problems and historical events. The idea that legend narratives can be used to document the climate of culture it is tied to is interesting and something I feel La Llorona accomplishes. However, Kapfhammer states that legends are not necessarily stories “to shudder” at but I respectfully disagree in terms of this Hispanic legend. I feel as though scary aspects of narrative and legend telling can still be used to teach and share content, in fact even more so as it makes it memorable.

To expand more on the historical contexts of legend, Folklorist Bill Ellis claims that a typical folk legend is a narrative that, “begins by placing the events that follow as precisely as possible in [a] group’s conception of the real world, and the events it narrates

or alludes to challenge in some way the boundaries of what the world is or should be” (2003:11). In other words, a legend is a story that seemingly takes place in the world of our own, but may contain shocking, striking, or abnormal aspects that cause you to question beliefs, cultural norms, and possibly even the truth itself. The legend of La Llorona illustrates this definition and is common knowledge in both Mexican/Mexican American children and adults alike. To aid in exploring the legend’s purpose and transmission, scholarship such as Bess Lomax Hawes’ “La Llorona in Juvenile Hall” (1968), Robert Barakat’s “Wailing Women of Folklore,” as well as Jeannie Banks Thomas’ contributions to the edited volume *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* will aid in expanding the knowledge of this legend. While the words themselves and its distribution are important to understand, the emotional subtext of this horror character leaves much to discuss. In the words of Bill Ellis, “Legend telling in its natural context is a means of expressing anxieties about a group’s cultural world view, as well as a way of redefining it in the light of individual experiences. It also provides a safe way of questioning what important institutions define as ‘real’ and ‘proper’” (2003:12). So, let us explore how La Llorona redefines and challenges cultural boundaries to be better prepared for my informants.

It is worth mentioning that although many of the following authors and researchers are not technically folklorists, their analysis on Latinx studies, *Chicana/Chicano* storytelling, and their wealth of knowledge on the legend of La Llorona can only further the growth and understanding of my thesis. Rudolfo Anaya was one of the most influential authors in my young Chicana life, and his breadth of knowledge on La Llorona broadened my understanding of her character. In Anaya’s “La Llorona, El

Kookooee, and Sexuality,” the exploration of La Llorona’s legend not only involves the variants of the narrative, but the variations of the narrative’s meaning. From exploring sexuality to understanding our deepest monsters, Anaya elaborates on how La Llorona’s multiple meanings affect the younger generation. Anaya explains, “It is in the bush that we encounter the darkness that assails our spirit. In the bush exist the monsters of our legends and myths, the ghosts of the communal stories. The spirits and monsters of the bush are creations of our minds, both the communal psyche and the personal. Awareness or coming to a new consciousness are steps toward maturity, and the stories can serve as guideposts” (1992:51). To further educate myself on the various guideposts La Llorona’s legend serves, I have relied on works including Norma Cantú’s “La Llorona Considers the State of Tortillas,” Patricia Marina Trujillo’s “Becoming La Llorona,” Bernadette Marie Calafell’s *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, and Domino Renee Perez’s *There was a Woman*.

To continue researching La Llorona’s horror context through a folklore lens, there is plenty of scholarship to choose from. Through Timothy H. Evans’ “A Last Defense against the Dark: Folklore, Horror, and the Uses of Tradition in the Works of H. P. Lovecraft” (2005) and Michael Kearney’s “La Llorona as a Social Symbol,” I gain a larger grasp on folk narratives’ uses of cultural traditions, traumas, hopes, and fears. To branch into my use of fieldwork and interview, the aforementioned Bess Lomax Hawes’ “La Llorona in Juvenile Hall” was a fantastic starting point in preparation of my methods of interview. Hawes’ exploration of La Llorona’s variants within a juvenile hall in Los Angeles not only presents the multiple versions of this legend she came across, but furthers the notion that legends come about as a reflection of society. Hawes quotes

social worker Marcia A. Tichenor: “I feel that these tales are a manifestation of their fear of the world and of society. Most of the girls cannot express fear to themselves” (Hawes 1968:169). This concept of reflecting both the hopes and fears through the lens of folkloric legends like La Llorona are other aspects of thesis research I focused in on as well as the folklore of generational trauma. Michael Kearney perpetuates this idea of intergenerational fear narratives within the Mexican culture by arguing that the legend of La Llorona could also be identified as a “Creation Myth.” Kearney, in “La Llorona as a Social Symbol” argues,

It may be seen as a creation myth because it does two things: first, it relates important experiences, perhaps the most important, in the psychogenesis of the individual...Second, since in myth the individual is a microcosmic replication of the world view, the legend is also a statement about the world, especially the world of interpersonal relations. (Kearney 1969:201-202)

This mythological retelling of how the world began could ring accurate within the psyche of Mexican and Mexican American children, for La Llorona is the first concept of fear many of us have ever experienced; she is our anxieties’ origin story. Another reaffirmation on this concept of original terror was mentioned in the book *Our Sacred Maíz Is Our Mother: Indigeneity and Belonging in the Americas*. In the chapter “The Children of La Llorona,” it is described in detail how this horrifying legend could have originated centuries prior in Tenochtitlan. During the time of colonization, La Llorona could have potentially acted as a metaphor for the destruction, sexual assault, and orphaned children conquistadors disgustingly left in their wake. The characteristics of the legend containing “illegitimate” children, violent death, and sorrow beyond belief mirrors an origin story we wish would disappear from memory. The chapter explains,

A story—this story—is another way to explain or describe the angst of deIndigenized peoples. But it also points to resiliency: seemingly rejected by all, these peoples find their own linkage to the maíz culture of this continent and create their own stories, stories that speak to their needs and their reality. (Rodriguez et al. 2014:186)

While it is clear that there is definitely no shortage of research on the legend of La Llorona, I challenge the boundaries and interview younger populations considering they essentially keep this legend alive. Not only this, but I broaden the metaphorical possibilities of La Llorona within the human experiences of those I interview. I explore how in a world of racist and spiteful individuals, a legend about reclaiming power and fighting back through a Latinx narrative can ultimately become the new folklore passed down for generations to come, as opposed to generational trauma, confronting our monsters and reclaiming them. Anaya contends,

...the ghosts of the bush are real, whether we explain them as projections of our psyche or as a creation of communal oral tradition. When you meet them in the dark and you are a child, you know they are real! (1992:51-52)

Research Questions

The research questions that I focused upon were primarily involving the interviewees and their unique depictions and versions of La Llorona. There was plenty of focus on emotionality as well as the popularity of this legend both within the versions themselves and within the subtext. The questions that encapsulated the magnitude of La Llorona's influence on my informants included "How has the legend of La Llorona manifested in emotionally diverse ways among the people and families I interview?"; "How do my Mexican and Mexican American interviewees characterize La Llorona in the stories they tell about her?"; and "How has the legend of La Llorona risen to such an

iconic and well-known status although she is technically a ‘monster,’ considering monsters have a negative stereotype?” The next research question that is also my favorite goes as follows, “In what ways is La Llorona used as a tool of communication within the Mexican and Mexican American households of my interviewees?” La Llorona is often used as a cautionary tale, one that warns young children to stay inside after dark. This is an act of subtextual communication. However, I was incredibly curious to learn if there were other aspects of communication hidden within the narrative. The research question with the most subcategories was the question on commentary. The question asks, “Are there any possible commentaries on the legend of La Llorona that are hidden in the subtext?” Many of the topics that were expanded upon within these interviews include gender, Latina motherhood, race, mental health, as well as monster and ghost exploration. The final two research questions involve the aspect of fear and horror within a children’s legend. The questions continue, “Why does this legend often get passed down to children even though it is scary?” and “How can a narrative of horror become a mirror of relatability for the Mexicans and Mexican Americans who I interview?” As previously mentioned, the use of horror is a very common theme in Mexican and Mexican American culture, so how does La Llorona figure in to this fear? Also, if La Llorona is something to be feared, why is she so often held on a pedestal and made the subject of a common narrative for little ones?

Methodology

My field research involved interviews and conversations with Mexican and Mexican American individuals who have had a personal experience and connection with the legend of La Llorona. I gathered their versions and variations of the legend they were

first told as well as created a conversation in which I found out why and how La Llorona uniquely made an impact on them. Because I interviewed both minors and adults on their experience with the legend of La Llorona, I followed the guidelines provided by the WKU Institutional Review Board who approved my research application. All of the interviews that I conducted were solely online and/or by phone due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the exception of interviewees already in my household. I interviewed members of my immediate family, as well as former students I once had the pleasure of teaching in southern California. Because there are children involved, I prepared consent forms in both English and Spanish for minors and their parents. The procedure in which I conducted these interviews included contacting these Mexican and Mexican American individuals who have a knowledge of the La Llorona legend, explaining my thesis research and providing consent forms, scheduling and conducting a distanced and recorded interview unless they are members of my household in which case it was in person, and then conducting follow-up interviews to achieve my research goals. All of the interviews that I took part in were primarily in English, considering my informants felt comfortable speaking this language as did I. The primary focus of these interviews was on the words exchanged during these interviews, or their texts as well as any and all performance within the interview context. This was also a very interesting exploration into context and performance during COVID-19, because just about all of my interviews took place virtually. This interesting medium added a twist to the legend telling experience because I was either able to see all of my informants' expressions up close and personal upon my screen, or I was only allowed a voice through a phone. . However, despite the multitudes of ways these versions were collected, the true terror of La Llorona

still managed to come through. I suppose this means La Llorona can haunt even through technological advances.

The significance to this exploration and research is to bring a culture's narratives of hurt and healing to light through the reclamation of “the monster.” While horror narratives can indeed instill fear and terror, La Llorona is so much more than the monster that the Western world makes her out to be. *Mexicanos* see a lot of themselves mirrored through this woman, and in fact can relate to being made as “the monsters” themselves. The beautiful dichotomy of this relationship is something that needs to be spoken more about. The haunting nature of this brilliant tool of communication should be vocalized in order to display how the legend of La Llorona in the Mexican horror genre can explain experiences that are too painful to describe. The beauty of this Mexican horror legend is boundless, and through this thesis, I hope to explain my analysis to the world. It is time to reclaim the monster. In the words of Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz:

You guys know about vampires? ... You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. I was like, “Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist?” And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might see themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it. (Donohue: 2009)

Summary of Chapters

The primary focus of Chapter One is to introduce the little ones important to the legend of La Llorona, the children themselves. How important are children to this narrative and in fact, if there were no children within this legend would there be a legend

at all? Also, since this legend is predominantly transmitted to children at a very young age in Mexican culture, what is La Llorona like since she is so fresh in their minds? In this chapter I interviewed my former students from El Sol Academy, a Charter School where I used to coach Speech and Debate two years ago. There is a massive Latinx population in Santa Ana, California, and many of my former students were born and raised there. These Speech and Debaters are phenomenal storytellers if I do say so myself, and I was ready to interview them to learn about their knowledge on La Llorona, especially through a children's lens where the story is brand new. I still keep in contact with a majority of them, so I anticipated being able to communicate with them for this project. The names of the students I interviewed for this specific chapter were Fernanda Ortiz, Zulam Palacios, Luis Moriel, and Miguel Carretero.

When thinking of the legend of La Llorona, many fail to remember that there was once a woman before the ghost. There was a young adult woman before her transition to a cursed spirit for all eternity. For Chapter Two of my thesis, I interviewed a young adult Chicano that is very near and dear to my heart: my brother Chris Acosta. My brother is of Mexican American descent and like me, is interested in and has had a personal relationship with La Llorona. Although both my brother and I grew up in the same household, I suspected that we have any differences in our depictions of La Llorona and what we take from her, and I was right. The family dynamics described in the legend of La Llorona really seem to be a reflection of the teller's family dynamic and/or experience in the world of *machismo* culture, and that's exactly how my brother elaborated on her. My brother attached his own views of machismo culture being a Latino individual, and his version of La Llorona mirrors his own thoughts on the hierarchy of Latinos vs.

Latinas. I share variants from both my brother and me and our explanations as to why La Llorona was such an important figure for us growing up, as well as how meaningful the character of Maria is in the narrative and as a reflection of society.

Chapter Three is focused on my parents, the ones who made both my experience as a Chicana woman and my experience with La Llorona possible. My mom has been through hell and back experiencing the weight of *marianismo* culture on her role as a mother, and ironically enough so did La Llorona. My mother has significant associations with this woman turned “monster,” and her insight was beyond necessary to fully understand how this spirit may haunt. My dad, Thatha, was the very first person to have ever introduced me to La Llorona, and I was very excited to pick his brain on his interpretation of the legend and La Llorona’s meaning for him. I was curious to see if his interpretations for this legend have been molded because of his experience as a Mexican immigrant, and they were. My father also majored as an English teacher, and one of his upmost fascinations has always been the horror genre. He has often associated his love of horror with the term “escapism,” and for him, “haunting” does not necessarily mean a negative experience for all who’ve experienced pain. For Thatha, La Llorona acts in a way as an escape from the darkness.

The conclusion of my thesis wraps up all that I have learned and makes connections as to why this legend is of such importance to communities like mine. Throughout the conclusion I touch on what I have learned through the process, final thoughts on how La Llorona manifested in the informants I interviewed as well as myself, any discoveries that I made along the journey of research, as well as hopes for the

future generations of Mexican and Mexican American children who find solace in what La Llorona stands for.

Welcome to the world of La Llorona through my eyes: a weeping Latina woman who has let go of her children and sacrificed them for revenge, but who has been holding on tight to the hands of my family for centuries.

Chapter One: *Los Niños*

A long, long time ago there lived a woman named Maria. She was the most beautiful woman in all of Mexico, *muy hermosa*, and she herself knew it too. Day after day, male suitors begged her for her hand in romance, but day after day men returned home defeated, *con el corazón roto*. This was the livelihood of Maria until a dashing young gentleman galloped into town and turned Maria's life upside down; *ella se volvió loca*. She knew in an instant that she had to have him, for he was the only man to match her in beauty and in elegance. Soon they were to be wed, and not long after had two delightful *chiquititos*. This delight however was short lived, for one damning day the dashing gentleman became grotesque as he rode into town with another woman at his side. He rode up to Maria and pledged his life to this new woman whom he barely met, because his current wife was no longer beautiful. Maria's heart burst into tiny shards of glass, invisible to the eye but painful for those handling it. That night, in a fit of sorrow and anger Maria decided to inflict the same agony toward the man that bestowed it upon her. Maria woke her two boys up, took their hands, and guided them to the river "for a bath." Hand in hand, the three figures immersed themselves in the water...but under their mother's hand, the little *niños* never came up for air. After the blood red glare of fury faded from sight, Maria realized what she had done. She shrieked from the gallows of her soul, "*Mis Niños!*" before letting the river water fill up her lungs. It is said now, this weeping woman or La Llorona has returned from the hereafter, searching for new children to claim as her own for all eternity.

Now I know what you're thinking: how tragic, and you are absolutely right. Imagine hearing this story for the first time at six years old, when your only previous

concept of devastation was when your brother ate your entire bag of Hot Cheetos the other day, and your Dad ends the narrative with “Sleep tight Sweetheart!” This was the version of La Llorona that I was first told as a little girl. Needless to say, Mexican kids like myself learn to have a thick skin at a very young age. This traditional legend of La Llorona is incredibly common within Mexican and Mexican American communities, specifically targeting children. The above version however is what we will call the kernel story for this thesis; it is my version that I will compare other versions to. Yes, Thatha did in fact first tell me the legend of La Llorona, but as I will explain in Chapter Three, even my version is different from his. Because it is the version I remember clearly, I will use my version as the kernel story. To further elaborate, folklorist Gary Alan Fine defines the kernel story as either the version or version’s elements that are popularized (Fine 1980:228).

There is a general consensus among the *Mexicanos* I have interviewed for this thesis that the reason this frightening tale is narrated to us as little ones is to offer a warning, don’t stay outside after dark. Like the multitudes of stories that fall under the legend category, it seems accurate to claim La Llorona is meant, “to produce a good scare, [and] serve to deliver a warning: Watch out! This could happen to you!” (Brunvand 1981:48). But is it fair to believe that eight-year-old *niñas y niños* solely have the concern of “safety” in their little brains after being told this story? Now don’t get me wrong, was I going to finish making my mud pie in my backyard, completely defenseless in my Pampers Pull-Ups knowing full well the sun was setting and La Llorona would love to claim me?...there’s no way. Trust me, I listened to the warning. But I can’t help but feel that the children who soak up these stories at a young age walk away with a lot

more narrative subtext than parents had intended. Perhaps this subtextual “haunting” makes sense, considering La Llorona is technically a ghost story.

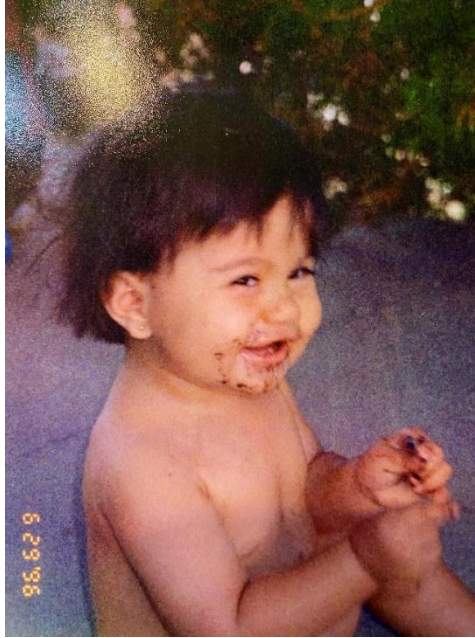


Figure 1. Young Camille Acosta playing in the mud (June 1996, used with permission of Acosta family)

In order to make way for clarification, I ask an important question: is the narrative of La Llorona a legend or a ghost story? Perhaps it is best to define both of these folkloric genres to begin with. Folklorist Sylvia Ann Grider elaborates that the definition of ghost stories may get a bit fuzzy, but the most basic description is, “a ghost story is about ghosts...in common usage today among children a ghost story is any narrative which deals with the scary world of the supernatural dead/undead” (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:112). Now the reason this definition can seem to lie in a gray area is because the undead themselves have also been listed with other titles. For example, Grider mentions Frankenstein’s monster is technically undead so would he be considered a ghost? The monster is a seemingly physically tangible individual, but he is in fact

undead so his narrative can be referenced as a ghostly one. If we go further, who is to say that this narrative of La Llorona does not also fall under the category of memorate, in which people describe personal experiences with the supernatural? Given that these terms and definitions are all often used to describe narratives involving ghostly apparitions, they can be used accurately for narratives like this one. I say this because La Llorona is seen uniquely to the individual transmitting her legend. I will expand more on this notion further on in this chapter. However, in this chapter, I use the term “ghost” considering that the little ones I interviewed for this chapter viewed La Llorona as a ghost story in the most basic of forms. As you will read, my young informants picture a spirit of a woman who haunts living children if they misbehave, so I took their perspectives for this chapter. If we take a look at La Llorona in my student’s eyes, she was once a living, breathing individual who has since passed and trails the rivers as an undead spirit; she logically fits all of the characteristics of a ghostly apparition. So, is La Llorona a ghost story? Yes, she sure is. These children view her as a ghost so I will approach her narrative at times in this chapter as a ghost story, following Grider’s definition above.

La Llorona also fits into the genre of legend, for my students and other later interviewees, as well. In Linda Dégh’s aforementioned scholarship *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*, we learn that legend has been an incredibly difficult genre to define, an “elusive butterfly” (2001:23). Much like the definition of a ghost story, the legend narrative has many components to its structure that make its categorization also a bit fuzzy. In fact, Dégh dedicated an entire chapter toward analyzing various definitions of legend and explaining how they all could technically be correct. So,

in order to narrow down the meaning of a legend as best as possible, I will use Dégh's closing remarks on defining legend:

The legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief. Short or long, complete or rudimentary, local or global, supernatural, horrible, mysterious, or grotesque, about one's own or someone else's experience, the sounding of contrary opinions is what makes a legend a legend. (2001:97)

If we take a glance at our La Llorona narrative, it is a story that is said to be true by some who tell it, involving a possibly local Latina mother who kills her children. My interviewees also share memories about looking for or encountering La Llorona. La Llorona does in fact lie within the legend category as well, specifically supernatural legend. It is interesting that the definition of this narrative is becoming more layered, but in a way, this is kind of beautiful. This story has existed for centuries, been used as a cautionary ghost story, and as a communicative legend within different cultural contexts. The fact that this narrative can be identified in so many ways is quite powerful, and reflective of the diverse forms of storytelling found in communities where people talk about La Llorona. The story of La Llorona is made into whatever the eye of the beholder views her as, which always leaves room for unknown excitement.

Since this terrifying tale resides in both ghost story and legend categories, then throughout this research I will refer to it as both. There will be moments when I refer to this narrative as a ghostly one as well as times in which I will be focused on its localization or transmission as a legend; La Llorona is multifaceted so I will treat the narratives about her as such. Legends can haunt just as profoundly as their ghostly characters do. In order to tackle this complex world of terrifying legend, I thought it best

to begin directly with the some of the first individuals that ever hear this legend in the first place: Mexican/Mexican American children.

The Children who Mirror Maria's

In 2018, I had the pleasure of working as a Speech and Debate coach for a predominantly Hispanic charter school in Santa Ana, California, by the name of El Sol Academy. This school taught children from pre-k to eighth grade, ages four to fourteen, and I was lucky enough to teach little ones about how their narratives are important to tell. I may be incredibly biased, but these students were unbelievably bright, determined, and curious about the world around them and made it a point to tell their truths in their speeches. From telling stories about the terrors of chain text-messaging to teaching the importance of childhood curiosity through reenactments of *Coraline*, these students were budding flowers of wonderment. Upon deciding to follow through with this specific thesis idea, I knew for a fact that reaching out to my former students would be the way to go. In this chapter I will explore La Llorona through the lens of my former kiddos: Fernanda (thirteen years old), Luis (thirteen years old), Zulam (fifteen years old), and Miguel (fifteen years old).

As you read on to explore the inner haunting workings of young Hispanic minds, keep the childlike innocence of Maria's two children in your hearts. Being a child is typically remembered as a whimsical time full of hope and overwhelming excitement, but as I mentioned before, childhood is also when life first teaches us how difficult it can be; we become aware. Folklorist Elizabeth Tucker has found that the exploration of ghostly apparitions at young ages, such as school children playing with the ghost in the elementary bathroom or fearing spirits at slumber parties, brings together childhood

innocence with growing curiosity. Kids are bound to feel compelled to test the waters of maturity, and perhaps summoning “scary things” is a steppingstone. In Tucker’s “Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self” from 2005, she analyzes why children and young teens are so horrifically fascinated with discovering a ghost in a mirror. Although her focus is on apparitions in mirrors, the fascination with the ghost on the other side rings intriguing. She writes:

Narratives about apparitions in mirrors help students to explore a more mature sense of self...Many works of literature, from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1946) to Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1961) and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1999), show how looking into a mirror reveals a new dimension of oneself: a little girl becomes a heroine in a world on the other side of a mirror; a man sees himself struggling with a wolf; and a boy sees himself with the parents whose presence he deeply desires. Mirrors tell the truth about aspects of the maturing self that are difficult to acknowledge. (Tucker 2005:187)

This first chapter continues with this idea of ghostly exploration from the point of view of the Hispanic children I have interviewed. These four children may have once believed that La Llorona was simply a ghost story but may now relate to the two boys lost to both the rushing river and Maria’s heartbreak. Like the children in this narrative and many Hispanic children in history, it is evident that my interviewees have experienced a maturity through La Llorona, dealing with something really tough for the first time. Chapter One explores the Hispanic children who are forced to grow up way faster than they so choose. This chapter is for the niños.

“She’s a spirit...SCARY SPIRIT.”

As with all legends, there are multitudes of variants that come in to play with La Llorona. No two legend tellings are the same even if their basis is the same legend cycle.

For example, if we all think back to the infamous legend of Bloody Mary that many remember from childhood, the legend would vary in many ways. Some say a girl named Mary was bullied and murdered in her school bathroom, some say she took her own life in a school bathroom, some say it wasn't in a school bathroom at all, some say she only haunts in the girls' bathroom, some say she can only reappear in mirrors, etc. A person's environment and experiences can have a direct influence on the variation of the narrative. Folklorist Ülo Valk defines the multiple forms and transmissions of legends and their narrations as reflections of a person's environment,

...which actually makes legends bigger than their scanty textualized forms. Many discursive influxes in legends remain ephemeral and occasional. Thus medical discourse on neurological disorders or parapsychological discussions on telepathy can affect the vernacular interpretations of supernatural experiences, fashion can have an effect on the reported clothing of supernatural entities, and legislative reforms can change the norms that are negotiated in legends. Any single story that is told can be affected by a variety of contextual factors. (Valk 2015:143)

By analyzing the points of view of the niños I interviewed, it seems as though we are dealing with a "ghost story" due to their constant reference to her either as a "ghost" or a "spirit" (excluding Miguel). However, it is important to note that depending on the individual I interviewed, La Llorona manifests herself as a mix of different fears and anxieties which I will address in later chapters. However, for the specific children I interviewed for this chapter, she is always remembered as a "ghost." There is a subtle beauty and complexity to ghost stories in their ability to haunt both within the narrative and outside of it. Co-author of *Haunting Experiences* Jeannie Banks Thomas reminds us that while many view ghost stories as fiction because there is no tangible proof of their existence, others feel the story's cultural traditions that continue to haunt our world is proof enough. Thomas explains:

Like any form of folklore, supernatural narratives directly or indirectly tell us about culture. However, one of the characteristics that distinguishes supernatural narratives is that they emphasize mystery and the indeterminate, which overtly invites interpretation of various kinds. Unlike other folk narrative forms—such as a folktale that is recognized as a fiction—ghost narratives are more slippery. For instance, one person hears a ghost story as truth, and a different person hears the same narrative as fiction. Ghost stories reveal how culture manifests itself in a twilight world that makes copious room for uncertainty and possibility. (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:30)

A ghost or a haunting can be interpreted into various degrees of meaning. Perhaps it is a spirit that has passed and returned, or perhaps it is a ghost of a memory of fear that continues to haunt again and again. The brilliance of ghost stories is that for many, they tread the fine line of fact and fiction. The following interviews will explore this mystery a bit further, from the minds of young ones who possibly haven't even decided who La Llorona is just yet.

Who is La Llorona to You?

On January 7th, 2021 I had the pleasure of interviewing my four really fantastic former students from El Sol Academy over videoconferencing. In Spring of 2020 I was working on a separate project on La Llorona for a Folk Narrative class in which I also interviewed these same students. However, one of the main focuses of that specific interview were variants, so, there wasn't as much of an in-depth discussion on the cultural aspects of the legend itself. I will elaborate on those differences between the two interviews at the end of this chapter.

It was truly wonderful to see Fernanda, Zulam, Luis, and Miguel. It had been months since we all had last spoken, and after a year of difficulty it was lovely to catch up. Truthfully, I was a tad bit teary eyed when the meeting kicked off because I was

taken aback by how mature they all seemed. From longer locks of hair to the use of an academic vocabulary I even had difficulties following, my little kids were turning into teenagers. Having known them as once eleven years of age, it was wonderful to see both their maturity and the persistence of their childlike wonder. Not only this, but our platform of telling scary stories through videoconferencing was quite fascinating to say the least. Although we couldn't all get together to form a story circle around a campfire, it was great to see all of their faces up close and see all of their wonderful expressions. I am very thankful that the online video functions of Zoom allowed us to all get together and create multiple interviews at once, because I feel as though this added to the performativity of the students. They were all so excited to react to one another's stories and each student either made commentary or played off each other's version. I am curious if I would have received the same amount of interaction in an in-person interview. To kick off our interview I began with the basic question, "What is the version of La Llorona that you know?"



Figure 2. Fernanda Ortiz and Luis Moriel posing at Middle School Speech State Tournament (May 2019, used with permission of Ortiz and Moriel)

Thirteen-year-old Luis was the first to begin our long journey into the versions with which this group was familiar. Luis' version of La Llorona proceeded as follows:

Luis: Uhhh...the version that I know is...so a GORGEOUS lady [chuckles from around the Zoom room] like, like Beauty and the Beast type right? [Acosta: Mhmm] falls in love with this man. And then, they have, they have kids right? [Acosta: Mhmm] Oh, and then, and then they're all in love and they're just a big happy family, until I think the husband cheats on her? [Acosta: Okay] And then yeah! And then she gets super mad, and I think she kills the kids in the river? [Acosta: Okay] And then she kills herself and then you could just hear the people saying, "Ay mis hijos! La Llorona!"...She's a spirit...SCARY SPIRIT.

Acosta: So what..uhm...why do you think she's uhm, I guess back? Why do you think she's haunting?

Luis: Because she wants to haunt the dude that cheated on her. [Acosta: Oh, okay] But! In my, this is my theory like. Like, I'm going full like...theorist here. I think she doesn't remember the guy so she just haunts everybody until she, finds the guy.

(Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

A couple of interesting points to make note of in Luis' version was the inclusion of not just a beautiful but a GORGEOUS lady, a love story persists, the husband is unfaithful,

and she furiously murders her children in the river before killing herself. One curious detail that Luis mentioned in his version, was that the people in the village witnessed the killings, as suggested by his statement that the people yelled in sadness at La Llorona, “Ay mis hijos! La Llorona!” This act of terror and vulnerable heartbreak was displayed for the world to see, forcing the individuals to mourn “Ay mis hijos! La Llorona!” In many common versions of this legend including my own, I was often under the impression that La Llorona was the person moaning “Aye mis hijos!” in search of her murdered children, so this specific element Luis mentioned in his narrative creates another level of suspense. To note, different variations are not right or wrong by any means. However, using Luis’ variant of a public killing, it is easy to ask the question, would Maria knowingly murder her children in public? Or perhaps her broken heart blinded her to act horrifically no matter what? In many Mexican and Mexican American cultural ideals, a mother is held in the highest esteem, *La Reina de la Casa*. So, if this was the case, could a public display of a mother murdering her children add to her guilt? I will dive deeper into the context of motherhood in Mexico in Chapter Three.



Figure 3. Camille Acosta and Fernanda Ortiz at Middle School Speech State Tournament (June 2019, used with permission of Ortiz)

Next to explain her version of La Llorona was thirteen-year-old Fernanda. Fernanda was quite fearful of La Llorona as a kid, and she recalls a familiar version that never left her mind:

Fernanda: So I wasn't like...I don't think when I was like small my parents would tell me this story a lot. I think they just didn't want me to get scared cause I was a very, like easily scared child [chuckles from around the Zoom room]. [Acosta: That's fair] But uhm...I remember there being this girl, and then yeah like Luis, she married a guy and then the guy cheated and she was really upset?...And then, oh and then they had the kids. [Acosta: Right] Yeah, I remember her like, murdering her children. And then I think, yeah, she did kill herself. And I remember her being more sad than angry? [Acosta: Hmm...yeah] Like, La Llorona...Uhm, I also remember when I

first watched like, I think it was the second Harry Potter movie [Acosta: Yeah!] When Moaning Myrtle came on, and my mom was like “Oh, like, she’s kinda like La Llorona.” And I was like, this girl is very creepy. [Laughter in the Zoom room]...Moaning Myrtle? [Acosta: Yeah!] So yeah, I remember her being more like sad and crying a lot...and yeah she’s a ghost? [Acosta: Okay] She’s dead, or like a spirit I guess. [Acosta: Okay] But yeah I just remember her being like sad a lot [Acosta: Yeah].

Acosta:The kind of...weeping, crying ghostly apparition of a woman was like the scary thing for you right?

Fernanda: Mhmmm. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

Fernanda brought up some very fascinating thoughts and concepts about La Llorona, and I was impressed by her attention to emotional detail. However, it is important to note that she never gave a step-by-step version of the narrative but rather highlighted elements of the variant that she is attached to. Once again there are striking similarities between the interviews we have so far: lovers ended by unfaithfulness, there were children between them, the young woman murdered her children, and then took her own life. What struck me about Fernanda’s explanation of La Llorona was that she was not as focused on the details of the plot within the legend, but she was fully immersed in the emotionality of the experience. For starters, Fernanda reminded us that this narrative was quite terrifying for her as a child, so her parents did their best to avoid telling it to her often. At the

beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that it is common for legends to include a “fear tactic” to caution the listeners away from dangerous outcomes. Perhaps this is just a testament to how much Fernanda’s kind parents hate to see their daughter in fear, but I find it curious that Fernanda remembers the legend as fearful anyway. Fernanda was quick to mention the memory of “sadness” is what made the legend terrifyingly memorable and she made connections to a character in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*: Moaning Myrtle. Moaning Myrtle is a ghostly character within the Harry Potter series that haunts the girls’ bathroom in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because that is where she was killed. This young girl terrorizes those who attend the school by quite literally “moaning” in despair about her murder (Columbus 2001). Ghostly apparitions in bathrooms are in fact quite common in supernatural folklore. However, Fernanda did not make this connection based on the relation of a haunted bathroom or even haunted river or sewer water, but of sadness.



Figure 4. Zulam Palacios performing at the El Sol Speech Showcase (March 2019, used with permission of Palacios)

Zulam was the next to provide her version to us eager listeners, and I must admit I was thoroughly impressed with her terrifying tale told proudly and in great detail:

Zulam: Okay uhm...I heard that she was a woman, right? And she got married. And this guy cheated on her and she had two kids [Acosta: Mhmm] and, in an act of rage she ended up killing her kids. And then, she fell into a really deep depression. And she stopped eating and that's how she died? [Acosta: Mmmmm]. I heard that she stopped eating. She stayed by the river, where she drowned her kids and then she starved to death? And now, my family tells me that uhm she basically roams around rivers, and if a guy's walking alone at night she'll kill him? Because she has this vendetta against men? And if there's a kid that's walking alone she'll take them...and like, as her own. 'Cause she just misses her kids a lot [Acosta: Right] and you can hear her crying at night and stuff like that....She's an apparition. So like she is a spirit but she looks very human. And a lot of the times you can see...well at least my family they say that uhm 'cause my Grandma? She lives by a river, so my cousin told me that a lot of the times uhm when he can't sleep he'll look out the window and he can see her? Like walking around and crying and stuff like that? [Acosta shivers]. And then she'll just like, walk behind a tree and disappear and she won't come out anymore....like an apparition type thing. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

Once again, though Zulam mentioned many aspects of my kernel story such as the marriage of a man and a woman, two children, a river of some sort, and the killing of her children—followed by her own death—Zulam's narrative included some intriguing

details that I had not previously heard before. For example, Zulam, much like Fernanda, mentioned the deep depression and sadness this woman experienced. On top of this concept Zulam stated that this woman died of starvation because she was too pained to eat, as if her depression caused her to refrain from nourishing her body. Zulam included real life encounters of La Llorona within her legend telling, and might I just say it added a shudder in our video call. In this real-life scenario in which Zulam's grandmother and cousins claim to have witnessed La Llorona by their local river in Mexico, our ghostly lady makes us question if she's "real" or not. Personally, I am a firm believer of both the reality of this apparition as well as the real fear her narratives pass down traditionally. But again, there will always be individuals who feel this narrative is completely fabricated as a cautionary tale, nothing more. As a source popular among my interviewees puts it:

Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?

~Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Rowling 723:2007)



Figure 5. Zulam Palacios and Miguel Carretero at Middle School Speech State Tournament Awards (May 2019, used with permission of Palacios and Carretero)

Last but certainly not least was fifteen-year-old Miguel's version:

Miguel: [Fun and lively family chatter and television are heard in the background] So my version...uh it's kinda similar to everyone else's? Like the main like, characters at least are like La Llorona, her children, and the husband? A husband cheats on her, and this like, not like drives her crazy? Like that's what I had heard...[Acosta: Right] but like madness is what leads her to like, drown her children in the river? And like, it was kinda like Zulam said like for me at least the river was always told to be like near her house? [Acosta: Right] And like, but she only drowned her children it wasn't like, she also died? It was like...for me the way I was told, It's the like...La Llorona is like the like mother that's like still looking for her children. Because she like feels regret

for what she did. [Acosta: Hmm..yeah] So that's why she's like calling out for her children.

Acosta: So...does she die in your version?

Miguel: She doesn't die...[Acosta: Mmm okay cool] that wasn't part of what I heard.

Acosta: Yeah, yeah, yeah! She basically just, wandered the rest of her life in regret...right? For what she did.

Miguel: Like regret and looking for other children. To like, claim as her own. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

It is clear from the get-go that Miguel only found it fair to cite the other students for their concepts and ideas, as well as not focusing on the literal narration of the legend. For example, he opens up the narrative proclaiming his version is similar to everyone else's. Perhaps this was because at this point in the interview, he had already listened to the story told three times but either way these variations he spoke of were unique to him, no matter how similar. Whenever one passes a legend on to a listener, there is a direct reflection of themselves with every detail they mention. I hope Miguel will soon understand there is autonomous power in his version of legend telling, no matter how similar it may seem to others. In fact, his cumulative legend telling process based on those versions before him highlight the brilliance of legend telling, its creative transmission. Legend narratives are echoes of those the teller has heard before. Linda

Dégh explains how children's legend telling groups create variants of narratives passed down to them by outside influence:

With or without the consent of adults, the consumption and reproduction of legends begins early and develops consistently as children's ability to formulate meaningful structured narratives improves. The youngest children relate components of legends by identifying threatening figures and violent acts to be elaborated on at a later age... This primitive foundation of concepts is implemented later and shaped into more complete stories. Five-year-olds can already tell simple but coherent scary or spooky stories that they have learned and traded for others on the playground, at the daycare center, at the nursery, at home, or in the neighborhood. (Dégh 2001:231)

Miguel creating a hodgepodge of narrative structures paying homage to the versions he's heard in the past is just informing us of his maturity; he is no longer the five-year-old on the playground. Miguel's version of La Llorona is maturing right along with him. The last piece of information that Miguel relayed to us was the fact that he didn't believe La Llorona ever died. In Miguel's eyes, she was a human cursed to wander all of eternity due to the guilt she bore on her back. This motif makes me wonder if in fact Miguel's version would be considered "a ghost story" if the main character never truly passed on? I feel as though the haunting of La Llorona's guilt even in human form could be considered "a spirit." In the Introduction to *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Culture*, the way in which ghost stories are transmitted is described as follows:

Ghost stories are like...bottle trees. The stories contain spirits; they capture them for us and keep them before our eyes, scaring us but containing that fright in narrative form, which captures our attention and also reminds us of the variegated hues and shapes of the numinous world. (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:2)

Could it not be argued that human experiences can haunt us in a similar fashion ghosts do? Every single student seemed to hone in on the complex emotionality of La Llorona herself, so perhaps it is appropriate that we dig a little deeper into that glass bottle.

“Maybe I’m taking too much into like, a little scary story...”: Fear and Emotionality within Children’s Legend-Telling

The comprehension of emotions related to death, loss, or pain can be a difficult path for anyone to wander down, and yet these middle schoolers willingly explore these complex emotions in discussing La Llorona. Thomas explores how ghost stories themselves not only reveal to us information on those who’ve passed, but possibly even more so on the living. She furthers that there are two general questions one must ask when carving out the cultural truths of a ghost story: what does the story reveal about cultural values, and “Does the story present issues about which there is fear, stress, or conflict in the culture?” (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:31). I think it is fair to say that the students really highlighted certain cultural values as well as cultural conflict in their interpretations of La Llorona. Consider the following responses to my question, “Why do you think [La Llorona] killed her children?”

Zulam: Uhm...I heard that she kind of blamed them? Cause she felt like uhm, that maybe she gave them too much attention instead of her husband and that’s why her husband left? And so, she...it was just like in the moment she was really mad. And she had to take her anger out on something she took it out on her kids and ended up killing them. But inevitably, ended up regretting it and...killed herself. And like, that was in the version that I heard. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

Fernanda: Uhm, I think that she was really sad about her husband because I do think that she truly loved him? So, I think that when people are in a bad state of mental health, they can do really crazy things that they're obviously gonna regret later.

[Acosta: Yeah] So I think it was just uhm, kind of a way to cope, I guess? Not a very healthy way like murder...but [Acosta: Haha sure, sure] I think it was kind of like her way of coping with all of the depression she was going through. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

It is interesting that the two female students in our interview were quick to answer this question, and in such detail. My first thought was these two young women could potentially relate even more toward La Llorona's actions living as a woman in a Mexican world. Zulam highlighted how her anger was seemed to be largely linked toward her feeling like an inadequate partner, stating, "maybe she gave them too much attention instead of her husband and that's why her husband left" (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021). Fernanda mentioned how a broken heart could lead one to a poor emotional state, leading toward irrational action. Neither of these students outright condoned the action of killing, but they began to understand why she did it in the first place. So what do these responses allude to in terms of cultural values and conflicts? It seems as though there are far more cultural subtexts between the lines that I feel Zulam and Fernanda caught onto. From feeling inadequate in a partnership with a man, to women dealing with unfaithfulness from husbands quite frequently, it is unfortunate to

think that *machismo* in the Mexican culture may be a concept both Fernanda and Zulam are fully aware of.

The massive overarching cultural stressor or conflict in Fernanda and Zulam's versions was that of machismo: the strong, overbearing presence Latinos have over their female counterparts. Américo Paredes offers a fascinating exploration of machismo culture that I will explore in more detail in Chapter Two; however, his definition of machismo seems to hit the nail on the head. Paredes states that machismo is problematic masculinity:

The characteristic traits of machismo are quite well known: the outrageous boast, a distinct phallic symbolism, the identification of the man with the male animal, and the ambivalence toward women – varying from an abject and tearful posture to brutal disdain. (1971:17-18)

Paredes goes on to note how many men justify their macho ideal as a protest of the powers of colonization. Centuries ago, white men tried to dominate indigenous groups to establish a hierarchy. So, as the men of these indigenous groups matured, they felt it necessary to establish dominance right back to fight for their rights to be in power. However, this “dominating” trait bled into the mistreatment of women throughout history and is represented in this centuries old legend of La Llorona.

Both Fernanda and Zulam seemed to pick up on how normalized a man breaking his wife's heart for another “better” woman was, and yet their speaking out on a woman's vulnerability is not often heard of from children (I had expected to hear that complexity from adults). It is also important to take note of the fact that machismo not only means boasting of the destructive and abusive power of men in society, but suppressing the emotional vulnerabilities of women, because they don't deserve to take a breath.

Fernanda even went as far as to explore how a woman showing her heartbreak and emotionality is unheard of; therefore, it is far more frightening. Fernanda and I continued the vulnerability conversation:

Acosta: Fernanda, I know you mentioned that her crying was kind of scary. Why do you think that was scary for you? Or still is? Like coming into your teens now? Why do you think that's scary?

Fernanda: I feel like, I uhm....I don't...oh I was gonna say something I forgot...what I was gonna say [Acosta: It's okay!...]...Uhm I guess when people are I guess frightened or scared, and they cry they kind of like, not just cry but sob? And like, I feel like La Llorona was also kind of like screaming? At the same time and like, not in agony but like...oh what's the word, like... because of how much she missed her children she was just like really...all of her emotions were kind of like, jumbling together? [Acosta: Yeah, absolutely] Scariest part for me.

Acosta: And do you still feel like that's kind of something that scares you when you think about her?

Fernanda: Yeah just 'cause like...I feel like when you're younger you just think like oh she's really scary? But then when you get older you can like, actually analyze what she's feeling? I feel like that's more scary? (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

I am in awe at how forward these young girls were about women's emotions, and I began to wonder if their generation is more open about feelings. From personal experience, it is not common that Latina women open up to emotions very easily due to cultural pressures of being "strong." It is often that crying is synonymous with showing weakness, and a woman who is taking care of an entire household "shouldn't have time for that." I was very surprised at the vulnerability from these young Latina informants, and I must say it made me happy. It was apparent that the young women I interviewed identified elements of machismo woven into the tale of La Llorona, but is it possible Luis and Miguel caught them too? Later on in our interview I asked one of my favorite questions to the students that consistently sparks conflict, "Is La Llorona a bad person?" Their replies were complex as they should be. Here was the overall general consensus:

Luis: Yes. [Acosta: Okay, why do you think so? Again there's no wrong answers here I'm just picking your brains.] Cause she murdered two innocent kids! [Fernanda: Well obviously that's not a good thing!] I just personally don't see any defense for her. [Zulam: I don't know...]

Zulam: I don't think she is?...by reason of insanity. [Acosta: Okay.] I don't think she understands what she's doing. I don't even think she understands what she was doing then. She obviously regrets it but in the moment she...she did it so she obviously can't tell...she's not right in the head. By reason of insanity, she is not a bad person. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

This debate went back and forth for quite some time, and discussions of court trials and news reports and the words “justify” were thrown around constantly. Zulam was determined to change Luis’ mind, and Luis was determined to convince her otherwise. It was clear that this was so much more than just a ghost story even for children; it’s a human story that continues to haunt us to this day. Fernanda and Miguel were quick to make their voices known that this story is as complex as humans are; there is no easy answer:

Fernanda: Uhhmm..I don’t think she was bad...I think what she did was bad. Like murder is never good...We read “The Tell Tale Heart” in my English class this year and we had to write an essay if he was innocent or guilty by reasons of insanity. And I picked he was innocent because he was insane? And I feel like that just opened up my mind to like, not to just immediately assume someone is a horrible person. To analyze why they did what they did. And I feel she definitely regretted it, because it’s not a good thing to kill your children. But I think it was her only solution. That was the only thing she was thinking to blame her children, but I don’t think she is a bad person overall.

Miguel: So I have a lot to say about this, ‘cause okay even tying it to speech there's two speeches that I remember. And I think I talked about this last time about like, I don't know but one of them was about like...it was a prose it was just a normal narrative and it was talking about the way that the story is told is kind of made to paint her as the victim. Because she was using a story where it was that she didn't kill

her children they were crossing the river and the children happened to die and then through that grief is what turned her into La Llorona...[Luis: That makes sense.] ...so it was kind of like it was kind of like how even like Mexican culture tends to like put the blame on women and like that's kind of what she tied it to. So, I think like even through that narrative and that light she's not the victim I mean she is the victim and she's not the one that's like... she's not evil. It's that everyone is twisting the way to look at her. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

With just the answers to this question alone, the kids were bouncing their own ideas and concepts around the room and giving some of their most impassioned explanations of the entire interview: Luis even began to see La Llorona as a better person than he had previously thought. At first, Luis believed that La Llorona was simply just a ghost story to scare young children into obeying their curfew. However, Luis potentially became more and more aware of how grief stricken this woman was by a man. While Luis never outwardly stated he witnessed machismo in the narrative, he went on to make some pretty elaborate claims on how this woman, this mother, lost everything and quite possibly didn't deserve it. Luis was quick to tell me, he had a theory worth sharing.

"I have a theory Miss Camille...": La Llorona in COVID 2020

No matter where people were quarantined or what they experienced, the year 2020 tested people's limits in ways that they would have never imagined. Many refer to 2020 as the loneliest year on record because truthfully, everyone experienced loss in one form or another. Whether as a fifty-year-old adult or a six-year old child, living through the pandemic was tough. I was reminded of this difficult time during this interview when

Luis surprised me with a response. Luis has always been the student to try and make the entire class laugh. In fact during this Zoom meeting, he changed his virtual background to a colorful picture of a silly house that made us all chuckle. However, there was an element of seriousness that Luis brought to this interview I surely wasn't expecting. I was asking about the children's thoughts on some of what appear to be patterns across versions of the legend. For example, does La Llorona only haunt children or can she only be found near a river? One question I asked however, sparked some intriguing responses:

Acosta: Had you guys...or have you heard of any versions in when she like can come into the house or do you guys think there's any rules to that? Like is she not allowed in the house?...I'm curious to see your guys' thoughts on that; or have you ever thought about it?

Luis: I just think she's like a ghost...that like she's like a free spirit so she can just like...like those ghosts you see on TV where they can like go through walls.

Zulam: Uhm...I hear that she's pretty much all over Mexico but only like in the rivers? So like if you go, if you live in really big city she's not going to be there but like I said if you live in a small town like by a river like where my grandma lives she's going to be there but she's not allowed in your house. So, a lot of the times the people by like where my grandma lives they would go in after like nine and then stay in there and protect themselves because she's not allowed in your house.

Luis: I don't understand why inside is like okay...is there like a special barrier outside your house?

Acosta: Isn't that an interesting thing.

Fernanda: It's like vampires! Or-...they can't come in unless they're invited?

Acosta: ...Why do you think she can't touch anything inside?

Zulam: I guess that...it was maybe because since my grandma's super religious and she has crosses everywhere that she just couldn't get by.

Luis: I have a theory Miss Camille...

Acosta: What's your theory?

Luis: That like... she can't go inside of the house because mentally she's scared of being reunited with like a family you know? When she gets reminded of a family...

Acosta: That's so sad...that's an interesting thought though...do you think it's out of ...I don't know like regret or like embarrassment, what do you think Luis?

Luis: Yeah because when she sees like a house that she reminds... it reminds her of what her life could have been if she didn't do any of the bad things she did.

Miguel: Okay this is going to kind of sound like weird?... But like once again as you said, Harry Potter does like have a lot of this type of stuff? I was going to say like the like there's like this whole like theme of it like where it's like the reason why Harry survives Voldemort the first time was like that connection with his mother? So it's kind of like Luis said like the connection of a family is what protects you...(Acosta: Right, right.) yeah that's why that's like the barrier of the home because that's like the center part of the family. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

There were such fantastic responses to this point of discussion, and to tell you the truth I was taken aback by the seriousness. These children made connections from vampires to spirits to Voldemort and everything in between. I had from time to time heard similar relations, but the thought of La Llorona being confronted with what her life could have been was new to me. These answers paid homage to the importance of family during difficult times. Perhaps these children's year helped them get to that conclusion.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I previously conducted a smaller scale interview with these students on April 4, 2020. At this time COVID-19 had struck the U.S. only a few weeks prior, and schools were announcing their physical shutdowns. It is a bit baffling to think we had all only just begun the difficult rollercoaster 2020 was about to become, but I think our two discussions of La Llorona showed these children's growth over the course of the pandemic. I will discuss the version they first shared below,

as a source of contrast with the above, more recent versions. First, I will briefly describe some changes in the contexts of our interviews that also help explain the differences in the narrative versions from April 2020 and January 2021.

Anna Cecilia Fierro is a student I had the pleasure of interviewing in April, and I was really wishing I could interview her again this year, but she was unavailable at the time when I connected with the other students. My project in April was primarily focused on variants and narrative storytelling detail, so I focused on the student's versions of the legend rather than their interpretations of it. Fernanda and Luis' interview was not a focus of my earlier project, but comparing the transcript of their previous versions of La Llorona to their interview this year especially shows the complexity that emerged over the past several months.

When I asked these students to recite to me their versions of La Llorona in 2020, Zulam Palacio's variant was as follows:

Camille: Okay, so my question for you Zulam, uhm, what do you know about La Llorona?

Zulam: Okay so...I've heard the story a million times. So, what I know is that there is this woman, I can't remember her name. But she had two kids: she had a boy and she had a little girl. And she lived a happy family with her and her husband and her two kids. And one day her husband left her. And she got extremely sad about it, she went into a really deep depression, had a bunch of dark thoughts...And one day, she...there's two versions of the story...

Camille: Okay.

Zulam: There's one version where she burned her house down, with her two kids in it, so she killed both of her kids. And there's another version where she took her kids out to the lake and drowned them. So in either way, she killed her kids. And she did this in like, an act of...I guess I would say like in an act of rage? Just because you know, she was so upset that her husband left her? But almost immediately after her kids died, she started feeling a lot of remorse. And now she roams around the streets; or her spirit roams around the streets screaming, "Mis niños! Mi niñ- Mis niños!" [Zulam chuckles] Which is, "My kids! My kids!" You know? She's looking for her kids. And uhm...there's also...some parents tell this to their kids...uhm that if you're bad, La Llorona will come into your and she'll take you and she'll raise you as her own. So she could have her own kids. So she goes out looking for kids who wander out at night? And takes them, and raises them as her own.

Camille: That's great! That was one of the most detailed stories I've heard so far. So that was really good! (Palacios, April 4th, 2020)

Zulam's previous interview was of course detailed because that is the type of storyteller she is, very elaborate and passionate. Once again, Zulam did indeed mention the concept of depression, which at the time I found very interesting because none of the other students had mentioned it. In fact, none of the adults I interviewed had made mention of depression at the time either. Is it possible that this year has sparked so many of us to truly understand what dark emotions feel like? There has been a skyrocket of mental

health mentions in the media due to COVID-19. Unfortunately, this pandemic depression was just as apparent in children. *Time Magazine* on July 23rd, 2020 reported:

[While] COVID-19 is sparing most kids' bodies, it's not being so kind to their minds. Nobody is immune to the stress that comes with a pandemic and related quarantining. Children, however, may be at particular risk. Living in a universe that is already out of their control, they can become especially shaken when the verities they count on to give the world order—the rituals in their lives, the very day-to-dayness of living—get blown to bits. (Kluger 2020)

The lack of control in a terrifying world must be so debilitating for young minds and it makes sense that the children I interviewed were more in tune with La Llorona's discombobulation. I hate the idea that people and more specifically children are hurting more; it's an awful thing. But I am filled with hope from learning that people are more willing to talk about it now; I am beyond thankful.

Let's take a look at Miguel's variant. In this interview, Anna and Miguel chose to be interviewed together; they are really close friends. However, I have removed Anna's words from this document because I was not able to get consent for her part in this interview:

Camille: Okay, so...And you guys can answer like, for the rest of this interview...You can answer together, you can answer separately; however you wanna answer it, I have no problem. Uhm, okay so...what do you all know, from memory, about La Llorona?

Miguel: [Laughs] Okay! Cool beans, okay. So I know there are like...It's like just a Mexican like Folklore. There's not like, one specific like story to it? There's like different incarnations depending on like what region you hear it from?

Camille: Okay.

Miguel: But like, the main like...[Miguel chuckles] the like, basic like foundation of it, so like at least that's kept throughout the whole thing—

Camille: Mhmm

Miguel: Is, that a woman's children die in a river?

Camille: Okay

Miguel: And like...I don't...Does she die? Or like—

Camille: That's okay! No! No, what do you remember?

Miguel: Like from what I remember like, she dies but she comes back. She also dies by— Sometimes it's killing herself, but like usually it's the same like as her children?

Camille: Okay.

Miguel: She comes back haunting those who like—Well she comes back looking, haunting people looking for her children.

Camille: Oooh Okay. So, she—her children die in the river, [Miguel: Yeah] she dies in the river, [Miguel: Yes.] and she comes back as a ghost? Yeah?

Miguel: As like...I don't know, like it depends [Camille: Yeah.] like, just in some sort of form that isn't human?

Camille: Okay! Yeah.

Miguel: Okay.

Camille: And she looks for, other children?

Miguel: Yeah.

Camille: Cool! Okay, dope, okay. (Carretero and Fierro excluding Fierro, April 4th, 2020)

In this interview, Miguel has not stopped being polite and kindhearted by any means. He was always truthful in his explanations of the legend and gave credit to Anna if any pieces of his version she had stated before. However, Miguel's growth from last year's interview to this year was the most visible even through wording alone. From hearing more stories from the Speech and Debate universe, to experiencing his own difficult year of being a high schooler in this pandemic, it was clear Miguel had a lot more to say on why La Llorona is important in 2021. Through rhetoric of "victim blaming" or exposing the machismo that is embedded in Mexican/Mexican American culture, Miguel's La Llorona indicates he is a student that's been through a lot. Miguel was not afraid to tell me during his latest interview that he had a lot to say about machismo. Miguel's interview in general was far longer this year as opposed to last year, and it was far more focused on the strength of La Llorona as a woman. Perhaps the growth in maturity in Miguel from 2020 to 2021 was simply a boy transitioning to a young man in high school. But I can't help but wonder if the vulnerabilities of the year had caused students like him not to shy away from emotionality but embrace it.

Rudolfo Anaya uses a metaphor of a bush in terms of "the unknown." Sometimes, our deepest and darkest fears lie behind a bush; something that shields them from the light and makes us question if we have what it takes to look behind the bush. For many children, schools and educational institutions have a difficult time teaching the complexities of fear. This theory reminded me of another area of scholarship which touches on communication of unspoken anxiety through narrative. Bess Lomax Hawes' 1968 article "La Llorona in Juvenile Hall" takes us on a journey of fieldwork and research that took place within a juvenile correctional facility in Los Angeles, California,

known as Las Palmas School for Girls. A social worker within the facility, Marcia A. Tichenor, collected ghost-lore from many of the girls who attended the school. While there was a hodgepodge of diverse ghost stories mentioned by the girls, a large majority of them included the ghostly La Llorona herself. Topics of the legend's violence, death, and guilt seemed like the perfect medium of conversation for a majority of these girls considering their lives were unfairly filled with similar experiences and sentiments. Perhaps they sensed a relatability to La Llorona, and they wanted more than anything to be seen as valid and real; La Llorona's pain is a tool of communication:

The striking thing about these tales isn't the preoccupation with violence, but the fact that they are believed...I feel that these tales are a manifestation of their fear of the world and of society. Most of the girls cannot express fear to themselves. (Hawes 1968:169)

It appears this year of COVID and loss could have manifested in the versions of La Llorona my students narrated. This year alone has been a whirlwind of fear and unknowns, and yet legend seemed to be a helpful form of communication for the students from El Sol Academy, similar to the students at Las Palmas described by Hawes. Rudolfo Anaya argues that stories or narratives can be some of the greatest teachers we never knew we needed. He explains:

Teaching can be an open process of revelation, not one which fears the intimate areas of growth. An open, accepting process is far better than one which favors fear and whispered interpretations...The school system did not acknowledge the ghosts of the bush which I knew so well. The stories of La Llorona or El Kookooee were never told in the classroom; there was no guide to lead us through our folktales. I was not helped to understand the meaning of my own world. (Anaya 1992:54)

Through a plethora of variation and patterns of legend-telling, the four students I interviewed this year proved just how much a "silly ghost story" could not only warn a

child of the night but warn a child of the world. Communicating childhood fears as well as current ones in our society became unveiled as these students elaborated on their personalized legend variants. Luis spoke freely about the importance of family and even warmed up to the idea of La Llorona as a good person. Fernanda faced her childhood fears of ghosts and instead created meaning through La Llorona's ability to feel. Zulam stated loud and proud that human beings are capable of multitudes of emotions and that should not be held against them. Miguel revealed machismo could be a woman's demise, and that there is power in a woman who helps a child cross a river. All these discoveries and concepts were garnered from one childhood legend told to each of us five, ten, fifteen plus years ago. Jeannie Banks Thomas relates to this idea of communication when she typically teaches her students about ghost stories. She mentions how often, her students will ask her if she believes in ghosts. Although it is possibly the answer her students don't want to hear, she is quick to

...give them a poetic answer; I say that the DNA each of us carries in our bodies makes us all ghosts. This is the reverse of how we usually think about ghosts. That is, we imagine them as ethereal forms and as those who've died before us—and not as those of us who are alive today. However, our DNA makes us, in part, the ghosts of our ancestors. We embody scraps, fragments, and glimmers of our forebears. (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:25)

In whatever way you want to define it, ghosts are real and they teach us so much. My students learned about themselves, their powerful ideas, and the importance of kindness during a year that made us question it constantly. Zulam ended our interview in explaining why this terrifying ghost story is so very important and so often told to Hispanic children. Her answer was short, sweet, and to the point:

Zulam: ‘Cause it’s like culture, you know? You can’t really get rid of culture. I don’t know I guess it’s a tradition to scare your kids with it...and the older you get the more real it gets, so you just keep sharing the story. I guess, yeah. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

I close this chapter with a segment of the interview that told it like it is; stories ebb and flow just like we do and grow with us, for the better and for the difficult:

Acosta: So I'm curious...there's been... it has been a very interesting year as we all know it's been a really like difficult year for everybody in some way, you know? It's been...it's just been hard and I'm curious if any of like...if La Llorona were to exist in 2020...COVID times...pandemic times...all of these things...

Luis: Don't jinx it!

Acosta: I won't, I won't! I'm not jinxing it! No, we're in...

Luis: Knock on wood, go!

Acosta: I'm knocking right now! We're in 2021, it is over!...Uhm but I'm curious of your thoughts like...does that make her existence like more scary in that setting?

Because like for example, I know some of you guys mentioned loneliness...that not only like do people experience it when they see her or they're scared of her but she experienced loneliness too. Which is why she did what she did in a lot of senses. So

like, a lot of people have experienced like a lot of isolation uhm this year you know? Or like just not being able to see family, not being able to see friends, not being able to go to school...like there's been a lot of difficulties. So how do you think... I don't know like do you think her haunting would be any different?

Fernanda:She'll have to wear a mask. (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)



Figure 6. Second Zoom/Video Conferencing Interview (From left to right/top to bottom: Camille Acosta, Zulam Palacios, Luis Moriel, Miguel Carretero, and Fernanda Ortiz. Taken by Zulam Palacios (January 2021, used with permission of all photographed)

Chapter Two: Maria Before the *Llorona*

“La Llorona Considers the State of Tortillas”

She knows they sell them in meat packages
Cellophaned and counted.

They come in whole wheat, yellow, or white corn,
Even red tinted and crisp ready for tostadas or chalupas
Too easy it seems to her for the truth to be told

She also knows machines can never render
A product true

If flour...one misses
The familiar smell of dough cooking on the comal
The puffing up one must, simply must, pat down
To hear the proof of air escaping
The taste--hot off the comal, melting butter or honey

If corn,
The smell is sweeter
The touch rougher
The taste has vestiges of corn on the cob
Or pinole ... él que tiene mils saliva traga
más pinole
Weeping woman weeps to see
The chemicals preserve and make these tortillas last
I could write poems on the smooth surface
or fold them up and eat them

Tortillas are
At once food and utensil
I scoop up memories with each bite,
And La llorona
weeping woman smiles
(Cantú 2008:129-130)

The legend of La Llorona has become as familiar as the back of my hand for *mestizas* like me. La Llorona is published in children's books and sung in *corridos* at birthday parties. La Llorona is utilized in pop culture and portrayed on screen in the scariest of horror films. From birth we are made to come to terms with the normalcy of a feminine spirit of undead vengeance lurking in dark corners. However, what happens to La Llorona when you grow out of your size three Converse and *Dragon Tales* backpack? What happens to La Llorona when you become young adults with credit card payments and existential crises? What happens when you become the Maria before the Llorona? In this chapter, I aim to focus on the young adults who are not children any longer but are not yet the ghosts of their ancestors: my brother and myself. We both have grown up as Mexican American individuals and the legend of La Llorona has made a large impact on us culturally, emotionally, and communicatively. I decided to use our perspectives in this chapter because much like Maria before that fateful night, we have grown to feel the weight of machismo on our shoulders and the stigma associated with emotionality in our world. Chris battles with the dichotomy of machismo and monsterization and why it is such a commonality. I have often questioned why "weeping woman" is the name of this entity and why a crying Latina is so terrifying. Here are two perspectives from Maria

figures that hope to steer clear of Llorona. or perhaps at least to understand her a bit better.

Chris' La Llorona



Figure 7. (From left to right) Chris Acosta, Bruno Acosta, and Belle Acosta (December 2021, used with permission of the Acosta family)

When I was a young girl listening to the ghostly legend spill from my Thatha's [Dad's] mouth, I was never alone in experiencing the adolescent fear; my older brother was right beside me covering his face with a pillow. Chris Acosta is that older brother, approximately four years apart but with the same Chicax blood brought onto us by our parents. We both were told the legend of La Llorona, but I was curious if we really heard the same legend. Logistically, Chris is older and I am younger, Chris identifies as a man and I identify as a woman, and quite honestly our fear tolerance is practically nonexistent. So, was the same variant of La Llorona perceived in two diverse ways? In order to explore this question, I ventured to interview my twenty-nine-year-old brother on the

ghostly apparition that spooked our kid selves. I began the interview with asking Chris where he felt he first learned about La Llorona. I had assumed that our dad was the first to instill the narrative, but I was mistaken:

Chris: ...Hmmm I feel like I heard stories about her from family members. So it would like...the very, very first time would have been like probably from Thatha. Or maybe his dad Grandpa Felipe.

Camille: Oh really so from both of them?

Chris: Yes I feel like...I can't specify who's for sure who told me first or and what detail but I know for sure it was both of them because you know Thatha liked to tell ghost stories and just stories in general and so did Grandpa. Grandpa liked to tell stories too but I think I remember the first time like really getting into detail of it was when I got to read about her in elementary school...I can't remember which grade it was but it must have been like fourth, fifth grade I think. And like yeah we just have reading time and I think we were talking about like folktales or something or just ghost stories and it actually went into detail like about like you know her story and her life and what led up to the...her tragic death and why she became a spirit. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

I found it incredibly heartwarming that Chris remembered hearing the narrative from our Grandpa Felipe. The only narratives I remember hearing from Grandpa were that of El Cucuy, and perhaps this could have been due to our four-year age gap. However, learning about Chris' claims of La Llorona means there could be at least three generations of

legend telling in Chris' version. Not to mention, for our elementary school to be educating their students on La Llorona is brilliant and something I do not remember relating to. A lot of the schooling I took part in did not emphasize learning about the folklore of our own cultures. Of course, there were a select few teachers that did so and helped us find our cultural pride, but it wasn't too often that we were able to dive into a book on legends from our Hispanic ancestors as opposed to a European legend that was part of Texas State curriculum. I am so glad Chris had an alternate experience than I did, and I do hope this changes in the future.



Figure 8. Old photo of Chris Acosta, Grandma Licha, and Camille Acosta (mid 1990's, used with permission of the Esparza family)

Chris had a collection of bits and pieces from at least three La Llorona sources at such a young age, so I was curious to see the differentiations of his variant over mine:

Chris: Let's see if I can put my brain cells in order so from my understanding there was a, a woman who oh gosh...[laugh]...

Camille: No you're doing great!

Chris: It was a very long time ago and I know that it was along the Rio Grande but I don't know exactly... I've heard stories that was in New Mexico? But that was when I moved to New Mexico that it actually happened here. [Camille: Right...] but I also heard that it was in Mexico, but then again, you know this used to be Mexico... So uhm, it was a very long time ago and it was a woman who I believe she had had children from a previous marriage she had two children and uhhh... she fell in love again with this guy and it was just 'cause so much of a blessing in her eyes that she found him and found love after I don't know if she had lost her husband or if he had left her... but basically you know just to kind of make a new beginning with for her and her children. And I don't know what exactly happened I want to say that he... he, he like left her; this new man left her or he, he just did something terrible to her and she was so, so like broken by that and so grief-stricken and it drove her into madness and I believe that she drowned her children in the Rio Grande; in the river where they were living nearby. And, you know very Madea-esque. And from that point just kind of realized what she had done and I guess she had died or killed herself at that moment and from that point on became the spirit known as La Llorona who travels up and down the river like many believe spirits can do and specifically like comes out to avenge women who have been wronged or attack men who are doing wrong... right yes I feel like that's kind of why she's—there's some positive to the story and that's what like keeps her in respect. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

To begin my analysis, I find it delightful that Chris had to really dive deep to pull out the remnants of La Llorona memory. In the previous chapter, even though the children felt the need to question if their versions were “right,” they never struggled to remember how the story went. The students’ quick and easy responses were simply because they had only first heard the legend a few years prior. For Chris on the other hand, the first time hearing La Llorona was at least twenty years ago. Despite being influenced by school versions and our Grandpa Felipe, both of our versions have come to the same consensus on there being a woman, her lover was a male, the male disrespected her in some fashion, and she drowned her children in the river in a fit of grief before dying herself and haunting the waters as a spirit. These aspects of this narrative all relate to the “kernel story” I described in chapter one. While there were plenty of similarities in our versions, there were quite a few differences. For starters, Chris had heard a version in which Llorona’s origins were in New Mexico. This localization or oikotypification is common in the legend telling process, where a legend includes aspects of the surrounding areas in which it comes to life. For example, Chris includes the New Mexico backdrop in which he lives. Oikotypification makes the legend feel even more tangible, perhaps even more believable due to real life scenery and history. Chris also mentioned that the children in the narrative were potentially from a previous marriage. This idea of separation and/or divorce from a prior marriage creates some interesting inferences about La Llorona sub textually, such as her not being a “good enough wife,” hints of a possible infidelity, or maybe even a tragic death. While the inclusion of stepchildren doesn’t fully ring negativity, the ending of a marriage often brings the audience to think of tragedy. Chris included a clever reference to the infamous Medea, who is a character from a Greek

tragedy written by Euripides. This narrative is quite similar to that of La Llorona, as Medea is betrayed by an unfaithful husband, forcing her to murder her children to spite him. Chris's inclusion of references and historical figures makes it evident that formal educational environmental factors have helped shape La Llorona in his eyes. The most obvious difference between Chris' variant and my own, however, was in the purpose behind La Llorona's revenge. I had always remembered the version in which La Llorona returns to the land of the living to find children to replace the two she had lost. Chris' revenge, on the other hand, focused entirely on causing men the great strife that they had once caused her. Our interview continued:

Acosta: So, in your eyes like the way that she comes or like somebody can see her, is it like a man is doing wrong?

Chris: Yes, or just yeah like a man is doing wrong or a woman is just going through something or I've also heard that like, when we were kids it was also a warning that like if you were a bad kid she'll get you...because since her story did deal with the death of children, it was a good way to scare children into acting right.

Acosta: Do you think uhm, Grandpa or Thatha said that version?...The about like, kids should be worried?

Chris: ...mmmm I don't think so...well, maybe that might have been their intent? But I kind of just took it as a ghost story...like that was my takeaway, just a good scary story. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

The "Deviant Femme" Vs. "The Extreme Guy" as Crafted by Jeannie Banks Thomas

Chris highlighting the focus on female vs. male within his legend brings up a pattern that has quite often been analyzed in the folklore realm. What I mean by this, is that there was a layered and fascinating dichotomy between man and woman in Chris' version of La Llorona, and this is all too common in narrative structures. In Folklorist Michael Kearney's "La Llorona as a Social Symbol," there is a deconstruction of the gender-based conflict of this traditional Hispanic legend. Kearney provides a structural breakdown of the legend of La Llorona with the following:

- (1) Man abandons woman;
- (2) Mother drowns male child;
- (3) God punishes mother;
- (4) Woman harms man (who is abandoning females). (1969:203)

It is evident that there is a clear split between La Llorona and her male partner from the start of the narrative, and depending on the variant, there is almost always a blame on the female partner at the end. This idea of a disrespectful husband and a vengeful woman, however, is not unique solely to legends of La Llorona. Jeannie Banks Thomas explores the complexities of gender and ghost story in part through discussion of the "Angel in the House" character. She elaborates on this mid-nineteenth century trope:

Coventry Patmore published the well-known poem "The Angel in the House," which defines the Victorian model of the ideal, submissive woman and wife: "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure." Well into the twentieth century, the Angel in the House was still haunting women and urging them to sacrifice their own happiness and "fling" themselves down "the gulf" of their husbands' "necessities." (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 81:2007)

The Angel in the House, although birthed in a European-centered context, seems to have made its way on over to Mexico as well. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, one cultural tradition that is unfortunately still prevalent in Hispanic culture is that of

“machismo.” The Angel in the House character caters to a man’s upmost pleasure by sacrificing her own. As explained in a majority of the versions I have collected, this character goes hand in hand with Mexico’s darker side of machismo. It is very interesting that Chris, identifying as a male, was quick to elaborate on the machismo present in the narrative of La Llorona where my former student Luis, for example, didn’t highlight it. These realizations and conclusive sentiments seem to be stemming from the growth of getting older, because getting older has introduced Chris to the harsher realities of life and given him definitions for cultural trauma. Chris, being an older Latino male, has more than likely experienced far more than my former students have. While Chris never mentioned actual aspects of personal machismo he has experienced, I find it interesting that he emphasizes so much on how the woman is seen as a bad woman in Latinx culture. Much like legends can grow and expand the more they are transmitted, the legend-tellers themselves also morph based on life experiences.

Thomas argues that ghost legends often have gendered tropes: “The Deviant Femme” and “The Extreme Guy.” She explains:

The Extreme Guy exaggerates many of the characteristics most stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as toughness and violence. The Deviant Femme is the antithesis of the traits traditionally associated with femininity; for example, she is a murdering mother. In short, she’s the Angel in the House gone horribly wrong. As such, she’s also more interesting and dramatic than the Angel in the House. She is a manifestation of all that the Angel represses: rage, violence, mental illness, and eccentricity. Neither the Angel nor the Femme tradition presents an adult, female figure who is both strong and well-balanced...Ghost legends commonly depict Extreme Guys and domestic violence. Also, ghost stories in which gender is a significant factor often mirror cultural notions about gender and gendered behaviors. (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:82-83)

It is important to note that Thomas also used La Llorona as an example of the Deviant Femme in that she held power over her children as well as over male's sexual exploration (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:93-95). We can see here by Thomas' definitions and my own hypothesis however, that La Llorona can exemplify both the Angel in the House and Deviant Femme. La Llorona performing all of the acts that make her a "good wife" therefore makes her a "good woman" or "Angel in the House" according to many Mexican cultural expectations of women. However, the moment that her "Extreme Guy" cheats on her and abuses his power over her doesn't make him the bad guy, it makes her the bad woman, the "Deviant Femme." It seems bizarre that one character can portray vastly different extremes in one narrative, and Thomas continues to mention that the shift for women is often at the hands of the Extreme Guy. For many Latinx women under machismo power, trying to balance both extremes on a daily basis is normalized.

If we look closely at Chris' version of La Llorona, there is no question that Maria is The Deviant Femme, due to her failure at being a good mom as well as her ex-husband playing the part of Extreme Guy in which he oozes toughness and dominance over women (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007:92). In Chris' narrative, the battle between Angel and Deviant through La Llorona is made even more apparent when he compares her to the infamous "Medea" character. There is a conflict between the perfections of motherhood and the suppressed womanly rage, and I feel as though Chris expresses that in his analysis:

Chris: Yes, or just yeah like a man is doing wrong or a woman is just going through something or I've also heard that like, when we were kids it was also a warning that like if you were a bad kid she'll get you...because since her story did

deal with the death of children, it was a good way to scare children into acting right. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

Chris also goes on to mention that the man, Maria's husband in this instance, had the say in the relationship and whatever he said goes. In Chris' interpretation, Maria didn't have the ability to fight back and in fact could only express her anger through taking something away from him, their children. Also, it does not matter that this Extreme Guy forced a separation between the couple, Maria was the one who separated from "good femininity." And how did she do this? By doing the most unfeminine thing there is, failing as a mother. I will explore motherhood and Hispanic culture more in Chapter Three.

"... You know, this is a way to educate."

La Llorona, for me as a twenty-five-year-old, has taught me so much about my culture and my place in society as a Chicana; she is a tool of education. She has taught me a lot and I feel as though her teachings have helped me understand my cultural background more and more. Now as a child, I may not have believed this legend was teaching me any more than my fear of spooky undead women lurking in the corner. However, as I have grown older and have learned from various forms of education myself, I have come to the realization that the legend of La Llorona has taught me a lot. It was exciting to me that my brother felt the same sentiments. Chris and I began discussing how long the legend of La Llorona had been transmitted before our parents' time:

Chris: And it's probably been done since they were kids you know? Like...and our grandparents told them stories like this and it's probably been like cyclical and it

happens over and over again especially because you know coming... 'cause you had asked specifically in like a Latino context right Camille? [Camille: Right.] Uhm...just before the advent of internet and whatnot and especially like since not all of our ancestors were able to formally educated...you know this is a way to educate. [Camille: Oh wow...yeah.] And even if you don't know how to read or even if you don't have access to these books it's still a way to like pass down like you said communicate and give subtext and teach you something...it's like...and there definitely...even before like words like 'metaphor' and 'similes' had ever been applied to things, like that's what this... that's what this was doing even way back then. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

Chris' remarks including the fact that our ancestors were unable to receive formal education admittedly tugged at my heart strings. Chris and I seem to have a very similar belief on the important cultural tool that is La Llorona, one of education and communication. Folklore is like a language that has no barrier, no border, and I was thrilled to hear that Chris highlighted its educational importance in our interview.

Unfortunately, educating folk groups on cultural traditions is not the only use of legend telling, but legends have also been used to inform Latinx people on the effects of colonization in our culture. Chris suggests that horrendous colonizers instilled a trauma that perhaps mirrors itself in the legend of La Llorona:

Chris: So who knows it could even be something that... I mean a lot of tales like this kind of transcend like cultures and continents but having known that like this for sure like this tale exists here and like also in in Brazil both... both places that have experienced trauma at the hands of like colonization and also storytelling

from a native and Indigenous perspective. So the story could even be like older than like pre-Spanish for all we know...and this was just kind of like the retelling of it...which is still hundreds of years old [laughs]. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

For more on the potential connections to colonization within La Llorona's narrative, I turned to folklorist Robert Barakat in his work "Wailing Women of Folklore." Barakat expands how La Llorona herself has a rich history cross culturally and quotes Betty Leddy in her 1950's article "La Llorona Again." She mentions La Llorona is almost always, "...one of three general types: 'the siren, the grieving woman, and the woman who is dangerous to children'" (quoted in Barakat 1969:270). Barakat goes on to claim that in Chiapas folkloric history, La Llorona fits into the siren motif for she "haunts the streets," "wanders the hills and fields," and "appears in bodies of water," (Barakat 1969:271). In Aztec mythology however, La Llorona's legend is morphed into that of a deity by the name of Chalchiuhtlicue. This Aztec goddess was one of the waters:

... her likeness was that of a woman. It was said that she belonged among the rain gods, as their elder sister...she killed men in water, she plunged them in water as it foamed, swelled, and formed whirlpools about them; she made the water swirl; she carried men to the depths. This goddess apparently limited her victims to individuals who made their livelihood from water. Her motive, and the motive of the woman in the version from Mexico, appears to be revenge. (Barakat 1969:272)

Using this specific historical telling of various precedents of La Llorona through Barakat's analysis, it seems clear that revenge toward male figures seemed to be the highlight. In these historical versions, specifically, there is an added layer of an indigenous woman trying to get revenge on powerful men as a result of colonization.

Bess Lomax Hawes recites one historical variant of La Llorona from an informant in Las Calles de Mexico. This variant claims

La Llorona to be the repentant ghost of Doña Marina, who betrayed her own people by co-operating with Cortez. (In this form of the legend, the principal figure is often called “La Malinche”; whether this indicates two separate tales is debatable)...When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they were impressed by the beauty of the Indian children. The Spanish took the children (the most beautiful) and gave them to their wives. Some of the Indian women killed their children in order to keep the Spaniards from taking them. La Llorona is one such woman. She now is searching constantly for her children, whose faces she sees in all children. She kills the children to be united with her own again. (Hawes 1968:158-159)

With connections to La Malinche as well as siren stories about taking revenge on men, it is more apparent how scholars, in similar ways to Chris, have made the connections between colonization and versions of La Llorona. However, my brother has never formally read any of the references I have used in this thesis. My brother has mentioned in the past that he had learned plenty on colonization through literature while he was involved in his Theatre Bachelor’s degree at the University of New Mexico, so perhaps this program was to thank, or perhaps these are his own original interpretations formed as an adult. However as a child, one may not be so quick to realize that a legend involving machismo may date all the way back to Hernán Cortés himself. I must admit, it is a bit disheartening growing up and learning that the ghosts trailing your bedside window carry the traces of trauma dating back centuries prior. Much like Fernanda had mentioned in Chapter One:

Yeah just ‘cause like...I feel like when you’re younger you just think like oh she’s really scary? But then when you get older you can like, actually analyze what she’s feeling? I feel like that’s more scary? (Ortiz, Palacios, Moriel, and Carretero, January 7th, 2021)

“...You know the world isn't always pretty, but you can listen to the story and be a little...entertained.”

Throughout the interview with my brother, it was easy for us both to get lost in the conversation. From remembering how frightened we would get with Thatha's bedtime stories to going off on tangential rants on why racism can even affect a narrative, we were in the midst of proving a very important point: La Llorona can be a brilliant form of communication for the Hispanic community. Sure, my brother and I are very open with one another and can often speak for hours at a time. And yet, isn't it quite fascinating that a “simple” narrative of a woman experiencing betrayal could point us to our own cultural betrayal? It was hard to tell if we as young adults were learning more information on our colonized history with age and education or were just becoming more aware of the harsh reality of power and our suppressed voices. Within our lengthy conversation I asked Chris why he thought stories of La Llorona, or more generally scary stories, have been so prevalent in our cultural history. He responded:

I think there's a couple of different reasons...But I guess personally like when Thatha would tell us, I think he loved the art of storytelling and as a kid he loved scary movies so he actually...maybe not so much the takeaway of like the moral of the story but he loved the thrill of the ride. Of being told a scary story. So, I think like it's the fun and part of the art of storytelling but also as I mentioned before even though that might have not been our dad's intention...there still is a moral to the story. And I would say that and just like horror stories and stuff...it might have been like that the adults know that there are scary things out there? Whether they be like mythical or spiritual? But more specifically like there are bad people and you know people can do

bad things to each other and whatnot. So I think it's kind of a way to like to make you aware and prepared... like just to just to like know that it's kind of an introductory into like, you know the world isn't always pretty but you can listen to the story and be a little and, yes be entertained but that's kind of like the way to get you into the story but the real takeaway is that you should be prepared and kind of pay attention to like the characters in the story and from that just kind of pay attention to the characters in your life. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

Chris' answer here was very thought provoking. The usage of the words “scary things out there” morphing into the concepts of “bad people can do bad things” shows the evolution of a child directly influenced by the legend of La Llorona. I decided to keep on picking my brother's brain by asking him the question, “Do you think La Llorona is a bad person?” Chris took a few moments of silence, then replied:

In my opinion it's complicated. I don't think it's—I don't think there's like black or white or really I feel like ‘cause obviously she's known for...her story is known for doing something bad but you feel for her. And that's the thing like, like that's kind of her thing is that everyone like...she was wronged you know like she was made to do this so... I don't necessarily see her as evil. [Camille: Yeah...yeah.] But she just kind of like represents like the evil that people can do but it's kind of like the effect rather than the source...I think it's a story that teaches you what love can do to you and if love is misused or if people are misused it can drive them to do crazy things. And it's not necessarily that the person is born a monster, but it's kind of like what people can...what kind of monsters people can turn other people into...I think that's the takeaway for me. (Acosta, Chris, June 10th, 2020)

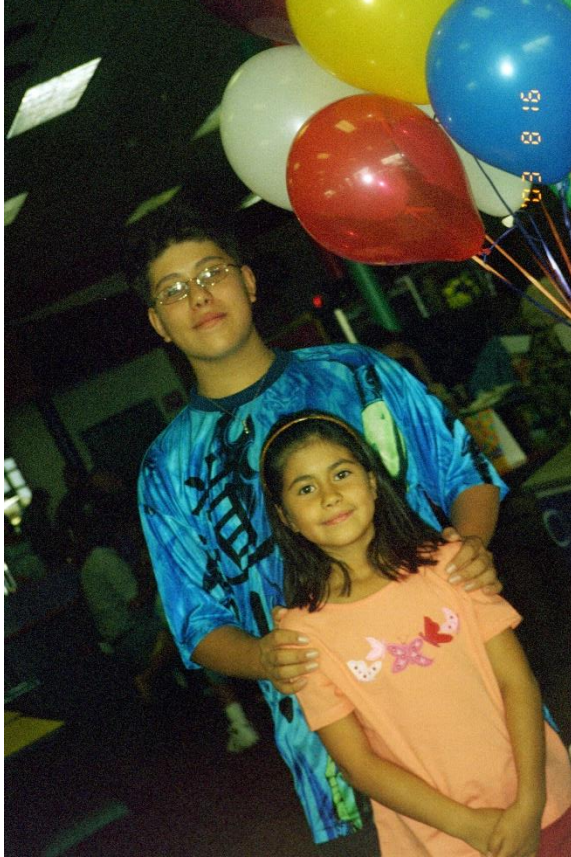


Figure 9 and Figure 10. Chris Acosta and Camille Acosta (left, August 2003; right, December 2020; used with permission of the Acosta family)

Camille's La Llorona

Up until this point, the woman behind the weeping has been known as both a legend and a ghost story. However, with Chris' last statement, the term "monster" was used to describe what La Llorona has become. The word "monster" in and of itself is a very strong term that provokes strong feelings. However, what differentiates a ghost from a monster? In Race and Ethnic Studies scholar Bernadette Marie Calafell's work *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, she defines the term monster using Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses of "Monster Theory." Through using words like "inhumane," "phobia," "harbingers of crisis," and many more, both Cohen and

Calafell seem to paint a picture of the monster as the opposite of human. One of the many monstrous theses I felt the most drawn to was that of “Otherness.” Calafell furthers that society is quick to construct monsters through “...how our difference, or Otherness, gets constructed as monstrosity in a world that has become more and more conservative” (2015:5). Calafell is interested in the ways that cultural anxieties and fears around Otherness, whether they are about race, class, gender, sexuality, body size, or ability, manifest themselves in representations of both literal and symbolic monstrosity (2015:5).

The first figures that come to mind when reading this particular definition are those you may find trick or treating at your door come Halloween. For example, you have werewolves or shapeshifters and possibly even vampires or Frankenstein’s monster. These monsters are different, evil, and a little bit off. The monster must be “Otherized.” Calafell digs a bit deeper in her and Cohen’s descriptions when she states:

...Cohen argues that, “The monster’s body is a cultural space” meaning that it is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment - of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture.” (Calafell 2015:6)

Ever since I was a little girl, when describing the legend of La Llorona I have always referred to her as a monster. When I try to think of the reason it is engrained as such, I am not completely certain on how it was born. Growing up, La Llorona has always been an otherized being that was certainly not human, definitely capable of evil, and always able to snatch me up if I wasn’t careful. She was terrifying. And to tell the truth, she still is just as terrifying. Through the second half of this chapter, focusing on my own

experience of La Llorona from my perspective as a young adult, I really hope to understand why.



Figure 11. Camille Acosta and Grandma Lucy (late 1990's, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Famed Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya was incredibly familiar with La Llorona as he grew up listening to her haunting capabilities in a Latinx household. In his work “La Llorona, El Kookooee, and Sexuality,” Anaya explores how he as an adult tries to make sense of the monstrous fear that is La Llorona. Anaya contends:

The historical role of the storyteller has been to characterize these monsters. We all have monsters to conquer, ghosts to confront in the bush. Today the bush has become the dangerous urban streets, the corporate boardroom, or the bedroom, but the folk stories have such a strong hold on the psyche that they serve us even in these new settings. When we understand the monsters within, we know ourselves better. (1992:51)

So, here begins the personal journey of folkloric discovery. Here begins the monstrous discovery of the self.



Figure 12: Camille Acosta at her eighth birthday party taken August of 2003 (With use by permission of the Acosta Family)

If a Monster is Fear Inducing, What is So Terrifying About La Llorona as an Adult?

As I think back to being a child, I try to encapsulate what truly terrified me about La Llorona. From what I remember, her appearance was always a bit off-putting in terms of her being a combination of human and the undead. I had never seen a depiction of her in media until I reached my twenties, but my dad's descriptions combined with my childish imagination left her horrifying looking in my mind. In my imagination, she was a long and lanky, pale woman whose face was hidden in darkness. However, her eyes were piercing and always visible, and would never blink. She would lurk in the corners of darkness which I could never light in my room; perhaps she would reside in areas of my walls that weren't already taken up with stuffed animals and Zac Efron posters. She wore a long-tattered wedding gown that was riddled with stained watermarks and holes where the river fish ate through. I have always been afraid of the dark, and I knew that was

where she thrived best. The most terrifying aspect of La Llorona for me, however, is that my imagination made her out to be completely still. She was just...there. Always there.

Anaya, in trying to uncover his own childlike fear of La Llorona explained her existence as a metaphor of forbidden sexuality. La Llorona was always narrated with a warning of not staying out past dark, and according to Anaya, that meant the acts typically done after hours were prohibited. Anaya reflects:

Was she a product of the fear of sexuality of the elders of the tribe? Was she created to keep me from the sexual desires and fantasies which began to fill my world? They had made a monster out of her and banished her to the river where I spent time with my friends...Awakening into the world of sexuality was not easy; it was a fearful journey. The ghosts of the bush were there to warn us of our indiscretions. (1992:52-53)

With “Sex Education” classes in grade school that only teach abstinence, to cultural norms that view talking about sex as dirty and wrong, and gendered separations of what is sexual taboo, it makes complete sense that the legend of La Llorona made a monster of young Anaya’s sexual curiosity. Of course, it seems as though Anaya could not have made these connections and analysis until he had grown up and seen the world. While reading his work, I couldn’t help but try to think about Hispanic cultural customs that I feared the most in order to dissect my fear of the weeping woman. And then it hit me: crying.

“Being Mexican American, there is no time to cry. We aren’t that privileged.”

One haunting cultural tradition that has grown ever so strong within the Hispanic and Latinx communities is the lack of emphasis on positive mental health practices. According to the National Alliance on Mental Health Practices, while a large number of

Hispanic individuals suffer from hurting mental states, taking initiative to heal is virtually non-existent. The National Alliance reports, “more than half of Hispanic young adults ages 18-25 with serious mental illness may not receive treatment. This inequality puts these communities at a higher risk for more severe and persistent forms of mental health conditions, because without treatment, mental health conditions often worsen” (NAMI:2021). Whether it be financial obstacles, language barriers, lack of cultural representation, or the generational trauma and stigma that accompanies a hurting Hispanic brain, being able to talk to someone about our problems is intimidating to say the least.



Figure 13. Grandma Lucy, Grandma Licha, and Grandpa Manny at children’s birthday party at Peter Piper Pizza (early 2000’s, used with permission of the Esparza and Acosta families)

Diana Diaz, writer for Hispanic digital media company MITU lets us in on her own personal journey with mental health and how merely talking about taking care of your emotionality as a Latina is complicated. She mentions,

In an ideal world, we would all play active roles in breaking down the mental health stigma. Dinner talks would be filled with, “¿Mijo, cómo te has sentido?”, “¿Cómo vas con tu medicina?”, or, “¿Sigues yendo a yoga?” Showing emotion would be encouraged and vulnerability would be praised. But you and I both know, this isn’t the case when it comes to the world we live in.... During the years that followed, I fought against cultural norms. For me, nothing else had worked, so I said “yes” to therapy and anxiety medication, even when my family opposed it or didn’t quite understand it. It was hard. I felt misunderstood and out of place. I was conflicted about how people would judge me and my family if they found out that I sought outside help. (Diaz 2019)

Diaz’ accounts resonate with me in trying to navigate the conversation of a happier mental state with my family, and I can attest to the fact that it is complex. I have always believed that my family was a positive reinforcement and always pushed for us kids to be happiest, but with centuries of generational trauma lurking beneath the skin there’s no easy way to allow ourselves to be sad. Making progress as a Hispanic individual in America is hard enough because there are so many barriers against us—where can a conversation about my anxiety fit in truly? My Grandpa Felipe was brought here by the U.S Government’s enactment of the Bracero Program which severely overworked and underpaid Latinx bodies only to implement Eisenhower’s “Operation Wetback”: deportations, abuse, and lynching across the border. My grandfather was safe, but my grandmother felt the weight. My Grandma Lucy had to raise seven children, including my dad, knowing only the Spanish language while working as a nurse in a local hospital. My Grandpa Manny worked upwards of fifteen jobs in his adult life to provide for his family to stay afloat, while my Grandma Eloisa took care of the house as well as a local bakery down the street to help steady the income. Sadness was often prayed away at church because despite financial hardship, a Spanish tongue, and Machismo ideals of remaining strong for the family, Our Lady of Guadalupe was always listening. However,

if there is a chemical imbalance in the brain that not even the Virgin Mary could pray away, what can be done? In the United States, not every family is equipped to have conversations about mental health. For many persons of color, there is no time to cry. We aren't that privileged. Mental health stigma for Latinx bodies has always been my monster.

Bernadette Calaffel explores how the use of monsters or "otherized creatures" in narratives has been a device used to represent people of color for centuries. From colonization tactics used to silence minority voices to conversations eased with the creation of a metaphor, monsters have helped us explain concepts that are too difficult to explain in the real world. Calaffel writes:

Monsters act as archetypes or myths that serve to guide a community. [Gloria Anzaldúa shared that myths are "usually what oppressed people use to express their experiences. They do it because they don't have the avenues of openly talking about their experiences." Furthermore, colonized people are seen as abject or monstrous. One need only look at how Cortés was said to have treated his two sons; one born with a Spanish wife and the other from his Indian mistress Malintzin Tenepal to see how mestiza/os were treated as abject. His "racially pure" son held higher status, while his mestizo son's lot in life was to serve his brother. Therefore, it is useful to consider what the appropriation of discourses of monstrosity by colonized or Othered might yield. As Quiñónez writes, "Through appropriation, writers may take the language of the dominant culture and replace it with their own, in some cases reconstituting it totally into a 'vehicle for new meanings and its adaptations of the cultural experiences of the non-privileged.'" Thus, monsters may offer us a new lens to think about identities and Otherness as "the poem is not merely an intellectual advance, but a political advance." (Calaffel 2015:56)

For the past twenty-five years of my life, there was always something unsettling about La Llorona. She was definitely scary being a ghost and everything, but I couldn't get past that sadness. It wasn't until recently, writing this chapter, that I realized it wasn't La Llorona that I have feared all these years, but Maria. Maria was the Hispanic woman

whose emotions overcame her, and she was deemed monstrous for it. The fear of being so emotional that bad things happen is a monstrous fear that has haunted me since I was a child. However, flash forward to Spring of 2021, and I am proud to say therapy has finally become an option for me to help deal with this monster. The pandemic, although treacherous, brought about mental health opportunities not only financially but conversationally with my family. Let me be the first to say that it shouldn't take a global crisis for a family of color to feel as though they finally have a safe space to speak on their mental states, but I am thankful for the positives that have come out on the other side. I'm glad my family could reclaim the monster.

It is interesting to note that although my brother and myself are from the same generation and from the same family, both identifying with Maria in many ways, our interpretations of her as a metaphor are diverse yet familiar. Chris views her as an empowerment of strong Latina women in reclaiming their well-deserved space over machismo. For me, Maria is a beacon of emotional awareness for the Latinx culture and more specifically, Latinas who are predestined to carry the world on their shoulders due to machismo. La Llorona is important to both of us despite our different gendered experiences or our specific histories; La Llorona haunts all.

As I have dived deeper into my thesis research, La Llorona has become for me a narrative about mental health stigma and how emotional expression can be terrifying. However, I like to imagine that maybe in an alternate universe after Maria's husband broke her heart, she was able to run home and talk to her *abuelita* about it. Maybe then her grandma spoke about her previous heartbreaks and they laughed and cried over *pan dulce* and coffee. Maybe in that moment, grandma admitted to dealing with depression or

anxiety and they both took a deep breath with clutched hands. Maybe that gave Maria the confidence to seek out some therapy or a couple of *curandera* visits to help express her emotionality. Maybe after that Maria went home to her two sons and hugged them so tight, and maybe they started their own conversations of mental health that day. Maybe, even for a narrative on Latinx bodies, the story ends with a “Happily Ever After.” I don’t know. Maybe.



Figure 14. Camille Acosta at her eighth birthday party making a wish (August 2003, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Chapter Three: The *Llorona*'s Haunt

So far, I have explored the voices behind the little *niños* who see themselves reflected in a ghostly legend as well as the individuals who claim to understand the Maria that makes herself known in the *La Llorona* legend; all that's left is the ghost. The apparition of La Llorona herself has so far been described as the undead ghostly figure of Maria, cursed to roam the world of the living in search of children to claim as her own. Now unfortunately, I do not know of any ghosts to interview for this portion. However, I do know of two humans whose narratives and experiences have haunted the generations that follow them: my parents. Linda Dégh mentions that legend telling often results from parents and/or other adults (2001:248). These individuals are the captains of the legend telling ship, and their traditional transmissions to children spark a terrifying creativity that sticks through adulthood. Dégh proposes,

I suggest children's legendry is a subvariant of that of adults. Scary characters such as Dracula, werewolves, witches, and crazy killers are adult inventions, as are performances of costuming and acting. The adult input is powerful and overwhelming in legend formation; in fact, it is the parents who create legends on the basis of the trauma they themselves suffered in early childhood. By romanticizing, socializing, and revising their experience, they suppress the natural fantasy products of their own childhood. (2001:248)

As mentioned in my Introduction, Irma and Toby Acosta (henceforth known as Mom and Thatha) have been the source of Chicano storytelling for our family, and I feel as though their take on this legend has birthed narrative meaning for decades to follow.



Figure 15. Photograph of Irma Acosta and Thatha Acosta (Mid 1980's, used with permission of the Acosta family)

La Llorona and Her Impact on Latinas

I burst into tears as I told [my mom] about seeing La Llorona. My words were caught in my throat and I immediately became a six-year-old Llorona. Tears and mocos swamped my face; the taste of salt filled my mouth. My small shoulders bobbed up and down as I struggled to find my breath. I cried until I hiccupped. My mom held me; she let me cry, told me to get it all out...she walked out of the room and brought in a mop with a yardstick taped across it for arms, one of my gramita's old dresses, and a pillowcase. "La Llorona," she explained...She tried to take the sting away from my hurt and humiliation. It was the first time boys had broken my heart. "I don't understand," I demanded. "I never did nothing to them." "I'm sorry, mi'jita. It's too bad that you had to find out this way," she said as she smoothed out my damp hair. "Now you know what La Llorona is really crying about." (Trujillo 2006:104)

The above quote was taken from Patricia Trujillo's "Becoming La Llorona," in which she tells the story of her first encounter with the legend. She speaks on how she was frightened to death from seeing her for the first time, but even more so when she learned it was just the boys in her family pulling a prank. There was immediate betrayal here and imminent heartbreak, and her mother associated it to La Llorona's emotionality as well.

Perhaps the ghost of La Llorona is merely a personification of the emotions of betrayal and hurt. Perhaps the ghost of La Llorona lies within every Latina woman who was crumbled under the weight of a man. Perhaps La Llorona has made her way inside all of us, especially *madres*.

My Mother's La Llorona

My mother was never the type to recite scary stories to my brother and me, she left that job for my father. Mom was always the one who was easily scared of bumps in the night but would replace them with glimmers of positivity. For example, if our dad scared us half to death with a spooky story, Mom would come up with an explanation as to how kindness can eliminate all darkness before putting us to sleep. I don't remember Mom ever reciting the legend of La Llorona to me, so I was very curious as to what version of the narrative stayed afloat in her mind.



Figure 16. Irma Acosta and Pi Acosta (2021, used with permission of the Acosta family)

During the stay-at-home orders of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in April of 2020, I was lucky enough to be quarantined with my parents in New Mexico. I was fortunate to interview my Mom in person. Now, out of all of the interviews I conducted for this project, my Mom's was the shortest. Was this because scary stories weren't necessarily her favorite? Or perhaps, was there no need for deep explanation of Maria's choices considering my Latina Mother understood her better than we ever could? My mom responded to my questions as follows:

Camille: So Mom, what do you know about La Llorona?

Irma: Well, as most families in Mexican culture... it's always one of the things that's talked about especially when parents are reprimanding you. [Smiles] And at that point my parents would sit down and talk to us about well, "don't you know there's the story about La Llorona"...[imitating her younger self] "what what does that mean?" The crying one, the Weeping Woman. And we would look at each other me and my sister Carmen we would get scared and be like "what do you mean?" And she says yes it happened in the lake this woman was so upset and crying and crying in the lake because she lost her children...or she drowned her children at first we thought she lost her children in the water but my mother said she actually...she knew and it handed down from generation to generation her mother told her and so on and so forth, about this woman who was so...maybe she was insane because of what she did you know? But we just thought that she did that because her children did

wrong so she reprimanded them that way that's what scared the bejesus out of us thinking "is my mom going to do that to us?" you know. But little by little the more we found out and read on our own, well obviously it was because of you know... a lost love and that she had and that she had...and he didn't want her with the children.

Camille: So what's the full story?

Mom: So in other words, they weren't from him in other words she... she was having an affair and the man didn't want the children of the other man so that's why she drowned them...I know just like I told you it was a scare tactic from my mother that's how see you know I fear you know to do better. We won't be bad kids 'cause that's what happens to bad kids you know but again that's my mother that's how she works. But you know talking with other friends they had heard similar stories but like I said it was because of a woman that lost or would lose the love of her life if she still hadn't...her own kids from another marriage or from the marriage with her so she figured if she did away with her children that were—but that haunted her the rest of her life because the man never stayed with her.

Camille: So did Grandma tell you that version?

Mom: No.

Camille: So you heard that version from your friends?

Mom: Mhmmm

Camille: So it was just the scary tactic variant from Grandma.

Mom: Yes.

Camille: Would Grandpa tell you anything about that stuff?

Mom: No, not really he always referred us to get the information for my mother.

Camille: Oh okay.

Mom: Cause my mother knew everything. (Acosta, Irma, June 11th, 2020)

Right from the start, my mom's version makes it apparent that specific narrative details weren't of that much importance in her eyes. By this, I mean that the descriptions of where the story took place were not as necessary to my mom as who told it to her. She was quick to point out that she felt her mom's emphasis on naughty children and their punishment was all that was worth remembering; she felt children were in the wrong. My grandmother was one of the most dramatic people to walk the earth, and I mean that in the best possible way. Let's just say, if someone ate her bag of Hot Cheetos, she was quick to give you the silent treatment. Knowing this fact, I could only imagine the fear that grandma instilled on my mother with a narrative on "killing your children." From the get go, my mom seems to have envisioned the legend of La Llorona as not only a cautionary tale for naughty children, but as a beacon of warning for the "bad mother" and the "bad wife." Her version was the only one in which Maria was the one initially at fault, as she cheated on her husband before adding to her evil nature and drowning her kids. I found it incredibly fascinating that this concept of Maria having no sympathetic explanation for her actions within the narrative was one that my mother latched on to. It's

important to note that not all of the narrative influences of my mom's version came from her mother, but from her friends as well. Pieces of my mom's version of this narrative were derived from her friends growing up, and all pointed to the societal pressures of womanhood in the Latinx culture. However, I will focus on the individualities of my mother's complex interpretations of La Llorona before making my way to these broader cultural contexts.

I wanted to dive deeper into my Mother's explanations of La Llorona's identity, so I continued to ask my mom for details:

Camille: Yes. So what were the rules to avoid La Llorona or not...did anybody ever tell you like... that rules?

Mom: Well no... we just kind of used our common sense. We don't want to do wrong by our mother because we don't want her to drown us.

Camille: So if you were bad...

Mom: Yes.

Camille: She would come.

Mom: Yes.

Camille: Okay, would she come at night, in the daytime, anytime?

Mom: Well, we just figured she'd make her visit at night when nobody was watching.

Camille: That makes sense... So do you remember vaguely how old you were when you first heard the story?

Mom: I want to say this was... six...five or six...It's just the way she [her mom] talked about her in my mind especially being so young at the time I mean that's a mother...how could a mother kill her children you know? Her own children...so that that was freaky. (Acosta, Irma, June 11th, 2020)

Much like the young kids I interviewed, my mom very much identified with fearing the mean mom. Whether as a child or now as a mother of her own, Mom seemed to closely identify with the horror of La Llorona not being the ghost but being neglectful. Because this fear of a mom not being “good enough” affected my mom so deeply, it is important to further explore the gender roles within machismo and *marianismo*. The term machismo has been mentioned before throughout this thesis, and it primarily serves as a framework for understanding a man's dominance over a woman in the Latinx world. However, marianismo is the term used to define the specific place of a woman in a machismo world. A popular source defines this phenomenon as follows:

To put it in simple terms, Marianismo is the counterpart to Machismo. Machismo being the colonial gender role placed on heterosexual males of Hispanic, Latino, Latin American and Portuguese descent....Marianismo on the other hand is the gender role and identity that heterosexual Latina women must follow. It is the submissive, family oriented, non-sexual, virgin, dependent, spiritual and naive woman. Ironically, it is also the element that keeps Machismo alive and allows it to pass on to the next generation of men. It is the hierarchy system of gender roles among the Mexican culture. (Cazares 2020)

Another definition of marianismo that adds further explanation is from Chicano/Chicana studies scholar Maria Herrera-Sobek's 2012 work *Celebrating Latino Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions [3 volumes]: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions*. Herrera-Sobek quotes social worker Rosa María Gil and clinical psychologist Inoa Vásquez' in the following definition of marianismo:

Gil and Vásquez consider themselves the first to introduce this term to the general reader, and they define it as representing the ideal role of the Latina woman, a role modeled after the Virgin Mary. They name *marianista* woman *la santa de la casa*, the household saint, as well as *una mártir de la casa*, a household martyr. The traditional *marianista* is dutiful and uncomplaining, self-sacrificing and chaste, submissive and dependent on her male counterpart—she possesses a long-suffering superior spirituality that requires martyrdom. Gil and Vásquez explain that this ideal can be extremely physically and psychologically damaging for Latinas, placing them at greater risk for domestic abuse, HIV and other STDs, depression, and general feelings of unworthiness and dissatisfaction. (Herrera-Sobek 2012:683-684)

It is important to make note that my mom never actually stated the term “marianismo” in her interview at any time. However, her legend explanation of La Llorona was dripping with the both the compliance with and the defiance of Latina submission as mentioned through the definitions above. To begin, being a good mother and caretaker is a highlight of marianismo ideals, including raising children to be exemplary. My mom viewing this narrative as one of motherly teaching through morals highlights how good of a mother my grandmother was. This is emphasized because my mother describes my grandmother as being able to pass on morals of being a kind mother, reflect on her as a good mother. Next, the blatant betrayal of a woman toward her man draws attention toward Maria being a bad Latina woman in terms of marianismo. Not being faithful, having sexual relations out of wed lock, and essentially becoming independent of her husband shows that Maria was destined to become the evil apparition that is La Llorona. Given this characterization of La Llorona as the epitome of what a Latina woman shouldn't be, I wondered if my mom felt La Llorona was a bad person before killing her children as well. We continued with my favorite question:

Camille: Do you think she's a bad person?

Mom: Well, for doing what she did... but realize you know what she had been going through before she pondered upon doing that act that must have been scary for her. I figure...A man wouldn't want to accept her children if he loved her why couldn't you accept the children as well? Being older you obviously put that you know it's more profound right.... that you a man that would accept someone else's children and for you to actually....the mother the one that bore, held those you know kids in her body to have done that that was...[silence]. (Acosta, Irma, June 11th, 2020)

My mom was very quick to unpack a lot of information with that single question. At first, she mentioned that of course killing is never commendable. However, she claimed that in a sense she understood where Maria was coming from. She went on to explain how a man not accepting her children, even from adultery, was heartbreaking and potentially drove her to darkness. Although it is difficult to express through typed words, through a scrunched face and frown, my mom seemed very bothered by this act of horror by a mother. No matter what she had seen in Maria, for my mother, nothing was bad enough to kill your own offspring. Because of the heightened reaction, I decided to continue asking about this bothersome feeling:

Camille: Are you still afraid of her?

Mom: Yes.

Camille: Why?... 'Cause I know you mentioned that, something to scare children but why does it still scare adults?

Mom: Well because again like art life represents art and vice-versa you know? It is a folktale, a legend and you see now and then a case of a woman again being deceived by a lover...and this was a while back early 2000s where this woman you know saw to maintain her, her life with her lover but her lover didn't want the children around so she went ahead and strapped the two children in the back of a car and put the car on drive and it went off the river...Now how cruel can that be? You know as you watch your children fighting to get out...horrible...but those things happen.

Camille: Do you think that your take on La Llorona changed when you became a mother versus when you were a kid?

Mom: Yes...it's two different senses. As a kid it was like it's scary as a mother you get angry like how could you do that?

Camille: So do you think you're more angry at her like you mentioned, now versus when you were a kid?

Mom: Yes 'cause as a kid you take it from the perspective of a kid to a kid like I'm one of those kids drowning you know how could you do this to me? And as a mother I was like those are my children how would I even begin to think about doing something...much less do that. (Acosta, Irma, June 11th, 2020)

My mom made some pretty spot-on connections to real life happenings of women killing their children. I too remember when this story of a car and a lake made the news in our city, and it was terrifying. She was right, there is a fear as a child when you realize that

mothers have the potential of taking away your safety. However, in all honesty I couldn't help but feel saddened by my mom's heavy disdain for Llorona. I realize I am very biased; I see plenty of pride, power, and hope in my version of La Llorona, and I hate the idea of my mother not being able to have that solace in her. I began to question the possible impact of marianismo on my mom's interpretation of La Llorona; had society morphed who La Llorona was for my mom? If you truly think about it, every single version of La Llorona that has been mentioned within this research relates on one specific element: La Llorona must suffer. For my mother, any form of stepping out of line or being a reflection of failure as a mom or wife meant that you deserve to suffer. You become La Llorona.

English and Mexican American Studies Scholar Domino Renee Perez explores the legend of La Llorona both in folklore and popular culture contexts, and she mentions how often La Llorona is meant to suffer in different variants. Perez quotes Rudolfo Anaya to further her point:

...countless variations of traditional folklore show that La Llorona's merciless destiny is to wander and wail eternally in search of her murdered children's bodies. One of the most salient and seemingly unchangeable features of the legend is La Llorona's suffering. Rudolfo Anaya contemplates the fixity of her fate when remembering stories from his childhood. Unlike the heroines Snow White and Cinderella, who eventually free themselves from their tragic lives, "There is no happy ending to the story of La Llorona. She comes from a Catholic world and breaking a taboo is not forgiven. She is condemned to search for her children forever." In the traditional narrative, La Llorona's destiny has been meted out by divine judgement, and as a result we often have difficulty imagining her outside of the tragic context that defines her. (Perez 2008:37)

There is a sense of Catholic guilt that is mentioned by Anaya that I will analyze later in this chapter. Even in my own variant, La Llorona was destined to suffer even though she is becoming a symbol of hope for me. It was within reflecting on my mother's

interpretation that I realized for Latinas anyway, suffering is predestined if they do not abide by marianismo ideals. However, it was also in this moment that I realized each interpretation of suffering was unique to the narrator. We all have our own weeping women, especially those of us in Latina bodies. We all have our fears that are personified through her haunting. I suppose being a bad mother was the epitome of evil for my mom, because to her that was the opposite of being a “good Latina.” I continued the interview with asking my mom if she believed La Llorona was real:

Mom: Do I think she's real... I think that she or that sense of... how do I want to say... the I don't want to say spiritual but there's something there that kind of in the back of...of mainly a woman's mind can be you know I mean for a woman to... I don't know to go through certain issues in her life in terms of wanting to deceive her husband or wanting a way out, and she has her fling or whatever and I mean it just turns and twists in the mind that you don't see you don't see straight. You don't see that you're doing wrong at the time you know? It just clicks and you...it disguises maybe for her to suppress I mean a mother's nurturing of her children to be the caretaker of her children and for her to actually do something so twisted like that it's... it's there in the psyche I guess that just kind of a switch flips on there. (Acosta, Irma, June 11th, 2020)

This response further validated, in my opinion, how the suppression of the woman as a wife and mother really is almost second nature for many Latina women. My mom feels as though Maria, although searching for a way out, was potentially not seeing straight because she failed at being a good domestic woman. Granted, my mom was more than likely referring to the murdering of her children. However, it was curious to me that still

that it was hard for my mom to find redeeming qualities in her. The thing is, in no way does my mom have to. My mom has the autonomy to feel about a narrative any way she so chooses, and it seems as though this narrative helped my mom view how she could succeed in motherhood. Not every woman has to stand by Llorona's side and feel empowered by her; fearing her can instill just as much greatness within themselves. It was made apparent after listening to my mother's responses that the darkness of marianismo culture may have clouded what it means to be a "good Latina"; however, through La Llorona she learned how to reclaim that fear into being there for her children. In a sense, La Llorona was a cautionary tale for my mother not simply to go inside before dark, but to be there for your children even if you fear the darkness.



Figure 17. Irma Acosta and Vinny Acosta (March 2021, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Cultural Context: Motherhood

Folklorist Michael Kearney explores the cultural history of the narrative La Llorona in his work “La Llorona as a Social Symbol.” Kearney collected ethnographic research and variants of the La Llorona narrative, “in the Zapotec-mestizo town of Ixtepeji, in the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca, Mexico” (Kearney 199:1969). He explains how this legend is likely to have begun during times of conquest and colonization and either includes La Llorona mourning for her children or seducing men. Many variants in Ixtepeji use the name Matlaziwa in place of La Llorona, and this woman is still cursed for all eternity for defying expectations of motherliness. Kearney goes on:

Looked at in this light, the La Llorona tale becomes mythic. What we have are the fragments of a creation myth. It may be seen as a creation myth because it does two things: first, it relates important experiences, perhaps the most important, in the psychogenesis of the individual, that is, betrayal by the mother...Second, since in myth the individual is a microcosmic replication of the world view, the legend is also a statement about the world, especially the world of interpersonal relations. (1969:201-202)

If Kearney’s hypothesis is right about the creation myth, La Llorona suffering and acting as the bad mother has been engrained in Latinx societies, woven into our generational trauma. La Llorona is bound by the chains of machismo; she never had a chance for a happy ending. It’s even more fascinating when you realize that these stories may have originated during a time where colonizers assaulted and abused indigenous women, thus birthing “illegitimate” children. If these women, although controlled by colonizing men, are considered bad mothers for merely surviving, then can La Llorona ever free herself from the chains of marianismo? It seems as though a good mother does everything in her power to defend her children, even if that means suffering abuse and dying for them.

As my mom’s interview was winding down to a close, I could sense my mom’s confusion and disdain toward mothers who harm the children they bore. My mom’s

Llorona was forming behind her eyes; it was terrifying to her. I asked my mom if she had anything else that she felt needed to be said, and she replied:

Just you know I guess you have to understand I mean as women I mean it's like a deep dark and you figure...well, do these people have other people that they can talk to you know that maybe could talk them out of doing something so dangerous you know? (Acosta, Irma, June 11th, 2020)

As always, my mom found a way to place a positive spin on such a dark narrative. In a sense, my mom crafted a new, more empowering view on La Llorona, a “new mestiza consciousness” (Herrera-Sobek 2012:680). Chicana poet, scholar, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa coined this idea of “new mestiza consciousness” in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in 1987. In her work, Anzaldúa elaborates on this consciousness by demonstrating:

...how mythic stories can be employed to uphold social norms. She then encourages people to imagine a way in which these myths can be rediscovered and re-created to be used as paths to liberation....With these stories she shows that to recover our full potentiality and that of the world we must stop moving from one world to another and reside in the Borderlands, the uncomfortable and transformative spaces between cultures and ways of being/knowing. Anzaldúa explains that forcing oneself to inhabit the Borderlands, to navigate the space between the oppressive nature of cultural myths, one can recover the transformative aspect of them. This then allows for the development of a new consciousness, mestiza consciousness, a consciousness that allows for ambiguity and change....Anzaldúa explains that this synthesis is not merely a blending of a dominant culture and oppressed culture, but is a reformulation based on the knowledge gained from that blending, much in the way she blends folklore to create new myths. For her, this blending is the way to form powerful alliances. (Herrera-Sobek 2012:680)

My mom in a sense has garnered her own version of new mestiza consciousness by transforming what society told her was a “bad Latina mother” into understanding the

difficulties a Latina mother deals with on a daily basis. Unlike society's marianismo culture, my mom has incorporated her sense of understanding and forgiveness into this legend and in turn, incorporated it into her ideals of motherhood. Mom has brighter hopes that women can start talking about their emotional wellbeing and it in fact is not too far off from my hopes. My mom is the strongest and most caring mother I have had the pleasure of knowing. My mom listens, forgives, and holds her children's hands as they encounter all of life's ghosts. I feel as though that in itself is breaking the status quo. That, in itself, is a reclamation of the monster.



Figure 18. Camille Acosta, Irma Acosta, and Chris Acosta celebrating Christmas (December 2021, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Thatha's La Llorona

The eighth version of the La Llorona legend I collected, and the final one I will focus on, was from the person who was the originator of the narrative from my perspective: my father (Thatha). Now, although I can easily say that Thatha can tell a terrifying scary story like no other, he is one of the most introverted individuals I have ever met. Because of this, he had a unique and yet brilliant way of transmitting his legend to me the first time I asked as part of this research.



Figure 19. Thatha Acosta holding Calypso Acosta (early 2010’s, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Back in April of 2020, I had begun La Llorona research. However, Thatha wasn’t necessarily interested in the “typical” interview format at the time. Upon hearing the words “record,” “camera,” and “internet,” Thatha quickly declined and instead, offered something else. I handed Thatha a notepad, asked him if he wouldn’t mind jotting down his version of La Llorona, and he returned his written response to me in no more than one hour. Although this version of the legend may seem less “vivid” or “vibrant” than that of

the other informants because it was created on paper, the process in which Thatha worked hard to be open to writing words on a page produced the most exciting version I had come across. The context behind this storytelling truly added to the believability of the legend and made the fear that much more real, all thanks to the narrator. Folklore scholar Elliott Oring argues that a legend's "ability to engage the mind and arouse the emotions greatly depends upon the sensitivity and artistry of the narrator. A good narrator may engage his audience totally, directing or redirecting their thoughts, emotions, and perhaps their future behavior as well (1986:122).

Reading this handwritten legend scribbled on the yellow sheets of a notepad one year ago honestly still gives me the chills now, and Thatha isn't even in the room. Maybe it is the fact that the narrative itself was handed to me in silence giving the horror-like feel; perhaps it was his occupation as an English teacher making an appearance on the page; or maybe it was the words themselves illustrating a personal tie to his Chihuahuan roots. The overall legend Thatha narrated was a personal account of his early years in Parral, and it was interesting to collect a more personalized version than I received from the other interviewees. Here is what Thatha wrote:

I first heard the story of La Llorona in Mexico, in my hometown of Parral Chihuahua in the late 50's. Essentially we were told this story as a cautionary tale, that if we didn't behave she would come looking for us and take us away into the realm of the dead.

I heard more and more about her as I grew up. She was a woman who drowned her own children, usually two, in a fit of despair and was condemned to wander the waterways searching for them till Christ should come back. In these stories

she was just a frightening apparition whose screams and lamentations you would suddenly hear at night, when she wandered nearby, at the river or the watery canals throughout Parral. If you were out at those late hours you may see her materialize out of the mists that often lingered over the canals and riverbanks. Everyone claimed to have seen her at least once. In my hometown, which was a mining town, loud sirens would announce the shift changes for the minors to go to or leave work, and wherever we were we would rush home at the 9 p.m. siren, else we may hear or see La Llorona as she began her nightly vigils. She was a very effective curfew. (Acosta, Christopher, April 11th, 2020)

It is so fascinating to read Thatha's explanation of La Llorona that originated within my family and comes from a Mexican perspective. The students as well as the rest of my family members have a Mexican American perspective in regards to where La Llorona comes from. However, Thatha's localized descriptions of her roaming the streets where both he and Maria come from makes the legend feel a bit more terrifying. Thatha, much like my Mom, shares the fact that this legend really makes its mark as a cautionary tale, and for him there was a level of safety associated with the legend—the physical safety of an effective curfew. Upon interviewing Thatha again for this thesis research, my understanding of his use of the word “safety” expanded.



Figure 20. Thatha's Friend Victor and young Thatha (1972, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Over the summer of 2020, I interviewed Thatha to gather more details from the man who made it possible to do this project in the first place. This time, I called my Dad and recorded myself on my computer's video camera. This way, Thatha wouldn't have to technically be on camera. I asked him about the first variant of La Llorona that he knew:

Camille: I know obviously there's no right or wrong way to tell her story of her and especially since it's been morphed all these years because we've heard so many different versions but do you remember the earliest version or like your first introduction like how the story went when you first heard it?

Thatha: Well, they told us it happened here in Parral, from there and that she killed her children... drowned her children and they didn't tell us why they just said she had drowned her children and that she was being punished by God right?

And that she would have to wander the Earth until she found them but in the meantime she would take any kid she could find. [Both laugh] Which was us yeah but that's basically the story but much later I found out that while they would tell us that because in a fit of jealousy or her husband left her something to that effect....so it became more detailed yeah. The older you got the more details you got which is probably smart because I don't know if we could have handled that at that young age you know? (Acosta, Christopher, July 8th, 2020)

Right from the start, there is some incredibly interesting individuality with his version, but I will touch on Thatha's individual context a bit later. However, there is some cultural context involved here that is worth mentioning first. One important cultural piece here is the ties to religion that Thatha makes. In the previous versions that I had collected, no one had ever brought God into the narrative. My father would often talk about how Catholicism was a massive aspect of Mexican culture. Thatha clearly included this context in his legend's variant by referencing La Llorona's punishment from God. A vast majority of Mexicans and Mexican Americans are religious in some shape or form, and marianismo ideals involve good faith and keeping God in your heart. I asked Thatha for a bit more background on this aspect of the Llorona:

Camille: So do you think that that you don't know is she like a spirit is she still alive curse to be alive forever kind of thing or what do you think?

Thatha: I think so...I think that's the legend the legend the punishment hasn't stopped.

Camille: And I think it's interesting that you remember your version being like associated to religion because God punished her?

Thatha: That is interesting yeah you know 'cause we venerate women over there above and beyond I mean you know starting with Mary and this was like the exact opposite you know... (Acosta, Christopher, July 8th, 2020)

It surprised me that Thatha mentioned women were held in such high esteem back in his hometown. I had personally grown up viewing machismo and marianismo suppressing women in multitudes of ways, and in my opinion, veneration was far from the description. But it is important to note that my dad grew up within a different culture that he has more knowledge of than I do. However, the idea of the church or God punishing a woman for her straying away from good motherhood doesn't strike me as strange or far off, as a Mexican American woman. Rudolfo Anaya explored the ties between religion and the legend of La Llorona as well in his discussions of male sexuality. When Anaya was confused as to why Llorona was made out to be the evil villain, he asked,

Was she a product of the fear of sexuality of the elders of the tribe? Was she created to keep me from the sexual desires and fantasies which began to fill my world? They had made a monster out of her and banished her to the river where I spent time with my friends...Awakening into the world of sexuality was not easy; it was a fearful journey. The ghosts of the bush were there to warn us of our indiscretions, and the strict rules of the church were there to punish us. It was, after all, the patriarchal church that ostracized La Llorona for her sin. (1992:52-53)

Whether it was the discussion of La Llorona during times of colonization, using her as a negative symbol of sexuality, or making her suffer for stepping out of lines of motherhood, La Llorona seems to be the perfect individual for machismo to make the villain.

As Thatha was continuing on with his interview answers, it was obvious that the idea of horror was one of fascination for him. Of course, this was incredibly apparent growing up as he would tell my brother and me every scary story he could find. I was curious to see if Thatha felt that horror had unique importance for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, beyond simply giving one a fright:

Camille: Why do you think that, I mean you were obviously very young when you were introduced to a lot of... not only like her story but a lot of other scary stories like as very young...why do you think at least in the Mexican household, why is that a commonality do you think?

Thatha: I think it's the that old thing that old human thing of storytelling you know? We told stories or they told us stories right and you know they weren't all scary you know somewhere just fun yeah... but a large part of them were scary you know of ghosts and devils and there were rumors that...that skeletons would walk around at night and stuff like that and when you're talking about a very old town you know, couple hundred years old already... it just seems to fit you know?

Camille: Yeah... do you think there is a certain tie with horror and just like the Mexican people?

Thatha: Oh yeah definitely they were for the most part I would call peasants you know... uneducated you know? My dad went to the 3rd grade if you could even call it that; third grade... uneducated they were there, people who lived in town where they would work for the most part and you'd be in the mines you

know yeah 'cause it was little ranches and farms scattered all around yeah.... but that's basically... I don't think I met an educated person, gosh growing up you know? You know what businesses were handed down, stories were handed down from family to family and stuff like that.

Camille: What do you think it is then, that keep stories like that going even amongst you know a doctorate student right? Why do you think that's something that's just like people grasp onto in the Mexican culture?

Thatha: It's still a third world country is one reason you know? I mean they have a huge, maybe the biggest city in the world Mexico City but the rest of the country is small you know it's still largely rural and largely uneducated and largely illiterate so it strikes a chord you know? We still need the stories whether we read modern novels or not. These are the stories for the most part...for people who have not done that. People that don't read or haven't gone to school we need that connection whether it's with our elders or with our kids you know we passed these stories on as something precious and it strikes a chord. I mean I would tell you guys stories and I already had a degree you know [both laugh] but it was just so much fun. Maybe it helps bind us closer together you know who knows. (Acosta, Christopher, July 8th, 2020)

These narratives as not only a form of communication but a form of education really tugged at my heart strings. I really enjoy what Thatha had to say here, and it made me smile to think that storytelling knows no bounds in terms of what an “educated” brain looks like. These horror stories told in the Mexican culture are meant to fill the holes that possibly a language barrier couldn't fill, or a diploma couldn't fill, or a financially stable

homelife couldn't fill. I found it very interesting that Thatha responded to this question not focusing on the horror as much, but on the simple importance of familial connection. However, he did mention that speaking scary stories ties into speaking the history of his town; there are plenty of skeletons buried beneath the mines of Parral Chihuahua. Perhaps, scary story has become synonymous with plain history for many Hispanic individuals because quite honestly, our history can be frightening.

This concept of using a horror narrative as a terrifying lens to the past influenced director Jayro Bustamante to create a thrilling historical narrative himself. In 2019, Bustamante released his film *La Llorona* that involved a haunting metaphor of Guatemala's past. There was a dark and difficult history that Guatemalans tend to cast aside; however, Bustamante feels as though the past needs to be spoken about, no matter how difficult. He explains,

In Guatemala, there's a movement going on right now where people want to pretend that life is wonderful and there's nothing wrong going on... There are people who even say that there was no genocide [during the Civil War] and I wanted to confront that idea, but I knew doing it as a drama would not be appealing to audiences who crave only entertainment. That's why I had the idea of entering the film as a horror movie and then the metaphor of La Llorona as a Mother Earth crying for her children came in; it just fit perfectly. (Motamayor 2020)

The choice of using the character of La Llorona as a metaphor for a mother and her broken relationship with her children of the earth is brilliant and nothing short of inspirational. Bustamante claims that using scary stories like this one, can capture a vastly wider audience because not only does everyone enjoy thrilling entertainment, but everyone knows La Llorona. The article continues,

As for the La Llorona, Bustamante decided not to explain her legend — as most Latin Americans are already familiar with it — and instead lets her imagery speak for itself. The crying, the white dress in the dark, and Monteverde’s terrified expression when he thinks he’s seen the ghost give enough context for the unfamiliar. (Montamayor 2020)

Individual Context

Although Thatha included various layers of cultural subtext within his version of La Llorona, I couldn’t help but feel as though the narrative itself resonated with my dad even more so on an individualized level. In fact, the way Thatha associated this narrative with his hometown and his culture makes it seem as though the legend is far more personal than even he thought. I very much appreciate the idea that these historical ties with Parral for Thatha were actually personal reflections on his end. For Thatha, there was a feeling of safety associated with ostension, the acting out of folk narratives which he engaged in by going looking for La Llorona. This is interesting considering legend-tripping is something many folklorists believe is behavior that young people engage in to take risks and test boundaries. Thatha felt a sense of safety in the curfew with La Llorona as well because there was familial communication of “be careful *mijito*” through a terrifying story. However, one final element of personalization that Thatha made apparent in his description of ostension was how it served for him as an escape.

Camille: So honestly just to make the question easier because there's a lot to cover with La Llorona, what do you know about her...let's make it a broad question.

Thatha: What do I know about her now or back then?

Camille: We can start from back then.

Thatha: Okay well back then like I said she was just...early on she was something to scare you with.

Camille: Yeah.

Thatha: You know if you don't go to bed early, or if you're out too late La Llorona will come and take you away and then a few years later it was more real it was real then but later when we were out in the city or in a small town...

Camille: In Parral?

Thatha: Right, and we thought we could actually run into her.

Camille: You were trying.

Thatha: Yeah 'cause we only had to walk a few blocks or I guess a half a mile in any direction and you were out in the wilderness pretty much.

Camille: Right.

Thatha: You know what I mean? You went in one direction you were in the mountains if you went another direction you are across the river but right away you were out in the boonies.

Camille: That's scary.

Thatha: And it was scary because there was no light there, is no electricity and everything was super dark

Camille: Right...And what year would you say give or take?

Thatha: I would say starting around... at that time when I started noticing those things about 1961. Because I was born in 55. And there was only one major highway through Parral but there is no paved roads in Parral itself it was just a town on the way to other towns.

Camille: It was a pass through.

Thatha: It was the only paved highway...paved street period. Hardly any cars so it was more you know more than a third world country it was just like somewhere back in time. No televisions, so our imaginations played...had a lot to do with what we saw and feared and everything else.

Camille: And you mentioned though that there was something to you guys looking for her it was almost exciting?

Thatha: Yeah that's true, little older yeah we would go look for her.

Camille: Wow.

Thatha: This is when we were like 8 years old or 9 years old and then we would say let's go look for her but as soon as we did we'd all chicken out and run home because it was so scary after a while you know? Especially when you heard strange noises it could have been anything it could have been birds, coyotes, anything, but we would... we would all get together and go look for her.... till about 12 [years old]...Sometimes a bunch of us would go sometimes the girls would go with us, our cousins and stuff, but usually it was just a bunch of guys just a bunch of us guys like maybe a group of 5 or 7. (Acosta, Christopher, July 8th, 2020)

It clear that Thatha is quite the brave soul in terms of scary stories, in fact it almost seems as though finding the monster was the safe option. In a time and place where there wasn't a vast array of entertainment, La Llorona was Thatha's Netflix subscription or Youtube Vlogger if you will; she was a way out of real life. Still, it was curious as to why Thatha didn't pick a "kinder" figure to chase after in the woods? For example, why not chase after the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy? Why was there a peace with an apparition that unsettles the rest of the world? Why was this his choice of ostension?

Camille: And you specifically have always had a close connection with scary stories specifically right? Those have always been your favorite?

Thatha: Yeah, yeah.

Camille: Why do you think for you?

Thatha: For me personally... it's probably just the the unknown you know? I've always been drawn more to the unknown and whatever the beyond of normal life is. So I would actually go out and look for things you know we would go to haunted houses or go to haunted areas of the city you know once we moved to El Paso, we did it there also. There was an old train station in Memorial Park 'cause the trains would pass through there and we would go there on full moons or we'd go there at midnight to see what was going on you know? Now whatever that comes from I don't know but it kept life interesting and exciting...

Camille: It was almost like an escape?

Thatha: Yeah.

Camille: Would you say?

Thatha: Definitely an escape... family life was not a happy life so that was an esca- well...definitely. (Acosta, Christopher, July 8th, 2020)

For my dad, La Llorona was not simply an apparition to be fearful of, although he would in fact appreciate the good scare. But La Llorona was a friendly face and a helping hand to Thatha's imagination, a key that helped open a door of escape and close one of reality. A gate toward happiness.



Figure 21. Thatha Acosta and Camille Acosta at her eighth birthday party (August 2003, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Bernadette Calafell introduces us to her personal journey with monsters as a Queer Latina growing up in the U.S. In chapter two of her book, she explains in great detail how America has a history of romanticizing the “Monstrosity of Whiteness” as opposed to the “Monster of Color” (Calafell 2015:37). During the 2012 theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado—in which Calafell almost found herself a victim—there was a tendency in the news coverage and popular media to place the shooter James Holmes on

a pedestal. Whether it was writing off his act of terror as one of mental faults, equating his pale white skin with storybooks, or claiming that he was a normal man before he entered the (largely minority) community of Aurora, Holmes was the white monster that suddenly everyone was okay with.

Upon examining the interview with my father, Calafell's research burned within my brain. There is such an interesting dichotomy of Latinos and the monster that can be so confusing yet so freeing. It is incredibly frustrating that when a racist, white individual hurt others based on "mental pain" he is seen as peaceful. And yet, when a Latinx body simply exists, many times also with a mental strain, they are seen as villainous monsters who should jump back over the border. It is curious that when the world is telling us we should be feared, our imaginations find solace with the "scariest" of monsters. It is so incredibly difficult to find the strength to reclaim the monster when so many hateful voices have given it such a terrifying taste in our mouths. I asked my father:

Camille: ...are you still afraid of her?

Thatha: I think somewhere in the back of my mind when I'm out at night I get intimations of what it was like back then and it still scares me you know? It'll come back to me yeah, 'cause it was so much a part of our lives so yeah...

(Acosta, Christopher, July 8th, 2020)

Although in diverse ways, both my mom and Thatha have always found a way to be fearful and proud of the monster. For my mother, the weight of being an adequate Latina was terrifying to say the least. However, the legend gave way toward my mom's understanding of what it takes to be a good mother by leading her toward alternate ways

of mothering not suffocated by machismo ideals. Thatha has always led my brother and I to believe that monsters like La Llorona are just otherized by mean people and that they are worthy of our love just as much as any human because if anything they are direct reflections of ourselves. And although we are deserving of peace, we are some of the most frightening complexities that walk the planet. La Llorona saved Thatha in multitudes of ways, and it also saved my mother as well. You could even picture my mom and dad as the little niños Maria was looking for. You can picture both Mom and Thatha needing guidance across the river away from home, and she was more than willing to hold their hands through it all. She was a guide. A teacher. A lesson. A friend.

“We are fascinated by horror – but I find that very healthy...Being in love with the monstrous is about the desire to understand the Other, as opposed to destroying it.” – Guillermo Del Toro (Cotta Vaz and Nunziata 2016:10)



Figure 22. Young Thatha Acosta during his first Holy Communion (1961, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Conclusion

“I find comfort in knowing I’m not alone. There’s a whole cadre of women - other educated Lloronas of the twentieth century, who had the historical audacity...to become thinkers. We are historical apertures, unwanted in our times, and adulteresses to our culture and class.” (Gloria Holguín Cuádras, quoted in Calafell 2015:117)



Figure 23. Camille Acosta at Las Cruces Farmer’s Market (December 2021, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Back in April 2020, right when COVID-19 was becoming a household word all across the world, I had the benefit of being quarantined with my parents in Las Cruces, New Mexico. My parents were out of jobs and COVID started to feel like a monster waiting to pounce. We all were really feeling the heaviness of life at this point and worked hard at trying to find the silver linings, so we made it a point to watch as many movies as we could. One particular night however, Thatha told me he wanted to see the

new film *The Curse of La Llorona*. I was a bit hesitant to be honest; I had heard very mixed reviews about the film and was truthfully afraid it wouldn't capture the heart of the Hispanic culture. However, with a Hispanic director Michael Chaves and some Hispanic cast members, I agreed to sit and watch. My parents were incredibly excited for they had previously seen the film in theatres and got a huge kick out of it. I looked up the film on Netflix and all three of us, along with a few feline friends, huddled around the couch in preparation of getting scared. All in all, it was not a bad film by any means. There was a terrifying La Llorona, homages to Mexican spirituality and *curanderismo*, as well as respect shown to a legend that has been the glue for so many families like my own. While I could do without the immense amounts of CGI, my favorite part of the entire experience was watching my parents throughout the film. My mom was screaming bloody murder every time La Llorona made an appearance, even though she had seen this movie before. Thatha kept saying "Wow, did you see that sweetheart?" every five minutes as the story progressed and La Llorona was defeated. You could sit around all day arguing whether or not this 2019 film was "culturally accurate" or not, but that makes no sense: it's not the point. My parents who have lived a full Mexican American experience were touched that a massive film corporation would even think of telling a Mexican American story and give it such a platform. This is the power that La Llorona has over families like mine, she is a gateway to feeling understood. Whether it be a parent trying to help a child feel safe, a conversation about things that scar us, or leverage to gain strength against our monsters, La Llorona is communication. Not to mention, on my twenty-fifth birthday my parents got me the Blu-ray DVD of the film because they wanted to help get my thesis on its feet.

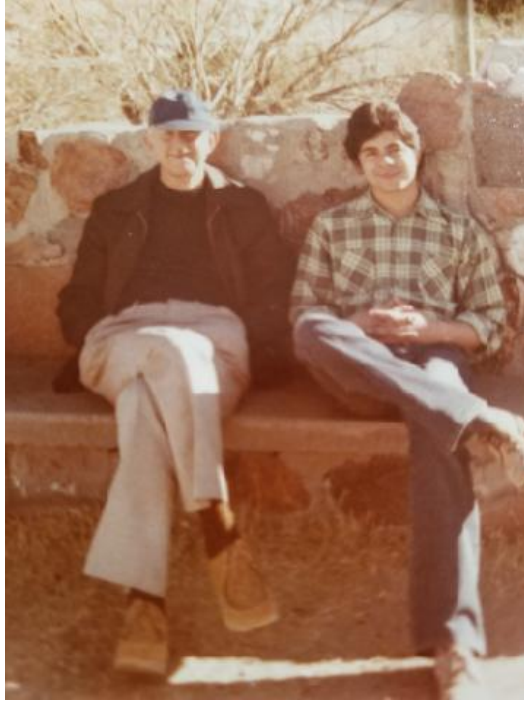


Figure 24. Unknown friend and Thatha Acosta (1978, used with permission of the Acosta family)

Now, one year later in April 2021, COVID still feels like a negative force that lurks around every corner and unfortunately my parents still are out of jobs. However, throughout this project I can happily say that communication between my family and me has never been better. Although this pandemic looks a little different than La Llorona herself, it's crazy how withstanding monsters and gaining bravery over them can help you defeat them a little at a time. My thesis journey has been one of exploration and emotionality, and I couldn't be happier that my life led me to researching such an important Latina figure.

Research Answers

I conclude that all of my research questions proposed were in some way acknowledged and/or answered through my interviews. One of the first research

questions that I answered was how the Mexican and Mexican American individuals I interviewed characterized La Llorona. The answer to this question definitely ranged which I found wonderful because no two individuals view La Llorona in the same way. For example, the children I interviewed mostly saw La Llorona as a ghostly apparition more than willing to instill fear in young ones who misbehave. For the young adults including myself, there was description of La Llorona not just as a ghost but as a monster making us feel isolated from normalcy. For my parents however, La Llorona wavered from being a mother with the world on her shoulders to a key for escaping the harsh realities of life through ostension. Every single informant viewed the Llorona as a unique and personalized character in their own minds, and I was more than willing to accept all illustrations of her being. There is no right way to define La Llorona in my opinion because fear is not easy to illustrate. Quite honestly, I am just happy to have helped start the conversation on the fear itself.



Figure 25. Chris Acosta and Camille Acosta at the Nashville Farmer’s Market (March 2020, used with permission of the Acosta family)

I also conclude that the research question that I feel was touched upon most was regarding the possible commentaries hidden within the subtext of this legend. My research with these informants revealed ideas about race and “otherization,” for example through the influence of machismo/marianismo. At times, it was made clear that subtextual communication through the warmth of tradition allowed us all to hear this legend. You cannot pass down or soak up this legend without understanding the Hispanic culture because it lies at every aspect of the narrative. From the weight of Latina motherhood to the ostracizing of “imperfect” Hispanic women, La Llorona drips with commentary on ethnic and gender identities even if it is never outwardly stated with words.

In Chapter One, I described how my research with young children made it known that a hidden subtext of parental safety was beneath La Llorona’s narrative. Fernanda, Zulam, Luis, and Miguel all made mention that La Llorona was first told to them as a cautionary tale in some form to keep them safe from dangers after dark. In fact, every informant I interviewed remembered La Llorona as a communicative tool of warning from parents to children. However, it is important to note that Thatha was informed by his cousins of this monstrous legend, not his parents. Thatha went on to explain that La Llorona was merely used to scare one another in his opinion. However, Thatha grew up to use La Llorona as a tool of caution with both my brother and me. If we progress forward to mine and my brother’s thoughts on La Llorona, we learn that hints of gender and mental health made themselves visible in our versions of La Llorona. From my brother exploring the weight of machismo culture to my mental health feeling the weight

of marianismo ideals, La Llorona was an empowering force fighting to be listened to. Lastly, my parents viewed La Llorona as both a warning to bad mothers as well as a positive force of escape. While the ghost of La Llorona could be described by my informants as a terrifying undead woman in search of lost children, she was most accurately described as hidden messages that every informant took away with them, held close to their heart.



Figure 26. Grandpa Manny and Grandma Licha (Early 2010's, used with permission of the Esparza family)

The last question that I feel was not only answered but perhaps encapsulates my research as a whole was, “How can a narrative of horror become a mirror of relatability for the Mexicans and Mexican Americans who I interview?” Focusing on the children’s portion of the research shows that they related to La Llorona in terms of race, gender, and emotion. From Fernanda feeling as though dealing with sadness and crying was a scary story of her own, to Zulam making mention that La Llorona’s mental health is an important concern that all should pay attention to; from Miguel noting that La Llorona

can be a helping hand for immigrant children crossing the border, to Luis feeling as though La Llorona wants something that all of us want, a family; these children found personal relatabilities in La Llorona that made her seem as though she was a reflection of themselves. Moving forward to the young adults' personification of La Llorona, we find that she is a reflection of societal and cultural pressures. Chris' views of La Llorona were that of rebelling against machismo culture and reclaiming the monstrous ideals everyone placed upon her. In my eyes, La Llorona was a reflection of Latina women everywhere who struggle with mental health difficulties but are too afraid to speak up. For my mother, La Llorona was a woman crushed under the pressures of my mom's greatest fear: becoming a bad mother. And for my dad, La Llorona was a tool of strength that he could use to give himself a better childhood. La Llorona is so much more than just words on paper or a story played out in movie theatres, and her endurance in oral tradition illustrates this. La Llorona is not only a reflection of our innermost fears, but she is the living breathing proof that we can overcome them as well. Her narrative passed down for centuries is a reminder that our voices are being listened to and acknowledged, La Llorona is understood more and more each and every day. And in a way, so are we.



Figure 27. Grandpa Manny and Camille Acosta dancing (late 1990's, used with permission of the Esparza family)

I am thrilled to say that a conclusion I didn't expect to make was one about the vast amount of communication outside of this research. This thesis and *La Llorona* herself have paved the way to me starting conversations with my family and friends about our wellbeing and mental states. I check up on my students every once and awhile to see if they need anything and they send back emojis and discussions about their day. My brother has begun therapy and although it is such a difficult journey ahead, I couldn't be more elated that he has started it. I too have begun therapy this year and every day inch closer to naming and defeating my monsters. In fact, my therapist uses the narrative of *La Llorona* as a tool every once in a while to help me with metaphor and emotionality; I am beyond thankful. My parents and I speak far more than usual, and slowly but surely, we are starting to engage in deep conversations that are indeed scary, but necessary. This

year has been tougher than anyone could imagine, but sometimes it takes a scary story to make you realize how strong you truly are.

I hope this inspires you all to learn a little bit more about your Lloronas. Perhaps there is a reason they're so terrifying and that you in turn can defeat them or even befriend them. Me and my Llorona are still staring at one another across a fast-moving river, worried about the deep and curious about the length across from each other. Both of us, still silenced by diverse tongues and ancient borders. But although we aren't exactly on speaking terms yet, she waves at me every once in a while, and I now wave back. And for me, that is enough.



*Figure 28. Camille Acosta performing in the UIL One Act theatre competition in the play *Call the Serpent God to Me* (2012, used with permission of Camille Acosta)*

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