

Following *El Río*: La Llorona's Past and Present Interpretations Across the U.S.–Mexico Border

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Abstract

Before the Spanish invaded Tenochtitlán, the Mexica heard a woman crying. She wailed and asked a question which would haunt Mexico for centuries: what will happen to my children? The woman, who eventually became known as “La Llorona,” cemented herself as a critical figure in Mexican culture. Her story was retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined within Mexican households, developing into a source of cultural knowledge and memory. As her children migrated across the border, La Llorona moved with them, continuing to inquire over the fate of her children as they settled and created Chicano communities within the United States. La Llorona’s story evolved to fit the needs of her people and the context of the era in which her story was needed. The fluidity of La Llorona’s interpretations across space and through time reminds her children of the pain they endured in the past and the empowerment they may find today.

Keywords: La Llorona, Mexican folklore, migration, Chicano/a, oral storytelling

The story of La Llorona has resided within the bones of Mexican culture and people since her first wail that preceded the Spanish invasion. While La Llorona's fate remains unchanging, the details of her narrative are constantly evolving. La Llorona is sometimes depicted as a poor beautiful woman or a beautiful Indigenous woman, or any combination of the two. Her husband was thought to be a rich man and more likely a rich Spanish man who eventually abandons, sometimes violently and sometimes not, La Llorona and their children for another woman.¹ In every variation La Llorona drowns her children in the river sometimes as an act of revenge and in other circumstances as an act of desperation to keep her children from starving to death or potentially facing the wrath of society.²

Understanding the evolution of her details is necessary in order to recognize how deeply rooted she is within Mexican culture, and how she has followed the cultures movements through time and space. While her origin is tied to Tenochtitlán and to what is now known as Mexico, La Llorona has migrated across the border and settled within Chicano spaces, continuing the rhetorical haunting she began in Mexico. As Chicano communities developed, La Llorona gained broad recognition as a cultural touchstone. Every retelling or reinterpretation of the story layered new meanings and transformed the character from a creature of fright into one of empowerment, representation, and ancestral connection. Chicanos identified with her and found that her story could be infused with new contexts which allowed the story to remain relevant in the era it was being retold and reinterpreted. Traditional stories and storytelling practices preserve Mexican culture and create a space within communities across both sides of the border, allowing for the story to be made anew according to the context and needs of the era.

A woman's cries preceded the invasion of the Spanish and the eventual establishment of a new culture in Mexico.³ The upheaval of infrastructures and the blending of cultures can be considered the origin of present-day Mexico because it created new social, political, and economic structures. Although La Llorona is not a figure who played any physical role in the development of the country, La Llorona did contribute to the narratives that developed after the invasion. She makes an appearance within the story of Mexico's origins in the form of an omen which

¹ Domino Renee Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 1 (2012): 155-56.

² Miriam L. Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," *Journal For The History of Rhetoric* 24, no. 1 (2021): 67.

³ Barbara E. Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (University of Texas Press, 2015), 52.

anticipated the arrival of the Spanish and warned the Mexica of the evil that sought to ruin everything they built.⁴ It was the sixth omen Moctezuma II experienced and which he attempted to decipher with the help of his counselors.⁵ The omen came in the form of an unseen woman wailing in the night, asking where can she take her children and wondering what will happen to them. Although the horrors that awaited the Mexica could not have been predicted or altered, the counsel understood that the woman's cries signaled that an evil was lurking, waiting for its moment to strike. The woman's cries attempted to warn Moctezuma II about the invasion of the Spanish colonizers and prevent the destruction and devastation that would fall upon the Mexica empire.⁶ The woman, who would later become La Llorona, mourned her children's fate and ingrained herself into Mexico's history and culture. In the ruins, Tenochtitlán became a new city, one which blended cultures and relied on a story of a woman weeping to perpetuate the new identity created. After the invasion, stories of the woman's wailing were passed down, evolved, and transformed until she became the figure now identified as La Llorona.

The earliest written acknowledgement of La Llorona appears in the Florentine Codex which details the weeping that rang throughout Tenochtitlán.⁷ The Florentine Codex contained stories which centered around experiences that occurred before the Spanish's arrival.⁸ In "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," Miriam L. Fernandez highlights the significance of the Florentine Codex which was written by natives from Tlatelolco between the year 1575 and 1577.⁹ The Codex recounts the history of the invasion and the omens that warned the Mexica of the horrors that awaited them. The authors of the Codex included the story of a woman crying and attempting to warn them of the danger that sought to destroy their land and culture. Writing about the cries heard before the invasion cemented the woman's role as an omen and her signaling of changing times. Fernandez notes that from the beginning, the woman's cries signal death and the inescapable violence that awaits the Mexica.¹⁰ Many of the accounts found within the Florentine Codex were later translated from Nahuatl into Spanish and written into Miguel León Portilla's *The*

⁴ Miguel León Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Beacon Press, 2006), 6.

⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶ Domino Renee Perez, *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2008), 16.

⁷ Portilla, *The Broken Spears*, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 63.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico. Although she is not given a name in either source, La Llorona begins to emerge as a figure central to Mexico's history through this text.

The development of La Llorona's earliest written narrative serves as her first retelling and establishes the necessity of keeping her story alive. Her first cry warned the Mexica of danger and what she could not stop from happening. In writing about her cries, the Florentine Codex reveals the past trauma that entire communities endured while also capturing La Llorona in the present moment. Furthermore, in writing her story, the Florentine Codex operates as her first retelling and gives space for La Llorona to develop as a cultural touchstone. She existed prior to the arrival of the Spanish and she follows the country's development through her various interpretations. La Llorona eventually emerges as an essential cultural figure that moves with her people and time. The fluidity of La Llorona's interpretations begins with the method through which her story is retold within the household.

Oral storytelling is critical to transmitting culture within Mexican households and is a significant way stories such as La Llorona are passed down across space and through time. For many indigenous groups, oral storytelling served as a critical source and method for sharing cultural information. As Leslie Reese argues in "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices," sharing stories, narratives, *dichos*, and *consejos* is "a prominent experience among families in Mexico . . . An opportunity . . . to share cultural values and construct identity."¹¹ Families told stories not only to bond, but also to share the values of their society and to cement identities within people. It became an important method to instill behaviors and highlight expectations for children. Reese explains further that, indigenous ". . . oral traditions predating the conquest . . . include a rich history of poetry, prayers, and discourse through which cultural content was transmitted from generation to generation."¹² After the arrival of the Spanish, indigenous oral traditions continued to be a significant part of indigenous lives, but the stories evolved as Spanish ideas began to change the culture and communities within Mexico. Specifically, the story of La Llorona portrayed the changing times, highlighted the effects of the conquest, and depicted the Mexica's views on life before and after the conquest.¹³ The Spanish influence on the legend contributed to its evolution and transformation into the story that is retold today.

¹¹ Leslie Reese, "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices," *Bilingual Research Journal* 25, no. 3 (2012): 277.

¹² Reese, "Storytelling in Mexican Homes," 278.

¹³ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 18.

In the 200 years following her first retelling, La Llorona's story remained popular across different regions in Mexico among working-class people, who shared her story with fondness and fear. While traveling through Mexico in the 1880s Thomas A. Janvier spoke with older generations of working-class people across different regions in Mexico and gathered popular folkloric stories.¹⁴ These stories were ones which the older generations already knew by heart because they had been passed down by word of mouth many times over. Janvier notes that stories such as La Llorona, are cherished by the older people of Mexico City "alike lettered and unlettered" and passed down with a "lively faith" from "heart to lip and from lip to heart again through the centuries" and which retain the "full flavor" of their origin.¹⁵ The people who told these stories shared them with a "simple-souled faith in their verity," allowing for characters such as La Llorona to live as an ever present figure in Mexican households.¹⁶ The version of La Llorona which Janvier captures in his collection, he notes, was popular in Monterey and nearly identical to the version he heard in Mexico City.¹⁷ In the version of the story Janvier hears, La Llorona, dressed in a white *rebozo*, walks quietly down the streets crying for her children. She is seen by different people in multiple places at once. When La Llorona appears before someone, their senses seemingly abandon the body, leaving the person with the feeling of being "dead."¹⁸ The question La Llorona asks, which is the one she is always asking, is "where shall I find my children?"¹⁹ La Llorona, Janvier notes, migrates with the people who believe in her and although she is fluid in her movements, she remains unchanged in the search for her children.²⁰

While La Llorona was an oral story passed down for generations, it was not until the late 19th century that the folkloric version we know now would be written down and officially titled "La Llorona." The story of the crying woman found within the Florentine Codex was the first retelling of the story, but the version that formed through the passage of time had not been documented under an "official" title. In "Absolving La Llorona: Yda H. Addis's 'The Wailing Woman,'" Rene H. Treviño explains that in 1885 Vicente Riva Palacio and Juan de Dios Peza published *Tradiciones*

¹⁴ Thomas A. Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1910), 13-14.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 136.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ibid., 164.

y *leyendas mexicanas* which contained a story titled “La Llorona.”²¹ The foundation of their written version was the popular oral story which Janvier wrote about in his collection.²² The written story detailed the experience of a beautiful woman who married a Spanish man and because of his betrayal she murdered their children. In Palacio and Peza’s version, the story ends with them referring to the woman officially as La Llorona.²³ Giving La Llorona a name aided in the development of the story’s details and contributed to her evolution as the character that is well known today. Her name made her tangible, a figure who could be evoked for the needs of the storyteller. Her story continued to be published and passed down through generations, with the details of her story constantly changing each time it was told.

The details of La Llorona’s character such as her indigenous identity and class status are part of her *historia* which gives audiences an insight into Mexican history and culture in both the past and the present. When people retell the story of La Llorona, they are participating in the tradition of oral storytelling which passes cultural information between storyteller and listener. In “The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream,” Perez states that the story of La Llorona is a “cultural touchstone,” a way for people to connect to a Greater Mexican community.²⁴ By connecting to a Greater Mexican community, the story is capable of reflecting a reality which exists in both in the past and within the present moment. La Llorona can be portrayed as a poor or indigenous woman, acknowledging the economic and social oppression women experienced at the time of the invasion and continue to endure in modern day Mexico. “In some configurations of the legend, La Llorona’s story is a metaphor for what happens to the Indigenous residents of Mexico as a result of Spanish colonization.”²⁵ When storytellers portray La Llorona as indigenous, they imbue the story with the discrimination indigenous residents face and how little social power they hold at any moment throughout Mexico’s history. Furthermore, when La Llorona is depicted as a poor woman, she teaches audiences about class prejudices made severe after the invasion and the lack of economic power women continue to experience.²⁶ These retellings reveal that La Llorona’s story is happening in the present while remaining rooted to her past. Much like the water she is said to haunt which

²¹ Rene H. Treviño, “Absolving La Llorona: Yda H. Addis’s ‘The Wailing Woman,’” *Legacy* 36, no. 1 (2019): 124.

²² Janvier, *Legends of the City of Mexico*, 164.

²³ Vicente Riva Palacio and Juan de Dios Peza, *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1927), 51.

²⁴ Perez, “The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream,” 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

holds the memories of her children, La Llorona's fluid interpretations are rooted in critical memories.

The story of La Llorona provides a platform to discuss modern day injustices and to remind Mexican society of the country's violent past. La Llorona's story holds a place in many Mexican households. However, her story plays a more particular role in Mexican society because it operates as a haunting. In "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," Fernandez dissects the concept of rhetorical haunting and asserts that it ". . . is specifically tied to the critical memory of trauma and injustice. Not all critical memory invokes a rhetorical haunting, but all rhetorical hauntings are rooted in critical memory."²⁷ Rhetorical hauntings encapsulate the trauma marginalized communities experience and ensure that the memories are never forgotten. The story of La Llorona operates as a haunting because she reminds all Mexican people not only of the country's history of colonialism, but also the continuing impact colonialism has had on communities across both sides of the border. An example of the effects La Llorona's haunting has on people can be found in *Recuerdos de Durango: Narraciones y Leyendas*, Tomás Dimas Arenas version highlights the way people feel after hearing La Llorona's wails. Arenas writes, "*Los hombres se encontraban cobardes y a las mujeres les temblaba todo el cuerpo; los corazones, se sobresaltaban al oír este gemido terrible, largo que penetraba hasta los huesos.*"²⁸ The men trembling in fear and the women feeling her cry in their bones demonstrates the power behind La Llorona's haunting and her ability to pull on the critical memories. La Llorona offers people a space to reflect on the culture that has embedded and interwoven itself within her narrative.

La Llorona's hauntings makes her existence throughout Mexico's public sphere fluid, further emphasizing how she rises above time. As Perez notes, to "those who participate in the transmission of the lore . . . through storytelling or as interlocutors, La Llorona is alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, a person, legend, ghost, goddess, metaphor, story, and/or symbol."²⁹ La Llorona takes on many forms with the time and place in which people retell her story influencing the shape of the narrative. La Llorona's story is a rhetorical haunting and her hauntings can be seen as responses to economic, political, gendered, and social oppression.³⁰ Additionally, her hauntings demonstrate the fluidity of her interpretations because she pulls from critical memory to haunt the present moment, following her community

²⁷ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 57.

²⁸ Tomás Dimas Arenas, *Recuerdos de Durango: Narraciones y Leyendas* (Durango, 2001), 107.

²⁹ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 2.

³⁰ Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream," 155.

wherever they need her. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes in “Artworks in Word in Image,” audiences must understand that artworks or, as with La Llorona, folkloric stories “are marked by an immediate presentness in time and at the same time by rising above time”³¹ Sometimes La Llorona takes on the role of a poor woman, or an indigenous woman, or any combination of the two. The husband may be rich, a white man, or both. These identities shift the story’s meaning and make it adaptable to the era in which it is needed while also keeping it rooted within history. Each of her identities informs the audience of present social norms, but also rises above time, connecting communities across both sides of the border to their cultural origins and to the current challenges they endure. The adaptability of her story allows for her story to be molded and layered as necessary. As La Llorona follows the flow of rivers in search of her children, she follows the flow of communities and takes on the needs of her community. While her story exists in Mexico’s public sphere, the story of La Llorona has made its way into the Chicano mainstream.

La Llorona’s movements across the border further illustrate the fluidity of her interpretations which allow her to be shaped to the needs of the storyteller and audience. The story of La Llorona has moved beyond Mexico, crossed the border, and settled into many states that are near the border such as Arizona, California, Texas, and New Mexico.³² As a result, La Llorona takes on new forms, becoming, for some, a voice of reason and a space for reflection. Specifically, her ties to Chicano culture have allowed Chicano communities to reclaim her as a symbol of empowerment. One example of La Llorona’s fluid interpretations in communities across the border can be found in *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians* in which Catrióna Rueda Esquibel argues for the recognition of La Llorona and her connection to lesbian Latina motherhood. She analyzes stories where La Llorona is rendered as a lesbian which makes her capable of experiencing both great love and great violence.³³ Esquibel argues that the variations of La Llorona’s story serves as a reminder of colonization and as a warning to women to be careful of the partners they pick, their sexuality, and even abortion. Perez’s “The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream,” analyzes the story not only from the Chicana perspective but also looks at La Llorona’s evolution within popular culture. She identifies La Llorona as the bogeywoman of Mexico and Chicano folklore, emphasizing that she exists in multiple

³¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Artworks in Word and Image,” *Theory, Culture, Society* 23 (1992): 58.

³² La Llorona is told across many Latin American countries and states within the United States. However, the scope of this analysis remains on her connection to Mexico and the borderlands.

³³ Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, *With Her Machete in Her Hand* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 33.

spaces.³⁴ La Llorona's existence in multiple spaces further solidifies her ability to move with the tides of temporal and spatial distances. As she has settled within Chicano spaces, La Llorona reaffirms her power to champion the causes of her community.

Chicanos have retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined her story. As Domino Renee Perez establishes in *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*, La Llorona's story became intertwined with Mexican culture and society, playing an important role in the shaping of social norms and expectations even as families migrated and created new communities away from Mexico.³⁵ La Llorona has since followed her children and migrated into Chicano spaces and taken residence in their communities as a figure of resistance. Chicanos have reinterpreted in their oral storytelling and reimagined her story in the literature and music they create because she often takes on the role of muse.³⁶ Her status as muse serves as a means to haunt and La Llorona's presentness within Chicano communities requires methods which reach a contemporary audience. Works such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* provides a platform for La Llorona to reach modern audiences while remaining rooted in history. Chicano communities have retold her story through different media in order to continue conveying her significance in the context of what is needed for the community. As Perez explains, reinterpreting La Llorona within Chicano spaces presents an opportunity to forge connections and highlight her ability to both take and bring forth life.³⁷ She becomes a source of strength and a site for reflection.

La Llorona houses a convergence of worlds within her story and creates a site for Chicanos to reflect on the issues that their community faces, ultimately reaffirming the significance of her position within the community. La Llorona's movement across the border and settling in Chicano spaces demonstrates a convergence between Mexico and the U.S. and the way in which a new world is being created.³⁸ The creation of this world does not change the way that La Llorona rhetorically haunts communities.³⁹ Similarly to the way La Llorona rhetorically haunts Mexico, she haunts Chicano communities. She voices concerns of deportation, the strength of cultural connections, and the desire to be recognized. As Perez argues, La Llorona reflects the cultural and national concerns of Chicanos.⁴⁰ While she voices fears, La Llorona also allows for the community to reflect through the process of telling her story and coming

³⁴ Perez, "The Politics of Taking: La Llorona in the Cultural Mainstream," 154.

³⁵ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 10.

³⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁷ Ibid., 45.

³⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 11.

³⁹ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 56.

⁴⁰ Perez, *There Was a Woman*, 11.

to an understanding of necessity for action. La Llorona's haunting provides an opportunity for Chicanos to empower themselves and challenge oppressive institutions and systems.⁴¹ Chicanos tell stories in order to construct identity and perpetuate the rich history of cultural content.⁴² The story of La Llorona and her role within Chicano culture cannot be separated or isolated. To do so would be to untether her from her cultural and historical essence. "Therefore, in every present moment not only is a horizon of the future opened up but also the horizon of the past is in play."⁴³ The peculiarity of folklore lies in its essence which reveals the problems of the era and moves communities toward a place where they may reflect on the past that is always at play and use the past to create a future that is one of strength and resistance.

The new world created by La Llorona's haunting within Chicano communities exists both beyond the physical border and outside of time. "This demonstrates, I think, the absolute presentness of art to all times and places. Art is able to build bridges that reach beyond the enclosure and space in which it originated."⁴⁴ La Llorona's interpretations are fluid both in time and space. Her folklore is steeped in the cultural history of Mexico while also continuing to meet the present needs of communities across both sides of the border. The retelling, adapting, and layering of her story allows storytellers and audiences to learn from La Llorona and become aware of the context in which people tell her story. La Llorona exists in Mexico's past and in this moment within Mexico's public sphere. After her migration, La Llorona did not leave Mexico and instead she continued haunting Mexico while haunting Chicano communities across the border. Each household which retells her story forges a bridge to her origins and to the necessity of retelling her story in the now. La Llorona takes on many faces with each reflecting the current state of her community.

The story of La Llorona has been retold, reinterpreted, and reimagined for generations. Through the different versions of La Llorona's story, scholars have identified many variations of her character and analyzed the slight shifts in meaning that come as a result of the changes. As people retell her story, the significance of her wailing and her role in shaping Mexican and Chicano culture becomes more and more pronounced. Each meaning generates a new layer which cements La Llorona's status as critical to Mexican and Chicano traditions and storytelling. Scholars suggest that the transformations and adaptability of her story not only reconnect her with the past but also give La Llorona the ability to call attention to the issues that impact certain groups

⁴¹ Fernandez, "La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere," 55.

⁴² Reese, "Storytelling in Mexican Homes: Connections Between Oral and Literacy Practices," 277-78.

⁴³ Gadamer, "Artworks in Word and Image," 59.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 59.

in today's society. Her story connects to issues such as colonialism and gender expectations, but also to resistance across borders. La Llorona's story can be molded to fit the needs of her audience and of the storyteller in order to bring awareness to the challenges they find critical. La Llorona builds a bridge beyond time and across space, connecting the children she first cried for to the children who now call upon her for the cultural knowledge and empowerment she carries.