

INVOKING LA LLORONA: ABJECTION AS A SITE OF POWER IN JOVITA GONZÁLEZ,  
CHERRIE MORAGA, AND JAYRO BUSTAMANTE

By

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to analyze how La Llorona's abjection allows her and those who call on her to exist as specters, haunting the space of their personal, cultural, or historical trauma to make sense of their abuses and gain power to combat the oppressive structures that allowed for abuse to occur. I include both Historical and Literary contexts to locate La Llorona as a transcultural and hemispheric conduit that provides a space for the feminine collective to find the familiar in the grotesque and carve out a space for themselves in a society that would otherwise force them into silence. I will use this essay to argue how historical and contemporary artists across North and Central America have invoked La Llorona's abjection to counter the ongoing dominance of colonial, patriarchal power that has forced them into similar subjugated roles across time and space.

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## Introduction

“The cry of La Llorona is every woman’s lament,” wrote Chicana author and critic Cherrie Moraga in May of 2018 at the onset of public cries for the mistreatment of families being separated at the U.S-Mexico border. Her blog post, *This Is America*, is a commentary on the political situation surrounding the migrant crisis at the border which she deemed to be the fault of “...greed that makes immigrant detention centers where human beings are caged good business for private prison companies.” The piece opens with the familiar cries of Latin America’s most prolific folkloric figure, La Llorona, who laments “Mis hijos!...My children, where have you gone?” In this iteration of the legend, Moraga views La Llorona as a native mother, perhaps linked to La Malinche, who has seen the ongoing destruction and devastation of her children, the inhabitants of North and Central America, at the hands of colonialism and the American government. In this respect, La Llorona’s cry of “Mis hijos!” is a metaphorical cry of the Indigenous motherland for the children who are sacrificed and mistreated at the hands of Western colonialism and imperialism, both at the immediate southern United States border with Mexico from California to Texas and farther south into Central and South American countries who still feel the weight of colonial oppression.

Though La Llorona is traditionally ascribed, especially in North American media, to Mexican-American culture and struggles, Moraga broadens La Llorona’s scope by highlighting the demographic shift currently occurring on the border. Moraga builds this connection by tracing the contentious and historical border struggle that began at the end of the Mexican-American war when portions of northern Mexico, along with its citizens, were taken by the United States. It resulted in an ongoing struggle for the reclaiming of identities and citizenship for Mexican-Americans, and later grew to encompass all who came from the south in search of

the mythical American dream. With the current border and immigrant crisis, it is no longer Mexican refugees who are at the forefront, but rather Guatemalan refugees, often families, who are forced to suffer abuse by being detained in unsanitary detention centers for an extended period of time where they are subject to unethical treatment governed by racist ideologies. Beyond this, children are being separated from their parents, which has caused an alarming issue regarding the movement of these unaccompanied minors. These abuses are broadcast on a global level where the attention rests primarily on the children who are impacted and the mothers whose wailing is the only recourse to express their grief.

By centralizing La Llorona as a mother grieving for her children, Moraga builds a connection between the Mexican-American community who has historically suffered similar abuses, and the new demographic of Guatemalan refugees. Through this connection, La Llorona's cries open an avenue for the Mexicana, Chicana, and Latina to express their pain and anger towards the unjust society that creates situations where their only recourse is wailing. The connection allows women from these different cultural backgrounds to find their voices in a community that silences them. By associating La Llorona with this shift in immigration demographics from primarily Mexican to Central American refugees, Moraga broadens La Llorona's reach across borders and cultures. Moraga shows how La Llorona can function as a hemispheric figure who not only serves to stand as the Mexican-American folk mother, but as the Central American mother, as well.

*This is America* provides a modern example of the long historical relationship between folklore and literature. As a practice, incorporating folkloric elements in literary and intellectual works functions in a number of different ways. María Eugenia Cotera explores the many different reasons for this marriage in her book chapter, "Latino/a Literature and the Uses of

Folklore.” Cotera explains that interest in this practice resulted as a reaction to “broader historical changes that transformed the political and economic realities for Latino/as” (“Latino/a Literature” 219). The practice was an attempt to combat the cultural erasure that was occurring within the U.S. as part of ongoing colonial practices to homogenize the nation’s population. Since then, authors and scholars alike have deployed folklore expressions in literary and intellectual works to make claims of subjugated knowledge, unearth collective historical memory, offer feminist critiques, and to trope the trope “via a meta-critique of the very canonical status that folklore has obtained” (Cotera, “Latino/a Literature” 219).

Moraga’s deployment of the La Llorona folkloric figure above pulls on a number of these different uses to unite two subjugated populations while also redefining La Llorona’s traditional position as a villainous monster woman. Moraga offers a critique of La Llorona’s historical patriarchal position and transforms her into a mourning mother who is physically helpless while her children suffer. Moraga is also pulling on collective memory shared between two subjugated populations who have encountered colonial violence and displacement across history. Moraga’s use of the Lloronan figure is one of many examples of how authors have utilized La Llorona’s myth to make sense of their own struggles with colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative violence. This essay will focus on three primary examples of how authors and artists across North and South America have utilized La Llorona’s myth in their own stories, but I will begin by building context for the myth by providing a historical, literary review of her numerous iterations.

### Literature Review

Traditionally, La Llorona symbolizes “the monstrous personification of failed womanhood” (Treviño 123). While she is one of the most popular monster tales within Latinx

communities, the details of her story change frequently depending on the storyteller. In my family, our version paints La Llorona as a vengeful woman who commits infanticide out of revenge towards her husband who leaves her for another woman. After realizing what she has done, she drowns herself in the same river in which she drowned her children, and her spirit is left to wander waterways in search of them. If she finds a child while she's searching, she abducts them and they're never seen again. Author Domino Renee Perez opens her book, *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*, with the version she learned from her mother. Her version describes La Llorona as a jealous woman who murders her children to keep her husband's attention for herself. After her husband discovers what she's done, he leaves her and she dies of loneliness. She can't get into heaven because of her sins, so as punishment, she wanders the world looking for her children in the hopes that, in finding them, she will be allowed into heaven (Perez xi-xii). Both of these versions present La Llorona as a vain, selfish figure who murders her children for her own gains. Historically, these types of tales are the most commonly transcribed and spread about her with the specifics of her motivations differing, but the same selfishness remains.

One often cited early version of the legend was published in 1910 by American folklorist Thomas A. Janvier in *Legends of the City of Mexico*. This version depicts La Llorona as a truly monstrous woman who murders any child born to her until "her conscience began to prick her about what she did with her children" and she began wandering the streets as "penance for her heinous acts" (136). Janvier makes the connection between La Llorona and the Aztec goddess, Cihuacotl, crediting the origin of the La Llorona myth to the Aztec myth of the goddess. In Janvier's text, Cihuacoatl, like La Llorona, is a woman who "appears dressed in white, bearing on her shoulder a little cradle, as though she were carrying a child; and she can be heard sobbing



and shrieking” (163). She is a “bad omen” to those who witness her and described by Fray Bernadino de Sahagun as “a demon...represented as a woman” (Janvier 163).

The transformation of Cihuacoatl to La Llorona, Janvier argues, occurred when Catholic missionaries were trying to convert the native indigenous peoples to Christianity. It was a way for the indigenous people to keep their “old-time faith in their old-time gods” while ensuring loyalty to the colonizers (Janvier 163). Over the course of generations, the legend became less about the worship of the Aztec goddess and more about the fear one has of the unknown and, more specifically, the fear men have of a strong, disobedient woman. The spiritual aspect to the legend was taken and replaced to instill obedience in a people with the main targets being women and children.

However, the first reported written form in Mexico of La Llorona, said to have been a sonnet written by nineteenth century scholar and poet Don Manuel Carpio, provides a different perspective to the myth (“Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society & Culture”). In the sonnet titled simply “La Llorona,” Don Carpio recounts the tale of a woman from his small, unnamed town or *pueblo* who was murdered by her husband. Don Carpio identifies the woman as Rosalía and paints the image of a ghostly figure that, in her pain, runs crying through the streets in agony over her own death instilling fear in all who hear her. She runs through the pueblo wrapped in her veil until she ends at the riverbank where she subsequently disappears until the following night (Carpio 13-14). The whole town is left in fear of the pained wailing of the woman.

To connect the legend even further back in time, historian Luis González Obregón in his text *Las Calles de Mexico* credits the legend of La Llorona as appearing in Mexico City in 1550 as a wailing apparition running down the streets of the city dressed in her classic white dress (Leddy). Obregón’s version focuses less on how La Llorona appears physically and more on her

wailing, indicating that the rattling noise is what disturbs the witnesses in the middle of the night when the moon has risen. Both Don Carpio and González Obregon detail the same kind of apparition of a woman running down the streets in pain, her wailing acting as an omen to those within earshot to stay away. She is described in much the same way in both versions: a woman in a white dress whose main characteristics and identifiers are her cries and the white clothing that cover her.

Although Janvier, Carpio, and Obregon all detail similar stories of wailing women, the most surprising aspect of Carpio's and Obregon's versions is how neither credit her wailing and wandering to infanticide. Rather, both authors identify her as a victim of domestic violence, a horrifying truth many women face in a machismo society and one that society seldom pays attention to or attempts to alleviate. By positioning La Llorona as the victim, Carpio and Obregon allow La Llorona to function as a mirror to the very society she is meant to scare. She represents the violent acts committed against women by their husbands, lovers, or society as a whole, and stands as a testament to the ways in which communities fail them by turning away.

This functions in contrast to versions like Janvier's retelling, which uses La Llorona as a personification of dangerous feminine sexuality and independence. In fact, Carpio's version, specifically, aligns more readily with modern day retellings of the La Llorona myth where she acts as the voice and sometimes even protector to those who are victims of violence themselves. She expresses the pain they cannot and calls attention to the injustices committed against them. Like Moraga, who used the image of La Llorona's wailing to show the grief of the Guatemalan people who suffer injustices at the U.S. and Mexico border, modern scholars use similar tactics to show how La Llorona can function as a symbol for the oppressed and serve as a conduit for their own grief.

Many Chicana authors such as Domino Renee Perez, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Cherrie Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, and Gloria Anzaldúa have taken up the task of redefining who La Llorona is and what she represents for the community. Anzaldúa, most notably, is often cited by authors such as Perez and Gaspar de Alba for her interpretation and analysis of La Llorona in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa allows La Llorona to take residence in the cultural mythos alongside La Virgen de Guadalupe as well as La Malinche, all three of whom, she argues, form the Aztec Goddess Coatlicue. With these three women, Anzaldúa provides an examination of what the three pinnacles of womanhood represent for the Chicana people: “All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and La Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of other two” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 52).

Anzaldúa does not identify La Llorona, or La Malinche, through the negative attributes that have been given to them by the common discourse. Rather, she chooses to identify both of them through their maternal role, addressing that before they were transgressors, they were mothers and, therefore, should be referred to as such. Anzaldúa also follows the pattern of connecting La Llorona to Coatlicue, further building the connection between La Llorona’s colonial iteration to her alleged indigenous roots. However, instead of further reinforcing the patriarchal and colonial narrative of a demon goddess, Anzaldúa interprets Coatlicue and, by extension, La Llorona as a powerful protector of the mestiza.

Perez is another key figure in La Llorona scholarship and analysis. Her book, *There was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*, examines the many instances when La Llorona appears in print, artwork, and digital media throughout history to examine the ways her figure has shifted and transformed over the course of her history. Perez argues that La Llorona is

“an avatar of social and cultural conflict” that reflects the shifts being experienced by the changing population of Chican@s as they move through different spaces (either physical, metaphorical, or spiritual) (13). Perez claims that it is up to the Chican@s to “determine, individually, which cultural values, beliefs, and productions we wish to carry with us across borders and into the cultural mainstream” and that La Llorona’s fate is, ultimately, in our hands (13). By witnessing and being involved in this shift in her narrative from cruel, monstrous woman to vindicated mother, we are able to establish a new set of norms that validate shifting cultural tides regarding femininity, motherhood, and villainy.

Modern La Llorona retellings are following this trend identified by Perez where La Llorona is provided more humanity by connecting with her audience on a personal level. Rather than function as a site of fear, she becomes a home for those who feel disenfranchised by the larger community. An often-cited example of this narrative shift is found in Sandra Cisneros’ short story “Woman Hollering Creek” where La Llorona is figuratively present in the roles of three different characters in the short story as well as the literal Gritona Creek that runs behind Cleofilas’ house in Seguin, Texas. For the main character, La Llorona began as a scary story she heard as a child, but as she finds herself trapped in an abusive, loveless marriage in a place she does not consider home, she not only finds solace in the babbling, incoherent noises of the creek, but also in the loud, unabashed wailing from Felice at the end of the story.

Whereas previous iterations of the myth command the audience to run away from her, “Woman Hollering Creek” instructs readers to listen between the incoherencies to discover what it is Cleofilas truly hears and understands from the babbling and how this understanding not only connects Cleofilas with the mythical mother, but also allows Cleofilas to find solace with a figure who has received similar treatment. What this story addresses with the La Llorona myth

relies more so on how La Llorona fell victim to a force far greater than herself, whether metaphorically or literally, and suffered at the hands of others who wanted to cause her and her children harm. It does not centralize her significance in the murdering of her children. By strategically reframing La Llorona's narrative in this way, Cisneros is able to give new meaning and life into her story. This is but one example of how Chicanas and Mexicanas alike are driving the shift in the social and cultural conscience regarding La Llorona to keep her relevant and alive within the community. As Perez says, "La Llorona's future has always been in the hands of her cultural and metaphoric children" and that by "determining her fate, we will decide our own" (13).

One incredibly impactful way La Llorona's story is being reimagined and given new life is through Mexican Author Edith Mora Ordonez who rhetorically uses La Llorona to bring about awareness for the Ciudad Juarez femicides that left many women dead in the Chihuahua desert. This use of the legend not only connects La Llorona to a relevant issue occurring within the community in present day, but it also allows for community members to call forth her image as a signifier of voice against oppressive silence. Mora Ordonez collected and examined poetry written by female authors from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border that centralized the femicides through the voices of mothers, daughters, and victims. The purpose of this endeavor was to identify ways in which La Llorona can be found in these texts.

Although La Llorona is not outright identified by name in the original pieces, Mora Ordonez calls forth her image to illustrate how La Llorona as a symbol could be used by victims of sexual assault to bring attention to their otherwise ignored suffering. This particular piece utilizes the La Llorona figure to counteract the violence and forgetfulness often surrounding the topic of violence against women. Mora Ordonez argues that La Llorona's symbolic presence is

represented in the cries of the poem's speakers that express not just pain and grief for the loss of daughters and mothers, but also a screaming cry "of resistance that acts against the silence" and suppression of the topic from the cultural, social, and national discourse from both sides of the border (Mora Ordonez 78). This powerful piece reads the figure of La Llorona into spaces where she is otherwise unnamed, but where her presence is still felt in the grief and wailing exhibited by the women who are suffering. Mora Ordonez's reading of the La Llorona figure seems to address what Carpio only alluded to in his poem. Despite society's attempts to vehemently subordinate female expressions of loss, grief, and pain, La Llorona's cries never cease to haunt the very spaces where she is silenced.

La Llorona is able to function in this shifting capacity through her position as a liminal figure who is capable of traversing, or haunting, different in-between spaces. Author David Ramirez Plascencia argues that La Llorona's liminality settles her between "'normal life' and the 'underworld'" and has allowed her to remain in the collective imaginary of the culture as well as given her the ability to evolve with the changes occurring within the community itself. For Ramirez Plascencia, access to the internet has increased La Llorona's capabilities of transitioning between the supernatural underworld and into the normal life of community members on a more frequent basis. Videos, article comments, and social media not only allow for the story to reproduce, but also lends visual and audio elements to the myth that otherwise would not be replicated in an oral retelling. Her physical appearance and the sounds of her wails are capable of infiltrating the spaces of a wider audience, both within the Chicano community and an international community as well. What this does for her story, Ramirez Plascencia argues based on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "The seven theses about monster culture," is that it allows for "dissimilar attributes of the monster [to] stand against the traditional patriarchal model" (8). In

this respect, La Llorona stands as an abject figure, as Julia Kristeva defines in “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.”

As an abject symbol, La Llorona “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). She is socially grotesque, if not physically grotesque in some appearances, because she inherently disrupts what we expect women to be, specifically in the roles of devoted mother and wife who also remain quiet and submissive. By murdering her children, which symbolizes the rejection of motherhood, she dispels the constructed role of motherhood that is deemed integral in the lives of women through societal norms. Her punishment is then the ultimate price to pay should other women decide to violate these norms and mores. However, it is not only the act of infanticide that creates an abject symbol out of her.

The very act of her wailing, which is oftentimes incomprehensible to the audience, rejects order and definition while also disrupting the mores that govern female voice and expression. We, as the audience, cannot seem to understand exactly why she finds the need to mourn her lost children if she was the cause of their death. We cannot identify whether it is guilt, grief, or anger that causes the woman to wail, yet her wailing is a defining characteristic. Moreover, in the act of wailing, La Llorona disrupts the image of a silent, submissive woman who puts the comfort of her community above herself.

Traditionally, tellings of her story attempt to trap her in conventionality and instill fear, guilt, or disgust in the listener of her tale while also, as Anzaldúa notes, ensuring female conformity. Yet, through her abjection, she is also capable of functioning as a conduit for women to think about, explore, and talk through ideas that are incomprehensible to the larger, more traditional community. La Llorona allows Chicanas/Mexicanas/Latinas to question the traditional social bounds placed on them by exploring taboo freedoms that come from the rejection of

traditional marriage, womanhood, and heteronormativity. Her figure and symbol are powerful identifiers for women to locate and call upon when they are otherwise unable to express their emotions. However, as Mora Ordonez illustrates, she does not always need to be named to be invoked.

### Thesis Statement

Though early written records of La Llorona tend to rely on depictions similar to Janvier's ghastly Weeping Woman, her figure has been transformed through more subtle appearances in cultural texts that allude to her story, rather than outright naming her. These narratives often describe ways in which the speaker, often portrayed as a woman or with a feminine voice, encounters a figure similar to or experiences grief in ways that are similar to La Llorona. Though there are many examples of this narrative choice, I will focus on three distinct eras that supersede major historical moments for the Mexican and Latinx communities within the North and Central American countries. These historical moments hold significance because they provide snapshots in history when oppressed communities were responding to subsets or remnants of colonial oppression that not only silenced their voices, but displaced them as well. These iterations of La Llorona's narrative also show how, through the horror of wailing and grief, these oppressed communities are able to find or form power within themselves and their community to help them combat the oppressions they face.

My analysis focuses on how La Llorona's abjection allows her and those who call on her to exist as specters, haunting the space of their personal, cultural, or historical trauma to make sense of their abuses and gain power to combat the oppressive structures that allowed for abuse to occur. I include both Historical and Literary contexts to locate La Llorona as a transcultural and hemispheric conduit that provides a space for the feminine collective to find the familiar in



the grotesque and carve out a space for themselves in a society that would otherwise force them into silence. I will use this essay to argue how historical and contemporary artists across North and Central America have invoked La Llorona's abjection to counter the ongoing dominance of colonial, patriarchal power that has forced them into similar subjugated roles across time and space.

### Jovita González and Subtle Rebellion

The first texts I will examine showcase how female authors in the late 19th to early twentieth centuries used subtle rhetorical tools to counteract the dominant discourse of the time regarding female autonomy and voice. This dominant discourse stands as the signifier of colonial oppression because it not only originates within the oppressed community (Mexican descendants), but is further instigated by the invading community (White America). More specifically, I will illustrate how three folk tales transcribed by prolific Texas folklorist Jovita González, who centered her stories on the border between Mexico and the U.S. in south Texas in the tumultuous years when modernity and racial oppression weighed heavily over the lands, used La Llorona as a subtle resistance against gendered oppression.

This moment in history, preceded by the annexation of parts of Mexico to the U.S. a generation before, challenged community members such as González to negotiate their own identities on ancestral lands that no longer belonged to them while dealing with extremely violent attacks from the invading Americans (G. González 4). This resulted in class and racial discourse that attempted to counteract the negative attitude towards Mexicans in Texas by transitioning from more traditional Mexican ideologies of class stratification into a more unifying call to join together regardless of class identification (G. González 6). Middle to upper class women in South Texas sought to bring about social change through their own organizations

such as the League of Mexican Women who “sought to identify with those who existed in society’s margins...to improve the lives of the poor to the greatest extent possible given their own constraints” (G. González 43). Gabriela González explains that this was in an attempt to counteract the negative stereotypes of the Mexican population in Texas and to strengthen the political power of their own communities (G. González 43).

Jovita González, too, did this work in the early 1900’s, specifically with her engagement with the Texas Folklore Society, a society dominated by white men who more often published books that “functioned as nostalgic apologias for Anglo imperialism” (Cotera, “A Woman of the Borderlands” 4). González subtly counteracted these texts and the nostalgia of the Texas revolution by covertly challenging what scholar Leticia M. Garza-Falcon calls a “rhetoric of dominance” through her folklore and academic writings (qtd. In Cotera, “A Woman of the Borderlands” 4). González’s master’s thesis is a key example of this covert (or overt, as Maria Eugenia Cotera argues) challenge towards the dominant narrative regarding the newly formed Republic of Texas and its inhabitants, most notably the struggle between Mexican-Americans and the Anglo invaders (Cotera, “A Woman of the Borderlands” 5).

Furthermore, like other middle-class woman mentioned above, González also took part in founding the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) to combine the two forming factions of Mexican-Americans within south Texas, namely the old world rancheros and the new world urban middle class to help strengthen cultural identity while also assimilating into the new society the Anglo invaders brought with them to Texas (Cotera, “A Woman of the Borderlands” 27). Though the examples above are more direct retaliations against the “rhetoric of dominance,” I argue that González also used her transcribed folktales in this subtle resistance where the

female character's actions in "Without a Soul" and "The Bullet Swallower" are actually subtle motivators to transform the traditional mindset surrounding women and their independence.

González is considered by some a pioneer of Chicana feminism and Mexican-American literature; her works are valuable recordings of early life in South Texas (Reyna x). Though her setting is situated on the borderlands of South Texas, González's work is more southward facing than some of her contemporaries, like Adina de Zavala. De Zavala is notable for connecting herself and her folktales in a more northward direction, primarily choosing to orient herself within European spaces by connecting more closely to her Spanish ancestry. González, on the other hand, orients herself and her stories in relation to the southern half of the border, connecting the folktales to Mexico and the Mexican heritage her characters claim through their societal structures, gender norms, and stories of their familial migration. Her characters, though prominent members of society, do not align themselves with the American or European spaces. Instead, they stand as the last remnants of colonial Mexico within Texas before it was eradicated and replaced by American values. The La Llorona figure in her folktales is then both a figure of the female transgression within the community of South Texas, and a transnational figure that ties the characters, stories, and transgressions back across the border to Mexico.

The first folktales I will examine to argue this point, told from two different perspectives, are "Without a Soul" and "The Woman Who Lost Her Soul" which were both published in Sergio Reyna's edited compilation of González's folktales. Both versions, though similar in plot for most of the story, diverge in their endings and minor details that allow for two different interpretations of the same text. I argue that these transcribed folktales, "Without a Soul" and "The Woman Who Lost Her Soul," represent how isolation and grief are transformed into a punishment by society against transgressive women. Yet I also argue that "Without a Soul,"

specifically, shows how forming a community between two transgressive women can work to absolve them of the sins they are accused of by the overall society, thus questioning what it means to be transgressive.

“Without a Soul” and “The Woman Who Lost Her Soul” are two versions of the same story, presented in two different modalities, at different points in time, and to different audiences. González first presented “Without a Soul” orally in 1928 at the Meeting of the Texas Folk-Lore Society where her audience consisted of predominately white, oftentimes rich, Texan men (González 141). By contract, González published the second version, “The Woman Who Lost Her Soul,” in the 1935 and 1936 issues of *Mary Immaculate Magazine*, a Catholic magazine that catered to the religious and cultural ideologies of the community (Vizcaíno-Alemán 39). The differences in modality and audience directly impact the ending and possible interpretations of the story, providing readers of the texts a multifaceted view of the same story.

“Without a Soul” and “The Woman Who Lost Her Soul” both follow the encounter the narrator has with a woman named “La Desamalda” and “Maldita,” both phrases that insinuate the woman’s cursed nature before she is even properly given a name (J. González 136). Both versions begin in the town’s rectory where the narrator is awaiting the priest, Father José María, until the narrator notices the people outside the rectory reacting fearfully to a woman who is donned in black. The narrator decides to follow the woman and finds herself in a small hovel where they confront La Desalmada. The narrator listens as La Desalmada recounts her transgression and explains that she is being blamed for the death of her close friend because she willingly and knowingly courted the close friend’s betrothed. This act stains La Desalmada’s reputation, and she is forced out of her community, left to wander alone in penance.

As I mentioned previously, the key differences between the two tales arise from the modality and audience that González was interacting with. Reyna explains in a footnote for “Without a Soul” that it was presented “as a personal field experience” where González substitutes herself as the narrator (Reyna 135 un). By presenting this version orally at a meeting for The Texas Folklore Society, González lends a feminine voice and feminine perspective to the events of the story. The oral version ends on a cliffhanger with La Desalmada proclaiming “My Soul is gone. My soul is lost” before the narration abruptly ends, providing no solution to the events of the story, leaving audience members with a sense of foreboding as González’s words hang in the air (J. González 140). In the written form, “The Woman Who Lost Her Soul,” published in *Mary Immaculate Magazine*, González’s grandfather, Don Francisco, is named as the narrator and there is a marked difference in how he engages with and tries to help La Desalmada. He takes on a paternal role towards the disgraced woman and, ultimately, finds a way to integrate her back into their society by adopting her into his family. The written version ends with La Desalmada’s silence as she is presumed saved by a religious, patriarchal figure. These differences in narrative voice are significant because they establish the gender imbalances present within the Mexican-American community in South Texas and, I argue, offer a critique of the patriarchal ideals that governed the society.

As Melina Vizcaíno-Alemán argues in her piece, “Rethinking Jovita González’s work: bio-ethnography and her South Texas regionalism,” the switch in narrative voice between the two stories was a direct move by González to show how masculine figures are the only ones within patriarchal societies who can repair a transgressive woman’s fractured identity. Vizcaíno-Alemán notes that González, herself, felt fractured from her community represented through the fractured, unresolved tension in “Without a Soul” where she finds similarities between La

Desalmada's solitude, and the solitude González felt (41). The narrative switch from feminine to masculine voice between the oral and written versions then "became a way to re-establish [González's] place in the traditional Mexican family" (41). Though I do agree with Vizcaíno-Alemán that the masculine narrator is the only one able to repair the fractured identity of both La Desalmada and González, I argue that the narrative switch actually acts as a critique of the ways the patriarchy reaffirms itself by forcing transgressive women back into subordinate roles rather than dismantle the societal structure that marks them as transgressive in the first place. Similar to Don Carpio's version of La Llorona, "The Woman Who Lost Her Soul" shows how the community remains willfully ignorant to the sufferings of women and treats their incomprehensible grief as something that needs to be silenced. I argue against Vizcaíno-Alemán's reading of these folktales and instead posit that the oral version, "Without a Soul," provides the two transgressive women with a space to unite and grieve together while also forcing the audience members to hear the final cry of La Desalmada's injustice from González herself.

Despite the female narrator in "Without a Soul" being an intellectual and independent woman who is well liked by the religious patriarchal figure, Father José María, she, too is a non-conventional woman who seems to be in isolation from the community at large. It is her intellect and ability to maneuver the world as a man would that creates this friction between herself and her community. We see this alluded to in the opening scene when she stands by the rectory window observing the world outside the Church. However, rather than this pointing to her place in society as someone above the Mexican community, as Vizcaíno-Alemán suggests, I suggest her glance through the rectory window, instead, illustrates how she is separated from her community by a barrier; one she is able to look through, but never pass. I posit this isolation is

because she is a woman with her own agency, capable of forming her own thoughts, beliefs, and actions outside of male influence. The narrator shows this agency from the very beginning of the narrative when she visits Father José María to discuss a manuscript she discovered (González 135).

According to González's master's thesis, women who take on responsibilities and qualities traditionally associated with men, such as discovery and the ability to have an intellectual conversation with a man, seldom find acceptance within their community (*Life Along the Border* 46). González writes, "[women] had complete control in the home management, yet she lived a life of conventual seclusion" often forced to adhere to whatever the men in her life deemed appropriate (*Life Along the Border* 46). We see this cruel double standard in the written version of the tale when Father José María explains La Desalmada's story to Don Francisco. He explains that La Desalmada was deemed "vain" and "charming" by her community and these attributes are what led to her eventual downfall. The female narrator in the oral version exhibits some of these attributes as well, coming across as proud in her own intellectual work and charming enough to have built a comfortable relationship with Father José María. In the oral version, the feminine narrator functions as a mediator for La Desalmada to connect once again with her community through the shared experience of transgression. Though the tension at the end of the story is not resolved, there is a sense of understanding between the women who are both suffering isolation because of their individual histories.

Perhaps it is because of this isolation, this separation from the community as a whole and its resources, that one woman is seemingly unable to help the other and neither are ever, truly, given names. Yet, I argue that the very act of listening to La Desalmada's tale is transformative for the narrator as she is able to not only understand the other woman through her

unintelligibility, but also come to understand herself and the society she is distanced from. The silence shared between the two can be viewed as an unresolved tension, but it can also stand as an understanding between the two that La Desalmada is not evil. Instead, in witnessing her cries and grief, the narrator and listener are able to give La Desalmada a place to relieve her agony and can take part in the expression of grieving, either for themselves, the other woman, or womankind as a whole.

It is important to note that this salvation occurs within a liminal space between two liminal figures, forming a middle ground where the specter of La Llorona is able to appear. The liminal space, represented as the hovel where La Desalmada resides, exists both within society, yet decidedly outside of society at the same time. This space is where the narrator and La Desalmada are able to connect and drop their own societal barriers. La Desalmada is capable of opening up and explaining her side of the story, as well as releasing her fears that seem incomprehensible to the reader. However, to the narrator, La Desalmada's cries are the wailing of a woman who is desperate to be welcomed back to a society that has rejected her because of the actions of a man.

As with La Llorona and her many iterations, the blame for La Desalmada's transgressive acts and the subsequent death of the innocent friend are placed solely on the woman when the man who was also involved does not suffer any consequences for his actions. For the narrator, who is also transgressive and separate from the community, there is a silent understanding that the suffering La Desalmada feels comes from the guilt of making her friend suffer as she expresses how she has visions of her friend, Rosario, and that "the torments she suffered" are what drove La Desalmada to insanity (J. González 140). Therefore, it is in this version that the



truth of La Desalmada's incomprehensibility and suffering comes to light. She is not wailing in penance for her sins, but wailing for the suffering she feels she inflicted on another woman.

Though this version does not show the same conclusion for La Desalmada as the written version, "The Woman Who Lost Her Soul," I argue that this final moment between the two women provides La Desalmada with the community she desperately mourns. Though the scene between the two seems to suggest "a sense of alienation as a result of non-conventional female behavior" as both women sit outside of the community, disgraced for their own unconventional actions, I argue it shows the formation of a connection or bond between the two women who identify themselves through incomprehensible grief (Vizcaíno-Alemán 41). This bond not only acknowledges La Desalmada's grief and identifies why she is suffering, but it also allows for the narrator to identify her own isolation through La Desalmada's uncontrollable wailing.

Vizcaíno-Alemán makes the same point in her article where she identifies how González used La Desalmada's character as a stand in for herself to show how she felt fractured from her community (41). Yet, I will take it a step further and argue that the narrator, whether González or not, not only identifies with La Desalmada, but understands the gendered injustices perpetuated by the patriarchal society they are both a part of. I argue this understanding works to absolve La Desalmada from her sins by literally giving her a voice through González's narration. This voice allows La Desalmada's story to be heard by the very society who has deemed her as a transgressor and forces members of the society to question their own complicity or guilt within La Desalmada's suffering. Beyond this, because González presented this to a room of upper class white men, I argue González herself was subtly protesting the gendered and racial disparity between herself and her audience members. The power that this version presents is found not only in how the narrator finds herself within the horrific wailing of the cursed woman, but also

how that loud, uncontrollable wailing marks an abrupt end to the story which leaves the reader/listener feeling jarred. It forces the reader/listener to uncomfortably sit in silence and reflect on the events of the story. There is no happy ending. There is only the loud, silent injustice.

As a subtle resistance against patriarchal norms, González is using this version of the folktale and invoking the figure of the inconsolable wailing woman to call to question why transgressive women are shunned and forced into isolation for acting and committing the same sins as men. It does not paint La Desalmada as the villain of the story and instead shows how the narrator understands the nuanced intricacies of La Desalmada's sin as well as the societal structure that marked her as a transgressor. As an invocation of La Llorona, this version forces readers/listeners to question the pre-conditioned notions we have about feminine grief, pain, and guilt and asks us to listen for the truth buried under the surface rather than attempt to silence the mourning.

González provides opportunities for personal introspection in another folktale titled "The Bullet Swallower." In this folktale, González utilizes a frame narrative where the narrator begins the story in third person before morphing themselves into the male voice of the story, Antonio Traga-Balas. Similar to "Without a Soul," the setting of "The Bullet Swallower" opens in the liminal space between the feminine and masculine worlds where readers are introduced to the story from the feminine folklorist voice, but then see the action of the story take shape through the male perspective. It is a gendered cross dressing of sorts that forces readers to question their own interpretation of the monstrous woman found in this folktale. In this tale, the solitary female figure is presented as a woman who lived in sin for most of her life with a man who wasn't her husband until the very end of his life. She undergoes the process of grieving in a chaotic and

incomprehensible fashion and, to Traga-Balas, she is the ultimate abjection. However, her abjection is also where she holds her power over Traga-Ballas, re-defining yet another one of La Llorona's abject attributes.

Though authors such as José E. Limón and Sergio Reyna interpret "The Bullet Swallower" as a folktale depicting "political resistance of the Mexican American," I argue that González works to covertly set up a critique of gender imbalance within the Mexican American community by challenging the embodiment of the border hero with an abject woman (Reyna xxvii). The folktale opens with Traga-Balas' escapades in his past that sets the stage for his perceived heroic actions later on in the story. González strategically crafts Traga-Balas as the traditional border hero seen in other folktales and corridos of the time to covertly engage in this critique. Through her use of the frame narrative structure, González is able to interrogate the border hero trope by presenting it as an overexaggerated recounting of Traga-Balas' heroics when, in reality, we see that he is nothing more than "a landowner by inheritance, a trail driver by necessity, and a smuggler and gambler by choice" indicating that his embodiment of the heroic, rogue bullet swallowing figure is nothing more than a well-crafted façade (J. González 47).

This argument is not without merit. As an author, González's historic framework "is characterized by the political and social conflicts between the conquered and the conquerors" and that, through this framework, she "knowingly depicted...the patriarchal system in which women were seen as having an insignificant role in the political and social development of the community" (Reyna xix-xx). In other words, González sought to show the realities of the community she participated in, including the subordination of women. In the same vein, she did not romanticize old world rogues and heroes, but instead chose to complicate the role of rogue

revolutionaries by showing their complicity in the oppression and abuse against women.

González's novel, *Caballero*, is often cited as the text where González utilizes this feminist critique of the border hero/rogue revolutionary to call attention to the gender imbalance present within the community. Cotera argues that Gonzalez and *Caballero*'s co-author, Margaret Eimer, "[reveal] the class and gendered contradictions behind heroic resistance by demonstrating that (to paraphrase Paredes) a "warrior-hero" defending his rights "with his pistol in his hand" is, more often than not, fighting for control over the women, peones, and property that are his right under the patriarchal code" ("Recovering 'Our' History" 166). This same patriarchal code and way of thought is present in "The Bullet Swallower" through the character, Traga-Balas, and I argue that González is engaging in the same critique as in *Caballero* by presenting a rogue hero who is terrorized by an abject woman.

When Traga-Balas first encounters the troubled couple, he only cares for the man who is dying and not the wife who is in deep emotional distress. For most of the tale, the wife is in a drunken stupor while Traga-Balas sits watching the corpse of her husband for most of the night as well as preparing for the funeral the next day. Throughout the recounting, Traga-Balas describes the woman in negative ways, referring to her as a "shameless creature" who was so drunk she could not stand (J. González 52). It appears as though the woman is more of a hindrance to Traga-Balas than a member of the deceased's family and there is never any attempt to discover why she is so desperate to remain drunk during the marriage to her husband, his death, and in his wake. The only indicator we receive of her troubles is the repeated excuse that she needs to gather her courage for "the ordeal ahead" (J. González 51). No action is truly taken by the woman in the tale until the very end when Traga-Balas has left the corpse for a short while to find others to sit and watch with him. When he returns, he finds the jacal on fire and the

woman yelling “He is burning before he gets to Hell” (J. González 54). This is the last appearance by the woman in Traga-Balas’ retelling of the story and it stands to portray her as a crazed, manic being who is heartlessly mistreating the man who attempted to do right by her in his dying moments.

Yet, what the wife gains through her chaotic grief and pain is the power to instill fear in those who encounter her, most notably, men who hold power in the patriarchal society in which she lives. By utilizing Traga-Balas as the symbolic representation of this patriarchy through his self-identified heroism and actions and connection to the stereotypical border hero, González critiques the validity of the wife’s subordination when she is the one who holds the highest power against Traga-Balas. Though he is the ideal man who does not let his foes get the best of him and despite his courage when dealing with physical threats from other men (both Mexican and American), Traga-Balas is ill equipped to handle threats from a more spectral space, specifically the spectrality of a La Llorona-like figure who is present through the unnamed wife.

Though at the beginning of the tale Traga-Balas attempts to paint the wife as a useless drunkard, once he returns to the jacal to see she has set it and the corpse of her husband on fire, Traga-Balas is instilled with a deep, unnerving fear he has yet to feel. He comments how this fear “nailed [him] to the floor” and left him struggling to gather the courage to re-enter the jacal to put out the blaze (J. González 54). The wife becomes a physical and spiritual threat to Traga-Balas by burning the corpse of her husband. As the only independent act she takes in the narrative, burning her husband’s corpse can be read as a form of self-advocacy that frees her from the patriarchy if only through her transformation into the abject. In this role, she condemns her abusive husband to hell and gives him a monstrous appearance through the burning of his body. Like La Llorona, she is unintelligible to the patriarchy, yet she is capable of unlocking her

own chains through violence and grief and succeeds in driving away the oppressive power that has kept her under its foot for so long.

These tales as a critique of the patriarchy showcase ways in which women can find familiarity and power in the grotesque. Through her subtle narrative moves, González forces readers to question their own preconceived notions of feminine insanity and grief as well as the societal structures that created these ideologies. González's invocation of La Llorona provides an early feminist interpretation for the weeping woman, a move that continues into the Chicano movement of the later twentieth century and further into the twenty-first century.

#### Cherrie Moraga and the transgression of Queerness

Similar to González's subtle resistance through the three women in her folktales, Chicanas in the later half of the 20th century utilized La Llorona and other mythical women to challenge the restrictions placed on those who did not fit within a community's norms. Within the Chicano community in the mid to late twentieth century, particularly during the Chicano Movement, the transgression of female autonomy and voice continued to be a contentious issue that the larger movement attempted to stifle, similar to González's own struggle with freedom and autonomy.

The larger Chicano movement, though noble in its pursuits, focused attention and resources towards elevating the Chicano while further oppressing the Chicana under its machismo ideology (Ruiz 7). Women within the movement who tried to call attention to their own struggles under the machismo culture suffered under the "Malinche complex" which marked them as betrayers or sellouts vis a vis La Malinche (Blackwell 112). Similar to the issues of González's time, this oppression within the community itself was a direct result of the larger ongoing colonial oppression faced by the community as a whole. The Chicano Nationalist

identity relied on this oppression towards women to uphold the traditional familial structure that placed Chicanos as the protectors of the family and Chicana's as the subjugated housekeepers (Blackwell 108). The traditional structure then forced Chicanas to play the submissive role. Those who did not want to play the role were then seen as a threat not just to the movement, but to the Chicano culture as a whole (Blackwell 108).

As author Aida Hurtado notes, this label is not one that Chicanas chose for themselves, but La Malinche did become a symbol for Chicanas to address the oppression they faced because of their gender (16). From the 1980's onwards, La Malinche became one of three mothers alongside La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Llorona that many Chicanas embraced to illustrate their oppressions based on gender (Anzaldúa 52). Further pushing back against coloniality and American imperialism, Chicanas also associated themselves more closely with their indigeneity, tracing back their roots to the Aztec culture. In doing so, they had access to a pantheon of goddesses from which they built and expanded their sources of power, often associating goddesses with the more modern folk figures such as La Llorona. Through these female figures, Chicanas are able to address oppressions beyond gender to encompass class, race, and sexuality within the larger Chicano community, national discourse, and also within Chicana feminist circles.

With the rise of this more challenging discourse, further intersectionalities were pushed to the surface, no longer being delegated as an abject taboo, but pushing against the blatant erasure that kept them hidden for so long. One such abject taboo or transgression was the rise of queerness in Chicana spaces. Though it was not a new concept by any means in the late 1980s into the 1990s, queerness was not often allowed space within the larger Chicano and Chicana movements of the 60s, 70s, and 80s because it transgressed on the conservative sensibilities of

both larger movements as well as the national and cultural mores (Saavedra 103). Instead, these voices were silenced in favor of a more heteronormative dialogue about gender and sexuality. Despite this oppression and homophobic current throughout the 70s and 80s, Chicana Lesbians were often at the forefront of the battles against machismo and gender stereotypes (Saavedra 102).

The uphill battle of bringing queerness to the forefront began to slowly shift into the 90s when queer Chicana activists and writers began asserting their presence in academic, social, and cultural circles. In her historical analysis of queerness in Chicana spaces, Yvette J. Saavedra highlights the ways in which queer activists and scholars began to change the perception of queerness through their work and participation in organizations such as the National Associate of Chicano and Chicana Studies (NACCS). Saavedra notes key moments from NACCS conferences in the 90s when Chicana lesbians stood up against the oppressive erasure that was ongoing within Chicana feminist spaces and outwardly pushed for clearer acknowledgements of queer contributions within the Chicana feminist response to misogyny and sexuality (111). Outside of these public gatherings, queer Chicana authors spoke about oppression and erasure in their own works where they reclaimed figures like La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe to express their frustrations with dominant discourse that delegated them to the margins of society.

Notable Chicana author, playwright, and activist Cherrie Moraga is a key figure who examines this point in her play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. She and other authors were using folk figures, like La Llorona, as a conduit to bring their struggles to the forefront. Other contemporary authors, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Domino Renee Perez, Naomi Quinonez, and Pat Mora, most notably sought to reclaim La Llorona in their poetry, prose, and intellectual



work to give a new meaning to her story by associating her with their own personal struggles. Similarly, Anzaldúa and Moraga choose to closely align the weeping woman with her Aztec predecessors, Coatlicue, the goddess of Earth, and Cihuacoatl, the instigator of war and most threatening goddess in the Aztec pantheon (Perez 77-79). In doing so, both authors reclaim these mythical figures to give them back their power and, by extension, give Chicanas power and autonomy, as well.

Moraga situates *The Hungry Woman* within this struggle for power with Medea, an incomprehensible protagonist, who is struggling to regain the power she once had over her ex-husband, Jasón, and her son, Chac-Mool. In the tale, Medea and other jotería<sup>1</sup> have been outcast from Aztlán for being queer, despite helping create Aztlán. Medea's biggest struggle in the play is coming to terms with her ousting because of her queerness, and she continually grapples with internalized homophobia that stems from colonial ideologies of the heteronormative family structure. In her struggle, Medea perpetuates colonial violence onto those around her, specifically onto the people she loves the most, functioning as both a victim of these oppressive structures and perpetrator.

Medea's struggle with her queerness and lack of power in male spaces showcases a personal struggle many queer Chicanx people face, especially those who once adhered to the heteronormative status quo, but have since lost any privileges associated with heteronormativity. Through the marriage of Medea and La Llorona, Perez argues that Moraga helps readers "establish a wider history of female disempowerment that stretches beyond geographic and cultural boundaries" (*There Was a Woman* 100). Yet, beyond establishing this wider history of oppression, the marriage between the two women requires audience members to question the

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<sup>1</sup> Jotería, which is derived from the derogatory terms joto and jota, has been reclaimed as a term of empowerment for queer Latinx peoples, as explained by Xamuel Bañales in "Jotería: A Decolonizing Political Project."

oppressive, heteronormative structure that has disenfranchised women, specifically queer women, across history and cultures. By requiring the audience to question this oppression, Moraga opens a space for Medea/La Llorona's monstrous actions to be viewed not as senseless violence, but as a woman's desperate attempts to accept her queerness and release herself from the chains of the patriarchy.

Moraga strategically opens this space by utilizing the frame narrative structure similar to González's "The Bullet Swallower." In *The Hungry Woman*, we begin Medea's journey in the middle of her psychosis when she is least comprehensible to the patriarchy and audience members. However, though Medea begins the play in a state of incomprehensibility and psychosis, it is quickly established that the incomprehensible Medea is a Medea at the end of her journey. We see the comprehensible Medea in flashbacks where the story within a story takes shape. In these flashbacks, Medea is represented as an angry, vengeful woman, a self-described "rabid dog" who is forced to watch her own revolution through a window, unable to receive the benefits of what she fought for (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 9).

This representation of Medea classifies her as the scorned woman which aligns with the harmful, misogynist trope utilized to identify the woman as a villain to the patriarchy. La Llorona is famously typecast into this role in most versions of her story told by men such as Janvier where her actions are the result of her anger and vengeance against her husband or lover in her story. Therefore, when we see Medea as this rabid dog, it aligns with our expectations of her based on our own history with La Llorona. Yet, through the frame narrative structure, Moraga destabilizes this expectation by presenting a more nuanced situation that drives Medea's actions.

Through this nuance, the audience comes to understand Medea is not truly driven by vengeance against the patriarchy, as our expectations initially want us to believe, but she is instead driven by her fear of losing her home, her rights, and her son. This is seen through her desperation to return to Aztlán, despite being ousted for being queer, and her desperate fight to keep Jasón from taking her son back to Aztlán without her. Medea identifies her own queerness as the thing that jeopardizes her position within the patriarchy and is outwardly attacking the physical embodiment of queerness, her lover Luna. Though Medea claims that Luna is “medicine for [her] brokenness,” she is outwardly cruel to Luna in the flashback sequences, often casting her as the outside other in her familial unit with Chac-Mool (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 5).

Medea’s aggression and refusal to accept Luna officially into her family stems from Medea’s desire to be accepted, once again, into Jasón’s family unit, which is a stand-in for Medea’s desire to be accepted back into the heteronormative society she is shunned from. This is an ongoing tension between Medea and Luna. Luna desperately wonders why Medea never divorced Jasón and why she is so obsessed with his new marriage to a younger Indian woman (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 8-10). Luna addresses the tension when she asks Medea, “why are you courting [his illusions]...that you’re not a Lesbian” to which Medea responds, “I’m not you, Luna. I wasn’t born that way” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 48, 50). Despite being outcast and classified as queer, this shows that Medea has spent the seven years in exile refusing to accept her queerness, alluding to the claim that she is not inherently queer like Luna and, thus, can return to Aztlán.

In this relationship with Luna, Medea functions as the subjugator or oppressor, mirroring the same oppressions that Medea is suffering under the hands of her ex-husband. This shows

how Medea's rabidness and hostility are not threatening the patriarchal structure, but rather reaffirming it. While Medea is still clinging to the privileges once afforded her by being closer to heteronormativity, she is reproducing this system of oppression to regain a semblance of the power she lost.

By portraying Medea as the instigator of colonial, heteronormative violence, Moraga complicates La Llorona's myth. Whereas, typically, an audience interprets La Llorona's myth as the actions of a vengeful woman against the patriarchy, here she is portrayed as an actor of the patriarchy. Similar to Carmen in González's folktale "The Woman Who Lost Her Soul," Medea is reacting to the constraints placed on her through the patriarchy and attempts to return to the society that disgraced her, hoping that she can be saved from a destitute existence. Yet, her hostility towards Chac-Mool's desire to return to Aztlán with Jasón shows that she is also afraid of playing a role in recreating the patriarchal oppressions through her son. Medea understands that Aztlán, as it stands in her world, "only replicates the dominating structures that the revolutionaries in Aztlán sought to overthrow" (Perez, "There Was a Woman 99). There is no place for queer or transgressive folk within its borders. Medea is fearful that Chac-Mool, in returning to Aztlán, will become the monster she tried to protect him from. She is afraid of failing her son.

By embodying the contradictions of victim and perpetrator, Medea's actions show how internalized homophobia and colonization force marginalized communities, in this case queer women, to choose between their truth and the societal norm. In choosing to side with the patriarchy by rejecting Luna, Medea traps herself in the prison of the patriarchy, which is expected of her. But, after realizing that Jasón intended to trap her in a literal prison as his ward, Medea realizes that reaffirming the patriarchy will never save her or Chac-Mool. At this point,

she chooses to “free herself of patriarchal control” by “[allying] herself in body and spirit with women” (Perez, “There was a Woman” 104). I argue that Medea’s queerness facilitates this allyship which provides Medea with a new form of power that works directly against the patriarchy.

Moraga illustrates this shift by showing how Medea longs for Luna and mourns her loss when she can’t find her in the second act of the play. In the flashback sequences, we see tender, soft moments between the two women, which contrasts the violent interactions we’ve seen previously exchanged between them (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 60). Similarly, Medea’s entire stay within the psychiatric ward, which takes place after the events of the flashbacks, show how she is desperate to reconnect with Luna. Conversely, the only time we see Jasón appear in this section, he is presented as a threat to Medea, someone who wants to subjugate her because of her queerness. Medea further solidifies her rejection of the patriarchy when she tells Chac-Mool “I can’t deny what I am, hijo. I thought I could, but I can’t” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 78). Instead of this signifying the beginning of Medea’s transgressive turn, I argue her turn towards queerness establishes her as the “hija rebelde” who “allies herself with a female resistance movement” because it shows how she is more open to rejecting Jasón’s wishes and kills Chac-Mool to save him from becoming a patriarchal monster (Perez, “There Was a Woman” 103). Once this revelation occurs, she is no longer shackled by the chains of the patriarchy and is able to free herself, and her son, from the patriarchal control under which they suffered.

Moraga’s placement of Chac-Mool’s murder after Medea’s revelation further distorts audience’s interpretations of the infanticide because it is not shown as a vengeful act. Instead, Medea cradles her son in her arms as the poison takes effect, and in doing so, “facilitates Chac-

Mool's transformation into a new kind of man, one who does not derive his power from the subjugation of disenfranchised groups" (Perez, "There Was a Woman" 105). This is a direct critique of Chicano Nationalist discourse which, as mentioned previously, upheld colonial patriarchal notions of family and community. The act of killing her son establishes the final severed edge between Medea and what author Paula Straile-Costa identifies as "patriarchal motherhood or male-identified woman" ("Myth and Ritual" 215). Whereas previously Medea distorted herself to adhere to the male centered gaze, Medea's fall into insanity establishes her acceptance of herself and her queerness. It stands as a turning point from the phallo-centric world view she initially held, and showcases how she is more willing to accept herself and her new existence. Through the killing of her son, the acceptance of her queerness vis a vis her acceptance of and desire for Luna, Medea is reborn and frees not only herself, but other women like her as well.

Though Medea began the play rejecting her queerness, it is through this very same queerness that she was able to save herself from eternal suffering at the hands of Jasón and the conservative community within the promised land, Aztlán. Her true power, in the end, did not come from rejecting herself and perpetuating oppressions, but from finding power in a new source and using that power and autonomy to deliver a striking blow to the patriarchy through the transformation of Chac-Mool. Moraga's interpretation of Medea/La Llorona asks audience members to interrogate the traditional story associated with them. The play forces audience members to reexamine the patriarchal lens that typically shrouds Medea/La Llorona's tale and question their own perceptions that are directly influenced by the patriarchal society. Instead of reading Medea/La Llorona as a scorned woman who killed her son to punish her husband, Moraga opens a space for Medea/La Llorona to speak and share the truth of their actions,

transforming the transgressive, murderous act into a transformation for herself and the generation that comes after.

### Jayro Bustamante and the Transgression of Resistance

Though I have focused primarily on Mexican-American retellings of La Llorona's myth, Moraga showcases how she is a hemispheric figure capable of crossing borders to unite people who are facing similar struggles. I mentioned briefly in my literature review above how Moraga relies on La Llorona to address the pain suffered by the migrants from Central American countries who were being detained and separated at the U.S. border in 2018. Similarly, Mexican women, through their poetry, are using La Llorona's pain to show their anger and resentment towards the femicides so prevalent in Mexico. In these iterations, La Llorona embodies the mothers who have lost their children to the colonial, capitalist structure that seeks to subjugate and eradicate them. Both of these instances of La Llorona's image are not exclusively connected to the Mexican-American experience with American colonialism, but rather explore the far reaching impact modern colonialism has on people south of the U.S. border. More specifically, though, La Llorona is being used by indigenous artists as a transnational figure who functions to illustrate the ongoing violence Indigenous communities experience from coloniality, particularly how these communities are facing a second wave of colonial violence, as described by Maylei Blackwell et al. in "Critical Latinx indigeneities."

Blackwell et al. identify this intersectional violence through hybridization "in the process of migration" as creating hybrid hegemonies where these communities first encounter colonial violence from the initial wave of colonization that eradicated or attempted to eradicate Indigenous groups, then suffer a second wave when they attempt to flee oppression and violence in their home countries only to become victims of violence at the U.S. Border (128). Blackwell

et al. argue that this violence stems from a refusal to grant “Indigenous peoples the right to live in their communities of origin or to create new communities” (128). Similar to Moraga, Blackwell et al. use the example of Guatemalan refugees to illustrate how this violence is embedded in the societal structures not just here in the U.S., but in Central and South American countries who are also the product of colonialism.

*La Llorona*, a Guatemalan film released in 2019 and directed by Jayro Bustamante showcases Blackwell et al.’s argument. In this film, *La Llorona* serves as the embodiment of the Mayan-Ixil people’s rage and pain and serves as the catalyst for the community’s revenge against the homicidal general who lead the efforts to eradicate the Mayan-Ixil from Guatemala. Bustamante invokes *La Llorona* as a protector, which is similar to the way Mora Ordóñez and Moraga invoke the weeping woman. Rather than subjugate *La Llorona* under the oppressive, misogynist version of her story, these artists and many more like them draw on her figure to express their rage and pain, hoping that through her, justice can be found.

The Guatemalan film *La Llorona*, not to be confused with the American film *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), centers on the family of fictional General Enrique Monteverde, a stand-in for the real life genocidal general Efraín Ríos Montt who oversaw the massacre of Guatemala’s indigenous population between March 1982 and August 1983 (Albizúrez Gila 2). At the beginning of the film, the dictator is on trial for orchestrating the brutal killings of the native Mayan-Ixil people, but his sentencing is overturned on a technicality. Following this, protests erupt from the Guatemalan people of both indigenous and Latin origin. These protests trap the general and his immediate family within their lavish home where the majority of the film takes shape.



Scholar and author Mónica Albizúrez Gil, who examines cultural memory and gender in her piece entitled “El film *La Llorona* de Jayro Bustamante: memoria cultural y género en la justicia transicional guatemalteca,” identifies the domestic space of the Monteverde home and *La Llorona*’s indigeneity as an important aspect to the analysis of the film (8). This is because *La Llorona*’s personification as an indigenous servant of the White general’s home conforms with the dominant Guatemalan perception of indigeneity and allows her to enter the space unimpeded (Albizúrez Gil 13). As a subservient figure and an indigenous woman, *La Llorona* is not viewed as a threat to the White general and his family. Yet, it is through her subservience that Alma/*La Llorona* is able to enact ultimate justice against Monteverde and dismantle the colonial structure from the inside. Beyond this, Alma/*La Llorona* is also able to bridge the cultural and racial gap between the indigenous population and the upper echelon through her relationship with Carmen, Monteverde’s wife.

Through her indigeneity, Alma/*La Llorona* is positioned in layers of subservience by the film. Her position as an indigenous woman who works within the home of a White general establishes her physical subservience, but she is also linguistically subservient through her inability to speak Spanish and be understood by the general and his family. For the majority of the film, Alma remains silent except to speak with the other indigenous staff, Valeriana. Her linguistic subservience identifies her as an incomprehensible figure to both the Spanish speaking Monteverde family and those in the film’s audience who do not speak Kaqchikel. This language barrier highlights a dimension of colonial oppression where “colonized subjects [are seen] as incapable of communicating legitimately in any language” by the colonizers (Rosa and Flores 624). This linguistic oppression allows for the colonizers to further dehumanize indigenous

peoples and makes it possible to further subjugate and eradicate them by claiming that they are less human than those who speak European languages (Rosa and Flores 624).

We see this theme take shape within the film when the general is on trial for his crimes. He claims that his “intention was to create a national identity in this country” by eradicating the indigenous population (Bustamente 00:21:28). By claiming to create a unified national identity, the general is asserting that the horrors he enacted on the indigenous population were justified because he assumes the Mayan-Ixil people are less human than the white Guatemalan population. This claim is juxtaposed by the earlier testimony given by a Mayan-Ixil female victim who delivers her testimony in Kaqchikel. The only way she is able to be understood is by having a translator convert her story in a language that everyone in the courtroom, and the audience, can understand. This positions the victim in the same subservient role as Alma, yet it is through Alma that Bustamente truly critiques this colonial ideology of incomprehensibility and subservience.

Alma’s spectral introduction in the film is facilitated through her nightly haunting wails that disturb the general and his family. Though this act of communication lacks verbal structure, the meaning behind her cries is still abundantly clear to the indigenous staff who choose to heed her warning rather than remain employed in the Monteverde home. Even her silence, once she is physically manifested, speaks to the anger she feels towards the general and the injustices her people faced. This is done primarily through the unnerving presence of the character facilitated by Alma’s actress, Maria Mercedes Coroy. Though in the daytime, Coroy plays Alma as a curious, yet timid, housekeeper, the actress’ portrayal takes on more haunting, spectral qualities during the night scenes. These qualities are most evident in her facial expressions and eyes which transform the actress’ soft face into a cold, wide eyed stare. This shows the character’s human

façade fading as she stalks the home at night to lure the general into situations that reveal his monstrous truth. It becomes apparent that Alma is not truly subservient and is instead shown manipulating the general and his family to enact justice on her behalf. She becomes less and less incomprehensible to the audience, despite seldom speaking a word. By contrast, the general turns into an incomprehensible figure as he slowly descends into madness driven by paranoia and guilt. This turn in the general's position functions to subvert colonial notions of incomprehensibility by positioning the placeholder of colonialism as the unintelligible character.

The general's unintelligibility also serves to destabilize patriarchal notions of insanity, as it, too, inverts stereotypical representations of the insane by replacing the madwoman with a madman. Though madness and insanity are difficult to define, Michael Foucault describes it as a product of a given society which "appears, in its violent forms, as the savage expression of the most primitive human desires" (*Madness and Civilization* 200). Though Foucault refrained from examining how gender and insanity intersected, Adrienne Rich further explains that definitions of insanity and its treatment of insane subjects is inherently patriarchal because women are typically the embodiments of insanity and the ones who suffer the most under supposed treatments ("Women and Madness"). This is evident in the La Llorona myth where her madness or insanity is represented as a violent, selfish act or as the result of eternal punishment and guilt. However, though Alma has every right to be insane in her grief and anger in the film, Bustamente does not portray Alma as the insane character. Rather, the general becomes the insane and violent figure who jeopardizes the safety of everyone in the home which calls to question the validity of his power and position within society.

This madness is brought on slowly over the course of the film where the general becomes more and more deranged until the climax when he almost kills his granddaughter. Though his

family attribute his madness to stress and old age, the audience sees Alma intentionally manipulating the general into committing these acts. These haunting acts, then, function to reveal the true monster in the household and in society at large by driving a divide between the general and the four women in his household until all four women are unable to ignore that he is capable of unspeakable violence. Through her haunting, La Llorona calls to question the validity of the general's claims of innocence during his trial by insinuating that these acts that he's committing against Alma and his family were the same types of acts he carried out against the Mayan-Ixil people. He becomes the embodiment of La Llorona's horrific tropes as a child killer who was driven by insanity and rage.

This turn of the Lloronan subject functions to question the validity of power given to European men within indigenous spaces. While these men are viewed as the highest authority, capable of playing God and taking the lives of those deemed lesser, it is through an indigenous woman that the highest authority crumbles under the same torture he inflicted on her. La Llorona's haunting also shows how, in death, Alma is given the power she wasn't afforded in life. While alive, she was terrorized and tortured by the general and his men. She was incapable of saving herself or her children, both because of physical powerlessness and linguistic differences. In her death, though she is not capable of inflicting physical violence herself, she is capable of possessing and manipulating others in the household to enact her revenge. Her death, then, establishes a power shift between herself and the general.

Not only does Alma function to enact justice for the Mayan-Ixil people, but she also acts as a conduit for the women in the household to form a bond based on their shared experiences with patriarchal oppression. She additionally allows the Monteverde women to grapple with their own complex grief and guilt that stems from their complicity in the murder of the innocent

indigenous people as well as their own self-subjugation under the oppressive norms of colonialism and the patriarchy.

In the opening scene of the film, Bustamante immediately establishes the gendered divide between the members of the household by having the men in one room and the women in another. The men are strategizing ways to help the general escape the conviction while the women are holding hands, praying for his safety. This establishes the tension between these two halves of the household where the men are the actors capable of making decisions and change and the women must rely on their soft and quiet spirituality, begging an outer force for the power to make change, literally chanting “Guide us, use us, use my hands, use my feet” (00:02:16-18). We see this same quiet spirituality from the indigenous house keepers who also pray to their ancestors for the general’s safety, linking the women of the household to the indigenous waitstaff.

This is an intentional linkage made early on to build the connection between these two populations, establishing that they are both being manipulated and controlled to further the agendas of the men or patriarchy. However, the strength of both the women and the wait staff is seen through their spiritual connection which allows for La Llorona to enter the space. While the men use strategy and influence to help the general escape punishment, something they know he deserves, the women and indigenous wait staff understand that concepts like punishment and justice are not controlled by humans. They understand that true, karmic power comes from a higher power or outer force; something that is bigger than them. The men, on the other hand, do not respect this higher power and that, ultimately, is their downfall.

After La Llorona is introduced, we see tension begin to build between the family members, most notably between the general and his wife, Carmen. At the beginning of the film,

Carmen is adamant about the general's innocence, despite knowing what kind of man he is. She outwardly calls the female Mayan-Ixil victims "whores" and claims that "We must move on for the country to go on," insinuating that she believes burying the atrocities is the right thing to do for the continuation of society (Bustamante 00:26:34). This conflict between Carmen's desire to protect the general and ignore the truth of his actions exemplifies Blackwell et al.'s claim of racial whitening that occurs within Latinx communities and how White Latin Americans are complicit in these violent atrocities (131).

Bustamante presents this conflict to his viewers on a smaller scale by using Carmen as the placeholder for White Latin America. By refusing to acknowledge the injustices suffered by the Mayan-Ixil people, Carmen is perpetuating their erasure. This is an intentional move by Bustamante who used the film to discuss the layers of injustice suffered in Guatemalan society. He found this necessary to speak about because "if people do not accept human rights, horrible things like genocide can happen" ("LA LLORONA Press Conference"). Though Carmen knows the truth of what occurred, she perpetuates the lies spread by the government and her husband that paints the Mayan-Ixil people as rebels or whores rather than the innocent people who were slaughtered and abused. Because Carmen represents White Latin Americans, Bustamante insinuates that, through this erasure and intentional ignorance, civilians like Carmen and her family are complicit in the genocides. He essentially argues that they need to interrogate their own privilege to understand their role in the atrocities and find ways to combat further oppressions.

We see this occur with Carmen towards the climax of the film when she is forced to grapple with her own complicity and guilt in the genocides through Alma's haunting as well as examine her own subjugation as a woman within a patriarchal society. This is instigated by

nightmares Carmen begins to have after Alma is brought into the home. In the nightmares, Carmen sees herself as an indigenous woman fleeing Guatemalan troops with two children by her side. Through these nightmares, Alma is able to show Carmen what kind of fear and hopelessness the murdered people felt, something that Carmen had adamantly ignored for the sake of protecting her husband and her status. It is later revealed that these dreams are Alma's last moments, showing Carmen that the general was the man who not only ordered her children to be drowned, but executed Alma personally. Through this exchange, Alma blurs the boundaries between herself and Carmen by connecting to their shared womanhood and calling forth the type of horrified grief that comes from being subjugated by a ruthless patriarchal society. Carmen is then able to empathize with Alma and by proxy the larger Mayan-Ixil people, using her rage to enact La Llorona's revenge on the general by strangling and killing him.

This spiritual exchange between Alma and Carmen shows how, as divided entities, both women were subjected to misogynist exploitation from the general, but combined in this spiritual way they were able to not only fight against him, but win. This directly comments on the racial structure present in many Central and South American countries where White Latin American women are held at a higher level than the indigenous population, therefore making them more powerful and capable of enacting change against a common enemy. Yet, because of their situation within the higher ranks of society, it takes a moment of monumental, personal pain to move these women to action. In this situation, La Llorona is bridging the gap between these two populations and attempting to mend the divide that placed them on opposing sides of the same fight by connecting not only to maternal pain, but women's pain as well. Through this pain, these separate populations are able to form a community to fight against the patriarchal society that seeks to subjugate them.

La Llorona's role in this film, though similar in areas to Moraga's Medea and Gonzales' La Desalmada, focuses primarily on vengeance and justice. Bustamante used her figure to raise awareness for the Mayan-Ixil genocide and brought these horrors to the international stage by presenting this film at the Toronto Film Festival. For Bustamante, this film represented more than a simple horror movie. Instead, he "decided to transform [the legend] and make La Llorona cry for the land, for all of the desperate people looking for justice" ("LA LLORONA Press Conference"). The film takes a disgraced feminine figure and turns her into a catalyst for change, giving her back the power and control that was taken from her.

### Conclusion

All three authors and artists that I have examined in this essay have used La Llorona in similar ways to counteract overarching colonial oppressions and its subsets. They took what once was a transgressive and abject figure and transformed her into a symbol for justice. Each author did so using their own historical and cultural contexts and responded to the subjugation they faced as a result of the colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative structures that oppressed them.

For La Llorona, each author gave her a space to function in different, yet similar ways, reshaping the myth to stand for something other than horrific abjection. All three authors showed how La Llorona is a powerful figure who acts as a conduit for women's connections across time and space, allowing her to facilitate the bonds women forge when they are at their most vulnerable. These bonds, then, no longer force women to deal with patriarchal atrocities alone and instead give them a community from which to gather strength that they can use to fight against their oppressors together. Furthermore, each author utilized La Llorona to criticize traditional interpretations of incomprehensibility by questioning who is typically portrayed as incomprehensible and why they are marked as incomprehensible in the first place. Through the



use of La Llorona's incomprehensibility, each author is able to show how women's grief is not violent, but rather a transformative action that allows for horrors and injustices to be heard. By connecting her to indigeneity, Bustamante, especially, is able to critique colonial expectations of incomprehensibility, forcing audience members to question their own perceptions of what it means to be linguistically incomprehensible.

As a result, all three authors not only reframed La Llorona's monstrous tale, but asked us as audience members to question our own preconceived notions of feminine insanity, grief, and incomprehensibility. Each author tackled these injustices in their own way, calling upon the weeping woman to open a space for them to not only make sense of their own grief and struggles, but to show audiences how they, too, can use La Llorona in similar ways. By utilizing different methods to present her story, each author took part in the practice of understanding their "relationship to [their] own cultural principles" to examine how those principles shape their worldviews (Perez, *There was a Woman* 207). In doing so, they also ask us as community members to interrogate our own position and powers as they relate to our cultural principles. Participating in this practice can help further destabilize and dismantle the Euro-centric, colonial oppressions many communities still face across the Americas and beyond.

As horrors and atrocities continue to be enacted against subjugated people both in the U.S. and Latin America, La Llorona remains a figure we can call on to help us make sense of these horrors. She stands at the ready to take up arms to help us fight against these oppressions. Whether we call on her to enact revenge on those who subjugated us, or ask her to help us grapple with personal struggles and losses, she is a mother who will not abandon her cultural children. However, as Perez argues, we, as her children, must be willing to grant her the space to grow and shift as the culture grows and shifts. We must question, at every turn, why we

demonize women for acting out against patriarchal and colonial norms and interrogate why she is the sole villain in her story. In doing so, we will be able to uncover unspoken cultural rules that need to be questioned and redefine our own cultural norms. However, should we remain ignorant to the depth of her story and keep her as a transgressive figure, she is unable to unburden herself and us from the shackles of colonialism.

The tale of La Llorona is one of tragedy, but her history is more complex than most realize. She is a mother, and a woman, who suffered a great loss and now cries for all who suffer the same pain she does. Throughout different historical time periods, she has been used as a symbol for communities to rally behind to cry for the change they needed to survive and thrive. She gave power to the weak and a voice to the silent. Even though her oral traditional lore is used as an omen to warn children not to wander too close to waterways, her legend has been transformed by Chicanas and oppressed Latinx communities as a symbol of defiance against authoritarian ideologies. In the modern world, La Llorona has become more than a bogeyman. She is a legend that transcends borders.

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