

La Llorona: “La habitación del desahogo”

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The online exposition “La habitación del desahogo/The Room of Relief” reinvents the legendary Mexican figure of La Llorona to put forward a poetic critique of the violent consequences of sexist inequality and gendered violence in Spanish-speaking countries. This chapter argues that this piece of transgressive artwork is a transcultural reinterpretation of the Mexican legend that, while maintaining some of the essential elements of the figure and addressing the relevance of the cultural community it belongs to, also exemplifies the ability of La Llorona to facilitate intercultural dialogue and to interrogate the monstrosity of transnational patriarchal structures that affect violence against women.

Because La Llorona is such a relevant figure of the Mexican cultural community on both sides of the US/Mexican border, I find it appropriate to quote Domino Renee Perez, a Chicana academic who belongs to that same community, to describe the main elements of the legend:

Also known as the Weeping or Wailing Woman, she is a ghost said to haunt the river banks and lake shores. Some know La Llorona as a murderous mother who killed her children in an act of revenge or grief, and they believe she is condemned to wander the earth in search of the children she sacrificed or, as others see it, relinquished willingly. For people of Mexican ancestry, La Llorona traditionally serves as a cultural allegory, instructing people how to live and act within established social mores. At times, however, she is simply a spooky bedtime story. Her tales are told to children to induce good behavior. (Perez 2008: x)

In many versions of the legend, Llorona is described as a native woman who becomes vengeful and murderous after being abandoned by the father of her children, a white Spanish man.

It can be argued that La Llorona's indigenous origins situates her in connection with pre-Columbian systems of belief. Prior to the Spanish conquest, a woman was heard weeping in the streets of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica/Aztec empire. This was one of the eighth omens that started appearing some years before the arrival of Cortés in 1519, which were interpreted by the Natives as auguries of death and ruin (León-Portilla 1959: 11). Moctezuma believed the woman to be the goddess Cihuacoatl or the Snake Woman, an alternate aspect of Coatlicue, mother of the gods—that is, of the Sun, the Moon and the stars (Cano 2004: 72)—and Toci (“Our Grandmother”). Cihuacoatl, like La Llorona, is a monstrous mother: she was referred to “as a horror and a devourer” (Brundage 1979, quoted in Perez 2008: 136), she was believed to crave human blood and she could sometimes be heard during the night, “crying to be fed” (Bierhorst 1984: 10). Years after the conquest, Catholicism assimilated some of the elements of the devotion to the goddess Toci who, in her form as the Virgin of Guadalupe, becomes an example of the syncretism between the religion brought by the Spanish and the original Aztec beliefs.

La Llorona is also associated with a female figure of Mexican mythical history: Malintzin or La Malinche, a Nahuatl woman who was given as an offering to the conquistador Hernán Cortés. Malinche has been defined by history as the interpreter, counsellor and lover of Cortés. Because she is thought to have had a relevant role in helping Cortés, she is considered by many as a betrayer of her people. For instance, in *El laberinto de la soledad/The Labyrinth of Solitude* (originally published in 1950), considered a key text for the definition of the Mexican (male) identity, Octavio Paz describes Malinche as the *chingada* (violated, raped) mother of all Mexicans and states that “as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. She embodies the open,

the *chingado*, to our closed, stoic, impassive Indians (2002: 25). It is due to this description of Malinche as a mother, as well as to the mistaken belief that she murdered the children she had with Cortés in order to prevent him from taking them to Spain with him, that she is sometimes conflated with La Llorona. There is, however, no historical record to support these events. This association of the figure with a La Malinche, classified by a male-defined national discourse as traitor to all Mexicans, as well as the perception of the figure as a monstrous mother, collaborate in the identification of La Llorona as a threat. This monstrosity, which is reflected in many of her representations in literature and popular culture is, as it has been made obvious, historically and culturally specific.

We can find one early example of this characterisation of the figure as dangerous in the short text “La Llorona” by Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, originally published in 1957. De Valle-Arizpe is considered one of the Mexican authors who, during the first decades of the 20th century, attempted to recuperate the spirit of nationalism through recuperation of stories of Colonial Mexico. In the tale, the La Llorona is connected both to Coatlicue and Malinche, as well as described as a supernatural figure that evokes great fear. Horror cinema has also reproduced this version of La Llorona as monstrous; some examples of classic Mexican films are *La Llorona* (dir. Ramón Peón, 1933), *El grito de la muerte* (*The Living Coffin*, dir. Fernando Méndez, 1959), *La Llorona* (dir. René Cardona, 1960), and *La maldición de La Llorona* (*The Curse of the Crying Woman*, dir. Rafael Baledón, 1963). Mexican director Rigoberto Castañeda) adapted the legend to the 21st century with *KM 31*, a 2006 horror film that uses the formal parameters of Asian horror (most saliently of Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-On: The Grudge*, 2002) to modernise La Llorona lore. Castañeda’s modernisation of the legend mainly consists of two components. On the one hand, the cinematic elements borrowed from an easily recognisable Asian tradition makes La Llorona

a “globally appealing monster” (Byron 2011) and, therefore, situate both the film and the legend in a more translational geography. On the other hand, the legend is updated to contemporary concerns by connecting it to gender violence and femicide. According to Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, the predilection of the ghosts in *KM 31* for attacking (mostly young) women and killing them in a systematic and grotesque way makes it impossible to overlook a connection with the constant disappearances of women in Ciudad Juárez (ongoing since 1993) (2018: 151). More recent horror films with a transnational scope that engage with the legend are *Mama* (dir. Andy Muschietti, 2013) and *The Curse of La Llorona* (dir. Michael Chaves, 2019).

Other reconfigurations of the legend move away from these depictions of La Llorona as horrific and attempt to change the social conventions that define the figure as monstrous and her fate as deserved and inescapable, therefore putting forward the type of transgressive notions that will later define “La habitación del desahogo”. Chicana feminists are perhaps the cultural community who most insistently have fostered these repositionings of La Llorona. In their texts, the eternal torture of the murderous mother, as opposed to the fate of the man who neglects, abandons or deceives her (depending on the version of the legend), is often interpreted as a reaffirmation of the continuation of the subordination of women under the patriarchy (Perez 2008: 73). Some examples of a type of subversive use of the figure of La Llorona that destabilises social and cultural assumptions are Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga’s work. La Llorona in Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek” has been interpreted by many as a figure of resistance (Limón 1990; Perez 2008); in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa theorises La Llorona as one of the symbolic mothers of Chicanxs, along with La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe, to affirm that the identity of all of them has been defined to reinforce dichotomy virgin/whore

as an oppressive patriarchal tool that restricts the roles of women in society; in the theatre play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, Moraga situates Llorona in a dystopic future which warns us about the possible consequences that maintaining a homophobic, sexist and heteropatriarchal order will have on vulnerable communities.

Many of the meanings explored so far are directly or indirectly reproduced in the online exposition “La habitación del desahogo”, a transnational take on La Llorona that positions her as a figure with the power of extend beyond her own cultural and geographical origins. After all, and as Perez affirms, “bridging different cultural communities has always been one of her roles” (2008: 151). The transnationality of this version of the legend lies in multiple factors. On the one hand, the text is informed and inspired by the original Mexican legend but also deals with issues affecting women worldwide. On the other hand, the visual renderings of La Llorona seem to be inspired not only by these traditional versions, but also by transnational horror. Finally, the fact that the exposition is freely available to anyone with an internet connection makes it a global cultural artefact.

The exposition was presented on November 25th, 2012, by the nonprofit organisation Femicidio.net. This organisation defines itself as a multidisciplinary observatory of civil society which attempts to build a bridge between society, academic and public institutions, to visibilize femicide at a global scale, and to be a portal of information and journalism created from a gender perspective. “La habitación del desahogo” is a hybrid exposition that combines photography, journalism and creative writing. In the images, ghostly, semi-transparent images of La Llorona are positioned over different scenes representing instances of gender inequality and abuse: femicides, sexual violence and exploitation, child abuse, human trafficking, and state legislation over female bodies. The text under the spectral images offers data on the violations of human rights

represented by the images in several countries of Latin America and Spain. These are accompanied by short extracts of prose poetry.

The legend of La Llorona that “La habitación” summarises reproduces many of the traditional elements of the legend: her existence in pre-colonial times, her act of vengeance when abandoned by a Spanish man, her wailing. The text also points out the fact that the legend exists in many Latin American countries, moving beyond the Greater Mexican context but obviously starting there—in fact, the destabilisation of patriarchal assumptions proposed by “La habitación” owes a lot to the cultural work done by Chicana feminists. The introduction concludes establishing the aim of the exposition: to link the figure of Llorona with femicide, a connection already explored by *KM31*.

The revisited figure of Llorona asks herself: what have they done to me? Why have they murdered me? I am condemned to live in the limbo of negation and that is why I return. My punishment is to remind the living that there is no justice for me. I carry and drag the deafening silence of societies that have little conscience about violence against women.¹ (“La habitación”)

Her physical appearance reproduces many of the usual features of a horror movie monster: she is a tall, thin figure wearing what looks like an oversized white burial shroud. Her long, dark hair covers her face, giving her a disturbing aspect that resembles Japanese *onryō*—a quintessential ghost of contemporary global horror made famous by the film *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) and its adaptations—and therefore adding to the transnationality of the depiction.

Despite La Llorona’s horrific semblance, it is not her monstrosity that defines her. In reality, she is a witness, a warning sign of societal and structural violence, and a companion to the women experiencing it. The text on the first full-sized image summarises

¹ Translated from the Spanish original. All translations are my own.

this new role: “La Llorona questions. La Llorona discovers. La Llorona interprets. La Llorona testifies. La Llorona knows” (“La habitación”). Instead of being a passive signifier to be interpreted and/or used by the to reinforce the patriarchal rule (to induce good behaviour, to blame women for the fall of the nation), she becomes an acting subject who defines her own story.

The extracts of prose poetry are written in the second person and directed towards an unnamed “you” who is blamed for this violence: for not speaking up for women, for raping them while friends cheer, for paying for prostitutes regardless of whether they are being exploited. La Llorona observes and becomes a reminder of these acts, haunting the perpetrators: “Now you try to escape yourself and La Llorona appears” (“La habitación”). Not only she becomes monstrous for the victimisers, but she also denounces the complicity (and responsibility) of the states that protect them. Thus, governments, their armed forces and the police are accused of being involved in the violation of human rights taking place during wars, of not giving enough priority in their political agendas to prevent gendered violence, of being complicit to human trafficking, of criminalising abortion and of not doing enough to free sexual slaves from mafias.

These extracts are intertwined with data on femicides (“In El Salvador 129,43 femicides are committed by one million women”); rape (“More than two thirds of rapes reported between 1998 and 2008 in Nicaragua were committed against girls younger than 17”); the situation of migrant women worldwide (“Each year, between 60.000 and 800.000 people cross international borders as victims of sexual slavery. 80% of them are women, 50% are minors); lack of abortion rights (“Deaths derived from illegal abortions [in Argentina] amounts to 300 women each year”); and prostitution (“90% of women being prostituted in Spain do it against their will”). The numbers highlight the appalling

consequences of the power imbalances permitted by patriarchal states. These are, as suggested by the piece, the true monsters.

The horror of filicide that originally defined La Llorona and that, in some of the versions of the legend justified her punishment, stops being a crucial feature of the figure: in turn, in “La habitación del desahogo” she becomes both a spectator and an actor, as well as a subject of her own story. Instead of representing a frightening bedtime story designed to keep people to act within established social mores, she collaborates in the destabilising of these assumptions. In this sense, La Llorona is no longer defined from a patriarchal perspective which picture her as dangerous: she becomes a figure of transgression and a transnational defender of women worldwide.

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