

LA LLORONA AND LA MALINCHE ARE CHICANA DAUGHTERS:  
HEALING MATRILINEAL TRAUMA BY TRANSFORMING  
“BAD” MEXICAN MOTHER  
ARCHETYPES

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council  
of Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a Major in Literature  
December 2019

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not be possible without the guidance, encouragement, and enlightenment from so many others, both within and outside of the academic community. Through my studies in the field of Chicana feminism, and in subsequently broadening my understanding of what it means to heal and to be empowered, I am privileged to have met so many amazing woman scholars and writers, whose works and influences have inspired me deeply to continue the conversation.

In particular, I would like to acknowledge and graciously thank my thesis advisor and committee chair Dr. Sara Ramírez, for helping me to articulate my ideas and encouraging me to adopt confidence and bravery in my writing; Dr. Geneva Gano, who has taught me to sharpen my critical eye and look closer in the works I study, especially those of Sandra Cisneros; Dr. Beatriz Aldana Márquez, whose help in directing me toward more sociological perspectives has equipped me with the understanding of machismo and family dynamics necessary for this study; Dr. Samuel Saldivar, who reminded me to expand my scope of how La Llorona influences an entire culture; and both ire'ne lara silva and Sandra Cisneros, authors whose works are vital to my analysis of La Llorona and La Malinche in the Chicana psyche, and both of whom I have had the honor of listening and speaking to about their works, which in turn has shaped how I write about them.

Lastly, I thank my family for all their support. Especially my mother, Catalina Brinkman, whose help in translating several words and passages for this thesis has created an exchange of ideas and understanding between us.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Hijas de Cuauhtémoc<sup>1</sup>

son las flores de nuestra nación,  
dieron la luz a nuestra gente Azteca,  
fueron sacrificadas al Dios Huitzilopochtli,  
fueron violadas por los españoles y  
dieron luz a nuestra gente mestiza.

Hijas de las Adelitas de la revolución,

Luchadoras por la libertad.

Les damos gracias a ustedes, nuestras madres,

que nos han dado el sagrado privilegio

de ser también, Hijas de Cuauhtémoc,

luchadoras por la libertad no solo

para nuestra Raza, pero libertad para

nosotras, las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc que

somos las reinas y madres de nuestra nación.

—Leticia Hernández, 1971

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<sup>1</sup> English Translation: Daughters of Cuauhtémoc / are the flowers of our nation, / shed light on our Aztec people, / were sacrificed to the God Huitzilopochtli, / were violated by the Spaniards and / gave birth to our mestiza race. / Daughters of the Adelitas of the revolution, / Fighters for freedom. / We give you thanks, our mothers, / who have given us the sacred privilege / to be, too, Daughters of Cuauhtémoc, / fighters for freedom not just / for la Raza, but freedom for / us, the Daughters of Cuauhtémoc, who / are the queens and mothers of our nation. (My translation, edited by Catalina Brinkman).

“We give you thanks, our mothers,/ who have given us the sacred privilege/ to be, too, Daughters of Cuauhtémoc,/ fighters for freedom not just/ for la Raza, but freedom for/ us, the Daughters of Cuauhtémoc, who/ are the queens and mothers of our nation” Leticia Hernández proclaims in her poem, “Hijas de Cuauhtémoc,” evoking an empowerment of two separate kinds of motherhood: physical motherhood and symbolic motherhood (Hernández, my translation).

Motherhood in Mexican/Chicanx culture has long occupied a complex position in gender and familial dynamics, in large part due to how motherhood and womanhood are conflated as one—and the primary—dimension of a Mexicana/Chicana experience. Good daughters become good mothers. To resist conformity, to resist putting the community before the individual and rebel against sexist standards, is to risk being labeled “bad,” the *mujer mala* or, at times considered worse, being viewed as rejecting Mexican-ness itself and becoming una “vendida” or “malinchista.” Such were the terms flung at early Chicana feminists like Hernández, comparing them to the figure of La Malinche for supposedly also betraying their community by branching off from the larger Chicano nationalist movement—the same movement that painted on its banners a different symbolic mother as its holy Catholic patroness/indigenous mestiza goddess figure: la Virgen de Guadalupe.

This “good mother/bad mother” dichotomy between la Virgen and La Malinche is not new but is in some ways specific to the cultural climate of the Chicano Movement, reflecting traditional values that have long existed and have been used by a patriarchal society to scrutinize and control women’s behavior. La Malinche is immortalized in Mexican history with the title “La Chingada” as the national scapegoat for her part as

Cortés's translator and mistress during the conquest of Mexico, the emphasis on her initial role as Cortés's concubine only further incriminating her through a conservative Catholic lens. La Virgen, through this same lens, is raised on an untouchable pedestal as the female ideal for her status as both virgin and mother, muted through the prevalence of her physical image in Mexican culture and ultimately obedient to male authority, the Christian God. Additionally, the ghostly figure of La Llorona comes between La Malinche and la Virgen to create the triad of Mexican maternal figures known as *las tres madres*. Like La Malinche, La Llorona is condemned as a "bad mother," for her infanticide and the selfish motivations that drive her murders in the conventional versions of the tale (needing to rid herself of her children before she can be with her lover). And like la Virgen, she also possesses antecedents in the form of Mexica goddesses—Coatlicue and Coatloapeuh for la Virgen, Cihuacoatl and the deified spirits called Cihuateteo for La Llorona. All three foremothers are influential figures in the Chicana psyche and have been utilized by the Mexican patriarchy to control women with shame, demanding, "Do not be unchaste or impure, do not be selfish or forget your culture or community."

In questioning the ways these female figures have been frozen into one-dimensional icons, and how the iconography of these mothers has been used to shape Chicana societal attitudes on how women and mothers should act, early Chicana feminists began the process of reclaiming *las tres madres*—and in doing so, reclaiming Mexicana/Chicana motherhood from patriarchal values. The purpose of my study is to analyze literary works by Chicana feminists who address the "bad" mothers

specifically—La Llorona and La Malinche—and locate where the loss of agency for these figures in these narratives may be rectified or restored.

Although la Virgen has also been used as symbol to control women’s sexualities and identities over time, my reason for not extensively analyzing media about la Virgen or Guadalupana figures is that unlike the other two foremothers in the tres madres triad she is not associated with predominantly negative attributes like La Llorona or La Malinche. Furthermore, my focus is on the separation or fracture between mother and child, which occurs in both La Llorona’s and La Malinche’s respective narratives, and not in the traditional depiction of la Virgen de Guadalupe. This severance between mother and child—more literally in the case of La Llorona, more symbolically with La Malinche—serves as another subject of reclamation, particularly through the daughter figure.

Chicana daughters of the movement, like Hernández, are pioneers of a new resistance ideology for Chicanas that includes reclaiming the women deemed “bad” by cultural standards into a Chicana sisterhood. For the purpose of this thesis, “daughterhood” can mean the literal biological concept (as all women are someone’s daughter) but we may also apply a figurative meaning. Just as with the symbolic nature of a “sisterhood” of Chicanas which unites them through similar experiences of trauma and even a shared decolonial awareness, for Chicanas to identify as the daughter figure rather than a maternal one—as Mexican women and Chicanas are often pressured to—can be a form of patriarchal rebellion, if only to demand for herself personhood separate from the mother identity. As Hernández reconciles Chicana daughterhood and Chicana motherhood in her poem, she melds together the links of physical bonds with symbolic

ones, going on to deify the Hijas of Cuauhtémoc as both patron mothers and daughters with agency. I argue that this symbolic sisterhood can extend to cultural foremothers La Llorona and La Malinche by peeling away patriarchal perceptions and challenging those that insist Chicanas who identify with La Llorona or La Malinche should feel ashamed of this connection rather than empathy for fellow women who have been scorned or damaged in the cultural eye; we need only seek to understand them the same way we seek to understand the experiences of our birth mothers.

However, it must also be noted that mothers are not always analyzed in relationship to their daughters as redeemed figures. In these cases, and in Chicana literature that reflects these filial trends, patriarchal complicity often leads mothers to harm their own daughters in many ways, whether this be through directly socializing Chicanas from adolescence to prioritize men over themselves and internalize the idea that women are lesser, or observing the mother prioritize male siblings over the daughter. This does not always occur consciously, either; at times mothers may expose their daughters to patriarchal conventions simply to prepare them for “the real world,” believing it beneficial in the long run. Throughout this thesis, matrilineal trauma—that is, a kind of trauma rooted in issues specific to women that is passed generationally—serves as another focus to my analysis of La Llorona and La Malinche. Because these foremothers represent a “betrayal” of some sort between mother and child, re-envisioning them as redeemed mothers and/or daughters with personhood may reflect both how these archetypal figures perpetuate conventions of matrilineal trauma and how they, themselves, have also been affected by it.

### **Centuries of Lloronas and Malinches**

Much like the eponymous figure of Yellow Woman in Leslie Marmon Silko's short story, La Llorona and La Malinche have existed with countless faces and names over time, in as many versions of their origins—sometimes combined and conflated—as there are storytellers. However, neither woman is an “every-mother”; in *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*,<sup>2</sup> Domino Renee Perez explains how La Llorona (and La Malinche, by the same reasoning) narratively cannot be a white woman or upper-class; a fundamental aspect of her tragedy is that she is socially disadvantaged to begin with, which inherently dooms her in most versions. Perez exemplifies this point with the comparison of La Llorona to Susan Smith, who in 1994 killed her two young sons to keep a prospective relationship and temporarily avoided suspicion by claiming that a black man had carjacked her vehicle while her two children were still strapped inside. This latter detail, Perez states, is precisely what makes Smith's case *not* a Llorona tale: “Even as a working-class white woman in the South, Smith was still able to capitalize on white anxiety and fear of black men to deflect blame from herself...La Llorona never had Smith's power or white privilege” (202-203).

La Llorona is too brown when her lover would prefer a wife with lighter skin, too poor and too Indigenous where a white woman seems the more “proper” choice; she is jealous and selfish in her lust toward her lover, not at all like a pure and selfless emulator of la Virgen would be. In Clarissa Pinkola Estés's archetypal exploration of the “Wild Woman,” *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Estés (like Perez) characterizes La Llorona's traditional oral narrative as one that is constantly being molded by shifting

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<sup>2</sup> Perez's work on La Llorona is the first book-length interdisciplinary study to analyze La Llorona's cultural representations and influences across different genres and mediums, and is a major source that fuels this thesis.

social values over time, “build[ing] on the psychic issues of each generation” (Estés 325). Factors like gender, class, race, and sexuality remain at the forefront of these issues that have been used to both victimize and vilify her. The historical context surrounding La Llorona’s myth is vital in understanding the nuances of her tragedy, as well as her prevalence in Mexican/Chicanx folklore and culture.

In her exploration of La Llorona across media, Perez illustrates the close social and cultural ties of La Llorona’s narrative to the Mexican conquest and colonization. The first story of the woman who went weeping and wailing for her children occurs in the form of an omen in the Florentine Codex, one of eight omens which foretold the arrival of Cortés, where a woman dressed in white is said to have walked the streets of Tenochtitlán bemoaning her doomed children and the inexorable downfall of the Aztec empire (16). Some heard this woman howling “O my children, where am I to take you?” while others claim she declared “O my children, we are about to go forever” (16). Both translations of this proto-Llorona figure’s crying evoke a sense of hopelessness for her children, whom we can interpret in a literal and metaphorical sense about the impending colonization of Mexico, as it brought to an end the Aztec empire and forever changed the Mexican culture, landscape, and social order. From the rapes and sexual exploitation of Indigenous women by Spaniard men came the mestizo race, in a new society where in the system of *las Castas*, *indios* and *mestizos* could only hope to elevate the class status of their children through increasing the degree of Spanish blood in their veins.

This is perhaps most heavily where La Llorona’s tale carries resonance with class and race issues in its core: the woman’s inequality to her male love interest places her as having Indigenous blood and him as Spanish, their children bastard *mestizos* whom he

refuses to acknowledge as his own; this folkloric tradition was a reality for countless Indigenous women and mestizas, including La Malinche, as she is portrayed in several versions of her story. Furthermore, La Llorona folklore began to surface and circulate in the cultural sphere around 1550—a direct product of the era of colonization in Mexico (Obregón, cited in Perez 19).

But several major aspects of La Llorona’s origins predate the conquest. The goddess Cihuacoatl is an antecedent to La Llorona, a goddess associated with midwives and childbirth, who was also viewed as an alternate aspect of Coatlicue (of whom la Virgen is a mestiza Catholic rendition). Cihuacoatl, or Snake Woman, was characterized by Nahuatl accounts as striking fear into people’s hearts, dressed completely in white and whose “roar was an omen of war” (Perez 136). La Llorona also has a connection to the female spirits who had died in childbirth and whom Cihuacoatl had dominion over, the Cihuateteo. At times, the Cihuateteo were known to be vengeful and would steal away children from the realm of the living, lingering near crossroads. La Llorona has also been traced to the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, who rules over water and rivers—elements both life-giving and destructive.

By exploring these origins, we can map where a powerful multifaceted goddess figure goes from having agency to no agency, where the colonially imposed European patriarchy dismisses her voice from that of an omnipresent force to the pitiful sound of a punished human woman’s ghost. Perez describes La Llorona as “a mother, sister, daughter, seer, and perhaps goddess, yet in all instances she is a woman who is condemned to either foresee or bemoan the fate of her children, biological in the tale but emblematic of the Indigenous people militarily, politically, and culturally displaced by

the conquest” (18). Understanding the site of this trauma in the cultural psyche is only one step of reclaiming La Llorona, however.

The same can be said of La Malinche. Whether called by her real name Malinalli or Malintzin—or La Chingada, as many have called her—she was an Indigenous woman who shared several similarities with the figure of La Llorona, as the “discarded woman.” She was translator and guide to Hernán Cortés, as well as his concubine, mistress, lover—whether she really loved him or was simply a powerless subject of patriarchal and colonial subjugation who did what she had to for her own survival, and the survival of her tribe, is still debated.<sup>3</sup> But regardless of Malintzin’s desires, Cortés married her off to a different man and returned to a Spanish wife. La Malinche’s son by Cortés, Martín Cortés, is said to have been the first mestizo.

Her status as literal and symbolic mother of mestizos in Mexico has been twisted into a vilification of her as a “bad” cultural foremother. In the eyes of Indigenous and Chicano nationalist critics, La Malinche betrayed her community by literally sleeping with the enemy and assisting in the conquest with her translation skills. The Mexican poet Octavio Paz’s famous fourth chapter in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, titled “The Sons of La Malinche,” describes mestizaje as a “bastard race” that has left the Mexican people with a sense of anxiety surrounding this lineage even in the modern cultural sphere. In labeling La Malinche “La Chingada” and explaining this meaning as inherently meant to denote the one on whom violence is enacted—a passive victim—Paz then posits that all

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<sup>3</sup> Chicana scholars like Norma Alarcón and Adelaida del Castillo place La Malinche’s situation into the latter, defending her actions as coming from a subjugated status. Perez however draws from cultural folklore the story that La Malinche killed her and Cortés’s children out of jealousy after he left her for a Spanish wife—thus implying she had feelings for him.

Mexicans and mestizos are “hijos de la chingada” and therefore the “offspring of violation” (Paz). Paz argues that this is the source of an inherent sense of shame in the Mexican psyche and frames this historical/cultural awareness as especially detrimental to Mexican masculinity, even calling La Malinche a “Mexican Eve.”

This casting of blame for the fall of the Aztec empire on La Malinche as an Eve figure ignores the complexity of Indigenous national identity before the conquest, however. As Adelaida Del Castillo details in her 1974 retelling of La Malinche’s story, “Malintzín Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective,” Malintzin was not an Aztec citizen but had been sold into slavery by her mother as a child to the Aztecs from a different tribe. Furthermore, while La Malinche is widely viewed in contempt as selling out her own people, her translation skills were beneficial to both Spaniards and Indigenous peoples because they allowed her a role as mediator in helping to avoid total violence and possibly complete genocide with communication instead. Norma Alarcón continues this reclaiming of La Malinche in her own essay, “Tradutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” pointing out that not only does this conventional narrative ignore the Aztec emperor Moctezuma’s role in welcoming and attempting to placate Cortés and his men, but also forgets how the Aztec empire was overthrown because the Spanish colonizers allied with Indigenous enemies of the Mexica.

Alarcón goes on to address the way Chicana feminists were called Malinches and Malinchistas during their break-off from the larger movement, illustrating how this insulting name was embraced by those who have felt a connection with La Malinche, and even La Llorona, for those who have been scrutinized based on how they navigate sexist

and traditional expectations of a system layered with both the Mexican and U.S. patriarchies.

### **Women of Resistance**

The epigraph poem by Hernández appears in Alma García's *Chicana Feminist Thought*, a volume on the writings of early Chicana feminists that broke off from the broader Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Here, as with other voices captured from time within the pages of García's compilation of poems, essays, articles, and interviews, a sense of empowerment and celebration of Chicana cultural identity prevails throughout the tone of Hernández's verse. When speaking of empowerment through a female community sharing their lineage, this sense of empowerment for Chicanas is one that first acknowledges a history of trauma and struggles for women—pre- and post-Conquest. Sacrificed to a patriarchal god of violence, violated by Spanish conquerors, Hernández does not shy from mentioning these tragedies but then challenges a stagnant narrative of victimization through characterizing these generations of Mexicanas and Chicanas as fighters for freedom (“luchadoras por la libertad”), even referencing the Adelitas.<sup>4</sup> Even in the wake of colonization, they are described as those who “give the light” (“dieron la luz”) to the mestizo race. Here, with a layered meaning conveying both illumination and creation, Hernández cleverly uses the phrases “dar a luz” (meaning to give birth) and “dar la luz” (to give something light) to parallel both literal and symbolic kinds of motherhood, both connected to overcoming adversity. Chicanas' foremothers gave the

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<sup>4</sup> During the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s, las Adelitas were the Mexican women who fought alongside the men and assisted them as fellow revolutionaries (however, they were not considered on par with the men in their liberation efforts).

Aztecs light but were sacrificed to a violent god, then out of the violence of Spanish colonization gave birth to a new people.

Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor and a martyr of anti-colonial rebellion, serves as a figure of Indigenous pride and Chicano nationalism in the history of el Movimiento. In this Chicana narrative, it is not Cuauhtémoc who reigns powerful and divine over a Chicano nation or a reclaimed Aztlán, but his symbolic daughters—the women of the resistance movement, “nuestras madres” (“our mothers”) who are deified into patrons of the movement.

Understanding the ideas and goals of these early pioneers of the movement will help in tracking how social values have shifted and continue to shift for Chicanas who come to hold the same political and cultural awareness. It also helps to show how Chicana literary works reflect this same theme Hernández achieves, in celebrating motherhood and daughterhood both in a new Chicana consciousness.

The early essays reflecting Chicana feminist ideology in *Chicana Feminist Thought* address Chicana identity and experiences regarding sexism, classism, nationalism, and the white feminist movement. One essayist, Consuelo Nieto, calls for caution in the Chicana community to polarizing the Chicana movement from the Chicano and mainstream feminist movements, stating the need for a Chicana perspective in both. Other writers however, like Marta Cotera, were critical and distrustful of the white feminist movement for the ways it appealed mainly to “white middle-class professional” women, and for the complicity of white women in racist/fetishistic views toward brown and black people. Many Chicanas additionally describe these tribulations of being seen as

“vendidas” and as simply mimicking white feminists by their own community and even other Chicanas.

A prominent voice during this era, Anna Nieto-Gómez, criticized the basis of this comparison of Chicana feminism to white feminism and the “malinchista” label applied to them. She pointed out that the way Chicana feminism challenges the heterosexist norms of el Movimiento does not equate to whiteness or casting off one’s cultural identity. Nieto-Gómez examines these norms and their origins in her essay “La Chicana – Legacy of Suffering and Self-Denial,” where she asserts that the major origin of generational trauma for Chicanas lies in the colonial period of Mexico, pointing out the Catholic church’s control of “social-sexual roles” in the Castas system that has long affected gender dynamics in Mexican/Chicanx norms.

Later in this essay, Nieto-Gómez also brings attention to the fact that female resistance to these norms is not a new movement by Chicana feminists, and is certainly not copied from the mainstream U.S. American feminist movement. Rather, feminist ideas have always existed where women of all cultures have sought independence and freedom against suppression but have been often been erased from history.

### **Motherhood and Fraught Female Dynamics**

One of the major studies that has fueled my research is the collection of essays in Cristina Herrera’s *Contemporary Chicana Literature: (Re)Writing the Maternal Script*. Combining her own experiences and observations of the dynamics between three generations of women in her own family in her introduction with detailed analyses of several works by Chicana authors that deal prominently in some way with mother-daughter relationships, Herrera seeks to expand on this topic of Chicana familial

dynamics, a specific topic that she notes has yet to receive a wide amount of scholarly attention. A prevalent theme in these essays is the friction between Chicana mothers and daughters that is often a product of sexist familial traditions where the mothers are somewhat complicit in upholding patriarchal values, and the need for Chicanas to reclaim their mothers in order to forge their own self-realized identities.

Ana Castillo's *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* contains similar ideas on the role of maternal figures in shaping a Chicana's identity. Castillo discusses the intersectional components of Chicana selfhood at length, her chapters on machismo and generational trauma passed from mothers to daughters particularly resourceful to my study. Castillo explains that the kind of behavior that may be classified as patriarchally-complicit motherhood at times is really an act of mothers teaching their daughters passivity as a means for survival. But for new generations of Chicanas—especially those with Xicanista consciousness—the definition of motherhood has become altered to where this passivity is more detrimental than not. Like Nieto-Gómez, Castillo locates the root of generational trauma for Chicanas as being the conquest of Mexico, but Castillo focuses on the specifically matrilineal aspect and includes factors like classism, sexism, racism, poverty, and involuntary sterilizations.

The distortion of maternal icons like *las tres madres* is also included in both Castillo's and Herrera's studies and in connection with this theme of traumatic mother/daughter bonds. According to Herrera, legends of *La Llorona* and *La Malinche* have "become symbolic of the historical gendered violence suffered by women during times of conquest" along with being utilized to inhibit women's self-realization;

reclaiming the symbolic mother is a means of reclaiming the maternal relationship, Herrera argues (57).

In a study on Chicana prisoner art, “Mothers, Daughters, and Deities: Judy Lucero’s Gynocritical Prison Poetics and Materialist Chicana Politics,” B.V. Olguín analyzes another aspect of Chicana oppression during the Chicano movement with an examination of the American prison industrial complex’s unequal ratios of incarceration against Black and Latino populations in contrast to the white population. Olguín narrows in on the commonalities surrounding the experiences of Chicanas in prison where in many cases, as Olguín notes, these women are put away for crimes committed by male partners whom they “[take] the fall for,” due to belief that they would be given lenient sentences as women (and oftentimes as mothers, as well) (64). The main subject of this scholarship is Judy A. Lucero, a Chicana prisoner who was forcibly separated from her daughter, and who wrote poetry until her untimely death behind bars, leaving behind three collections of poetry that were posthumously published. Through a close-reading analysis, Olguín posits that one can trace a transformation of subjectivity in Lucero’s poems where she eventually recasts herself from an objectified numerical identity to a “Convict Mother Goddess,” drawing on a sense of connectedness in spite of her imprisonment to her daughter and her own mother (66). Additionally, there is a shift from Judeo-Christian religiosity in her themes to indigenous motifs and Mother Earth, such as recurring mentions of female-characterized rivers that evoke the Mexica river/water goddesses. Olguín even goes on to argue that Lucero positions herself in a deified Malinche role in her third collection, calling the speaker of these poems a “bard-as-witness-participant” (similar to Malintzín’s role as translator) and describing the female

voice as that of a “mestiza heroine” for la Raza that precedes Gloria Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza” in *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (81-82).

These types of Chicana resistance narratives in Lucero’s and other Chicana feminist writers’ works reflect a notion that to reclaim the women and mothers that came before us is to reclaim ourselves from systemic and cultural oppression. To reclaim La Llorona and La Malinche as mothers and fellow daughters, Chicana feminists must undo that which has long cemented them as evil and shameful symbols.

### **Tracing the Transformations**

In order to fully assess how La Llorona and La Malinche can be transformed into Chicana daughters of the movement through texts by Chicana authors, my objective is to answer how and to what extent Chicana literature—especially that which utilizes the supposed “bad” maternal figures of La Llorona and La Malinche—explores and possibly rectifies the friction Herrera describes between Chicana mothers and daughters. And furthermore, how and to what extent these texts, in turn, reclaim or transform La Llorona and La Malinche.

In chapter one of my thesis, I delve further into the history of female resistance ideology in Mexican/Chicanx culture and the breakout of Chicana feminism, and explore the writings of the early Chicana feminists such as Nieto-Gómez and Del Castillo. From these works I trace the efforts of Chicana feminists in reclaiming and rewriting La Llorona and La Malinche to the works of Alarcón, Castillo, and Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* and Castillo’s *Massacre of the Dreamers* both encapsulate messages that push for a movement of new political and cultural awareness in Chicanxs, but especially for Chicanas, with Castillo calling this sense of enlightenment “conscientización.”

Additionally, Castillo offers the name “Llorona Complex” to describe a rejection of imposed motherhood, which is an idea I explore further later. In her foundational piece on Chicana feminism that tackles sexism, racism, colonization, mestizaje, homophobia, and the general Otherness Chicanas face, Anzaldúa asserts a dire need for Chicanas to “decolonize the mind” on the path to self-actualization, describing what she calls the Coatlicue State as a means of transformation one must surrender themselves to in order to achieve balance through self-reflection and dissolving the invisible borders that surround us. Another work by Anzaldúa I mention is her children’s book *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y La Llorona*, a positive characterization of La Llorona which sees her help a lost girl rather than preying on her.

Chapters two and three focus on two main kinds of transformation narratives Perez describes in *There Was a Woman*, humanized and deified figures, respectively. I hope to further this conversation by specifically analyzing works where we can observe humanization of the bad mother subject and deification of the maternal figure in order to reclaim these figures.

In chapter two, on humanizing La Llorona and La Malinche characters, I analyze Sandra Cisneros’s novel *Caramelo* and her short stories “Never Marry a Mexican” and “Woman Hollering Creek.” With its autobiographical elements, *Caramelo* is a multi-generational exploration of family dynamics in a Mexican/Chicano family from one side of the border to the other, told through the narrative voice of the youngest daughter, Celaya (or Lala). The major Llorona figure of this work is Soledad, the Awful Grandmother, whose early life serves as the main storyline for nearly all the novel’s second part as Lala’s effort to grant her now-dead grandmother a better understanding.

Lala's complicated relationship with her mother Zoila is another pivotal aspect in studying the reclaiming of maternal figures in *Caramelo*. "Never Marry a Mexican" similarly features a strained relationship between the protagonist Clemencia and her mother, but here Cisneros explores the figure of La Malinche, set in a modern setting and marked by a post-colonial awareness in her characters that shapes how Clemencia grapples with her cultural identity and the trauma of fetishization and tokenization. Cisneros's short story "Woman Hollering Creek," which sees La Llorona change from a symbol of tragedy and cyclical victimization to a symbol with new Chicana feminist meaning, her hollering of grief turned into that of uninhibited self-expression and joy by the character Felice. The main character, Cleófilas, gradually becomes disillusioned with the romantic conventions in her telenovelas she has been socialized her whole life to aspire to as she realizes her husband is abusive; prompted by a protectiveness of her children, Cleófilas breaks free of the conventional Llorona narrative looming over her life and in the process is introduced to a liberated Llorona/Gritona version. In this chapter I will also analyze aspects of Anna-Marie Mclemore's magical realism novel *When the Moon Was Ours*, a Young Adult romance story that evokes mythological and fairytale aesthetics into a high school setting. The backstory for the protagonist, Miel, includes a subverted Llorona narrative where the mother drowns and her children survive her and utilizes La Llorona to construe the potentially harmful effects of misguided parental affection.

In chapter three, where I analyze transformations of "bad" cultural foremothers through deification, I look at several works that deal more prominently with La Llorona's connection to Indigenous goddesses and restoring agency as mythic figures through

Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, Irene Lara Silva's short story "cortando las nubes, or, death came on horses" and Pat Mora's poem "Llantos de La Llorona: Warnings From the Wailer." Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* places the titular Medea character as both a Llorona and Malinche, her "betrayal" to her community depicted in the form of a romantic relationship with another Chicana, Luna. Throughout the play, Medea looks to the goddess Coatlicue as a guiding maternal figure, eventually reclaiming the cast-off daughter figure, Coyolxauhqui, as her primary goddess instead. Together with her son Chac-Mool, in death they reconcile the separation between mother and child that goes unresolved in the traditional Llorona myth. The short story "cortando las nubes, or, death came on horses" from Silva's work *flesh to bone* is a retelling of the Llorona story that emphasizes her Indigenous identity and bases her trauma on the violence of Spanish colonization. La Llorona does not commit infanticide in this version and is instead accompanied by the ghosts of her children in her wanderings, with her daughter, Cempasuchil, serving as the main narrative voice, who characterizes her mother as a patron goddess—with many similarities to the goddess Cihuacoatl—who is a fighter of social justice for Mexicans and Chicanxs throughout history. Mora's poem, "Llantos de la Llorona," also highlights La Llorona as an Indigenous woman, giving her a Mayan identity by naming La Llorona's mother as X-tabai, a Mayan goddess who is said to seduce men to their deaths. Mother and daughter are both disdained and ostracized by their community pre-conquest for rumors of their promiscuity, then post-conquest as La Llorona becomes infamous for her infanticides. However, these killings are framed as somewhat merciful, "spar[ing]" them from colonial violence at the Spaniards' hands (Mora). Over the course of the poem, La Llorona pulls herself out from the historical

setting and places herself in a timeless space where she addresses a Chicana audience, calling future generations her “daughters” and stating that there is power in the voice, a reference to her wailing.

Lastly, in the conclusion to my thesis, I review the evidence for my assertion that La Llorona and La Malinche are reclaimed as Chicana daughters and maternal symbols both, similarly to how these symbolic identities are embraced together in Hernández’s poem and the writings of other Chicana feminists. Furthermore, I analyze how Chicana feminists are normalizing these new versions of La Llorona and La Malinche to challenge the static cultural view, while simultaneously outside the realm of Chicana feminist activism, broader Latinx and U.S. American perceptions of these foremothers remain unchanged, and what this can mean for our interactions with these archetypes going forward.

## II. LA MALINCHE'S LEGACY: EARLY EFFORTS TO CHALLENGE THE HETEROSEXIST SCRIPT

### **A Minority Within El Movimiento**

The history of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement is often encapsulated in the cultural mind by images of labor marches, school walkouts, rallies with seas of posters, the faces of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. In the fight for racial and social equalities of Mexican Americans, the branching off of that section of Chicana feminists from the larger group must seem at first—as it certainly did to many Chicanos then—as evidencing a lack of solidarity, of priorities that did not, and still do not by similar reasoning, benefit the entire community, which still faces oppressive systemic forces to this day. However, the nuances that distinguish male and female, heterosexual and LGBTQ, even intergenerational experiences within racially marginalized groups create different needs in reaching self-actualization and autonomy. For Chicanas, this need has long existed through having to navigate overlapping patriarchal systems—that of the white-dominant Anglo-American society, and Mexican patriarchal traditions, where the former has often simultaneously fetishized and dehumanized Chicanas and the latter has long confined Chicanas into rigid and muted roles.

In tackling one major institution of inequality during the Chicano Movement, many Chicanas felt that the nationalist cause, even with all its celebration of Mexican culture and decolonial awareness, was not doing enough to secure dignity and protections for Mexican-American women (and in fact, at times the nationalist ideology led to conflating Mexican tradition with sexist values, as I explore later). Despite the sense of

dissatisfaction shared by many Chicanas in the broader movement due to its male-dominated organization, identifying as a Chicana *feminist* was socially taboo and avoided, due heavily to not wanting to be associated with the Second Wave Feminist Movement occurring during the same era, which was dominated by white women. Because of this separation of identities, and the clashing urges of the Chicana “traditionalists” to remain steadfast to the larger movement while the Chicana feminists argued the necessity to address oppression specific to the Chicana experience, La Malinche’s name experienced a revival in the Chicano cultural sphere. Accusations of being a “traitor” or “sell-out” to la Raza became a sensitive ground for Chicanas in the Movement during this time, as the formation of the Chicana feminist movement became a scapegoat in the broader historiographic narrative for the fracture in Chicano resistance ideology. To focus a critical eye at the nationalist cause, to divert attention from the primary goal of racial equality, made one a Malinchista.

However, the actions of these first Chicana feminists who forged their own space during the Civil Rights era do not exemplify a lack of unity in the Chicano community, but rather a demand for *total* unity in the community. Female activism has always been present in movements of resistance throughout Mexican and Chicano history, adding to these movements’ traction and strength, yet history has erased countless of these names and voices; by breaking barriers to create a space specifically for Chicana concerns, as a branch off of the Chicano movement, Chicanas fight to end ethnic and racial oppression while also reclaiming the achievements of these sisters and mothers who have come before them from a male-centered historical Chicano narrative.

In this chapter, I analyze how certain ideals of women's activism were deemed more palatable to the Chicano Movement and how this affected the perceived roles of women in the movement; the effect of machismo in Chicana culture and on the ideological split between Chicanas and Chicanos; and the formation of new narratives and retellings as a widespread response from Chicana feminists that challenges traditional perceptions that have controlled Chicana and Mexican women over time—such new narratives that cast La Malinche and La Llorona as part of a Chicana feminist sisterhood in the traditionalist/feminist discourse.

### **Las Adelitas – The “Good” Luchadoras**

So far in comparing “good” and “bad” archetypal female figures in Mexican culture in this study, the outstanding icon of good motherhood to which the other two mothers in the tres madres triumvirate are often placed in opposition to is la Virgen de Guadalupe. However, the days of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement saw the Chicana community, as part of its push to reclaim and revive figures rooted in Mexican history, adopt an additional culturally significant symbol of female activism: La Adelita, or la soldadera, the camp follower. Plucking this resistance figure from the history of the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s, La Adelita gets her name from a corrido where a (male) speaker sings of a soldadera love interest, whom he declares he would follow into battle. The real Adelitas were Mexican women who accompanied the resistance fighters and oversaw domestic and nurse duties such as cooking, cleaning, caring for the men, and even servicing the men sexually during their travels. Since that time, the Adelita figure has taken on an iconographic cultural significance in Mexico and in the Chicana

community, paralleled in the latter to a Chicana activist identity (as we have already observed in the epigraph poem of the introduction, by Leticia Hernández).

Guisela Latorre, in her essay “Agustín Víctor Casasola’s *Soldaderas*: Malinchismo and the Chicana/o Artist,” examines the iconization of the Adelita figure through photography and art by first pinpointing its roots in the photographs of real life soldaderas taken by Mexican photographer Agustín Víctor Casasola beginning in 1914. In the 1960s, “Chicana/o artists, who looked to the Mexican Revolution as a historical precedence for their own struggles in the Civil Rights Movement, included the soldadera in the pantheon of Chicano historical figures, which also encompassed individuals from both sides of the border like Emiliano Zapata and César Chávez” (Latorre 100).

However, this iconization has also—in a fate similar to La Malinche’s—“de-historicized and mythified” La Adelita by containing her within a specific narrative spread by the dominant voices in the movement (Latorre 101). Yet unlike La Malinche’s case, Chicanos did not view La Adelita as “threatening” to their social and nationalist order. Despite her cultural symbolism as a strong soldier woman and the fact that many Chicanas in the movement, traditionalists and feminists alike, embraced her, they did not perceive a need to scrutinize her form of activism (Latorre 101). In an introduction to *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, Amanda Nolacea Harris describes the contradictory and complex nature of the iconography and influence surrounding the Adelita figure:

As “Adelitas,” or soldadera figures borrowed from the Mexican revolutionarylore, Chicana activists contribute to the ethnic struggle as silent, unquestioning support

systems. In the literature and general historical testaments, conformity to patriarchal authority through obedience, sexual control, food preparation, behind-the-scenes organizing, and child-rearing earned Chicanas a secure place in ethnic community. Conversely, sexual independence (choosing if and with whom to be sexually active or choosing non-procreative sexuality), bringing feminist concerns to the table, public leadership, and refusal to have (Chicano) children, earned Chicanas epithets that imply the mutual exclusivity of Chicano activism and feminism—“agringada,” “Malinchista,” and “vendida”—under the assumption that feminism is a negative foreign influence as opposed to an authentic concern within Chicana/o communities. (Harris xi)

Chicanas are encouraged to be inspired by the Adelitas’ resilience and steadfast loyalty to their cause but must remain quiet and in the background while doing so, encouraged to aspire to this same pattern of unquestioning deference to the men in the movement. In this fashion, the figure of la soldadera, on top of being barred from leadership roles and her activist participation not considered on par with the men’s, is also muted and reduced simply to an image or aesthetic in her status as cultural icon. She is made recognizable in modern art and pop culture by her sombrero and bandolier, but her voice is absent. Las Adelitas are powerful, but only as an anonymous support system.

Additionally, her image has experienced a degree of sexualization, her guerrillera identity made consumable to a heterosexual male gaze that harkens back in history to soldaderas being expected to satisfy the male revolutionary fighters’ sexual desires, and to la Adelita’s lyrical origins as the love interest in the famous corrido, as can be observed in artworks where “misogynistic constructions [depict] [La Adelita] in revealing

clothing and provocative poses” (Latorre 107). Yet this raises the question in examining the Adelita/Malinche dichotomy in Chicana activism: how is the sexualized Adelita, who transgresses the virginal ideals normally strictly imposed on Mexican/Chicana women, not also vilified like La Malinche? According to scholar Alicia Gaspar de Alba, the answer lies in that la Adelita is “the good whore, who offers her body to the machos of la Causa”—that is, as long as the Chicana’s body remains a possession of brown men’s hands rather than the white man’s, like La Malinche’s body was, this cultural taboo of promiscuity is deemed forgivable (Gaspar de Alba, quoted in Harris xiii). This theme of sexualization further emphasizes how although the figure of the soldadera was adopted as a figure of resistance, she, like Chicanas meant to emulate these women of the past, is still not regarded as a “legitimate political and social being” by the broader Chicana community (Latorre 109).

My objective in examining La Adelita as an archetypal figure in the Chicana movement is not to incriminate her as complicit in symbolizing a traditionally silent, male-serving figure, but rather to analyze how La Adelita has been similarly utilized like other female archetypes by a patriarchal script to dictate which values are observed by “good” and “bad” women—the arbitrary criteria that discern a “good” activista in the movement from a “Malinchista.” Like la Virgen de Guadalupe, La Adelita has in many instances of cultural iconography been stagnated as a “nationalist symbol devoid of agency,” with Latorre phrasing this as also having to do with her translation across the border from Mexican history to Chicana mythology (107). She is condensed into an image and sanitized to resemble the main values expected of Chicanas in the movement—loyalty, deference, undertaking domestic chores, and sexual availability to

the activist men. Yet despite being perceived as an “ideal” activist figure, and not a bad mythified-historical woman like La Malinche, La Adelita is similarly reclaimed through Chicana narratives by Chicana feminists like Hernández, not just as a revolutionary woman, but—perhaps more so—for the way las Adelitas have been suppressed by their imposed anonymity and relegated to an archetype utilized to undermine female participation in the Chicano movement. “Nuestras madres (our mothers),” as Hernández wrote of them, who inspire Chicana feminists and from whom they have inherited the fight for social justice—not just as symbolic mothers through cultural iconography, but the literal mothers of generations of Chicanas.

### **The “Old” Ways of Machismo**

The concept of machismo relies on heterosexist and stereotypical views of men and women, where to be masculine is to be characterized as strong and providing, meanwhile women are confined to domestic roles in serving their men; men are dominant, therefore women must be submissive. In many Chicana feminist examinations of these traditions, machismo is synonymous with toxic masculinity and serves as a major factor in the ideological split between nationalist Chicanos and feminist Chicanas during the movement. But machismo is not a static cultural institution; over time, it has morphed and been influenced by external factors, such as foreign patriarchal thought, religion, and oppression. Many Chicana scholars, including Anna Nieto-Gómez and Gloria Anzaldúa, have drawn attention to the intensity of misogynistic behavior and homophobia surrounding the nationalist movement, and pinpoint the major cause for this as the relationship between Chicano masculinity and racial oppression from the dominant Anglo patriarchy. Nieto-Gómez writes sympathetically that Chicanos, like all men of color, do

not hold the universal power that men are thought to possess, as often seen in the oversimplified (white) concept of gender inequalities that position man as the oppressor and woman as the victim. But rather, Mexican/Chicano men are stripped of power and autonomy in Anglo culture, creating a need for self-actualization of their identities as men of color, a need that has been warped into a type of over-compensation for this loss of social agency and consequently directed at Mexicanas and Chicanas (Nieto-Gómez 55). Nieto-Gómez goes on to condemn this behavior, stating how, by utilizing sexism in some false reclamation of power in response to oppression, neither men nor women in the movement can ultimately benefit (55). This “false machismo” in fact leads to the silencing and brutalization of Chicanas, only adding to the oppression of members of the same community while supposedly fighting for Chicane rights and dignity (*Borderlands* 105).

Anzaldúa, relating her observations on the shift in machismo in Chicane culture, first relates it to its role in her family’s dynamics and through her father, saying:

For my father, being ‘macho’ meant being strong enough to support my mother and us, yet being able to show love. Today’s macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His ‘machismo’ is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchal male dominance.

(*Borderlands* 105)

Like Nieto-Gómez, Anzaldúa also recognizes the effects of trauma and systemic racism/inequality on the male Chicane psyche that translates then to the toxicity in machismo, yet simultaneously contrasts this with a more positive behavior in “machos” like her father. This suggests that although machismo is ultimately a patriarchal creation,

its concept of masculine strength does not have to be violent or rooted in social dominance, nor is its intensification during the Civil Rights era completely a response to Anglo patriarchal oppression. But where does this disconnect between an identity as the oppressed by a racist system and acknowledgement of the subjugation of women in one's own ethnic community occur in machismo? How does this mode of behavior in the dominant sphere of the Chicano community, although dictated by men, also control Chicano roles just as machismo seeks to control Chicanas?

Matthew C. Gutmann, in his sociological exploration of machismo titled *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, highlights the importance of analyzing the relationship between traditions and human behaviors by citing a term coined by Antonio Gramsci, that is “contradictory consciousness.” Gutmann explains this concept as “a descriptive phrase used to orient our examination of popular understandings, identities, and practices *in relation to* dominant understandings, identities, and practices,” exemplifying this relation in cultural perceptions of the Mexican father figure as the “Macho Progenitor”; however, “whereas the beliefs and practices of many ordinary men do not accord neatly with this monochromatic image, ordinary men and women are themselves often acutely aware of and influenced in one way or another by the dominant, often ‘traditional’ stereotypes about men” (Gutmann 14). Like Chicanas, Chicanos may certainly be self-aware of the sexist overtones in Mexican culture, and even resistant to behaving exactly according to cultural norms, yet even then, as Gutmann explains, traditional gender roles inherently affect how both Chicanos and Chicanas navigate their identities in response to common cultural perceptions. But how these “traditional” perceptions came to be constructed creates another need for examination. As I will

explore in more depth later, the imposing of a new patriarchal order through Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century created a ripple effect of trauma on the psyches of Indigenous and mestizo populations through to the present day. Ana Castillo, in her chapter “The Ancient Roots of Machismo,” pushes the origins of machismo culture even further prior to the conquest of Mexico, however, connecting the Hispanicization of the Americas to the Islamic invasion and occupation of Spain that spanned from the eighth to fifteenth centuries (62). Apart from its influence on the Spanish language, the effects of Muslim conquest instilled an “obsession with female virginity” that is still shared by both Muslim and Catholic faiths to this day, and where in both religions this fixation is “related to [viewing] woman as property,” while also passing on customs that predate Islam and derive from ancient Moorish traditions (such as circumcision) (Castillo 62). However, as Castillo also points out, misogyny in Mexico was not entirely derived from external sources, explaining how even the early Chicana feminists “often looked no further than the Mexican Catholic Church when tracing the origins of machismo. Many were reluctant to acknowledge male supremacist practices of the Aztecs because of romantic ideas of pre-Conquest society, nationalist bias, or lack of information, but mostly because European culturicide rendered Mexica practices ineffective in our lives” (Castillo 24). Mexica society was male-dominated long before the arrival of the Spaniards, thus allowing concepts of machismo to remain in effect even with the introduction of a new patriarchal order and the erasure of Mexica customs.

Upon tracing the historical roots of patriarchal values in Mexican culture and locating the causes of its prevalence, machismo seems to have re-strengthened its role in Mexican/Chicano male identity during the Chicana movement in tandem with its

reclaiming of indigenous identity through mythification of historical events and figures. On this sudden change in macho behavior and its effect on gender roles in the movement, Nieto-Gómez recalls in a 1991 interview the social environment during her activism with the *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* newspaper at California State University in the 1970s:

Looking back, I see that these guys [on campus] were trying out idealized roles of manhood, so everything was exaggerated. Working in the community helped me out because I got to work with men that seemed normal...I saw their male identity as being comfortable and part of who they were. Back on campus it seemed the guys were role playing the exaggerated stereotypical macho and forced women to play out their passive role, which was a very rigid thing, instead of being yourself. If these guys deviated from this hypermacho role they were criticized for being wimps or anglocized. (Nieto-Gómez, quoted in Blackwell 69)

This account is revealing for a number of reasons. The exaggeration of traditional roles with little room for deviance Nieto-Gómez observed in these male Chicanos' efforts to signify themselves as part of a politically aware, decolonial resistance group marks this behavior as controlled, and even unnatural. Perhaps more interestingly, though, is how the conflation of nationhood with masculinity in this brand of machismo, the use of the term "anglocized" to describe Chicanos who do not fully or successfully conform to these gender roles, very clearly parallels the scrutiny placed on Chicanas in the movement who were accused of being Malinches. Though La Malinche's name is not traditionally weaponized against men, it is worth noting that in the Nahuatl language, "The term 'malinche' applied generically to outsiders (thus, Cortés was as much a 'malinche' as Malintzin Tenepal)...in any culture, outsiders or strangers have always been seen as

potential traitors, and the Aztecs were no different in that regard” (Gaspar de Alba 54). The fear of imitating whiteness, and thereby compromising one’s Mexican-ness and being labeled a race-traitor, certainly could extend to individuals of all genders in the Chicana movement in this sense. However, the presence of male privilege begets a double-standard that prevents fair comparison between the experiences of Chicanas and Chicanos. Chicana feminism being accused of “Anglocizing” Chicanas does not merely draw on the idea that it is a copy of white U.S. feminism, but because of its criticism toward the sexism and violence of machismo in the Movement. The vilification of La Malinche in connection to this also carries contradiction, in that it singles out not just the Mexican woman as the agent of cultural betrayal, but the *Indigenous* Mexican woman. For a term that originates as a gender neutral word for “outsider,” Othering the indigenous woman figure specifically evokes the ideology Octavio Paz describes in “The Sons of Malinche,” where this inherited anxiety toward the violated indigenous mother is asserted as having an especially dire effect on Mexican and Chicano male psychology, alienating the mother and bastardizing her offspring, and thus can be seen to play a role in macho aggression and misogyny.

La Malinche, as the antithetical symbol to Chicano machismo, has then come to also symbolize a fracture in the Chicana psyche, as the perceived threat looming over the resistance cause that preys on the fear of being Other within one’s own community, further marginalized in an environment and a society overlaid with multiple types of oppression, particularly for women in the movement. Anzaldúa, in opposition to Paz’s statements, writes of the effect of this patriarchal narrative on the female Chicana consciousness, stating that “the worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the

Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias y mestizas, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has done a good job on us” (*Borderlands* 44).

Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, writing on the navigation of Chicana narratives in a male-dominated community, similarly describes the need to challenge sexist tradition and the traditional narratives placed on Chicanas to speak over them, celebrating these early Chicana feminist efforts that:

replaced the discourses of compadres and carnalismo with the discourses of comadres (sisters) and feminismo (feminists), macho with hembra, and fiercely combatted male domination in the leadership of the Chicano Movement and the political life of the community. These were the Chicanas who were often targeted as the objects of the newly revised Malinche narrative, authored under prerequisites of a dogmatic nationalism which was irreverent toward the shaping influences of the heterogeneous experiences of conquest and regionalism on Chicanas/os. (84)

The challenges Chicanas faced in asserting their own voices and identities due to machismo may have its roots in a combination of factors within and outside of pre-Conquest Mexico, but Chicana feminism, born partly in response to machismo, continues to challenge and transform this suppression.

### **Generations of Trauma**

Throughout the Chicane community, the Conquest of Mexico serves as the locus for an unhealed wound in the cultural psyche, as the event that ignited centuries of genocidal violence, massacres, rape and sexual exploitation, socioeconomic disenfranchisement, displacement, and destruction of cultural identities. The traumas of

colonization have not yet expired in an allegedly post-colonial world, out of the continued systemic forces of racism—north and south of the border—but also the collective memory passed on over the years, through blood and through *la cultura*. When hearing stories of the bogeywoman, *La Llorona*, her narrative is coded with colonial inequalities that resonate with the history of *mestizaje* and the class system of *las Castas*. The woman is eternally searching for her murdered children—the aftermath of severing the mother/child bond, and in the Mexican/Chicanx psyche *La Llorona*'s discarded children symbolize a lost generation, a future erased by colonization.

However, as I touched on previously, Mesoamerican women were being subjugated long before the arrival of the Spaniards. Castillo describes the sexism in Mexica society by citing pre-Conquest accounts that detail how, at one point, the doctors in Moctezuma's court reported no less than 150 of the Aztec emperor's women in the palace were pregnant by him. For men, harems were socially acceptable, particularly in wealthier citizens, yet for Mexica women their sexuality was strictly controlled. Prostitution was illegal but tolerated to reduce rape and adultery. Female divorcées were repudiated by their communities, as they were considered nymphomaniacs and hence, went away, to be sold into slavery as concubines. As Castillo notes, “these brief examples illustrate that at the time of the Conquest women were already living out the blueprint for the following generations” (58).

Trauma acts as a driving force in Anzaldúa's work on Chicana theory *Borderlands*, as her examination of history and cultural consciousness for Mexicanas and Chicanas offers a means to trace these so-called blueprints of Chicanx oppression, the

layers of it heaped on indigenous and mestiza women. Of this tradition of violence and erasure on Chicana foremothers, Anzaldúa draws attention to the body and voice:

The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people (and in Mesoamerica her lot under the Indian patriarchs was not free of wounding). For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. Many times she wished to speak, to act, to protest, to challenge. The odds were heavily against her. She hid her feelings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. (*Borderlands* 44-45)

The involuntary and government-led sterilizations of Chicanas in the twentieth century Anzaldúa references is important to highlight, I feel, for along with the centuries of other forms of violence and degradation on the Mexicana/Chicana's body, the anti-sterilization cause in the Chicana community served as one of the major instigations of the Chicana feminist movement's solidification to tackle its specific needs, though oftentimes it is left out of Chicano history. In the wake of the eugenics movement that gripped the American medical field from the early twentieth century, which injected ideals of "purifying" the human gene pool by forcefully sterilizing women in Black, Latinx, and Native American groups throughout the 1900s, many women in these marginalized communities continued to be disproportionately targeted by instances of coerced or nonconsensual sterilization practices even after the popularity of the eugenics movement decreased. In the 1960s and 1970s in Los Angeles, a group of Mexican

women and Chicanas who had been victimized by these practices finally took legal action, prompting the *Madrigal v. Quilligan* case that attracted the attention of Chicanas across the nation. In the details of this case, these women—somewhat reluctant, and fearful of having their stories told for what it would mean for them in their communities or in the eyes of their husbands—described the abuse and dehumanization they endured all at the same Los Angeles County Medical Center. Some women, like Dolores Madrigal and Helena Orozco, were pressed to sign consent forms for a sterilization procedure while in the throes of labor; others, like Consuelo Hermosillo and Jovita Rivera, were manipulated into signing these forms while heavily drugged with pain medication immediately after giving birth. Several of the women in the *Madrigal v. Quilligan* case were not approached with any forms at all. The commonalities of each individual experience made it clear that racism played the main role in these doctors' choices, as the main attorney Antonia Hernández argues in the case's legal documentation, "all of the victims and near-victims belonged to a racial minority, were poor, and could not readily understand English" (9). Furthermore, the accounts of the victimized women revealed the doctors involved often reasoned that preventing these Mexicanas and Chicans from having more children was actually beneficial, telling these women they would no longer be "burdening the taxpayers," under the racist assumption that Latinos take advantage of the welfare system (which none of the women in this case were on) (Hernández 8).

The robbing of these Mexicanas' and Chicans' agency, the denial of procreative capability that stabs at the maternal identity imposed at the center of Mexicana consciousness, despite its problematic conflation of motherhood with female identity in Mexican culture, still acts as another wound on the collective Chicana psyche in

America. In her 1994 Chicana feminist work *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo coins the term “Llorona Complex” to characterize women in Mexican/Chicanx culture who reject motherhood—and are often shunned or ridiculed for this choice—yet I wonder how much of this attitude derives not just from a clear resistance to patriarchal control on Chicanas’ bodies and reproductive sense, but perhaps as a response to this collective trauma, the not-too-long ago history of Chicana bodies being brutalized and mutilated by a legacy of racism in the hands of modern doctors (144). The medical oppression of Chicanas and Mexicanas is as fresh in the cultural mind for many of us as the genocide on the Aztecs or the immigrant detention camps of the current day. Perhaps the Llorona Complex Castillo describes is another response to this pain in history that comes from a place of anxiety, in order to, like La Llorona in some versions of her tale, cast away the duty of motherhood as a mercy or protection.

Anzaldúa, in exploring the effects of pain on the whole community, describes the inherent awareness of Otherness it fosters as *la facultad*, explaining that “fear develops the proximity sense of *la facultad*” (*Borderlands* 61). However, this adaptation in marginalized peoples also makes way for healing, for breaking down barriers and seeing past the norms meant to confine us. Healing of the individual as a response to collective or ingrained trauma is another major aspect of her Chicana theory, leading to her creation the process she names the Coatlicue State. Referencing the mother earth goddess in the Aztec pantheon of both creation and destruction, Coatlicue symbolizes balance and duality—elements Anzaldúa cites as vital for la Chicana’s sense of self-actualization and embracing all parts of her intersectional identity (68-69). By surrendering oneself to Coatlicue as the Shadow in their consciousness—the effects of generational trauma

inherited from the past and the oppression of today's world—Anzaldúa tells us to heal through self-reflection and transformation.

Maylei Blackwell similarly locates opportunity for healing after pain through an inspiration from the past generations, noting this in the environment of the early Chicanas' efforts:

Many studies assume that Chicanas came from 'traditional' backgrounds and then came to their forms of feminism through the movement. However, the oral histories of the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc reveal that many of the women drew their sense of political agency and gender identity from other community-based 'traditions' of female strength and resistance. As descendants of female labor organizers, political party activists, railroad workers, and women who managed family survival on scarce resources, most often members of this organization said that it was their mother, abuela, or tía who served as their role model. (66)

Reclamation from oppression is an inherent aspect of the era of civil rights movements. For Chicanas, this has meant finding strength in the women who have come before us in the resistance cause—even those who were denied a voice but whose "light shone through her veil of silence" (*Borderlands* 45).

### **A Narrative of One's Own**

In order to contest the stagnant versions of stories surrounding us, particularly those that utilize archetypal women to convey negative attributes, we must re-work the cultural factors at play, for culture decides a community's "truths." The insidious nature of this, however, is how both men *and* women are inevitably affected, which has led to the patriarchally complicit nature of Mexicana/Chicana identity when policing other

women; in the “buena madre sufrida” archetype popularized by Catholic tradition in Mexican culture, women must be domestic, self-sacrificing, and must not complain or rebel, as culture dictates, lest she be scorned by men and other women as well (Herrera 106). Anzaldúa aptly explains this frustration in *Borderlands* with:

We perceive the version of reality that [culture] communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being hociconas (big mouths), for being callejeras (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (38)

But as Anzaldúa continues, it is not just the sphere of domestic and familial obligation that becomes the instrument for the normalization of these cultural values in Mexican/Chicanx society, but, as previously explored on its effect on cementing patriarchal values and machismo, the problem originates from a widespread negative view of femininity itself even before Spanish conquest:

The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects. Coatlicue, the serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, Tlazolteotl

and Cihuacoatl, were “darkened” and disempowered much in the same manner as the Indian Kali. (*Borderlands* 49)

Furthermore, with the invasion of the Spanish patriarchy, “the subordination of woman’s sexuality was crucial for the survival of patriarchal religious practices” (Castillo 89). We see this with La Llorona in how her antecedent, Cihuacoatl, is stripped of her goddess status through her and made an enemy of women rather than a patron of female strength in childbirth and motherhood. In La Malinche, Chicana culture has designated her as the “Eve” who doomed the mestizo race.

The Chicana feminist movement observed the early efforts to rectify these cultural narratives, not only to question their heterosexist double standards, but to create a narrative tradition that encapsulates a female perspective and Chicana identity. One early Chicana feminist figure to challenge the broader cultural perceptions is Adelaida Del Castillo, who offered a retelling of La Malinche’s story in a volume of the Chicana journal *Encuentro Femenil*. Here, Del Castillo frames La Malinche—Malintzin Tenepal—as a resourceful and positive figure during the Conquest for her role as a mediator, allowing a prevention of total annihilation of the indigenous peoples through war, but also as a liberator in a sense for the indigenous tribes enslaved and conquered by the Aztecs, remarking that “in effect, when Doña Marina is accused of being ‘traidora a la patria,’ one wrongly assumes that there was a ‘patria’” (125). This blatant challenge to demonizing Malintzin, and to the nationalist historiography that erases the layers of conflict and suppression that existed among indigenous nations before the arrival of the Spaniards, was quite radical for 1971.

Norma Alarcón continues Del Castillo's work of forging this new narrative into the wider culture with her own study on La Malinche ("Traddutora, Traditora"), drawing on Del Castillo's transformation of La Malinche's narrative and delving further into the oppositional binary between La Malinche and La Virgen in the Mexican psyche. Like Del Castillo, Alarcón criticizes the way La Malinche's image was warped in its translation across the border from Mexican history into a Chicana archetypal figure during the movement, pointing directly to the influence of Paz's essay in that male Chicanos leading the cause "wanted to recover the origins. However, many Chicanos emphasized the earlier nationalistic interpretations of Malintzin as the traitorous mediator who should be expelled from the community rather than accepted" (69). Furthermore, this appropriation of the historic figure to fit into a preconceived set of Chicano values further influenced gender roles in that "the denigration of Malintzin was tantamount to a defamation of 'the character of the Mexicana/Chicana female'" (Del Castillo, quoted Alarcón 72). Chicanas during the movement, as a response, began the process of redeeming La Malinche as a way of validating their own experiences, identifying with this cultural foremother in the way they themselves "transgressed" cultural ideals, either by being feminist, by being lesbian, by calling out sexism in their homes and communities. Reclaiming La Malinche as the foremother to parallel the figure of La Virgen for Chicanas during the movement positions her as the mestiza daughter's redemptress and has opened reclamation of terms like "vendida" for Cherríe Moraga and "chingada" as seen in Anzaldúa proclaiming "Sí, soy hija de la Chingada. I've always been her daughter. No 'tés chingando" (39).

## **The New Chicana**

Restoring La Malinche as the indigenous foremother in the Chicana psyche is a necessary process in the self-actualization of Chicana identity, though it is not complete, not absorbed into the broader culture that continues to dictate gendered behavior and scare Chicanas away from identifying with “bad” archetypal women like La Malinche or La Llorona. The effect of the Chicana movement’s push to reexamine the narratives presented as unquestionable “truths” around us has grown since the movement’s peak, however, as Harris writes:

The examination of La Malinche allows us to deconstruct the separation of spheres. Studying figures that force us to address sexism and racism simultaneously makes us look beyond denouncing dominant culture and look critically at the way that we have constructed ourselves. Though it is necessary to look outwards at exclusion and negative characterizations, it is also necessary that we look inwards. If we neglect this responsibility, we effectively diminish the potential to create circumstances for equality within our communities, academic and otherwise. (x)

New generations of Chicana feminists, symbolically inheriting the ideologies of Anzaldúa, Castillo, Alarcón, as well as many others, are influenced even more now to analyze the traditional narratives prescribed by our culture.

Something I find significant in this continued effort by Chicana feminists is that this transformation and reclamation of cultural narrative is not something simply happening in scholarly or specialized academic spaces, but across Chicana literature and storytelling. In 1995, Anzaldúa published an alternative Llorona story in the form of a

children's book (*Prietita and the Ghost Woman/ Prietita y La Llorona*), which sees La Llorona in a much more maternal light, helping the titular girl Prietita to find her way home rather than stealing her away in death. Rather than offer a frightening tale of infanticide as children are often told of her in Mexican and Mexican-American communities, Anzaldúa retells La Llorona in a way that specifically highlights the mother/daughter relationship, even evoking La Llorona's origin as Cihuacoatl in drawing on the goddess's elements as a patroness of motherhood. Anzaldúa additionally offers her thoughts on this new Llorona narrative at the end of the book, with:

When I was a little girl growing up in South Texas near the King Ranch, my mamagrande, my grandmother used to tell me scary stories about la Llorona, the ghost woman. These stories were well-known throughout the Southwest and in Mexico. All the children were afraid of la Llorona—I was afraid too, but even at that age I wondered if there was another side to her. As I grew older and studied the roots of my Chicana/Mexicana culture, I discovered that there really was another side to la Llorona a powerful, positive side, a side that represents the Indian part and the female part of us. I discovered, like Prietita, that things are not always what they seem to be...I want to encourage children to look beneath the surface of what things seem to be in order to discover the truths that may be hidden. (*Prietita and the Ghost Woman*)

By encouraging Chicana children and youths, and especially young Chicanas, to look below the surface, future generations of Chicanas may observe a change in the cultural narratives surrounding us that the early Chicana feminists—even those Chicanas

and Mexicanas who came before them in the struggle to resist heterosexist norms—have worked to translate from Chicana feminism to the broader Chicana identity.

### III. FROM GHOSTS TO WOMEN: RESTORING LA LLORONA AND LA MALINCHE

Myth exists as a part of everyday life, though we are not always conscious of this small truth. As previously explored in chapter one, myth is shaped by man-made narratives and in turn shapes a people's culture, which then sets models and categories for human behavior, thus creating a cycle of narrative traditions that are not easy to break. For women, who are already tethered to a history of being perceived by society as sub-human or second-class citizens, the archetypal function of myth and folklore can often create inescapable images of womanhood that only further narrow the scope of experiences that patriarchal systems view us through. For Chicanas, these limiting archetypes are primarily *las tres madres*: La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona, La Malinche—the Good Mother, the Anguished Ghost, the Promiscuous Sell-Out. All are mothers, and yet La Virgen's motherhood is considered the ideal example for all to follow, the lone Virgin of the Virgin/Whore dichotomy imposed on the three foremothers. And yet despite La Virgen's apparent supremacy over the other two figures in the triad, they share an essential problem: they are stripped of human qualities in their lore.

Indeed, the stagnant nature of these archetypal women's iconography in Mexican culture has not prevented countless Chicanas and Mexicanas over time from relating these myths to their own lived experiences—particularly for La Malinche and La Llorona, whose flaws have resonated as inherently humanistic for Chicanas who refuse to conform to the status quo. However, even as negative archetypal women have long served as figures of resistance, such as how Alarcón details the embracing of La

Malinche as a redemptress by Chicana feminists during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement,<sup>5</sup> a vital step in relating to mythical women is to humanize her first. To make her, truly, a woman.

From this need to be understood and heard as Chicanas, and therefore to understand and hear others who share their experiences, transformation and subversion have become major means through which Chicana feminists can examine “bad” figures like La Llorona and La Malinche, not just through a retrospective lens that traces the cause and effect of these women’s misfortunes, but as living women, whether that be through levelling them into the contemporary realm as fellow Chicana feminists in an activist sisterhood, or simply to transform sympathy for their myths into a whole-hearted empathy. In the latter case, this ever-growing tradition in Chicana literature also opens avenues for stripping away the lore surrounding motherhood itself, thereby seeking to address and possibly heal the rifts that can occur between daughters and their mothers in the Chicana community.

Sometimes due to a mother’s perceived complicity in upholding patriarchal values, sometimes simply due to generational differences and changing social views of womanhood, the maternal figure as an obstacle in the daughter’s path to self-definition and self-actualization is a recurring theme in many works by Chicana authors. And yet in many of these narratives, it is by utilizing mythicized mothers that the daughter figure may come to understand her actual mother, showing how “Chicanas offer a unique perspective on [las tres madres], and in doing so they establish a new relationship with their cultural foremothers. As symbolic daughters of these mothers, Chicanas destabilize

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<sup>5</sup> See previous chapter.

masculinist narratives that seek to invalidate the mother-daughter bond” (Herrera 10). Simply by applying these unique perspectives on La Llorona and La Malinche, we are left with transformations that do not always necessarily hold the answers for how to heal our relationships with our mothers, or make them “good” women by conventional standards, but that offer visions of these mothers which allow them to be persons of their own.

### **The Modern Malinche**

In the trend to draw on the connections that Chicana feminists today feel toward figures like La Malinche, one can understand the desire to place this woman warped by time into an even more relatable environment, resulting in the modern Malinche. Here, in an allegedly post-colonial world, still aching sharply with the lingering infrastructures of Western colonization, in a nation now long-dominated by white systems of power rather than an indigenous empire struggling to be rid of these invaders, is where Chicanas may place the archetypal mothers in an environment that sees the specific types of classism, sexism, and racism that align with the Mexican/Chicanx experience. Cristina Herrera, in her study on Chicana mother/daughter relationships, cites the great value for Chicanas in “[using] their perspectives as modern women to challenge the dualistic confinement of their cultural foremothers, *las tres madres*” (47).

Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Never Marry a Mexican” takes the traditional Malinche myth and places it into a contemporary time setting, additionally transferring the mytho-historical tale across the border from Mexico to Seguin, Texas. Narrated by the main character, Clemencia—Cisneros’s modern Chicana version of La Malinche—the short story revolves around the painful affair between herself and her white former

teacher, Drew, who undertakes the role of Hernán Cortéz in her life—metaphorically in Cisneros’s narrative, and literally, as a heavy sense of self-awareness characterizes their relationship and sees them blatantly roleplay during sex as Cortéz and La Malinche, conqueror and concubine.

Clemencia is portrayed as not only aware of the Malinche myth Drew places her in, but as encouraging it at first, thinking back with “Malinalli, you called me, remember? *Mi doradita*. I liked when you spoke to me in my language. I could love myself and think myself worth loving” (“Never Marry a Mexican” 74). Furthermore, this harmful relationship eventually places Clemencia into a perverse pseudo-maternal role that sees her wield power as the sexual predator, only toward Drew’s son rather than Drew himself.

As Clemencia relays the story of her affair with Drew retrospectively, the divide between her current awareness of her initial vulnerability and unequal standing in their relationship versus the memory of how her younger version adored him—as well as, certainly, the reader’s ability to see clearly how this has a dire lasting effect on Clemencia’s self-worth—illustrates perfectly the double-standard of the racial fetishization Clemencia faces: “[Drew] painted and painted me, because he said, I was his *doradita*, all golden and sun-baked, and that’s the kind of woman he likes best, the ones brown as river sand,” and yet Drew’s wife, Megan, is a white woman (76). Not just white racially, but her pale skin and association with lightness are constantly emphasized, having “blue veins pale and clear” and “skin like roses in December” (77). In the scene where Drew finally introduces them, Clemencia instantly becomes self-aware of her shoes, how she “felt ashamed at how old they looked” and meanwhile Megan is

described looking like a Barbie doll in a fur coat (79). Clothing illustrates the stark differences in their class backgrounds, coming up once again when Clemencia inspects Megan's bathroom, finding "a pair of bone-colored sheepskin slippers, as clean as the day she'd bought them. On the door hook—a white robe with a MADE IN ITALY label, and a silky nightshirt with pearl buttons. I touched the fabrics. *Calidad*. Quality" (81). The light/dark binary Clemencia observes in comparing herself to Megan results in a fractured self-esteem and something of both an inferiority/superiority complex: Clemencia looks down on Megan as "dumb" for being ignorant of her husband's infidelity, holds a sense of power over her in how she asserts it was she who gave Drew permission to have a child with his wife, and yet Clemencia still ultimately cannot shake that she is viewed as "inferior."

Just as Alarcón details the cultural view of La Malinche as the Virgin of Guadalupe's "monstrous double," the narrative in "Never Marry a Mexican" similarly frames Clemencia and Drew's wife into a Malinche/Virgen dichotomy (58). Though Megan is not a Mexican woman, and likely does not experience the intense culture of purity surrounding womanhood similar to the Guadalupana culture of Clemencia's Chicana background, she is still described with imagery resonant of the white-washed Virgin Mary in American Christianity, particularly when Cisneros focuses on her identity as a mother ("I can't see a trace of my lover in this boy, as if she conceived him by immaculate conception," Clemencia remarks internally about Drew and Megan's son) (82).

The subject of motherhood is something that Clemencia is both wounded by and yet weaponizes in the story. With the latter, it is through her relationship to Drew and

Megan's son that Clemencia plots her revenge against Drew (and certainly in a way Megan, as well) for the way he fetishized, abused, and appeared to "cast her aside" when she was younger. Clemencia in the present preys on Drew's son, who is implied to possibly still be a minor according to the sections where she addresses him in the first-person narrative ("...what you used to be like when you started high school and what you're like now that you're almost finished"—making him a senior, but not explicitly of adult age), and who is also most likely her student (as she substitute teaches at San Antonio Independent School District), thereby adopting the same role Drew initially used to take advantage of her, that she now uses to sexually groom his son (76). In order to exact her revenge, she declares she is luring him to her with both sexual and maternal affection before she "snap[s] [her] teeth" on him, but what that precisely entails is left ambiguous (82).

However, in the final section immediately following the previous quotation, Clemencia fixates on the possibility of murder or a hypothetical suicide—her own, but preferably she would like to kill someone else. If we interpret that "someone" to be Drew's son, this turns the modern Malinche story toward a modern Llorona route, as well. One can observe the shared motifs between this story and La Llorona's conventional lore in how Clemencia targets her lover's child, her self-proclaimed dislike of children, and finally the scene where Clemencia steals the smallest matryoshka doll of a set from Megan and takes glee from getting rid of it:

On the way home, on the bridge over the arroyo on Guadalupe Street, I stopped the car, switched on the emergency blinkers, got out, and dropped the wooden toy into that muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim. The Barbie doll's toy

stewing in that muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since.

Then I drove home and slept like the dead. (“Never Marry a Mexican” 82)

While moments like this evoke La Llorona, however, one can infer that Cisneros’s intent is not to merely merge the two mythic figures into Clemencia, but perhaps to reveal more about Clemencia’s rejection of marriage and motherhood, as “though there are clearly similarities between [La Llorona and La Malinche], each represents a different historical moment. One foretells the future, the other is shaped by that future” (Perez 30). For Clemencia, these lines between seeing warnings in the past and deciding how to shape her own future in the aftermath of her trauma seem to blur, calling to attention that she is the way she is because her experiences are not rooted in one single source of pain, that has made it difficult for her to forge an identity outside of La Malinche’s shadow. Additionally, on the conflation of La Llorona and La Malinche into a solitary myth, Perez owes this trend largely to the fictionalization of Malintzin’s relationship to her children, as “people often mistakenly contend that when Cortés announced he was returning to Spain with ‘his’ children, Malinche murdered her children in an act of defiance and personal agency rather than allowing them to be taken from her” (31). Perez also notes, however, that there is no historical evidence for this version of events. Yet by making this ordinary woman Malinche figure a vengeful child-groomer then, on a mission to destroy this child (whether symbolically or with actual harm), Cisneros deliberately goes with the folklore that allows La Malinche a sense of power, or at least a semblance of power, evoking a darker version of the normally complicit Chingada figure La Malinche is perceived as.

But adding to this damage, even before Clemencia meets Drew, it is clear that Clemencia's identity is stunted due to her mother's influence, as Clemencia's mother, too, is a kind of Malinche based on Chicana cultural perceptions. Clemencia describes how she inherits her belief in the titular phrase, "never marry a Mexican," from her own mother, a U.S.-born Chicana whose first husband and Clemencia's father had been a Mexican from el otro lado.

It becomes clear to the reader that, for both women, to "never marry a Mexican" means something different, and on top of this the definition of what it means to be Mexican may differ as well. In the case of Clemencia's mother, if we are to relate her experience with her own husband, she might have meant to warn her daughters not to marry a Mexican *from Mexico* like their father, whose family looked down on her for being, in their eyes, too Americanized, a "Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish, who didn't even know enough to set a separate plate for each course at dinner, nor how to fold cloth napkins, nor how to set the silverware" (69). From the judgement and ostracization Clemencia's mother experiences, "never marry a Mexican" could mean: do not allow yourself into a traditional, patriarchal arrangement that evaluates your claim to your ethnic identity based on how well you perform gendered tasks and class values—a warning not to marry into the type of unequal union her mother had, at the young age of seventeen. But Clemencia takes this message literally, perhaps purposefully, extending her avoidance of Mexican men she will never marry to *all* Latino men, defending this internalized racism as something "[her] mother did [to her]" (69).

A major rift in the relationship between mother and daughter in the story stems from Clemencia's mother's choice to remarry not just anyone after her father's death, but

a *white* man, exemplifying how she takes her own advice she gave to Clemencia about never marrying Mexicans, but furthermore she marries a white man who “she was seeing even while [Clemencia’s] father was sick,” with Clemencia explicitly stating that the latter detail is what she finds most unforgivable in the entire situation (73). And yet despite Clemencia condemning her mother for this betrayal to her father, we see this repeated through her affair with Drew when she recalls to the reader how “while [Drew’s wife] lay on her back laboring [their child’s] birth, I lay in his mother’s bed making love to [Drew]” (75). The difference, of course, is that this time Clemencia is the adulterous lover in the equation and not the cheating spouse—the role Drew and Clemencia’s mother share in their respective marriages. Clemencia’s revenge then appears to expand to her mother in an interesting way, proving (perhaps to herself even) that in this regard she has taken back a sense of agency by remaining the unmarried mistress with nothing to lose. Though Clemencia may feel empowered in this way, it is apparent to the reader that her toxic obsession with Drew and double standards toward her mother are only further parts of a damaged identity. Clemencia stubbornly “holds a destructive view of her mother as a traitor that prevents her from seeing her parent as anything but an enemy, despite her mother’s death many years earlier” (Herrera 91).

What probably most highlights Clemencia’s self-destructiveness regarding her identity and agency occurs when her mother’s message she willingly hyperbolized gets thrown back to her, as she experiences the rejection she has internalized finally face to face with Drew: “Hadn’t I understood...responsibilities. Besides, he could *never* marry *me*. You didn’t think...? *Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican...*No, of course not. I see. I see” (80). Remembering her mother’s words at this moment serves as an

ironic reminder of the ways both mother and daughter have been rejected, each by a different community.

With this sharper awareness of what her mother went through, Clemencia has the opportunity to reclaim her mother in her memory, as “the daughter, in reclaiming her mother, is also on a quest to reclaim her female self, which has been devalued by both the dominant society and her own ethnic culture,” but this kind of whole-hearted reflection or sympathy for her mother never transpires (Herrera 93). Clemencia remains hurt and holding onto a warped sense of self at the end of the story. In this sense, Clemencia does not gain the kind of Chicana feminist consciousness one generally finds in Chicana narratives of archetypal transformation, but I believe this short story offers a valuable humanization of La Malinche in that it not only places the trauma of fetishization/exotification in the present setting that many Chicanas endure, but we can see the effect of how the broken mother-daughter relationship affects Clemencia in multiple ways. Though Clemencia’s mother may have meant well, she ultimately played a role in Clemencia’s adoption of self-deprecating, internally-racist mentalities that harmed her for years. Clemencia, in turn, by refusing to recognize herself in her mother, is unable to define or differentiate herself.

### **A Different Kind of Grito**

Though it appears in the same collection of short stories as “Never Marry a Mexican,” Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek” follows a drastically different approach to humanizing *las tres madres*, showing a damaged woman not stuck in a cycle of trauma but rather recognizing the harmful cycle she is poised to fall into and breaking free of it.

“Woman Hollering Creek” follows as the protagonist Cleófilas leaves her home to cross the border to San Antonio and marries Juan Pedro, containing the portrayal of their marriage—and especially how it fails to meet Cleófilas’s romanticized expectations, and quickly sours—into a telenovela aesthetic that parallels Cleófilas’s love of telenovela stories. However, this narrative parallel reveals how the romance stories Cleófilas and her girlfriends back in Mexico have long dreamed of emulating do not convey realistic nor necessarily healthy ideals of how love and marriage work, leading women like Cleófilas to internalize the idea that suffering makes love worthwhile (“Woman Hollering Creek” 45). The figure of the suffering woman in Mexican/Chicanx entertainment comes to take on several meanings throughout the story for Cleófilas: for the mostly female demographic of telenovelas and romance novels, the suffering woman is expected to eventually get her happy ending and find love, seemingly needing to undergo some misery first to “earn” this ending. And, significantly, it is by this convention in the narratives Cleófilas surrounds herself with that she clings to the delusion that the pain and dissatisfaction she experiences in her own marriage are both tolerable and to be expected—a view further reinforced by her new neighbors in America, Dolores and Soledad.

But the perceptions of love Cleófilas has clung to her whole life are soon shattered upon starting her life with her husband in the United States when Juan Pedro turns abusive, beating her and throwing her possessions at her. In the first instance of this behavior, we see Cleófilas’s reaction as having “been so stunned, it left her speechless, motionless, numb” (48). The emphasis on Cleófilas’s silence and inability to act reflect a

loss of agency, as she herself thinks back on a time when she always vowed she would fight back if a man ever hit her.

The extent of Juan Pedro's abuse is not just physical, however, but emotional, psychological, and economic, as throughout the story we see him cry in his wife's arms immediately after hitting her, deriving sympathy from her for *him* instead of herself, who has just been assaulted. In a section resonant of "Never Marry a Mexican," it is heavily implied that while Cleófilas is in the hospital giving birth to their child, her husband is cheating on her with another woman, as Cleófilas notices small things slightly out of place and unfamiliar fingerprints on the fridge (50). In Seguin, in a country where she cannot speak the language, and is stranded without Juan Pedro's transportation ("Because the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you're rich enough to own, allowed to drive, your own car"), and unable to speak to her family back in Mexico, she is essentially already living as a ghost (51). Trapped inside a home—albeit due to filial obligation and limited means of going anywhere else—and unable to make herself heard or her plight understood.

It is then here, as a result of these abuses, where Cleófilas's feelings of invisibility and isolation prompt her to identify with the folkloric Llorona—or La Gritona, as she is known based on the creek in the area there. It is during scenes with water that transformative elements take place, honing in on what lies beneath the surface as Cleófilas reflects on aspects of her situation: her husband, her children, even her identity, as she grapples with an ever-growing disillusionment with how she had once pictured her life and marriage to go. It is particularly during scenes involving the arroyo behind her house that the narrative invokes La Llorona, the creek itself described as "a good-size

alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own, calling in its high, silver voice. Is it La Llorona, the Weeping Woman?” (Cleófilas answers for herself several lines later: “La Llorona is calling to her. She is sure of it”) (51). This Llorona that Cleófilas initially identifies with is the traditional version of the ghost woman, who killed her children and now wails for eternity. Through this mounting recognition of her own life in the myth of La Llorona, Cleófilas comes to realize the reality of how the suffering woman is romanticized, thinking on her own experiences with “Everything happened to women with names like jewels. But what happened to a Cleófilas? Nothing but a crack in the face” (53). Just as La Llorona’s name shifts to La Gritona in a different place while retaining her overall myth in the conventional view, Cleófilas realizes that her fantasy of having a different name and therefore a different life is just that—a product of fiction—and that to tolerate male abuse can in fact be quite dangerous:

It seemed the newspapers were full of such stories. This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one’s cadaver, this one unconscious, this one beaten blue. Her ex-husband, her husband, her lover, her father, her brother, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker. Always. The same grisly news in the pages of the dailies. (52)

The suffering women of telenovela fairytales takes on a new meaning compared to the idea of the silently-suffering women of reality that Cleófilas has come to identify with.

However, just as it seems Cleófilas’s misery will push her over the edge to fully merge her life with that of the traditional Llorona figure, she is rescued—not by a shining knight or handsome man like in a telenovela, but by two Chicanas, Graciela and Felice.

Both women's impacts on Cleófilas are profound in transforming her life, not only in her sense of identity, as by observing Felice, Cleófilas expands her understanding of autonomy and womanhood in a way that directly reverses an earlier section on the agency allowed to those with transportation:

Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, but when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband's, she said she didn't have a husband. The pickup was hers. She had chosen it. She herself was paying for it. (55)

But this turn also marks the transformation of La Llorona, as through Felice's hollering, the meaning behind La Llorona/Gritona's voice moves from pain to joy, even self-expression for the sake of a woman's self-expression, as Felice explains to Cleófilas, "Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering...Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?" (55). Graciela's role in recognizing Cleófilas's situation is also one of significance, as like Felice, Graciela has agency in that she has a medical career and her own source of income, but also, as the reader observes, a position that allows her to help other women with less agency than herself. She asks Felice, "If we don't help her, who will?" (54).

According to Perez's analysis of "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros "includes the [Llorona] lore as both a symbol of patriarchal domination and to emphasize the importance of women as an interpretive community with the power to read the legend in a way that undermines male power" (84). As Perez elaborates, before meeting Graciela and Felice, Cleófilas has no interpretive community she is a part of, no mother or even maternal figure to guide her, and no critical eye toward the patriarchal conventions in

telenovelas that she and her girlfriends used to consume together. And yet though she is returning to her hometown in Mexico in the end, she is a changed woman: welcomed into a sisterhood of Chicana feminist consciousness, now a mother who put her children's safety over her marriage (her unborn child implied to be a daughter, with whom Cleófilas will be able to enjoy a bond she could not share with her own mother), Cleófilas is able to question the common narratives surrounding her.

### **Forgiving the Bad Mother**

Anna-Marie McLemore's 2016 magical realism novel *When the Moon Was Ours* is, at its core, a romance story that explores LGBT identities with nuance and sympathy. But looming heavily in the background is a subversion of La Llorona's story that offers depth and humanization of the Llorona mother figure through the eyes of her daughters—one being the main protagonist, Miel. Like Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek," this story portrays a version of the Llorona myth that breaks the cycle of its usual tragedy and humanizes La Llorona as a sympathetic fictional woman, only here it is La Llorona's daughters who redeem her, as they survive the drowning that kills their mother.

Miel in particular spends much of the story fixated on her mother, often walking by the river in her town and listening for her: "When the wind came, she listened for her mother's voice, hoped she did not hear her crying. The only thing she wanted more than she wanted Sam was for her mother to know that Miel forgave her. That she understood why she did what she did. That she knew her mother loved her" (*When the Moon Was Ours* 28). Already, McLemore subverts the usual tropes of La Llorona's tale by characterizing this Llorona as not cruel or selfish but, in the eyes of her daughter, misunderstood and full of regrets. Yet a source of mystery early in the novel derives from

Miel's partial amnesia she suffers from childhood after her near-drowning, as she struggles to fully remember her mother and her mother's motivations on the fateful day that she almost drowned her children. However, Miel heavily suspects that it was her roses that her mother had been trying to get rid of—a rose that grows from one of Miel's wrists and continues to regrow magically once plucked, as a part of Miel's body, working as a symbol in several ways (as I will delve into later).

Aside from her rose, Miel is also heavily characterized with other supernatural, more Llorona-like affinities that frame her as a kind of Llorona figure in the story, as well. As a child, Miel is first discovered by a crowd of people when an old water tank gets drained out and Miel is revealed to have been inside, being found dressed in “a thin nightgown, which must have once been white, now stained cream by the water”<sup>6</sup> (3). Additionally, Miel carries a connection to water in her clothing, in that it is always somehow wet, as “if [one] looked closely, they could see the hem of her skirt, always a little damp, never quite drying no matter how much the sun warmed it” (McLemore 4). But the most significant Llorona parallel occurs in the scene where Miel is first broken out of the water tank, and in the overwhelming and confusing awakening, she reacts by screaming:

...Miel, soaking wet and smelling of rust, screamed into her hands with everyone watching. Because everyone was watching, and she wanted to soak into the ground like the spilled water and vanish. How Sam crouched in front of her saying “Okay, okay,” keeping his words slow and level so she would know what

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<sup>6</sup> Though not a supernatural or unordinary detail of Miel's appearance, the white dress is a common motif associated with La Llorona.

he meant. You can stop screaming; I hear you, I understand. And because she believed him, and understood, she did stop. (McLemore 4)

This passage not only frames Miel in the role of a wailing girl, but just as with the understanding and attention she offers her mother's ghost, this moment reveals the importance of sympathy in the task of humanizing La Llorona. Of translating the untranslatable by listening to her cries.

The vilification of the Llorona figure, and the lack of understanding or perspective toward her mother, serves as one of the roots of conflict in the story. Miel is desperate to fit into her perceptions of what a good daughter is and to keep the rumors surrounding her family from tarnishing her mother's name, believing it will cause her ghost pain and prevent her from ever being able to move on. Early on, she gets blackmailed by a group of sisters who want to harvest her roses because they believe they contain magical properties. The Bonner sisters—known in their town as las Gringas Bonitas, for their fame as very beautiful, fair-skinned Anglo girls—threaten to out Miel's boyfriend Sam and Miel's sister Aracely as transgender, and also to spread the narrative surrounding Miel's mother that she had been intentionally trying to kill her children when she drowned:

“I heard a story from a woman a few towns up the river,” Chloe said. “One of my aunt's friends. This old lady who talked about a woman who tried to kill her children and then killed herself.”

“That's not what happened,” Miel said. None of that was the way it happened.

(42)

However, the truth in the events leading up to her mother's accidental drowning does not exactly make her guiltless, either. As the story progresses, Miel's childhood memories slowly return to her, and in these scattered revelations it becomes clear that Miel *did* undergo some forms of abuse at the hands of both her parents. From her father trying to burn the rose-slit on her wrist closed, to her mother sealing her inside a pumpkin despite her terrified pleas in order to rid her of her magical rose, Miel's parents did in fact put her through physical and emotional pain that Miel internalized over time into a fear of her own body and intense feelings of guilt toward a part of herself that she cannot control. In the case of her mother, though Miel states that she has forgiven her mother, it is significant to note that she also seems to recognize the influence of others in her mother's fear of her roses:

Her mother had only done what the priests had told her to, holding Miel in the river. But Miel fought so hard as her mother kept her underwater that her mother took it as proof that these roses had cursed her, that her daughter was pure and good and just needed to be saved. Whatever petaled demon made her grow them was leaving her body. But Miel fought so hard she broke out of her mother's hold, and the current, with its hands grown from the dust and cloudless skies of this drought, swept her out of reach. (158)

The influence of a patriarchal church figure, as well even Miel's father at several points, in convincing Miel's mother that her roses were a sign of impurity or witchcraft, that ultimately leads her to endanger her children's lives and lose her own, can act as another aspect for the tragic nature of her death—a woman pressured to see her own daughter as bad/broken and literally dying trying to conform them both to society's

demands—but it can also be seen as a form of patriarchal complicity in the mother figure, observing as a mother allows her own daughter to be hurt by the men around her, such as when Miel’s mother stands by as her father burns her.

And yet Miel herself does not fully recognize her own trauma at first, and instead anguishes over her mother’s trauma:

Her spirit would never find any rest. She was already weighted down having a daughter born with roses in her body, a curse that spurred those petaled children to turn on their mothers. Now, because of Miel, because of the roses the Bonner girls wanted, her mother would be blamed, slandered. What worse could Miel bring on her mother’s soul? Without even meaning to, she had become everything a rose-cursed daughter was feared to be, a disgrace and burden to her own blood.

(43)

The curse of having flowers attached to the body serves as a metaphor for the stigma placed on girls who do not fit the typical rigid conventions of Mexican girlhood/womanhood, and also seems to apply to the fear imposed on Chicanas of “betraying” filial and cultural duties. Furthermore, we can interpret the roses as a symbol connected to la Virgen, reinforcing their role in constantly reminding Miel of her purity—or lack thereof, in her perspective—in the form of something literally attached to her. Miel’s anxiety that she is a bad daughter manifests as a protectiveness toward her mother’s memory and spirit despite how her mother failed to protect her. However, her fears regarding a slandered narrative reveals another aspect of La Llorona’s relevance in a contemporary setting.

As mentioned before, rumors act as the major source of conflict, but specifically in the form of weaponizing negative characterizations or portrayals of marginalized parties. McLemore illustrates how vilifying women in order to control those women most affected by the spread of false or twisted narratives comes so often with double standards. In this case, both factions of women in the story—Miel and Aracely, and the Bonner sisters—are surrounded by rumors of their strangeness and thought to be witches by their shared community—Aracely and Miel because of their family business as curanderas, the Bonner girls because of their supernatural beauty. Even while the Bonner girls are infamously attractive and charming, they are still affected by a Bad Girl/Whore archetypal label after the eldest sister Chloe tries and fails to hide her unwed pregnancy. But unlike Miel and Aracely, the Bonner girls are never at risk of being persecuted or run out of town; their white privilege and higher socioeconomic status blatantly prevent this. Racial and cultural Otherness are what predetermine the double standards Miel and her sister face (“Miel and Aracely wore the name bruja on their skin”) and what also put them in several instances at the mercy of those in higher social standing than them (197).

The abuse of power between Miel and the Bonner girls accumulates until finally, when Miel stands up for herself and proclaims that it does not matter what version of her mother’s story they spread as long as Miel herself knows the truth. The sisters react by physically attacking her, as “[Ivy] grabbed Miel’s rose by the stem and pulled. Miel screamed, the ripping of the thorns through her skin like having a vein torn out...They turned the small opening in her wrist into a wound, and it throbbed like a burn, a hot coin searing her skin” (231). The rose at Miel’s wrist symbolically works as a site of trauma on her body, from the abuse she suffers at the hands of her parents who try to rid of her of

it, to its hereditary nature, considered a kind of genetic curse within Miel's father's clan of curanderos. But in the violence of this particular scene, several kinds of violation take place: Miel is literally "de-flowered"<sup>7</sup> and nearly killed in the process, all so the Bonner girls can possess her rose—and, by extent of their sense of entitlement, they possess *her* as well.

While McLemore does not write this violation being carried out by an explicitly patriarchal force as we usually observe in literature about marginalized characters, this scenario still effectively conveys how white entitlement results in the objectification and exploitation of non-white subjects—this time carried out by a gang of upper-class white girls.

Miel's struggle to resist being in these girls' power and to defend her autonomy ("No," Miel said. "They're mine." The words sounded petty, but they were true. Her roses belonged to her") resonates with a Chicana feminist consciousness that demands agency and rejects the commodification of brown bodies (41). Furthermore, in finally letting go of the guilt surrounding her mother's death and accepting the positives and negatives of who she was as a person, Miel liberates them both. Toward the end of the story, one of Miel's regained memories finally dwells on the good, nurturing side of her mother, remembering her laughter rather than thinking of her crying:

The kitchen had held more of her mother's laughter than anywhere else in the world. It was where her mother sugared violet petals with fingers as skilled as a silversmith's. She added cinnamon and cayenne to mole. She let Miel and

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<sup>7</sup> The sexual nature of this metaphor adds to the disturbing implications of how the Bonner sisters seek to exploit Miel's body (i.e. to use the perceived magic of her roses to seduce boys), thus also playing into the hypersexualized Latina trope.

Leandro cover their hands in flour and powdered sugar when they made alfajores, the shortbread they spread with dulce de leche. Finding that memory was as bright as catching trees bursting into bloom. It was a memory from when Miel was barely old enough to make them. After that, she would turn three, and four, and the roses would come, and they would take everything. But she could hold on to this, her hands and Leandro's pale with sugar and flour. (174)

Later, after Miel has recovered and a new rose grown back, she and her sister finally address the grief they have harbored and make an effort to urge their mother's spirit to move on:

The night after the sky had taken all the stained glass, Miel asked Sam for a moon he didn't mind never seeing again. He'd known what she meant, and gave her one so light gray it looked silver...Miel and Aracely brought it outside, held it up, waited for the sky to take it. Their mother would have a light to see by no matter whether the moon above them was a sickle or a bright coin. She could leave her broken heart with them. If she let it go, if she let it streak down to the earth like a fallen star, her spirit would be so light, so unweighted, she would float to places so beautiful they could not be told in stories. (262)

In completion of her subversion of La Llorona's tale, McLemore offers a narrative that concludes the grieving process for La Llorona and her daughters, and characterizes this mother-daughter relationship with forgiveness and understanding rather than vengeance. By making her Llorona a different kind of ghost, immortal through memory rather than as a stagnant archetypal figure, a well-meaning but misguided parent

rather than a murderess, McLemore emphasizes the vitality of empathy in the transformative process.

### **Breaking Down the Myths of Motherhood**

“Everyone said motherhood was sacred, but all the everyones who said it were men. Soledad did not feel sacred. She felt more human than ever” (*Caramelo* 190).

Cisneros’s novel *Caramelo* portrays a multigenerational story through the lens of Celaya (Lala) Reyes, the storyteller in her family who provides the narrative’s first-person voice. Within a time-frame stretching back all the way to before the Mexican Revolution of the early 1900s to the story’s present in the late twentieth century, leaping back and forth geographically from one side of the U.S./Mexico border to the other, Lala takes it upon herself to relay her family’s rich history, branching off at times to reveal miscellaneous details and dwell on certain moments. Just as Miel in *When the Moon Was Ours* occupies a role of truth-teller for her family legacy, and because “truth” and the act of storytelling itself act as significant themes in *Caramelo* (with an alternative title like *Puro Cuento*, “pure fiction”), the subject of manipulating fact and passing the control of a narrative from one mouth to another reoccurs constantly throughout the story and, in connection to this story, acts as something of a commentary on how easily the truth can be twisted.

While not heavily utilizing the story as a commentary or transformation of La Llorona’s narrative specifically, Cisneros certainly evokes elements of the traditional Llorona tale in order to explore the dynamics between Lala’s family members—particularly between the women in her family. Two of the major sources of conflict for

Lala occur in the fraught relationships she has with her mother, Zoila, and her paternal grandmother, Soledad.

Soledad, or the Awful Grandmother, as her grandchildren call her, starts out as seemingly only an irritable, controlling, and traditional old Mexican woman who frequently targets Lala with her criticisms. But as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Soledad's life marks the true beginning of Lala's own story in a couple of significant ways. The entire second part of the novel, "When I Was Dirt," centers on Soledad's childhood and follows her through her early life to her marriage to Narciso Reyes (Lala's Little Grandfather). "When I was dirt," a sentiment that follows Celaya throughout her narration, can simply mean the time before Celaya was born, as many of the events take place in times and places where she was not. But as the link between Lala's life and her grandmother's becomes more pronounced by the story's end, and it is revealed that she has made a deal with her now-deceased grandmother's ghost to relay her story so that her spirit can find peace (immediately launching into the narration we observe in the novel's Part II), the narrative reinforces the notion that Lala did exist "as dirt." That is, at least part of Lala has been alive through her grandmother—not to mean just genetically, as Lala's father's mother, but spiritually, and in essence. When we trace the treatment of Soledad's character and progression over the course of the story in juxtaposition to Lala's experiences growing up, Cisneros offers both characters a means of recognizing themselves in each other and reflecting on what this means.

At the beginning of the story, Soledad is known mainly as "The Awful Grandmother" by Lala and her brothers, as if they have placed her into an archetypal or mythicized state which Lala further reinforces when she remarks that "The Awful

Grandmother is like the witch in that story of Hansel and Gretel. She likes to eat boys and girls. She'll swallow us whole, if you let her" (23). But once Lala begins the task of telling her grandmother's life story, her language changes to convey her grandmother's personhood, with "Once in the land of *los nopales*...lived the woman Soledad" (91). While still evoking a fairytale feeling in its opening, we finally see the Awful Grandmother not as a mother or grandmother or wife, but as simply human.

However, even as a small child, the maternal figure—its absence in her own childhood, and the way this role is prematurely imposed on her when she is essentially put into a nanny/housewife role to her Aunt Fina's eighteen children—shapes Soledad and her perception of womanhood, even while she is still herself a young girl. Furthermore, the trauma of growing up without a mother of her own becomes symbolized in the unfinished caramelo rebozo Soledad's mother leaves her, a possession she clings to for comfort and familiarity. Yet its unfinished state reminds her of the break in matrilineal tradition she is also left with, the practice of making rebozos "as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on" that Soledad is never able to continue on from her mother (93).

In the same fashion that the act of storytelling is paralleled with the way many threads come together, making the story like a woven rebozo, Soledad feels that her life, her voice, is left out of the greater web of her mother and foremothers—similar to how Celaya feels isolated and powerless in her family as the youngest girl with six brothers. Soledad's marriage to Narciso (albeit out of wedlock) does very little to appease Soledad's feelings of being trapped after leaving her Aunt Fina's house and then working

as a servant in Narciso's household, as the flame between them quickly fades and Narciso is unfaithful. After the Little Grandfather's death, Soledad sells her house in Mexico City and moves to the United States with Inocencio and his family. Then she is finally able to regain a sense of freedom in some ways, from the obligations of marriage and from the domestic space where she has been dissatisfied for so long (251).

The connection between Soledad and Celaya comes to the forefront of the narrative near the end of the story, after Soledad is already dead and when Lala's father, Inocencio, lays near death in the hospital. It is this hospital scene, characterized with an aesthetic of "fluorescent lights, white cork ceilings, white sheets and white flannel blankets, and snowflake hospital gowns" where Cisneros lays thick La Llorona motifs (405). Celaya witnesses as her grandmother's ghost returns, The Awful Grandmother now transformed into a Wailing Woman in death, to try and steal her favorite son away with her into the afterlife:

--You've had him long enough. Now it's my turn, she hisses.

--No! Not yet, I say, anchoring Father by the ankles. --Let go of him, you greedy *perra*.

--You can't talk to me that way. I'm your grandmother.

--You're still a greedy bitch. Same as always. Nothing but a *metiche*, *mirona*, and *mitotera*. A busybody, an ogler, and a taleteller. *Una hocicona*.

--Well, that's fine, because I'm you. (405)

Soledad repeats this sentiment in telling Lala that "It's *you*, Celaya, who's haunting *me*. I can't bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life?" hearkening back to an earlier scene when Celaya is frightened by what seems to be a ghostly vision of her

grandmother in the room when she and Ernesto are about to be intimate (406). The parallels between Soledad's relationship with Narciso and Celaya's relationship with Ernesto (who dumps her after whisking her to Mexico and living together for several days, citing that they cannot be together in marriage because Lala is no longer pure) emphasizes Soledad's claim that Celaya is repeating her life by falling into the same regrets, and leads to Soledad advising her granddaughter—perhaps genuinely, for the first time—not to obsess over love but rather to love herself. It is also during this encounter that Lala, for the first time, sees the pain that has shaped her grandmother into the woman she was in life:

The Grandmother's face crumples and her mouth opens wide. –Well, it's that I'm halfway between here and there. I'm in the middle of nowhere! *Soy una ánima sola.*

Then she starts to howl and lets go of Father, and Father's color is his own again. And for the first time in my life, I feel sorry for the Grandmother. Her cries are like the yelping of a dog hit by a car, a terrible, ancient sadness, from below the belly. I've heard that cry before. I cried like that too, when the ambulance came for Father. A cry like a hiccup, over and over, and you can't do a thing about it.

(406)

As mentioned, it is from this part of the story that Lala takes over the task of relaying her grandmother's life in order to help Soledad's spirit move on, as Soledad herself admits, finally able in death to self-reflect on the ways her jealousy and insecurities formed into cruelty, that she needs her own narrative told in order to be understood. However, "Celaya does not tell her grandmother's story merely to gain

insight into Soledad's life and its impact on the present; Celaya seeks to come to an understanding of her own relationship with Zoila, initially fraught with frustration and the mother's apparent complicity in patriarchal gender roles" (Herrera 204). In reclaiming her grandmother's narrative from its simplistic dimensions she perceived as a child, and observing the effects of a maternal figure's absence and being defined through one's own maternal identity, Celaya is able to also perceive her own mother with more retrospection.

Herrera notes in her study on maternal Chicana bonds in *Caramelo*, "In a culture that validates patriarchy, Celaya turns to her mother in an effort to forge a female bond, yet her mother is heavily influenced by the patriarchal Mexican codes of maternal behavior that reinforce favoritism of sons, leading Celaya to question her role as a daughter and as a woman" (a trend noted by others within story, like Lala and her brothers, who recognize that their brother Toto seems to be Zoila's favorite) (94).

One of these conventions is the "buena sufrida madre"<sup>8</sup> example that Herrera names as another aspect of the patriarchally complicit mother figure, meaning the mother who silently toils and puts her family always before herself and (quite importantly) never complains or asks for more than this lot in life (106). While none of the women in Celaya's family match this definition exactly in how they behave within familial dynamics—Zoila grumbles and even calls out her husband on the ways he treats her differently depending on when they are in Mexico or the United States, Soledad constantly passive-aggressively hints that she is dissatisfied with her domestic role—the

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<sup>8</sup> Lit. "well-suffered mother," coined by Cristina Herrera. Could also be written instead as "buena madre sufrida."

influence of expectation surrounding the “buena sufrida madre” model for women in Mexican/Chicanx communities remains pervasive in the home environment. One such instance in the text sees Zoila having to wash her family’s clothes by hand, and “muttering and spitting and grunting things [Celaya] can’t quite hear under her breath” while doing so (*Caramelo* 64).

Long before hearing her grandmother’s story, Celaya is able to observe her mother with different eyes than her father or any of her brothers seem to, as the only two women in their immediate family (until the grandmother lives with them) and being able to not only relate to her mother’s feelings of suppression, but able to view Zoila outside her role of mother/wife:

Mother with those cat-eyed sunglasses, looking out at the street, out at nowhere, out at nothing at all, sighing. A long time. In a new white dress she bought especially for this trip. A sleeveless dress she ironed herself, that makes her dark skin look darker, like clay bricks when it rains. And I think to myself how beautiful my mother is, looking like a movie star right now, and not our mother who has to scrub our laundry. (65-66)

During this time, as a young girl, Celaya’s sympathy for her mother translates at times to a sense of guilt, believing herself to be complicit in her mother’s apparent dissatisfaction. But over time, in response to feeling that her mother is in fact the one complicit in *her* oppression, Lala’s earlier feelings of understanding toward her mother turn into resentment. The mother-daughter relationship unravels to where Celaya views Zoila as an enemy, characterizing their bond with language that denotes violence, with “How could father say I’m like her! Even she admits I take after him. Says even as a

baby I was *una chillona*. How she had to wear me on her hip like a gun, and even then I wouldn't stop crying. I drove her crazy. Now she drives me crazy" (242). Her refusal to be like her mother, to be seen in any way similar, stems from a perceived injustice Lala holds that her mother does not care about her. Lala is critical of the sexism she is treated with in her family, of the way her mother never defends her when her brothers or grandmother pick on her, and yet the idea that Zoila does not care for her only daughter seems inaccurate, as Zoila herself hints at:

--What's wrong with you? Mother asks.

--I'm depressed.

--Depressed? You're nuts! Look at me, I had seven kids, and I'm not depressed.

What the hell have you got to be depressed about?

--Since when do you care? I say to Mother. --All you ever worry about is your boys.

And for the first time I think Mother is about to slap me. But instead she starts yelling.

You spoiled brat, selfish, smart-mouthy, smart-alecky, smart-ass, I'll teach you.

There are tears in her eyes that she won't let out of her eyes. She can't. She doesn't know how to cry. (264)

The inability to cry, to allow herself that uninhibited expression of anger and sorrow, reflects an inability to communicate, thereby cluing the reader in to how Celaya and Zoila's relationship has amassed so much tension at this point in the story. But underneath the insults and yelling, it is clear that Zoila is genuinely hurt by Lala's accusation of not caring for her. While Herrera argues that patriarchal conventions

prevent solidarity between women in traditional Mexican/Chicanx families, Zoila does not agree with this in her own case with her daughter. Though the fact remains that Lala has experienced pain at feeling abandoned and isolated from her mother, Zoila's apparent disappointment in her role as mother likely does not come from any actual dislike toward her children, much less her daughter, but from an overall consciousness and criticism toward the sexism she experiences. Herrera concludes her study on Chicana mother/daughter literary examples by relating her own experiences and on the relationships between the women in her family, remarking that her need for her mother is a need "to be seen and heard by someone who understands what it means to be a Chicana daughter in a world where Chicana women are marginalized, overlooked, and invisible," something both Zoila and Celaya recognize in one another, even when their tempers prevent them from admitting this (206).

### **Conclusion**

In nearly all of the works I have analyzed in this chapter, Chicana mothers obtain different perceptions through the lens of the Chicana daughter characters, whether this individual narrative be a positive, redeeming one, or one riddled with flaws. Overall, apart from the transformative qualities of their narratives, the Chicanas of these stories are difficult to group together, as their humanizations from mythical archetypal bases to genuine, complex woman characters varies their experiences. However, in studying the trends over time of these authors' works—from Cisneros's many voices of Chicana casts, to the recent addition of archetypal subversions such as McLemore's that continue to challenge the heterosexist script—all prove that "by observing the repressive conditions under which many of our mothers became mothers, biologically or otherwise, because of

our new Xicanista consciousness, the definition of Mother is altered from the one we experienced as daughters” (Castillo 147). By continuing to place cultural foremothers like La Llorona and La Malinche into relatable settings in order to view ourselves in them, we may additionally recognize our actual mothers in them, and ourselves in them.

#### IV. PATRONESSES OF ACTIVISM AND CONVEYORS OF TRUTH

“A goddess is not a token title. To be a goddess implies that the deity has a realm of power” (Castillo 172).

Because deifying any subject involves the risk of dehumanization, it is therefore necessary to distinguish the act of deifying a woman figure so that she is removed or segregated from realistic depictions and expectations placed on living women, from the more radical act of restoring a goddess figure to a status she held prior to a mainstream trend of deliberate disempowerment. In the case of Mexica or Maya goddesses, one can observe this difference of intent between the traditional Chicana perspectives and those of Chicana feminists: the goddesses were made monstrous with negative attributes and buried from wide cultural knowledge, possibly under the Aztec patriarchy but mostly at the hands of the Catholic Spaniards who imposed their religion on the conquered indigenous peoples, thereby lowering the status of women in society, as well (*Borderlands* 49). A division occurred from this process, “splitting the female Self and the female deities,” where even in the fusion of the Christian Mary and Coatloapeuh or Coatlicue into la Virgen de Guadalupe—the good mother goddess presiding over Mexico—her other godly elements of destruction and fertility had to be removed (49-50). Within the male-dominant system of Mexican/Chicana society, it has been women who have located the sexism in these transformations and challenged them. And therefore, by subverting these figures who have already been subverted from previous, more powerful forms, this decolonial-feminist process of re-deifying la Virgen back to Coatlicue, La

Llorona back to Cihuacoatl, expands their identities and restores a different kind of agency, rather than simply turning them into idols or silent imagery.

### **Connecting Water and Womanhood Through Goddesses**

In a work I analyze in the previous chapter, Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours*, the character Miel possesses several supernatural or magical qualities, with some of these qualities—such as the perpetually and inexplicably wet hems of her skirts/dresses and the fact that she spent several years dormant inside an old water tank—giving her a distinct connection to water and rivers. This connection primarily comes from Miel's bond to her dead mother's spirit, McLemore's subverted version of La Llorona, whom she visits and listens to often near the river that runs through the town. While I have asserted that McLemore utilizes La Llorona in order to restore human qualities to the stagnant image of her cultural iconography,<sup>9</sup> I also believe McLemore evokes aspects of Indigenous Mexican mythology with these supernatural characteristics that recall La Llorona's goddess origins.

The most direct mythical antecedent to La Llorona is the Nahua goddess Cihuacoatl, patron of midwives and childbirth who is most often referenced or evoked in tandem with deifying La Llorona or remembering her Nahua roots. In *When the Moon Was Ours*, however, this aspect of restoring goddess imagery in La Llorona's tale appears as McLemore deifies the river that took Miel's mother into an entity containing magical properties and even somewhat personifies it with an ambiguous sentience. In this fashion, the deified subject seems more closely linked to the goddess of rivers, Chalchiuhtlicue, and the creation goddess Coatlicue—the latter of which Cihuacoatl is an aspect.

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<sup>9</sup> See: Chapter 2, page 14.

Coatlicue's influence appears in how Miel regards the magical river's capabilities for both destruction and regeneration with awe yet apprehension. Chalchiuhtlicue, "like many gods of the Mexicas, also required a human sacrifice, and each year a young woman was offered to honor the goddess... Thus as a Chalchiuhtlicue figure, the woman is offering both death and life"—which we see in how Miel, her mother, and sister are each individually affected by the river (Perez 136-137). Though it takes Miel's mother as a sacrifice, the river itself almost becomes a substitute maternal figure for Miel:

That water, that river that did not save their mother, had adopted them. It had found her and Leandro when their mother couldn't. It had kept them until it decided it was time to let them go. Miel hated it, wanted to turn it all to ice too solid to get lost in, while knowing that she owed it her life and her brother's. Her sister's. (McLemore 223)

While Miel grapples with conflicting emotions toward the river and its power, her sister Aracely's perspective offers a sense of balance by painting a more positive image. Through Aracely, a transgender woman formerly known to Miel as her older brother named Leandro, the narrative characterizes the water as transformative and truth-seeing, even as a symbol of femininity, that "births" Aracely's true self:

That Leandro loved his sister, that he almost died trying to save her from a river that wanted to take her. That his mother had died trying to save them both. But the water took Leandro, folded him into its current, brought him back as the girl he'd always wished he could grow into. Not a girl. A woman, finished and grown. That a summer covered in amber butterflies turned her hair to gold and welcomed her back into the world as someone else. How she did not know if this was the

water's gift for trying to save her sister, or if it was only the water seeing her for what she was, and showing it to everyone else. (102)

Though the narrative does not forget the tragedy of this event, as Aracely loses her biological mother and is temporarily separated from her sister, nor the element of the boy Leandro's "death" by water, this rebirth and physical validation of Aracely's gender identity similarly positions the river entity as a symbolic mother the way Miel comes to view it, creating for her a completely new body. While Aracely is no less of a woman before this bodily transformation nor while she is still closeted to her family—which indeed may prove an area for critique by some others for this narrative decision—this passage reflects more that it is the water's decision within the narrative to "show" Aracely's woman identity in an irrefutable way to a cisheteronormative society, allowing her a physical self-actualization. The symbolic juxtaposition between these transformative waters and the amniotic waters of a womb further emphasize the river's status as both mother and creator. Furthermore, its role in the story as a reflector of inner truths and in guiding Miel to face her past traumas and Aracely to accept her queer woman identity, its dualistic nature as both deadly and vital, frames the river as somewhat omnipresent within the town it flows through, almost like a watchful eye.

### **Coyolxauhqui, Patroness of Lost Daughters**

Apart from the mixture of Chalchiuhtlicue and Coatlicue that appears to make up the powerful and knowing river, the other major nature motif within *When the Moon Was Ours* that may connect to Indigenous goddesses is the moon itself, a similarly dualistic symbol of both loss and healing. For many Chicana scholars, the moon connects to symbolism surrounding the goddess Coyolxauhqui, whose attempted matricide and

subsequent brutalization at the hands of her brother Huitzilopochtli<sup>10</sup> have come to serve as allusive material for scholars like Moraga and Gaspar de Alba<sup>11</sup> in evoking patriarchal complicity in mothers, femicide, and/or Chicana rebellion, particularly of the first in portraying friction between daughters and mothers. Within McLemore's narrative, the moon's significance occurs primarily for the two main characters, Miel and Sam, portraying Sam's tradition of crafting and painting moons to hang up around Miel's house and neighborhood in order to offer her comfort at night, soothing her PTSD from being locked within a lightless water tank. However, earlier in the story, the moon also represents something lost for Miel. Within Sam's narrative, he recalls how upon first meeting her, "No one but [himself] had heard what Miel was screaming into her hands. I lost the moon, she had said, sobbing against her fingers. I lost the moon...And Miel kept screaming, wanting to warn the boy standing in front of her that the moon was a thing that could be lost" (5-12). I believe this "loss," while it can mean for Miel the trauma of losing her memories or sense of innocence, may also on a deeper level denote an absence of agency or denial of self-actualization, particularly for marginalized individuals. Miel's body, and specifically her wrist where roses grow, is constantly described as a site of mutilation, one for which she is both targeted by the Bonner sisters and constantly feels guilty, as if it makes her innately impure. Just as Coyolxauhqui was betrayed by her own mother, who stood by while Huitzilopochtli killed her, this vulnerability opens a wound

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<sup>10</sup> According to Mexica folklore, Coyolxauhqui conspired with her brothers, the 400 Warriors, to kill their mother Coatlicue upon learning that she was pregnant with the god of war, Huitzilopochtli. Before this could happen, Huitzilopochtli beheaded Coyolxauhqui, severed her limbs, and threw her head into the sky where it became the moon (Perez 103).

<sup>11</sup> See: *Un-Framing the "Bad Woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause*.

that reflects how overlapping systems of prejudice, both within and outside the culture and family system, have harmed Chicanas like Miel who do not fit ideals of properness and obedience.

In *When the Moon Was Ours*, just as with the Coyolxauhqui story, we also observe a fractured mother/daughter relationship within Miel's past that comes to define her internal struggle throughout the novel. With Miel acting as a Coyolxauhqui figure, her mother can be viewed as Coatlicue for her failure to act protectively over Miel when her father burns her. However, unlike in the original myth, McLemore offers an uplifting conclusion, healing the rift between mother and daughter and transforming the moon from a reminder of loss to a symbol of forgiveness and love. In the end, after fully regaining her memories, both Miel and Aracely offer their mother's spirit a paper moon, "like the moon in those library atlases. Miel and Aracely brought it outside, held it up, waited for the sky to take it. Their mother would have a light to see by no matter whether the moon above them was a sickle or a bright coin" (262). By giving the mother a light source as a symbol of their understanding so that she may be at peace, the narrative repairs the fractured mother/daughter bond and "restores" the moon in a way reminiscent of a version of the Coyolxauhqui story where her head is placed in the night sky so that Coatlicue may still look upon her daughter's face.

### **Coyolxauhqui, Mother of Malinchistas**

Though McLemore does not explicitly make known the Coyolxauhqui/Coatlicue elements in her novel, Cherríe Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* utilizes the myth in order to comment on contemporary Chicana issues and explore a queer Chicana feminism, with Moraga going so far as to meta-theatrically cast her

characters into a reenactment of the Coatlicue/Coyolxauhqui/Huitzilopochtli story within the larger narrative.

The deification of the central character Medea is heavily emphasized throughout as Moraga melds together elements of the Coatlicue myth, La Llorona folklore, and the Greek tragedy by Euripides from which she takes and Hispanicizes Medea and her ex-husband Jasón's names. By taking and reshaping these recognizable names from the Western canon and placing them into a futuristic, reclaimed Aztlán,<sup>12</sup> the narrative already confirms Medea's goddess qualities and eventual ascension to a deified status that we see in the epilogue from the beginning. Not only is this due in part to the Greek Medea's divine blood<sup>13</sup> in the Classical myth, but the very first image presented by stage directions is that of the goddess Coatlicue in statue form, flanked by a Chorus of Cihuateteo—the former to which Medea prays to as her patron goddess, the latter to which Medea becomes a part of among their ranks in the end. The Cihuateteo in Mexican folklore are spirits more closely connected to the goddess Cihuacoatl, thus strengthening the Llorona motifs in the narrative, as well. Furthermore, a major theme in both Euripides's and Moraga's versions of the Medea character lie in both distinct characters' shared identity as Other, or immigrant, and the plight of exile when assimilation is unattainable. But for this Chicana Medea, her Otherness does not derive simply from a cultural or racial alienation, but an alienation from the standard norm as both a woman within a nationalist revolution, and being lesbian or bisexual on top of this.

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<sup>12</sup> Homeland from where the Aztecs originated, located somewhere in the modern U.S. Southwest region.

<sup>13</sup> Medea is the granddaughter of the sun god Helios in the Greek play.

In the heteropatriarchal, post-revolutionary MeChicano society that retakes Aztlán, Medea is forced to leave this very land she led in reclaiming after being discovered making love to another woman, her girlfriend Luna (who comes to symbolize Coyolxauhqui, literally acting in her role at one point); Medea leaves together with her, Medea's mother Mama Sal, and Medea's son with Jasón, Chac-Mool, to Phoenix, Arizona, the place to where LGBTQ people of all new nations are cast out (now renamed Tamoanchán, or "we seek our home") (Moraga 24). Mama Sal and another woman, Savannah, give Chac-Mool their historical accounts from their perspectives as lesbians on how the Chicane revolutionary movement reverted back to heterosexist ideals. They recall how after the fighting was over, women were told to "put down [their] guns and pick up [their] babies," thereby cementing traditional gender norms even within this new era (24). Even men in this society, if not heterosexual or cisgender, are not considered legitimately "male" and therefore are denied claims to the promised land of Aztlán, where one's blood degree of indigeneity is seemingly the primary basis of land ownership and political power. In lamenting her exile, Medea exclaims that "men think women have no love of country, that the desire for nation is a male prerogative. So like gods, they pick and choose who is to be born and live and die in a land I bled for equal to any man. Aztlán, how you betrayed me!" (15). Despite being of Yaqui descent and a fighter for her people, her queerness is ultimately too great a cultural sin, and she becomes a pariah. Along with her traits highlighting her as a Llorona figure in the narrative, this conflict of sexual identity and "betrayal" against heteronormative conventions frames Medea as a Malinche figure, as well. In this environment as the story's major setting, an outcast settlement created from scorn against non-normative

identities, Moraga explores how Medea's subsequent distrust of men and the patriarchy from the trauma of exile shapes both Medea and her son Chac-Mool into metaphors for a Chicana borderland mentality: Medea, in how she grapples with her queerness and longing to return to Aztlán, and Chac-Mool's self-purpose as a bridge between Tamoanchán and Aztlán.

Within this borderland consciousness for Medea, just as it mixes elements of *La Llorona* and *La Malinche*, she feels herself trapped in-between fragments that make up her perceived Self – lesbian and mother being the main contradiction (based on traditional Mexican standards), but later she is revealed as both midwife and child-killer. In this *Llorona* storyline, Medea's decision to kill Chac-Mool is portrayed as a highly subjective form of mercy, rooted in an urgency to “save” Chac-Mool—from his father's influence, and mostly (in tandem to the former) from reaching manhood. Medea's fear of losing Chac-Mool to Jasón reveals itself as a deeper fear of losing him to the sexist machismo society Jasón comes to symbolize, as she states, “Betrayal occurs when a boy grows into a man and sees his mother as a woman for the first time. A woman. A thing. A creature to be controlled” (70). Just as countless Mexican/Chicana women are pressured by traditional values to do, Medea roots her womanhood in her identity as Chac-Mool's mother, but as this identity crumbles with Chac-Mool's looming separation from her and his transition into Chicano adulthood, this anxiety swells into a desperation to keep her son that leads Medea to go so far as to attempt to reject her own lesbianism, feeling that it is the only way to prioritize her maternity (54).

Chac-Mool, however, resists this anxiety his mother projects onto him by viewing himself as an opportunity to change the Chicano patriarchy with his own example from

within Aztlán. Like his mother and the women around him, he also occupies non-heteronormative qualities, albeit for a young Chicano boy. Raised in a queer community, primarily by women and having gay or otherwise queer men for role models of masculinity, at several points in the play characters remark upon this unique worldview it has fostered in him, often comparing him, whether directly or narratively, to a girl (or at least implying he is not traditionally boy-like) (20). Perez describes a major example of this at the end, in the ritualistic treatment of Chac-Mool's body after his mother poisons him:

The scene calls to mind a sacrificial ritual practiced by the Mexicas to honor the corn goddess, Chicomecoatl, along with the goddesses associated with water and salt, Chalchiuhtlicue and Huixtocihuatl, respectively, who were honored highly among the Mexicas...Each year the Mexicas sacrificed a young woman, who was also decapitated and flayed, to make a blood offering to the corn goddess to ensure fertility, renewal, and sustenance. The young woman's sacrificial blood, and the life-giving and sustaining qualities, ensured the continuation of the people. Medea replicates this ritual through her sacrifice, but in offering her male child, she interrupts a traditional renewal. The offering, made in this way, represents a violation of the ancient ritual, yet one powerful enough to create something new (105).

This "new" ritual echoes earlier sentiments in the story when Medea proclaims: No, my son is still an innocent. He will love you [Jasón] in spite of me, for his body requires that that animal memory be fulfilled. To that I do not object, nor to the fact that he must one day grow away from me, but he will leave me as a

daughter does, with all the necessary wrenching, and his eye will never see me ‘as woman.’ I promise you that. (Moraga 71)

Chac-Mool, though framed in the role of Huitzilopochtli initially, transcends this image of the macho Chicano fantasy through his openness to the female narratives around him, particularly in his awareness of woman-specific trauma. We see this in the scene where he claims he is not afraid of La Llorona in the traditional sense, but rather feels sympathy for her, claiming, “I felt like she was telling me her side of the story, like I was the only one that heard it like that” (38). As the sacrificial victim in the end that later returns—whether as a ghost or a hallucination—to absolve Medea and assist her into death, he reverses the *pietà* imagery before when Medea held Chac-Mool’s body, and—like with McLemore’s narrative—repairs the mother/child bond of the Llorona narrative by reuniting mother and son in death, with Medea then ascending to the rank of deified spirit as one of the Cihuateteo. Perez analyzes this scene as: “While we may read this ending as tragic, the final scene of the Cihuateteo dancing commemorates the addition of a new warrior woman to their ranks. Medea, who dies as a result of giving birth to a new kind of man, transcends time and space to take her place among the goddesses” (106).

However, before this resolution takes place, another arc of mother/child conflict unravels throughout the narrative, showing the transformation in Medea’s perceptions of the indigenous goddesses in relation to womanhood and empowerment. In Perez’s analysis of *The Hungry Woman*, Medea’s lesbian relationship with Luna serves to guide Medea in her eventual shift from revering Coatlicue, the mother goddess, to revering instead Coyolxauhqui, the punished daughter—transformed now as Coatlicue, the patriarchal mother, and Coyolxauhqui, the rebellious queer daughter. The subject of

patriarchal complicity in maternal figures and the consequent trauma for daughters arises at several points in the narrative, at one crucial point in revealing Medea's trauma after she was sexually preyed on by her adult brother as a young girl, meanwhile her mother had simply warned her to prioritize her brother's needs and to "give your brother whatever he wants" (57-58). Medea repeats the sentiments of this abuse at the end as she realizes the similarities between her own mother and the mother earth goddess, declaring:

You betrayed us, Madre Coatlicue.

You, anciana, who birthed the god of war.

[...]

My mother did not stop my brother's hand

from reaching into my virgin bed.

Nor did you hold back the sword

that severed your daughter's head.

Coyolxauhqui, diosa de la luna.

*[Her arms stretch out to the full moon.]*

Ahora, she is my god.

La Luna, la hija rebelde. (92)

This epiphany moment also marks the shift in Medea from trying to navigate the heterosexist values she would have to accept in order to return to Aztlán, into owning her sexuality and identity for who she is. But even prior to this point, as Jean Franco notes "In Moraga's play, Coatlicue is not idealized; instead, she, along with other female figures from the Mexica past, is a captive" (quoted in Perez 101). Luna herself voices this view, when explaining her motivation upon taking the small Cihuateteo statues from a

museum she calls them “Ancient little diosas, the size of children’s toys. They were trapped, sir, behind the museum glass. They belonged to us. I remember them from my youth, going to visit in my Catholic school uniform. I wanted to free my little sisters, trapped by history” (Moraga 59). The symbolism of this act not only speaks to reclaiming goddesses from twisted or disempowered narratives—here, they are shrunken and literally set in stone—but in reclaiming these figures for women who look to them as guides, or like Luna, set them into a sisterhood of marginalized women. With this awareness of what has been done to the statues and what they represent, “Medea’s own liberation from her particular kind of prison is foreshadowed when Luna ‘steals’ the statue and presents it to Medea as a gift, which serves as a physical reminder of the larger narrative of which they, as women, are all a part” (Perez 101).

The transition we see within this greater narrative in which Medea and Luna go from lesbian lovers to playing the roles of mother and daughter in the creation story also opens an interpretation of queering motherhood, in a way, particularly in the stage directions portraying Medea giving birth to Luna (87). With imagery drawing attention to Luna’s presence between Medea’s legs in a way both natural of childbirth yet erotically charged, one can interpret this mixture as resembling Medea’s psyche in defining her identity as a queer Chicana mother—de-bordering these concepts within her, as a kind of self-actualization. In terms of the goddess symbolism that also overlays them within the narrative, “Moraga’s substitution of a female lover, Luna, for the female child, Coyolxauhqui, privileges the broader issue of gender alliance over that of maternal fidelity and allows Moraga to address heterosexual oppression as a part of patriarchal oppression. Thus, in relation to the Llorona legend, Luna/Coyolxauhqui represents a

broken or lost bond between women” (103). Therefore, “by transferring her affection from the ‘treasonous’ mother to the ‘hija rebelde,’ Medea allies herself with a female resistance movement to overthrow or thwart her oppressors” in a way that allows her a sort of triumph in the end, deified with the Cihuateteo as Chicana warrior, mother, and lesbian (103).

### **Resistance Narratives and Las Madres Diosas Immersed in Activism**

Though Medea’s past as a fighter for the Chicana revolution is relayed but never directly shown in *The Hungry Woman*, social consciousness and elements of activism—now with a queer, feminist lens, rather than broadly cultural—follow Medea even during her time in exile from Aztlán. We see this in a way already mentioned, in Medea’s unyielding task to protect her son from becoming indoctrinated into a sexist, homophobic Chicano patriarchal tradition. She is motivated not only by a desire to protect Chac-Mool’s innocence, but to protect herself and other women from objectification and dehumanization through another set of masculine eyes. Medea at one point warns Jasón regarding his young Apache bride, “I will teach her, as I have learned, to defend women and children against enemies from within. Against fathers and brothers and sons who grow up to be as Conquistador as any Cortez” (70). Barred from reaping the rewards of the Chicano cause, her activism does not end in Tamoanchán where Medea adopts a new cause in criticizing and fighting against forms of oppression that plague her community of Chicanas. The wounds she sustains in her psyche from a sexually abused childhood and her discrimination as a lesbian mother ignite this new battle in her. And upon joining the other spirits of warrior women, after her disillusionment of realizing how Coatlicue has been warped into patriarchal iconography by the new Chicano society (just as la

Virgen de Guadalupe has been used), Moraga lays in this ending the implication that Medea has become a patroness for other women like her, the Malinchistas who reject Chicano heteronormativity. Among other Chicana feminist authors, framing deified Llorona/Malinche figures within narratives of social justice like this offers an interaction between old and new forms of trauma, and even a way of attaining some catharsis for a marginalized group through the activist deity.

Pat Mora's poem "Llantos de La Llorona: Warnings From the Wailer," follows the titular ghost woman as she tells the reader her own story in first-person, at first portraying the kinds of prejudices she faces in a pre-conquest Indigenous society, then transcending herself in time in a meta-historical commentary on her own archetypal image in the cultural sphere. But rather than framing her wanderings over time as tragic, here La Llorona is characterized as a source of wisdom and guide through the forms of oppression Mexican/Chicana women face, not wailing to be heard but addressing the reader with a command, "Oye"—"listen to me" (Mora).

In this version of the myth, "instead of assigning her with a Mexica heritage, as many others have, Mora locates La Llorona among the Maya, the people who gave Malinche to Cortés as tribute, to illustrate that the oppression of women did not begin with the arrival of the Spanish or that it is an act exclusive to men" (Perez 79-80). Mora also places La Llorona among the Maya culture by designating her mother as another recognizable mythic figure, X-tabai—who is additionally another Llorona antecedent, and an entity known for seductress qualities and being dangerous specifically to men.<sup>14</sup> Rather than placing La Llorona with a mother who sells her out as La Malinche's mother

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<sup>14</sup> See "The Malinche-Llorona Dichotomy: The Evolution of a Myth" by Luis Leal.

did, here both mother and daughter are vilified by their community, seemingly for inciting infidelity in men but the narrative also asserts that this is hearsay. With a pattern of lines starting with “They say/rumor says” throughout, it becomes clear that Mora’s Llorona is aware of how her own mythology is shaped to fit others’ perceptions, particularly based on her sexuality and social status (Mora).

However, when it comes to the infanticides that begin after the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, this Llorona does not deny the detail of her as a child murderer from the traditional tale. La Llorona does make it clear, though, that these children are products of colonial rape, and frames killing them as acts of mercy, particularly her female children and descendants, whom she wants to protect from “other piquetitos”<sup>15</sup> (Mora). In this way, rather than painting La Llorona as a maternal or redeemed patroness of Chicana feminists, Perez notes how Mora’s Llorona utilizes others’ fear of her as a source of power. Rather than rejecting the bogeywoman reputation that defines her in the oral tradition and the stories relayed to Mexican/Chicanx children, La Llorona not only encourages this image of herself but encourages other women to weaponize the negative and sexist images placed on them, like those La Llorona and X-tabai are labeled with (81). Instead of taking on the traditional cry of “mis hijos,” Mora’s Llorona directly addresses her symbolic daughters, reaching out to all Chicanas as “Hijas mías,” who, “like her, will inherit a particular kind of struggle in a male-dominated world...By aligning herself with Malinche, specifically, and other ‘madbad ghostwomen / roaming in the dark,’ and exposing the systematic way that she and her mother were ostracized, La

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<sup>15</sup> From “picadura,” a sting or prick. The sexual violence in this section of the poem contextualizes it to imply rape. But “piquetito” could also act as slang for a small headache.

Llorona demonstrates a history of punishing women who fail to conform to cultural or social ideals” (Candelaria and Mora, cited Perez 82). Perez concludes her analysis of “Llantos de La Llorona” by explaining how, in the fashion that Mora elevates La Llorona out of history to encompass social issues for Mexicanas and Chicanas throughout time, La Llorona “has survived and has not forgotten where she came from [in spite of her wanderings and evolution, no longer in her original form] or what she and her ‘lost daughters’ have endured” (83). Along with urging Chicanas to question the dominant narratives surrounding them, La Llorona offers narrative as an opportunity for self-empowerment, as well, advising her daughters to “Never underestimate the power of the voice” (Mora).

In her short story anthology *flesh to bone*, ire’ne lara silva similarly creates a Llorona myth that transcends time and history with an emphasis on cyclical trauma. In “cortando las nubes, or, death came on horses,” silva introduces the main Llorona figure through her daughter, Cempasuchil, who provides the first-person narration for most of the story and serves an interesting role as something of a “translator,” or mouthpiece, for her mother, as it is through Cempasuchil that we understand this Llorona’s thoughts, actions, and power. “Mami is the hero. Mami is the fighter. I am here to watch. Here to listen. Here to remember what happens and what has been forgotten,” she declares, positioning herself as a guardian of her mother’s narrative and retaining an obligation to remember her mother’s true identity (silva 38).

silva makes it apparent that this Llorona is the goddess Cihuacoatl through motifs such as the machete she cradles at times like an infant,<sup>16</sup> and acknowledges through the narrative that La Llorona is the name that has been imposed on her through a history of colonization. Cempasuchil remarks, “[The current people] don’t know her name, the name they need to awaken her to comfort her to keep her from breaking things and harming people,” reflecting a loss through the same consequences of conquest that affect both her mother and Mexicans/Chicanxs now (33). La Llorona/Cihuacoatl has lost her identity in the broader cultural psyche, and the destruction of indigenous customs, language, and history have resulted in an inability for many to now understand her. Despite this, La Llorona/Cihuacoatl remains walking the earth, searching for her children (unable to recognize Cempasuchil and her brothers, who follow after her), yet recognizing all Chicanxs and Mexicans as her symbolic children: “The people who remembered her, remembered her by the wrong name. But the ones who saw her, the ones she saved, the ones whose pain she ended, the ones for whom she was death’s face, the ones her own hands put to rest, they recognized the rage and tenderness in her eyes and called her Mother” (53).

Just as this Llorona is a deified ghost, so, too, are La Llorona’s children given powerful qualities. In this version of the tale, Cempasuchil’s mother and her brother Tomás both—mother and son together—are the “wailers” of the myth, but this wailing is characterized as a screaming and whirling, a storm-like rage. Yet here, just as Herrera describes in the prioritization of sons common in patriarchal family systems, the daughter

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<sup>16</sup> “In the past, people believed that [Cihuacoatl] had come by when they found the empty cradle in the marketplace with a sacrificial knife laid beside it” (Castillo 90).

feels left behind, struggling to keep up as she follows after them, meanwhile also acting as primary caretaker of her infant brother and the Llorona/Cihuacoatl character's youngest child, Iccauhtli. In taking over the role of a mother toward her little brother, Cempasuchil goes on to be characterized as taking after her mother in other ways—qualities passed on through deliberate teaching or by observations and a willingness to imitate her mother on Cempasuchil's own part—that create a version of the narrative where the Llorona identity is an inheritable one. The character of Tomás is evidence of this early on, acting as a sort of Llorón, but as the short story goes on there also exists through Cempasuchil's narrative a significance of the matrilineal bond between her and her mother as La Llorona. She states at one point, "I'm learning to make my voice weep as it sings. I imagine I am the river speaking and, on its own, my voice grows louder"—the voice growing louder, learning to emulate the wailing (33). This weeping, Cempasuchil soon reveals, comes from compassion and sympathy for the dead rather than a self-pity or despair as La Llorona is often traditionally written, as she helps her mother comfort and somewhat "repair" the dead. Later, this sadness transforms into anger at injustices and the genocides of marginalized peoples. The dying and oppressed Cempasuchil witnesses her mother aid and watch over are shown to mainly be Indigenous, Mexican, and Latinx groups facing racial persecution throughout history. Historical trauma surrounding the conquest of Mexico and the consequent systems of European-dominant power that resulted in its wake serve as the major wound every act of violence Cempasuchil sees connects back to. In a particularly powerful passage where Cempasuchil describes her mother's heroism, Silva seems to manipulate time in setting

La Llorona/Cihuacoatl involved in revolutions of the past and fighting oppressive forces of the present all at once:

Mami has run off past the outskirts of the next town. Tonight she's breaking lights along the river, deepening the shadows, distracting the men in white vans, with rustling sounds that seem to come from everywhere and nowhere. Afterwards, she'll take her sharp machete and gut train cars, leading the suffocated to a safe clearing. She'll run to lock doors and gates against the rioting Navy men with Mexican blood and skin and zootsuit under their nails. She'll lend her voice to the protests and the marches and whisper in the ears of poets. She'll save the children of the Adelitas who armed themselves and fell in battle. She'll swim along the rivers and pull the ones returning to the land of their ancestors away from the strong currents and the lights and the traps. She'll lead the Rangers' horses into falling over the cliff's edge rather than letting them carry death to the Indio villages. She'll fight with the campesinos to hold their land, their homes, their ties to the earth. She'll spend the night with the Yaquis fighting the pale ones. Running alone, she'll cover miles and miles, decades and centuries before dawn.

(39)

This Llorona/Cihuacoatl acts as both protector goddess and revolutionary, a *dea ex machina* who feels as much apart of the communities she watches over. *silva* goes another step within this portrayal of the goddess in narrowing her resonance with women—Chicana mothers, specifically.

The second part of the story, “Maravillas,”<sup>17</sup> opens on an unnamed young Latina despairing over her unwed pregnancy, and the possibility that it may start to rain while she labors picking cotton—as rain will mean her boyfriend will not permit her to run away with him so they can get married. So great and consuming are her fears of facing her father’s judgement and being cast out for her impurity that the young woman contemplates killing herself (40-41). Her isolation extends further within her situation in the fact that while her father has not yet discovered her condition, her mother apparently knows yet does nothing to assist or comfort her. However, upon meeting Cempasuchil and La Llorona/Cihuacoatl, the young woman’s perspective completely transforms from their influence: through Cempasuchil’s encouragement that she not give up on herself, and in witnessing the extent of Cihuacoatl and her children’s pain, as it is through this woman’s narration that we first see their scars, and the revelation that all this time mother and child have been unable to communicate with one another (48). After this encounter, the Chicana sees her pregnancy in a new light, no longer a burden or death sentence:

*I was a mother. I heard those words ring in my head, ringing through my body as if it was a bell. And I would hold my child in my arms the way She never would again. And in that moment I knew I would be a fierce mother. I would protect my child. I would find us a place in the world, with or without Chuy, with or without my family (50).*

Inspired by La Llorona/Cihuacoatl and Cempasuchil, she is saved from despair and finds resilience in her new identity as a Chicana/Mexicana mother.

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<sup>17</sup> Meaning “marvels/wonders” in Spanish. Also a name for a type of yellow flower similar to marigolds, which is Cempasuchil’s namesake.

## **The Appeal of the Goddess Narrative**

How do we avoid false empowerment and instead make a goddess “real”? As Castillo remarks in the epigraph to this chapter, the process cannot rely on “token title[s],” but must have substance of agency at its core (172). Just as Moraga employs her narrative in *The Hungry Woman* to convey, there is a danger in the Chicana community “reviving” these ancient indigenous figures in the cultural psyche only to suppress them into voiceless icons or box them into pre-existing social roles. The work of Chicana feminists in re-empowering these goddesses cannot—and indeed should not—avoid connecting them to modern-day forms of injustice that target Chicanas.

In Chicana resistance literature, Ralph E. Rodríguez finds that “Chicanas who position La Llorona as a figure of resistance rely on the existing narrative strategies attached to the lore to contest and oppose the oppressive forces” he identifies, defined to mean the political and social obstacles a group may face in a struggle that calls for a solidified—even armed—liberation movement (cited in Perez 73). Furthermore, Rodríguez observes a trend to center on territorial claims, which calls to mind the theme of Aztlán in Moraga’s work, as well as reaffirming how drawing on contemporary issues in which to set these resistance narratives spreads sociopolitical awareness—*concientización*, as Castillo calls it—and empowers a community with its storytelling. For Chicana feminists, La Llorona can be “a revolutionary engaged in a cultural battle for the liberation of women’s minds, bodies, and spirits,” as through contemporary Chicana narratives, involving attentions to contemporary forms of oppression, La Llorona becomes a feminist and a fighter for women of color’s rights (Perez 73).

For restoration of the goddess figure when it comes to La Llorona and/or La Malinche, Chicana feminists are called to revise and rewrite, culminating into the creation of a new, feminist cultural mythology. That is, in order for the “Bad Woman” to be a savior and role model to marginalized women, we must first save the “Bad Woman” from the patriarchal aspects that vilify and victimize her archetypal image. However, deifying and ascribing autonomy to these figures does not always absolve them of problematic behavior, as is evident in works like Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman* and Mora’s “Llantos de La Llorona,” where the Llorona/Malinche heroines, though reimagined with heroic and superhuman (or supra-human) qualities, still maintain their status as murderess like in the traditional Llorona myth.

Just as humanizing retellings of La Llorona’s and La Malinche’s respective myths offer complexity and sympathy to the motivations and conventions underlying these foremothers’ original folklore, reframing them as goddesses or restoring the goddess qualities of their pre-Columbian incarnations allows us several ways of interacting with these negative aspects like infanticide and infidelity. We can interpret these destructive acts as reinforcing the balance between creation and destruction that indigenous goddesses Coatlicue and Cihuacoatl are associated with; other deified narratives offer, whether implicitly or explicitly, that the infanticide is, in actuality, an act of mercy. Rather than seeing the “Bad Mother/Woman” at the center of the conventional Llorona myth as a figure needing to be moralized and sanitized in a fashion similar to La Virgen de Guadalupe’s transformation from the goddess Coatlicue/Coatlalopeuh, some Chicana feminist authors position La Llorona’s rejection of motherhood as compatible with a contemporary feminist ideology that criticizes the conventions surrounding motherhood

in Mexican/Chicanx culture (particularly that which devalues Chicanas who are not dutiful mothers). Still others, like Silva's and McLemore's reimagined goddess figures, operate a balance between life and death in a way that naturally includes both violence and regeneration. These Lloronas are neither the "Bad" or "Good" mother but are simply Mexicana/Chicana figures with agency.

## V. CONCLUSION

### **La Llorona's Continued Struggle in the Cultural Imagination**

This past March of 2019, *The Curse of La Llorona* premiered at the South-by-Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas. Preceded by a curandero performing a blessing at the showing—lest something negative follow audience members home afterwards—the film offered a bridge for La Llorona's traditional folktale from the realm of Chicana and Latinx media to the mainstream American horror box office.

As soon as I heard news of this film, I realized I would have to incorporate it into my thesis—not so much because the previews appeared promising, but to be faithful to the study of La Llorona's cultural influence. Immersed in my research of her folklore and its evolution that I was, equally excited and wary of how this horror film—set in the same cinematic universe as the *Conjuring* series, no less—would treat and possibly transform the legend, it took an adjustment of perspective to go from a Chicana feminist lens to observing how the broader culture perceived it. “That’s not her,” I thought any time the advertisement ran. “That’s not the *real* Llorona”—not this zombie bride-resembling product of a Hollywood scare flick. But as this thesis and the works of other scholars have reflected, La Llorona's image can take on many different forms, sometimes as fluidly as the waters she haunts; the duty for Llorona scholars remains in analyzing how these images convey meaning and which ones perpetuate harmful social attitudes. My initial struggle to recognize this Llorona reflects that there still exists a clear divide between the complex narrative of female trauma Chicana feminists represent her with and the archetypal image rooted in patriarchal values of broader Mexican/Chicana culture.

## Utilizing Genre as a Critical Lens

The realm of horror has historically tied closely to society and culture, often as a vehicle for deeper social commentary and a way to reimagine or redirect human fears in a cathartic light; intangible threats like disease and xenophobia are easier to interact with once compressed into a vanquish-able monster. La Llorona, who has served as the imagined embodiment of colonial violence, abandonment, parental anxiety, failed motherhood, and suppression of women's identities for centuries is no different: "As the culture is affected by various influences, our thinking, our attitudes, and our issues shift. The *La Llorona* story shifts, too" (Estés 327). A 2019 film based on her myth should then reflect recent cultural anxieties in this manner, even if subtly or subconsciously. The question then becomes, however, *whose* anxieties are in focus.

*The Curse of La Llorona* served as a directorial debut for Michael Chaves, who has been working within the American horror movie industry for around a decade. However, although Chaves's Latinx background provides him with the ability to culturally contextualize his own vision of La Llorona, the two main script writers for the film are both white—a man (Tobias Iaconis) and a woman (Mikki Daughtry). These factors fueled my apprehension of how the movie's conflict would be shaped around La Llorona as a Mexican cultural icon, particularly in whether the Anglo-American writers would opt to draw on La Llorona as an "exotic" entity, whose unfamiliarity to white U.S. audience members would make her more threatening to them. Or on the other hand, I wondered if this creative team would instead flatten or whitewash La Llorona down into a generic ghostly figure.

For its part, the film utilizes a version of the myth that paints La Llorona as a victim initially as much of a perpetrator in her own downfall: once a woman with a husband and children, she drowns her two sons upon discovering that her husband has been unfaithful, thus the infanticide is an act of revenge against him. This slightly alters from another popular version, placing La Llorona as the married woman who is cheated on rather than the rejected mistress character. While the difference may not seem significant, it carries weight in that the film's narrative specifically sets this inciting event in 1673 Mexico, when Mexico was still colonially ruled by the Spanish—and when the system of *las Castas* strictly determined one's social status based on their degree of European blood. Because La Llorona so often represents the indigenous woman's disadvantaged social position during this era, and her children are implicitly mestizos because of this, the writers' choice to portray her as a married woman whose children are legitimately their father's denies her narrative that nuance of racial oppression.

For the rest of the film, based in 1970s Los Angeles, La Llorona's vengeful spirit preys on the children of two different single mothers: Anna García, a widowed social worker, and Patricia Alvarez, a mother who ends up losing her children to La Llorona. However, the main maternal subject of the film, Anna (played by a white actress), is portrayed as the more sympathetic and heroic figure, the "good mother" in contrast to the poor, brown, distraught mother, Patricia—reinforcing the very same colonial/racial dichotomy that fueled La Llorona's initial marginalization and cultural relevance in her original backstory. Anna is able to save her children and defeat La Llorona, Patricia meanwhile spends much of her screen time anxious and eventually grieving her children.

Patricia's role is one of particularly disappointing wasted potential, relying on stereotypes that characterize her as an unfit, harmfully superstitious Mexican mother, and thus the narrative fails to delve into her plight or circumstances. Issues of classism and stereotypes surrounding mental illness in Latinas feel exploited rather than allowing for a sympathetic acknowledgement to these issues to a mainstream Hollywood audience. What's more, the defining trauma for this character, who is being forcefully separated from her children, similarly gets shaved down to a one-dimensional degree—the major threat standing between this mother and her children is a mythical entity rather than the U.S. court and foster care systems—so as not to seem *too* politically relevant in the current anti-immigrant regime. The end result comes across as more dismissive than ironic for a film that utilizes Mexico's most famous *madre sufrida* archetype.

Patricia's constant suffering also parallels La Llorona's misery. Her mothering style is ineffective, she fails to protect her children successfully, and ultimately her grief causes her to be violent and antagonistic within the narrative. Just as the narrative erases the social and cultural contexts surrounding La Llorona's origins, the film's narrative similarly vilifies Patricia without contextualizing her trauma as a Mexican mother whose husband is absent from the story.

### **La Llorona Deified or Demonized?**

*The Curse of La Llorona's* narrative fascinatingly deifies La Llorona, or at least seems to. At one point, after losing her children, Patricia reveals to Anna that she has prayed to La Llorona, asking that the ghost woman take away Anna's children as revenge for her own loss, thereby framing La Llorona in this version as having become a sort of patroness for other vengeful mothers.

As I explored in chapter three, the process of deifying La Llorona can be a complicated one that at times calls us to reconcile La Llorona's positive or more powerful attributes with her negative traits. Ultimately, empowering La Llorona does not always make her "good" or rectify her infanticides, but seeks to restore agency to her myth. We observe this heavily in Mora's poem, "Llantos de La Llorona," as the deified Llorona acts as a guardian to her Chicana daughters while still being guilty of killing children—albeit as acts of mercy. Though still a murderess, Mora's Llorona differentiates herself from her stereotypical image by rejecting the heterosexist conventions of oppression surrounding her. Mora instead expands her characterization of La Llorona by framing her as both rebellious patron mother of Chicanas and politically conscious daughter—reconciling both the positives and negatives of her deified image as well as the solidarity between Chicana/Mexicana mother-daughter relationships. Other Chicana feminist works, such as McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* and Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek," further reconcile La Llorona's image between the deified and humanized aspects of her transformation in the Chicana feminist psyche, utilizing both types of retellings to encompass her within a culturally enlightened Chicana community that evokes her indigenous roots.

Unlike these retellings authored by Chicana feminists, *The Curse of La Llorona* does not include references to mythological Mexica figures or take the opportunity to connect La Llorona to her ancient antecedents. Furthermore, Chaves and his main scriptwriters do not seem concerned with granting La Llorona agency so much as making her a more powerful oppressive ghostly force. As part of a mainstream American horror franchise primarily about a possessed doll, the narrative instead reinvents La Llorona as a

demonic figure—literally demonizing her as an evil entity, complete with an aversion to crosses and holy water.

While this narrative decision echoes the history of Aztec goddesses like Cihuacoatl being condemned as “devils” by the Spanish colonizers during their process of Catholicizing Mexico, this demonization feels to be more the product of contextualizing La Llorona in a way that mainstream (white) audiences would be better equipped to fear her. Rather than tying La Llorona to a history of colonization, genocide, sexual exploitation, and displacement that she represents to Chicanx and Latinx audiences, *The Curse of La Llorona* effectively Westernizes her by amplifying her monstrous qualities and erasing her heritage of Indigenous/mestiza trauma (*Borderlands* 49). Her grotesque appearance frightens meanwhile her pain gets erased.

### **A Spiritual Resolution**

What is the end goal for those of us who trace La Llorona’s transformations, often by decolonizing her narrative and peeling back the layers of patriarchal subversion? And how does understanding her maternal legacy in turn affect the ways we perceive Mexican/Chicanx gender roles, particularly those Chicanas observe or inherit from their mothers?

What I hope to offer with this study is not a concrete resolution to these issues but rather a new layer to the ongoing discussion ignited by Chicana feminists in the early days of the nationalist movement, those who challenged their vilification through labels like “malinchista” and “vendida.” Those who first asked why La Malinche is the traitor and not Moctezuma.

Chicana feminism exists not out of a need to define ourselves as women, but as a response to how men—both outside and within our own culture—have treated us, how systemic sexism of both the Anglo American and traditional Mexican societies subjugate and disadvantage Chicanas. In reclaiming indigenous identity like the nationalist movement, Chicanas go further in this movement of decolonial resistance by not seeking to normalize gender equality in the western feminist sense but instead to completely reform and undo the institutions of gender norms imposed on us when the Spaniards first overlaid a European patriarchy on Indigenous groups. The process of understanding and even reforming how Chicana culture treats Chicanas, which in turn often connects to a process of healing for individual Chicanas, lies in that “there is a need for us to explore and understand our relationship to our own cultural principles and how they shape our worldviews. Doing so can undermine usurping Euro-inflected ideologies used by those who attempt to define our cultural productions while ignoring us in the process” (Perez 207). The narratives explored in this thesis which utilize La Llorona and/or La Malinche offer ways of reinterpreting their myths so that, by encouraging Chicana readers to identify their trauma with these mythic figures, they may similarly recognize and transcend the patriarchal conventions that have long suppressed Mexican/Chicana women. However, the iconography surrounding these foremothers still retains the necessity for Chicanas to challenge the broader, sexist views in the first place; films like *The Curse of La Llorona* only reinforce this.

Ultimately, Chicana culture still retains a fascination with tragic women and the Indigenous woman’s pain, as we see through La Llorona. But whereas the sexist mainstream remains attracted to fearing La Llorona as a monster, condemning her for her

perceived failures at motherhood, the Chicana feminist sees herself in La Llorona, as well as La Malinche and all the other mujeres malas. She wants to save her, just as she wants to reach her hand through history and save all of her foremothers from conventions of violence and suppression (these women have, after all, often been the real-life Lloronas and Malinches).

To see the past clearly is to possess the capacity to change the future; although we are not (yet) at the point where more progressive and sympathetic versions of the Malinche and Llorona myths have become normalized, Chicana feminist writers will continue to challenge the patriarchal script surrounding us by offering our own narratives, expanding the community with a new chorus of both shared and differing experiences. Calling ourselves daughters of La Llorona and La Malinche, and mothers to the next generations to come.

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