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LA LLORONA CAUGHT IN TIME

BY MANUEL F. MEDRANO¹

Weeping Woman

Weeping woman, weeping woman
La Llorona caught in time
Do you still search for your children?
In the recess of our minds?

Were you born from the Mexicas
In the ruins of Aztlan?
Did you first appear before us?
In our home Tenochtitlan?

Are you really La Malinche
Who regrets her treacherous deed?
Did you really give your people?
To the Spaniards and their greed?

Do you still appear at midnight?
Near the river of our past?
Or do you walk by our resacas
Trying to cleanse your soul at last?

Will your story live forever?
Or will it last only one night?
As our abuelita tells it
And we tremble in our fright?

Weeping woman, weeping woman
La Llorona caught in time
Do you still search for your children?
In the recess of our minds?

A relampago (lightning bolt) is one of the most powerful phenomena of nature. This flash of electricity cannot be controlled and does not discriminate. What it can do, however, is ignite fires, destroy property, and kill or injure whoever or whatever is in its way. It also frightens those in its strike proximity and sometimes creates images they may or may not see. At times along the South Texas border, the natural wonder of the relampago serves as a vehicle that brings folktales to life. What one sees and what one thinks he/she sees become one. It is a confluence of culture and nature that nurtures intriguing stories. Such is the case with La Llorona. Her cuento (story) is centuries old and continues to exist as a syncretic continuum in the Americas bordered by past and present.

I am a ghost, legend, and siren. I am a creature of the night; I am the undead. I am the Weeping Woman. Ghosts like me are found in many cultures throughout the world. I am Medea in Greece², Die Weisse Frau (the White Woman) in Germany, Kuchisake-onna in Japan (Wells) and the shrieking Gaelic banshee in Ireland (Chiu).³ I was a beautiful young mother who was loved and betrayed. In my sorrow and desperation, I drowned my children and drowned myself as I tried to save them.⁴ My guilt and grief consumed me. My robes are white; my face is unforgettable. I now wander by those waters wailing, shrieking, and waiting—waiting for someone else's children and waiting for the man who discarded me. I am in the recesses of your minds and cultural souls. I am your grandmother's story; I am your mother's story, and I am yours. Fear me; respect me; remember me.

Mine is the most popular folktale in the Americas. It has evolved yet remained the same. My origins are believed to be Aztec and Mexican. The Aztecs believed that ill omens existed in the sounds of wild animals or the cries of women. I am the mythical goddess Cihuacoatl, one of those omens. I am a half-snake, half woman dressed in white. I wail while waiting for my son to return from war. I am filthy, ugly, and angry. Others said I might be Matlaciuatl (the net woman), a vampire-like creature who stalked, preyed, and fed on men or Cuapipiltin, the wandering Aztec goddess who carried an empty cradle searching for her lost child.⁶ The Spanish conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo wrote that during the final siege, he heard a woman lamenting that she and her children were lost.

Malinali, Malintzin, La Malinche, Dona Marina I am all of them

and I am none of them. Diaz, the conquistador, called me "a great lady." Without me, the Spaniards "could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico."⁸ I spoke Nahuatl and Tabascan and aided Hernan Cortes in acquiring allies and recognizing enemies.⁹ As his translator, I provided valuable information about indigenous populations who helped and probably saved him. According to lore, the Mexican people believed that by helping Cortes, I betrayed my own children, the Aztecs. As his captive concubine, I bore him a son, Martin, symbolically the first Mexicano of European and indigenous lineage. In the late 1800s, my story was published and embraced by Mexicanos and Mexican Americans. Nobel prize winner Octavio Paz once wrote that Mexicans had not forgiven me for my betrayal. The Spaniards were victorious, in part, because of my assistance.¹⁰

I am also Maria, a stunningly beautiful peasant woman who married a wealthy nobleman. We had two children, and I was happy. He, however, lost interest in me. One day, I saw him in our carriage with another woman. He spoke to our children but did not even acknowledge me. Afterwards, I went into a rage and pushed our children into a river. At night, I walk by that river and wail uncontrollably. Others say I was a self-centered woman who reveled in a nearby town more than I cared for my children. One night I returned home and realized both had drowned. I was cursed because I was vain and neglectful and am doomed to search for them forever.¹¹

My folktale still exists in the Southwest and beyond. In New Mexico, I have appeared on the banks of the Santa Fe River near the site of an old Spanish—Indian gravesite and at Guadalupita, near a creek. In Albuquerque, I am called the ditch lady because I walk near irrigation ditches. Others call me the bogeywoman. In Reedley, California I was heard crying for my children. I frightened visitors at Trabuco Creek, near San Capistran.¹² I have been seen on the banks of the Yellowstone River in Montana, in Manhattan, Kansas and at Indian Falls, Colorado.

In Texas, I appear near San Antonio at Hollering Woman Creek where my pioneer family was attacked and my husband viciously murdered. Before his killers returned, I drowned my children to protect them from a worse fate. When the attackers returned, my demonic screams frightened them away. I still wander by the creek crying. Near San Bernard, I was seen wearing a black tapelo and a black net over my face.¹⁴ Some say I steal the souls of children. Others say if you see me,

you, or someone you know, will die within a week. In the Rio Grande Valley, I have been seen near the Rio Grande, reservoirs and resacas and at Boca Chica Beach. On a stormy night, I frightened a young man as he walked home on a muddy road near Brownsville, Texas. Now a seventy-two, he remembers seeing me dressed in white near an irrigation ditch and hearing my chilling cries. He could not run away fast enough. Descriptions of me vary, but those who believe rarely change their stories. Furthermore, they do not care if they are believed or not. What they saw is what they saw.

I am everywhere; I am nowhere. I am in literary works, stage plays, and television programs. I am the subject of a recent motion picture, the *Curse of La Llorona*.¹⁵ Recently, I have been infused into Day of the Dead festivities in Mexico, possibly adding a new character to Mexico's public history and identity.¹⁶ My soul, however, remains in oral tradition. Abuelitas (grandmothers) tell my story to their nietas (granddaughters) who become abuelitas themselves. It has been this way for hundreds of years.

My face and misery are unforgettable. My deeds are unforgivable. Versions of my story are as plentiful as those who tell it, and most who do are women. Some say I am a villainess; others say I am a victim. Some call me a resistant political figure; others say I am a conduit for Latino communities to teach what not to do. I am quintessential; I am traditional; I am fluid; I am culturally indomitable. I am La Llorona.

Notes

1. MANUEL F. MEDRANO is a Professor Emeritus from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. He is the author and co-author of numerous articles and books about the Valley and the founder of the Los del Valle Oral History Project.

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