

La Llorona on Stage: Re-visiting Chicana Cultural Paradigms in Josefina López's *Unconquered Spirits*

Trevor Boffone

The lives of Chicanas, in particular, are circumscribed by cultural norms and values that try to dictate how they should behave as women and who their role models should be. Although several archetypes exist for women of Mexican origin to follow, perhaps none has as much sociocultural relevance as La Llorona.¹ The weeping woman of Mexican lore, La Llorona is largely considered the mythical form of the historical figure, La Malinche, who was given to Hernán Cortés to serve as his interpreter during the conquest of Mexico (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 30-32). Both La Llorona and Malinche have been linked since the conquest, often representing the vanquished plight of Mexico and its people, a condition that has permeated Chicana@ culture in the United States. By refusing to comply with social norms by which “good women” are constructed, these women become *malas mujeres* who are judged liable for the effects of their “bad” behavior (Gaspar de Alba 7). Both tales, therefore, have served as sexist cultural paradigms and been used to strengthen the patriarchy.

Concerning the role of cultural paradigms, Carl Jung theorizes that every community retains a collective unconscious that unites them through universal archetypes. Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious interprets experiential forms of archetypes in modern times:

If we cannot deny the archetypes or otherwise neutralize them, we are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from it. (157)

Jung formulates a theoretical framework that helps better understand how archetypes become integrated into contemporary cultures. He determines how myths impact identity, whether recognized or not. As for cultural paradigms, they are systems of established conventions that determine in large part how individuals perceive the external world and interpret cultural knowledge. In other words, new identities are adjusted to and comprehended by the schemes of thoughts existing in a specific culture. Therefore, cultural paradigms allow us to interpret realities in the past, present, and future.

A renowned *mala mujer* in Mexican and Chican@ culture, La Llorona offers a pertinent cultural paradigm for Chicana playwrights such as Josefina López to re-write. La Llorona holds much potential for the discussion of various issues related to the reality of women, thus allowing for new discourses in contemporary Chican@ artistic expression. Playwrights, among others, utilize these identities to unpack cultural memories, histories, and myths as (re)imagined realms for the stage.

Regarding Chicana performativity, Alicia Arrizón proposes that the female body is the ideal site to negotiate these previously fixed cultural paradigms as it can be deployed both to create layered subjectivities and give agency that will allow the subject in question to develop autonomy (27, 74). The body functions as the primary site to settle gendered cultural inadequacies. It is a space where women can both explore performative forms of identities and transcend the realm of the subjected. In this sense, as Cherríe Moraga confirms, performance functions as a site of political activism and resistance in which bodies make testimonies that require other bodies to bear witness to it (*Xicana Codex* 34). Chicana theater artists, by nature, create complex representations of female sexuality that destabilize the conventional stereotypes that typified the theater created predominantly by men in the 1960s and 70s. In fact, Moraga affirms that female artists become “bodies of revolt, bodies in dissent against oblivion” (22). She continues:

This, the core of the Xicana teatrista’s journey:
 The effort to uncover what we don’t remember,
 To use the Xicana body as a way to dig up the dirt,
 To find something of what is left of us. (46)²

In fact, in an unpublished essay titled “*Nomos*, the Feeding Place, the Dwelling Space,” Anzaldúa conflates the body with La Llorona, proposing that the body, as both home and the site of all intersections, serves as a shape-shifting entity, reminiscent of La Llorona (Gloria Anzaldúa Papers). La Llorona functions both as the body and a moveable site, a crossroads that enables

recovery. Given Arrizón and Moraga's theories on the performativity of the body, Anzaldúa's notion of La Llorona as body reveals possibilities of Chicana subjectivity, attainable through performance. In this way, we can begin to answer questions of identity by understanding how the body occupies space, in this case, the performance stage.

In the pages that follow, I use theories of the body as a site to negotiate and (re)appropriate cultural paradigms to examine the "bad woman" archetype of La Llorona and to how it has been used to destabilize patriarchal discourses in Chicana theatre. Chicana feminist playwrights appropriate, subvert, and transform these icons in such a way as to create discourses of resistance, deploying the female body as a tool for cultural upheaval and using theater practice as a weapon of sociopolitical resistance. López presents versions of *malas mujeres* that are beyond the male gaze and thereby inspires these artists to create complex portrayals of rigid cultural paradigms that limit the possibilities of Chicana womanhood. After a brief overview of the Llorona myth as it pertains to Chican@ theater, the focus shifts to López's *Unconquered Spirits* (1995) to explore how the myth of La Llorona has been performed across time and theater spaces. As we will see, López's play demonstrates how body and performance work in unison to reconfigure cultural paradigms, in this case La Llorona, to shape each character's own re-imagined identities.

Myth and Mother: Revising the Llorona Script

The myth of La Llorona, whose roots can be traced back to Aztec mythology and the goddess Cihuacoatl, who wailed for her children that were destined to die, maintains a visible position within present-day Chican@ culture. In his seminal essay, "The Rise of the Mestizo," Américo Paredes examines both La Malinche and La Llorona through a folklorist lens, elevating the latter to the level of the former in the Chican@ psyche.³ Paredes's work establishes La Llorona as an archetype of the Mexican nation and its people and, therefore, one of the Chican@ nation as well. The product of both Medea and Pre-Colombian antecedents, the Llorona myth centers around images of women who murder or abandon their children and cannot rest from that moment on, as seen in both indigenous and Spanish cultures. La Llorona's restless spirit wanders and appears to people walking on deserted streets or streams.⁴

Similar to La Malinche, La Llorona has long served as a scapegoat to explain conquest, incest, male treachery or infidelity, sexual desire, and the dichotomy between love and hate (Candelaria 94). The confluence of

these two “bad women” plays to male-centered viewpoints, such as that of Octavio Paz, to portray them as cultural traitors. While the union of these figures originates from experiences that appear to be similar, Domino Renee Perez argues that “these two women and their attendant narratives are two distinct entities, each representing something very different within criollo, Indigenous Mexican, and Chican@ cultures” (*There Was a Woman* 30). Nonetheless, certain aspects of their narratives correlate and support the conflating of these different figures. Primarily, the combination emerges from the destiny of La Malinche’s children. Although La Malinche did not murder her children, Martín and María, she did lose them when she was sent on a journey to Central America and disappeared from the historical record. As usual, instead of placing the blame on the colonizers, history prefers to blame the woman. The two figures therefore adhere to negative connotations as the failed mother. This contrasts with the ideal of maternal goodness that is La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Taking a feminist position, Cherríe Moraga maintains that the Llorona myth reinforces the ideology of the woman as inherently sinful, an “aberration, criminal against nature” (*Loving* 145). The myth encourages gendered cultural paradigms that promote male supremacy. For example, it teaches young girls to accept punishment for actions for which men are rewarded and that sexual enjoyment is sinful for women. In fact, female autonomy is conflated with the act of infanticide, painting the woman as an unfit mother who takes revenge on her unfaithful husband. Therefore, it is easy to see how La Llorona, much like La Malinche, symbolizes the “bad woman” and failed mother.

Given the important cultural role of myth, it is not surprising that La Llorona surfaces often in Chicana cultural expression. According to Domino Renee Perez, many Chicana authors

[. . .] are constructing new versions that cross the traditional borders of the folktale to celebrate La Llorona’s potential for triumph as well as tragedy. La Llorona storytellers who update the tale maintain many of its traditional elements (a woman, a selfish lover, weeping, and a body of water) that have multiple levels of meaning but revise the focus of the narrative to address such issues as feminism, lesbianism, and economic, political, social, and cultural oppression. In revisioning the legend, writers allow women to act as a protective consciousness to the young female characters in their work, which enables women to escape the mother/whore binary of the traditional tale by providing

them with triumphant and empowered roles such as healers, social activists, and professors. (“Crossing” 49)

In her book, *There Was a Woman*, Perez offers a more extensive overview of La Llorona myth by focusing on the many different interpretations presented by Latin@s and non-Latin@s alike in literature, performance, and other media.⁵

The myth of La Llorona has penetrated the domain of Chican@ theater, where it has been rewritten by male playwrights such as Jorge Huerta and Rudolfo Anaya.⁶ Adding a lesbian twist to the story, Monica Palacios’s *La Llorona* (1992), the performative version of her short story “La Llorona Loca: The Other Side,” reclaims the figure in a humoristic retelling of the archetype. Palacios presents a relationship between Caliente and La Stranger. La Stranger goes out with Trixie, which enrages Caliente, who drowns La Stranger in the river and, subsequently, drowns herself, too. Similar to other versions, La Llorona does not die but must cry for her actions:

A week after the burial, a villager was getting water from the river and was startled by the eerie cry of a woman. At first the man thought it was really loud Carly Simon music, but as he listened closely, he could hear something about a “stranger.” . . . a woman appeared from the bushes . . . sobbed to him, “Have you seen La Stranger?” (Palacios 51)

Palacios’s Llorona does not search for her lost children, but rather her lost female lover, thus queering the myth. More traditional in its telling, Silvia Gonzalez S.’s *La Llorona Lloro* (1996) centers on the question of national identity to emphasize the post-Conquest subjugation of Mexico’s indigenous population. In Gonzalez’s play, the mother haunts the man and town while the man is exonerated for abandoning her and his children.

Notably, Elaine Romero has tackled the paradigm in distinct ways in her plays *If Susan Smith Could Talk* (1998) and *Xochi: Jaguar Princess* (2010). Despite the focus of the first play on the real-life Susan Leigh Vaughan Smith, who was sentenced to life in prison for murdering her two children, Romero affirms that the work is an “undercover Latino play” that retells the Llorona tale through a different lens (“Llorona”). The playwright contends that the story of Susan Smith resonated with her while she was growing up in the Southwest and that La Llorona was on her mind throughout the playwriting process (“Llorona”).

Romero’s other play, *Xochi: Jaguar Princess*, written for young audiences, is ripe for a Llorona-based analysis focusing on the body. Romero focuses on Llorona’s innocence and who she was before her “crime.” In

one of several scenes that offer a glimpse into Chican@ culture, the Jaguar, a mythical creature, tells the young Xochi about the myth of the Mexican Medea. After Xochi sees La Llorona crying by the river, her story is told in flashbacks. At the earliest point in her story, she is getting dressed for a date, her children begging to go with her. She wears a beautiful white dress and carefully applies blood-red lipstick, thus creating a bold persona who outwardly signs inner confidence and strength. When she returns home, she realizes that her children are missing, whereupon her body becomes the site from which the typical Llorona vision emerges. She emits a silent scream that “resonates throughout her entire body” (33). Although the audience does not hear her cry, the actress contorts her body in a way that invokes a blood-curdling cry for help. Her beautiful body transforms into the bogeywoman of folklore as she grows more desperate. She goes to the nearby river and dips her hands into the water, but does not find anything. After her long hair falls into the water, it sticks to her face as she wails aloud, thus transforming before the audience’s eyes into the traditional image of La Llorona. Xochi explains her transformation: “La Llorona is no longer beautiful because she has cried her beauty out in her tears” (34). Nonetheless, Romero hints at a possible positive ending to the tale; the Jaguar tells Xochi that perhaps an eagle has saved the children.

The most well-known dramatic version of the Llorona myth is Cherríe Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001), in which she uses mythology to describe the plight of Chican@s, not only in the United States, but in relation to one another. The work is situated in a futuristic world in which Aztlán has replaced the United States and all queers have been exiled. Fusing the Greek Medea myth with La Llorona, Moraga presents her as a woman who has gone crazy over her love for another woman and the Indian nation that has rejected her. The work is revolutionary in the sense that it rewrites the Medea and Llorona myths alongside each other, using queer relationships and tackling concerns regarding Chican@ nationalism. In this play, Medea must navigate a custody battle over her child, Chac Mool, who is managing his desire to live up to the socially prescribed roles assigned to men. Medea is scared that she cannot stop her son from acquiring values traditionally associated with men: “He refuses my gifts and turns to my enemies to make a man out of him. I cannot relinquish my son to them, to walk ese camino triste where they will call him by his manly name and he goes deaf to hear it” (88). To change her situation, Medea poisons her son, thus invoking the myth. By mixing Greek and Mexican/Chican@ myths, Moraga

suggests that the plight of the woman is not only transnational but that certain similarities exist across distinct eras, including the future. According to *The Hungry Woman*, infanticide prevents the reproduction of the patriarchal system. Throughout the play, Moraga uses the Llorona myth to criticize the normative structure of the Chicano family alongside the heterosexism of Chicano nationalism.

As Chican@ writers continue redefining the figure, the myth continues to evolve. La Llorona has even entered into the domain of children's theater and theater for young audiences through plays such as the following: *The Ghost of La Llorona* (1997), staged by Express Children's Theatre in Houston; *Rice, Frijoles, and Greens* (2003), staged by ChUSMA in Los Angeles; and "La Llorona Dolorosa,"⁷ staged by Magical Rain Theatreworks in Durham, North Carolina. These productions demonstrate the myth's cultural importance and preserve its legacy for future generations. Thus, the forever changing details of the myth join a series of Chican@ cultural paradigms that have received much critical and literary attention in the retelling of the figure. These representations manifest that La Llorona is still relevant today and is a figure that should be recovered, studied, and rewritten.

Josefina López's Lloronas: *Unconquered Spirits*

Compared to Josefina López's early works, such as *Simply María, or the American Dream* and *Real Women Have Curves*, *Unconquered Spirit* is more ambitious. As López grew as a writer, she began pushing her boundaries. Although the play was considered magical realism when it premiered, it is now clear that the piece was López's first foray into *cineatro*, her self-coined genre that later became a trademark of her writing style.⁸ This play presents several Llorona stories, frequently jumping back and forth between countries and time periods. The playwright redeems La Llorona and all "bad women" from their marginalized positions by re-constructing the myth. By combining myth and history, in this case sixteenth-century Mexico and 1938 San Antonio, López equates the present and past conditions of Mexican women who are subjugated to patriarchal cultures in both Mexico and the United States.⁹

In *Unconquered Spirit*, the protagonists perform positive self-agency by invoking La Llorona, recognizing the figure as a viable image of motherhood. In the playwright's notes, López explains that she rewrites lore to add female perspectives to traditional Mexican and Chican@ culture:

With this play I hope to give recognition to my "mother," which is Mexico. I wrote this play for Mexico and for my great-great-great-

. . . “grandmother” who was Aztec and was raped by the Spaniards. I am recognizing her and accepting her because she is just as important as my Spanish great-great-great- . . . “grandfather.” The Chicano was born out of rape and hatred. This play was born out of love and acceptance . . . and “What if . . . ?” (*Unconquered* 176)

López re-imagines the Llorona myth to subvert the various sexist systems seen in the play and humanize her protagonists by converting them from objects into subjects.

In speaking about her experiences with the myth of La Llorona, López maintains that she grew up hearing the story from her mother, who told it as a love story that went wrong (“Hungry Woman”).¹⁰ As a feminist teenager, López began to understand patriarchy and the undeniable impact of Eve and other women, both historical and fictional,” on the subconscious of women. It became clear to López how and why La Llorona was used to reinforce the ideology that women are evil, wicked, bad, etc. (“Hungry Woman”). These myths have been utilized to keep women in line with traditional definitions of womanhood. In thinking about the conquest of territory and women, López began to reflect on the history of the Mexican conquest and the subsequent rape of thousands of women:

The conquest of one country by another in essence is the rape of all the women, because that’s what they do. Women represent property. So once you rape the women, you tell the other men, “Look, look what I’ve done to you. I’ve conquered the most valuable possession you have.” I wanted to dispel this story, because it romanticized something horrible that happened in our history—this pretty little story. (qtd. in McCulloh F6)

López revises the story of La Llorona from a Chicana feminist perspective and presents audiences with another possibility of what could have happened:

When I realized that you can never have intimacy with another until you can come to them as an equal or be seen as an equal I saw how this notion of an Indigenous woman falling in love with a Spaniard was ridiculous because at that time she would have been considered inferior and a savage even if she was a cultivated and intelligent woman. . . . More likely she was raped and they called it “love.” (“Hungry Woman”)

The playwright clearly rejects traditional accounts that paint La Malinche as Cortés’s unwavering lover, but more so she sees her as a woman in an uncompromising position with no end. La Malinche and La Llorona, not to

mention the countless other indigenous women lost to history, have been examined from male perspectives that do not adequately give a reason for their actions. In contrast, depictions such as López's portray the Weeping Woman as a heroine.

In *Unconquered Spirits*, López associates the stories of Xochitl and Xochimilco with the Llorona myth and theorizes their actions from a feminist perspective. López presents two parallel storylines in which the protagonists commit infanticide to save their children's spirits from (neo)colonization. In one version that takes place in sixteenth-century Mexico, Xochitl, a native girl who wants to be baptized, is raped by Spanish missionary Fray Francisco and becomes pregnant with twins. Not wanting to raise her children in Spanish society under the Church's influence, she throws them into a lake, thus mirroring Llorona's mythic infanticide. To escape, Xochitl drowns herself in the lake after sacrificing her children. In the second version, López equates colonial Mexico with 1938 San Antonio and the real-life pecan sheller strike led by Emma Tenayuca to demonstrate how the plight of Mexican/Chicana women has not changed significantly in four hundred years. López's twentieth-century Llorona, Xochimilco, is having an affair with her Anglo boss, Chris, and when she threatens to leave him, he rapes her. She becomes pregnant with twins and has an illegal abortion to avoid giving birth to a white man's children. Like Xochitl, Xochimilco prefers that her children remain unconquered spirits. As a result, she ends up in jail for defying the white man, thus reinforcing her subordinate position.

In light of these premises, the women must be seen as heroes in their own right. According to Cordelia Candelaria, retellings of the myth (re) present heroes,

[. . .] who bravely exercises her active agency in order to will her own destiny by electing a tragic fate rather than passively allowing herself and her children to live under inescapable tyranny. Usually when men do that they're called heroes. [. . .] It is finally time to let go of a single, narrow, masculinized understanding of the tale and to see La Llorona instead as an always evolving, freshly created emblem of gender, sexuality, and power. (97)

Rather than allow La Llorona and other cultural paradigms to remain seen through a male-centered discourse and *history*, López flips the script, presenting positive portrayals of these women. López gives her protagonists agency and a fighting unconquered spirit: "All these women that you see in the play, they release themselves from the chains of oppression when they realize

that they can do something. They can resist. They have a fighting spirit that releases them” (qtd. in McCulloh F6).

The 1995 world premiere of *Unconquered Spirits*, staged by the Theatre Department at California State University, Northridge,¹¹ and directed by Anamarie García, featured a 12-foot tree.¹² The tree, largely symbolic, revolved to demarcate changes in place and time, thus helping audiences to better understand the frequent switches from colonial Mexico to 1938 San Antonio. García’s idea, the tree did not appear in López’s original stage directions, but was later added to the published version after its success in enhancing the staging and performance. Garcia’s approach was to use the rotations of the tree as a performative ritual. By making the rotations visually appealing, the audience helps move the tree with their imagination and, consequently, drives the production further into the storytelling (Kroll 2).

The knotted and tangled tree symbolizes knowledge and, thus, equates womanhood with earthly and spiritual intelligence. As the tree rotates, it offers context to each woman connected to it. Speaking of the tree, López says: “The tree represents nature, nature being sacrificed, and nature lasting forever. You cannot destroy nature. It’s the most fragile element, but it’s also the strongest. That’s also what women are. The tree also represents a phallus, and it’s very militaristic, a cannon. There are many sides to it” (qtd. in McCulloh F6). In this way, the tree functions as the physical and metaphorical anchor of the playscript and production. In fact, the tree’s branches emerge as if they were the arms of women reaching toward the audience. While the tree remains on stage throughout the play, it is often highlighted in scenes and situations that invoke La Llorona. Each woman implicated by the myth becomes part of the tree at some point in the piece, with a culmination of each Llorona adorning the tree in a theatrical display of unification performed across nations, spaces, and time periods.

In addition to 1938 Texas, the play takes place in New Spain (Mexico) in 1559. Here, the play follows the narrative of Xochitl as she navigates the hardship of being an indigenous woman in colonial Mexico. In the turning point of her plotline, Xochitl is in the mission praying to God because she doubts and misunderstands this new branch of spirituality. When Fray Francisco enters, he confirms her doubts. After questioning why she and her people must suffer, the priest rapes her:

XOCHITL. Then if we are all God’s children, why would God let me and my people be enslaved and be treated like animals, and suffer this way?

FRAY FRANCISCO. It is because we are here to suffer. Only when we suffer do we prove to God how worthy we are of his paradise. Your people need to suffer, to repent for all of your sins, for all of your human sacrifices and worship of false gods. Only after you have suffered on earth can you truly deserve to enter through the gates of heaven. Do you want to be saved? (*XOCHITL nods 'yes' as she looks sadly to her feet.*) Then you must suffer. (*His hand is now between her legs, rubbing her. XOCHITL holds back her tears. She passively and defenselessly awaits his other hand. He puts his hand in her blouse and she does nothing. Blackout.*) (186)

Fray Francisco reinforces the power of not only the Catholic Church over the native people, but also the male's privilege over the female, which is based on patriarchal interpretations of the Bible. As a native woman, Xochitl is doubly marginalized. To be saved and accepted, she must literally and metaphorically allow the Church to penetrate her. Following this scene, hurt both emotionally and physically, she is crying, barely able to stand up, and forced to crawl on the ground. In addition, Fray Francisco insists that he perform the ritual of her baptism, thus reinforcing the oppression by the white man and the Church that Xochitl has already physically experienced.

In the dramatic close to Act I, Xochitl runs to the lake, which is marked by the tree on stage. The lake offers her the only possibility of saving her children's spirits as the body of water is "pure enough to cleanse my children of the poison" (196). Xochitl transmits her reasons one last time, thus manifesting the moral of the play itself and showing her love for her children: "It is because I love you that I've returned you to a better place where you won't be a half-breed, a mestizo, conquered and enslaved, but free souls" (196). After sacrificing her children, one to Tonantzin and the other to Tlaloc, Xochitl dives into the lake, drowning herself in Lake Texcoco's purifying waters. At this moment, La Llorona emerges from the tree. This is La Llorona of children's nightmares; she is "horrific and monstrous," with a "deformed face" (197). In this scene and the following one that takes place in 1913 Mexico, La Llorona's performance transmits the message of a figure to be feared in Mexican culture. While the young Xochimilco is at the lake, La Llorona emerges from downstage, screaming "¡¡¡Ayyy mis Hijos!!!," and slowly walks toward the young girl with her hands stretched out, calling to her (197). The act culminates with the lights fading as we see La Llorona alone on stage rubbing together her bloody hands. The performer wails while approaching the young girl, showing desperation and suffering.

Focusing on the performativity of the wail itself, the act of wailing demonstrates an effort to be heard through the power of language; her shouts replace whispers in an act of equal parts resistance, protest, and suffering (Arrizón xvi; Figueredo 237). In fact, at times, this was the only way for indigenous women to protest and to be heard, given their marginalization in society. As the performer playing La Llorona in *Unconquered Spirits* is moving toward Xochimilco and, subsequently, the audience, she is wailing to be healed, begging us to respond to her plea. Therefore, the wailing functions as a performative healing procedure that is the antidote to her suffering; by wailing, she is able to release her bottled-up anguish and betrayal through a natural process of purification or, as Anzaldúa proposes, La Llorona's sensitivity makes her "excruciatingly alive to the world" (38). The performative qualities of the wail dismantle the oppressive structures that have defined, silenced, and marginalized her.

In *Unconquered Spirits*' twentieth-century plot line, set in 1913, Xochimilco is a young girl when she first hears the Llorona myth from her mother. While this version is designed to oblige discipline from the young girl, she immediately questions whether La Llorona was really a "bad woman" and a terrible mother for killing her children out of revenge, asking if it was perhaps "an accident" (180). Nevertheless, her mother's tactics work, as Xochimilco is scared that La Llorona will appear. Later in the play, in 1938, Xochimilco uses the same tactic in telling the myth to her daughter before bedtime to help her maintain order and discipline. This reinforces the oral tradition of the myth, passed down from mother to daughter and so on. Even though she questions it as a child, Xochimilco buys into the sociocultural role of La Llorona in her adulthood, demonstrating the cultural longevity of the myth.

Eventually, Xochimilco's life parallels Xochitl and other Lloronas. When Xochimilco decides to leave her Anglo boss, Chris, he rapes her. López writes:

XOCHIMILCO. But I don't want you! I don't need you. You're nothing!

CHRIS. I love you!

XOCHIMILCO (*stops fighting him*). You do?

CHRIS. Yes. (*XOCHIMILCO kisses him. He closes his eyes, refreshed by her affection. Then, she kicks him in the groin, grabs her purse, and makes a run for it.*) You stupid bitch! (*CHRIS catches her. He drags her to a table by the hair and "slaps" all the tin cylinders and pecans off the table to clear it. He throws her on the table where he pins her hair down. She fights back with all of her might. CHRIS*

puts his hand over her mouth and unzips his pants.) . . . Let's see how much of a fighter you are after I get through with you . . . (211) She becomes pregnant with twins and, in a modern take on the mythical means of death, has an illegal abortion so that she does not have to give birth to an Anglo man's children (Mestiz@s). Serafina, who performs the abortion, reflects on the analogy: "We used to throw them in rivers, now we throw them in buckets . . ." (212). After her abortion, Xochimilco is alone onstage, illuminated only by the moonlight. La Llorona appears behind her and follows her off stage.

La Llorona's compassion in this scene represents a transition in López's retelling of the myth. Gone is the bogeywoman version of children's nightmares; when La Llorona reappears after Xochimilco's confession before God,¹³ thus replacing the Anglo- and male-centric spiritual leader and replacing him with an indigenous female figure, she is merely a woman and no longer the horrific figure previously seen on stage. This Llorona is beautiful, with large feathers extending from the mask she wears on her face, presenting a regal costume that distinguishes her from previous tellings. The humanizing manipulation of body and iconographic image performs an alternative of both the myth and the woman. Xochimilco now understands La Llorona's plight and is no longer afraid of her. La Llorona is now the comforting mother who supports Xochimilco physically and spiritually. When they enter Xochimilco's home, La Llorona is holding her lifeless body, carrying her burden. She places her in bed and tucks her in, treating her as a mother would.

After receiving La Llorona's spiritual treatment, Xochimilco returns to work in the pecan factory as an empowered woman, ready to lead her co-workers. Even though she is ashamed of her abortion, she taps into her newfound strength to stand up to Chris in front of the other factory workers. In her defiant turn, she confronts Chris and outs him for the rapist that he is, threatening him one final time:

Do it to me again! Show all these women what happens to a woman with a big mouth. Do it right here!! . . . See if you can do it without us killing you first! [. . .] And don't you ever touch any of my hermanas like that! Because one of these nights when you're asleep, I will sneak into your bed, and when you think you're safe, snuggled in your bed like a baby, I will choke you until you reach the hell that you've put me through. And you'll have to beg me to remember that I believe in God! (217)

Xochimilco's triumphant stand against Chris and patriarchal oppression ignites the pecan sheller strike. After Xochimilco leaves the factory, Emma begins chanting "¡Huelga! ¡Huelga!" (217), leading the women out of the factory. At the end of the play, Xochimilco goes to jail because of her role in the strike, but more so for defying Chris. The myth shows that women are punished for showing agency, while men are rewarded for similar actions.

At the end of the play, Xochimilco symbolically joins her sisters and mothers on the tree. As the lights fade, the tree is lit, and Tonantzin, Xochitl, and La Llorona call out to Xochimilco, who joins them. *Unconquered Spirits* ends with all four women holding hands in a demonstration of solidarity made possible by the tree's healing and spiritual powers. Curiously, while the tree was not in the original script, López describes elsewhere an image that includes a tree and that provoked her to both write and re-write the work ("Untitled"). In this image, a woman, menstruating or aborting, is walking as she bleeds. As she continues walking, she slowly becomes a tree. Consciously or not, López foresaw the image of Xochimilco becoming part of the tree and joining the other Llorona figures in a symbolic representation of their importance in both history and nature. By occupying the tree, these women show that their bonds are timeless due to their spiritual connection via La Llorona myth.

Conclusion

Josefina López's *Unconquered Spirits* gives La Llorona a voice, thereby humanizing both the myth and the woman. Through parallel stories from sixteenth-century Mexico and twentieth-century San Antonio, López demonstrates certain similarities between the past and present and in the conditions of Mexican women who are subjugated to oppressive circumstances. The Lloronas in *Unconquered Spirits* expand the myth to reveal a wide range of Chicana identities within a performance landscape. In re-constructing the myth through performance, López transforms La Llorona from the feared bogey-woman of children's nightmares to a nurturing mother and spiritual leader. The symbolic representations of the figure undo women's historic oppression. Furthermore, both Llorona figures in the play, Xochitl and Xochimilco, are given reasons for abandoning and sacrificing their children; thus, the myth of the "mala mujer" is disrupted and re-imagined. López's message is clear; these Lloronas do not murder their children, but rather sacrifice them to save their souls, thus allowing the children to remain unconquered spirits.

Unconquered Spirits illustrates how La Llorona remains a vital cultural paradigm in the present day. By analyzing La Llorona as what Gaspar de Alba calls the “bad woman,” we can see how López believes it is imperative to revisit, rewrite, and re-perform cultural paradigms for the stage so that these figures can be better understood in the twenty-first century. López, alongside other contemporary writers, has dedicated her craft to reevaluating history and myth to (re)write and theorize other versions that oppose patriarchal norms to which myths and legends tend to adhere. In these performances, the female body serves as a site of resistance in which the spectator witnesses complex depictions of female identity, forcing them to reconsider the past. By (re)appropriating the past, López unravels Chicana@ cultural paradigms on stage to create an archive in flesh and blood in the present. Thus, the body becomes a canvas to transmit new cultural paradigms.

University of Houston

Notes

1 Other examples are Coatlicue, La Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, La Adelita, and Frida Kahlo.

2 Moraga uses these theories, focusing on the Chicana body, in *New Fire: To Put Things Right Again* (2011), in which the indigenous body is the location where culture and history are projected, thus establishing an altered version of cultural paradigms.

3 Paredes signals the figure’s European roots, but sustains that the myth of Medea “struck deep roots in the Mexican tradition because it was grafted on an Indian legend cycle about the supernatural woman who seduces men when they are out alone on the roads or working in the fields” (103). La Llorona takes many forms—La Malinche, Medea, matlacihua, Madame Butterfly—thus best exemplifying the current synthesis between Spanish and Indigenous (Paredes 103).

4 In particular, La Llorona is associated with rivers and other bodies of water and, when children drown, Latin@s often blame it on the Weeping Woman.

5 Many female writers have returned to the figure: “The Night Filled With Faint Cries” (1980) by Carrie Castro; “Go ’Way from My Window, La Llorona” (1984) by Cordelia Candelaria; “The Cariboo Café” (1985) by Helena María Viramontes; “My Black Angelos” (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa; “La Llorona Loca: The Other Side” (1991) by Monica Palacios; “Woman Hollering Creek” (1991) by Sandra Cisneros; *So Far from God* (1993) by Ana Castillo; “La Llorona/Weeping Woman” (1994) by Alma Luz Villanueva, and *Llorona on the Longfellow Bridge* (2003) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba.

6 Jorge Huerta’s *La Llorona* (1978), an unpublished play housed in his archives at the University of California, San Diego, begins with a collective scream: “¡La Llorona!” This scream serves as an affirmation, declaration, and invocation of the myth, as the actors present the cultural diversity of the varied stories of La Llorona (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 15). Huerta focuses on distinct versions of the myth while demonstrating the ways that the community incorporates it. Although the play is primarily situated in the sixteenth century, Huerta equates the past and present of the myth by concentrating on the roots of

the narrative (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 15-6). Additionally, in “The Season of La Llorona” (2003) by Rudolfo Anaya, one can see the evolution in Anaya’s point of view about the figure by examining his cultural and literary production (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 53). Nevertheless, Anaya questions patriarchal representations as he corrects previous ideologies that paint La Llorona in a negative way. Nonetheless, despite Jorge Huerta and Rudolfo Anaya’s efforts to decolonize the Llorona myth, their works remain unpublished and largely inaccessible to the public.

7 “La Llorona Llorosa” is not a play in the traditional sense, but rather an educational theater program that Magical Rain Theatreworks regularly offers.

8 Josefina López coined the term *cin teatro*—a combination of “cinema” and “teatro”—to represent how her playscripts often use cinematic narrative structures such as jump-cuts.

9 Nevertheless, while the playwright does liberate La Llorona and other women from their demonized and marginalized social positions, she does not redeem the Church (Huerta 128).

10 Writing *Unconquered Spirits* was a cathartic experience, as López explains: “I had a very famous psychic confirm a suspicion I had about having been an Aztec woman a couple of years ago . . . when she told me this I was surprised, but then when I remember writing *Unconquered Spirits* I remember crying a lot as though I had experienced it first hand - the Aztec Woman sacrificing her children and drowning herself” (“Hungry Woman/Unconquered Spirits”).

11 López was an artist-in-residence in the Theatre Department at this time, producing the play and teaching playwriting classes.

12 The production’s artwork featured a tree with a woman’s face on it, one of her eyes framed by the branches. Serving as her hair, the branches intertwine, bleeding off the poster. The woman’s body begins on the trunk, but disappears into the ground, rooting her as an organic part of nature.

13 After her abortion, Xochimilco goes to confession to ask forgiveness. Nevertheless, the Church misunderstands and reinforces patriarchal values. This is highlighted by a change from reality when the priest takes out a whip and whips her, forcing her to scream for her lost children, an action symbolizing the conquest.

Works Cited

- Anaya, Rudolfo A. *Bless Me, Ultima*. Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol, 1972.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute, 1987.
- . Papers, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries.
- Arrizón, Alicia. *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*. Indiana UP, 1999.
- Figueredo, Maria L. “The Legend of La Llorona: Excavating and (Re)-Interpreting the Archetype of the Creative/Fertile Feminine Force.” *Latin American Narratives and Cultural Identity: Selected Readings*, edited by Irene Maria Blayer and Mark Cronlund Anderson, Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 232-43.
- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. *[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman”: Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause*. U Texas P. 2014.
- Huerta, Jorge A. *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society, and Myth*. Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Kroll, John. “The Mexican Medea, Transformed.” *Northridge*, vol. 1, no. 8, 1995, pp. 1-2.

- Limón, José. "La Llorona, The Third Legend of Greater Mexico: Cultural Symbols, Women, and the Political Unconscious." *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History*, edited by Adelaida del Castillo, Floricanto, 1990, pp. 399-432.
- López, Josefina. "Hungry Woman/Unconquered Spirits Questions." Received by Trevor Boffone, 18 Aug. 2013.
- . *Unconquered Spirits. Real Women Have Curves & Other Plays*. WPR, 2011, pp. 174-223.
- McCulloh, T.H. "The Tears of Oppression." *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 1995, F1, F6.
- Moraga, Cherríe. *The Hungry Woman*. U New Mexico P, 2001.
- . *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios*. South End, 1983.
- . *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Morales, Orquidea. "Chicana Feminism and Horror: Fear La Llorona." *Utah Foreign Language Review*, no. 17, 2010, pp. 1-9.
- Palacios, Monica. "La Llorona Loca: The Other Side." *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us about*, edited by Carla Maria Trujillo, Third Woman Press, 1991, pp. 49-51.
- Paredes, Américo. "Mexican Legendry and the Rise of the Mestizo: A Survey." *American Folk Legend: A Symposium*, edited by Wayland D. Hand, U California P, 1971, pp. 97-107.
- Perez, Domino Renee. "Crossing Mythological Borders: Revisioning La Llorona in Contemporary Fiction." *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1999, pp. 49-54.
- . *There Was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture*. U Texas P, 2008.
- Romero, Elaine. *If Susan Smith Could Talk. Ten Minute Plays from Actor Theatre of Louisville: Volume 4*, edited by Michael Bigelow Dixon and Liz Engleman, Samuel French, 1998, pp. 175-86.
- . "Llorona/Malinche Plays." Personal Interview. 13 Aug. 2014.
- . *Xochi: Jaguar Princess*. TS.