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From Llorona to Gritona:¹ Coatlicue In Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros

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In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the significance of the pre-conquest fertility goddess, Coatlicue, to contemporary Chicana feminist struggles. According to Anzaldúa, “*Coatlicue* states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself” (46). A psychic and emotional process foregrounding conflict and struggle instead of easy resolutions and compliance to social oppression, the Coatlicue state encourages Anzaldúa to delve into the depths of her consciousness and acknowledge the negative forces affecting her life, among them racism, homophobia, poverty, and misogyny. Coatlicue brings suffering to the forefront of consciousness, providing a clearer vision as to whom or what to confront. She prompts Anzaldúa to assert herself fully in the face of external psychic, physical or emotional violence so she will emerge *completa* or whole: instead of victimhood, Coatlicue encourages resistance against external forces that diminish a sense of self. In pitting creative resistance against destructive energy, this ancient goddess, representing “a cosmic process” rather than a fixed entity, embodies the act of *struggle* inherent within the principle of contradiction—the dynamic tension between conflicting forces, such as creation and destruction, lightness and darkness, masculinity and femininity.²

Many goddesses have descended from Coatlicue, among them Cihuacoatl, the patron of midwives who, like her precursor, embodies a holistic figure that embraces both death and creation. In turn, Anzaldúa and many folklorists have drawn the connection between Cihuacoatl and the legendary Mexican and Chicano figure of *La Llorona* (the weeping or wailing woman).³ Recurring themes in the maternal legend of *La Llorona* include: her white dress; her wandering at night wailing at the loss of her children whom she has often killed herself; and her association with water—she either roams by bodies of water or drowns her victims. Similarly, Cihuacoatl covers

herself in chalk, dresses in white, and wanders the streets at night weeping and wailing, foreboding war (Barakat 290).

Within folkloric literature on the La Llorona legend, La Llorona emerges as *both* a figure of maternal betrayal *and* maternal resistance. While she is most often imagined as a destructive figure, contemporary Chicana writers Helena Maria Viramontes and Sandra Cisneros, by constructing defiant Llorona heroines in their respective short stories, "The Cariboo Cafe" and "Woman Hollering Creek," have propagated and vitalized the set of tales about maternal resistance. Their contemporary Llorona tales give voice to the violated Latina mother who, in "The Cariboo Cafe" fights against poverty, a military dictatorship and the U.S. immigration service (INS) and, in "Woman Hollering Creek," struggles against wife battery and economic and emotional dependency on men. Viramontes and Cisneros do not explicitly invoke La Llorona's pre-conquest antecedents in their writings, yet they make implicit references to pre-conquest figures, and their Llorona heroines undergo a transformative process that strikingly resembles the process described by Anzaldúa in her "Coatlicue State." In putting these writers in dialogue with ethnographic literature on La Llorona and with contemporary Chicana feminist work, such as Anzaldúa's, a genealogy of La Llorona as both an ethnographic and literary figure emerges that foregrounds her as a resistant, culturally specific maternal figure.

In examining ethnographic accounts dating back to the colonial period, La Llorona and her antecedent, Cihuacoatl, repeatedly emerge as dangerous and destructive figures. These tales of maternal betrayal describe La Llorona as a treacherous, selfish woman who murders her own children, usually through drowning. The motivations provided include: insanity, parental neglect or abuse, and / or revenge for being abandoned by a lover. In addition, La Llorona often seeks to murder other children or women out of envy for her loss and to seduce or kill men out of spite.⁴ Since she is usually associated with water, water emerges as a negative image through which she commits her treacherous and vengeful deeds. Sometimes she is condemned to wander eternally the streets at night lamenting her sins, echoing a Christian model of repentance that attests to the enormous destructiveness of her actions (Obregón 15; Lomax Hawes 159; Horcasitas and Butterworth 210 and 212). In all these cases, her behavior stems from a state of selfishness or insanity disconnected from a social setting, carrying little social value.

La Llorona's precursor, Cihuacoatl, has also been mobilized as a destructive figure. According to Fray Diego Durán writing in 1570, Aztec high priests would manipulate the image of this popular

goddess as a “cunning device” to obtain more sacrificial victims for their war gods. These priests would solicit an ordinary woman to impersonate Cihuacoatl and carry a cradle that contained not a child, but a sacrificial knife. She would then disappear into a body of water, strategically leaving the cradle with the knife behind, so others would interpret it as a sign that the gods desired more sacrificial victims (Durán 171-77; Anzaldúa 95).

Nevertheless, these negative portrayals have not succeeded in fully erasing the holistic attributes of these ancient figures. As Anzaldúa has suggested, the Aztecs debased La Llorona’s pre-Columbian antecedents by splitting apart their original all-inclusive contradictory natures. Cihuacoatl, originally the patron of midwives, is an ancient earth goddess of both war and birth. However, the militaristic Azteca-Mexica culture, which terrorized other civilizations by, as Durán suggests, manipulatively demanding sacrificial victims for their war gods, focused on her destructive aspects by replacing Cihuacoatl’s child—a sign of fertility—with the sacrificial knife (Nash 350 and 355; Candelaria 2; Messenger Cypess Chapter 2). This exchange of symbols transmuted her exclusively into an agent of destruction and erased her life-giving powers as a fertility goddess. More generally, the Azteca-Mexica culture split Coatlicue’s multifaceted attributes by severing her numerous descendants—Tonantzin, Coatlopeuh and Cihuacoatl—from one another. Tonantzin and Coatlopeuh became the “good mother” while Cihuacoatl became the “bad mother” (Anzaldúa 27).

The Spanish polarized Coatlicue’s attributes even further. They desexualized and continued to extol Tonantzin and Coatlopeuh, associating her with Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Virgin Mary, and oversexualized Cihuacoatl (Anzaldúa 27-28), associating her with the seductive La Llorona who, in turn, has been linked to the highly denigrated *La Malinche*, Cortés’s Indian slave, translator, guide and consort.⁵ Because *La Malinche* was used as a sexual object by the Spanish, she has been misguidedly labeled a whore and has inherited the epithet of *La Chingada* who, in contrast to the closed aggressive act of *el chingón*, according to Mexican cultural critic Octavio Paz, represents complete openness and voluntary submission. Paz claims she *willingly* opened herself up, sexually, politically, and culturally, to the Spanish, permitting the downfall of indigenous Mexico (Paz 86). Fortunately, several excellent feminist revisions of *La Malinche* have recently emerged which locate her within the political and social climate of the conquest, articulating her limited choices as a slave and elucidating her constructive behavior as a mediator between the Spanish and the indigenous peoples, who found

themselves on the brink of annihilation.⁶

This pervasive denigration of female agency in Mexican culture has created the well-known virgin-versus-whore paradigm, a dualistic structure that attempts to police female behavior by extolling the Virgin's passivity and selflessness while denigrating figures who take action, such as La Malinche and La Llorona, as selfish, treacherous and destructive. Within such a worldview, Our Lady of Guadalupe is divested of her rebellious, proactive potential and seen as all-giving and completely selfless; La Malinche's constructive and proactive abilities as a mediator between Spanish and Indian peoples are labeled traitorous, holding her exclusively responsible for the downfall of indigenous Mexico; and La Llorona—a combination of both extremes—is depicted as a seductress and murderess who continues either to commit treacherous behavior or eternally and impotently weep for her sins. This binary opposition, representing women as either safely passive or dangerously active, undercuts the principle of duality embedded within La Llorona in the shape of Coatlicue, a principle that by its very definition not only allows for, but encourages female agency. Coatlicue encourages resistance by pitting the desire for survival against the act of destruction.

Despite these negative portrayals of La Llorona and Cihuacoatl, depictions of La Llorona as a resistant maternal figure who confronts the unjust race, class, and gender hierarchy of colonial Mexico also emerge from within folkloric literature. By emphasizing the lover's betrayal and locating his actions within a social context, these ethnographic accounts highlight the hostile forces influencing La Llorona's life and provide a social *reason* for her behavior. In describing La Llorona's race or class position and claiming the lover abandons her to marry another woman of his own higher social status, these interpretations register the unegalitarian structure of colonial society and shift the onus of responsibility for the tragic outcome of the tale—culminating in the act of infanticide in some versions—from La Llorona to the lover. One particular variant, collected in Reseda, California from a woman born in San Antonio, locates La Llorona within colonial Mexico and shows the extreme disenfranchisement of Indian mothers in this society:

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, they were impressed by the beauty of the Indian children. The Spanish took the children (the most beautiful) and gave them to their wives. Some of the Indian women killed their children in order to keep the Spaniards from taking them. La Llorona is one such woman. She now is searching constantly for her

children, whose faces she sees in all children. She kills the children to be united with her own again. (Lomax Hawes 159)

In this instance, La Llorona's ability to protect and care for her children is severely threatened. The actions of the Spanish not only rupture the mother-child bond, but also catapult the Indian children into servitude—they become objects of beauty for the Spanish women. La Llorona's infanticide in this version is not vengeful, but rather constitutes a desperate attempt to continue to exercise her maternal rights—to protect her offspring from virtual enslavement within the Spanish world. Also, unlike the tales of maternal betrayal, this Llorona's killing of other children "to be united with her own" is not out of envy, but out of a desire to defend them as well against the aggression of the conquistadors. Historicized versions such as this one provide a social frame for La Llorona's actions, suggesting her infanticide is *not* the result of female psychological aberration but rather, as Chicano anthropologist José Limón has explained, constitutes "an induced national malaise, a perhaps temporary insanity *produced historically by those who socially dominate*" (86).⁷ Whereas the historical context may not necessarily justify her behavior—her deeds may be extreme and even inappropriate—it may, at least, explain her actions, showing that her response cannot be interpreted in isolation from the hierarchical social system that surrounds her.

In these Llorona tales of resistance, maternal identity resembles feminist psychoanalytic definitions of the female "self-in-relation," an *interdependent* versus a *dependent* or *independent* self.⁸ Yet, whereas the female self's community consists of other interdependent adults, the "community" to which the maternal self belongs is comprised of dependent children. Therefore, the maternal self is responsible for defending her own welfare as well as that of her children. Consequently, La Llorona's actions in these tales of resistance constitute a necessary, if extreme, response to domination that allows her to continue to enact her motherlove—to protect and nurture *both* herself and her children.

These maternal-resistance tales give literary form to Anzaldúa's "Coatlicue State." By focusing on the lover's betrayal, these narratives *name* the oppressor and explicitly introduce the source of La Llorona's suffering, thus providing her with something tangible to combat. Viramontes and Cisneros pick up on this set of tales by focusing on the male perpetrator and contemporizing the historical frame. They "transculturates"⁹ dominant representations of the maternal self rooted in popular depictions of La Llorona tales of betrayal by teasing out and highlighting constructive indigenous figures

already inscribed within this hybrid figure.

In "The Cariboo Cafe," La Llorona's perpetrator is not her lover but the governments of her country and the United States, overtaken by a male-dominated international military state comprised of a Central American dictatorship and the INS. This military complex betrays her by suddenly abducting her child and dismembering her relational maternal self. In "Woman Hollering Creek," the Mexican heroine's oppressor is her abusive husband living *en el otro lado*—on the other side of the border—who betrays her romantic notions of female dependency and the American dream. Viramontes's and Cisneros's heroines undergo a psychic transformation much like entering Anzaldúa's Coatlicue state. Whereas at first they cannot apprehend the extent to which they are negatively affected by a military state or wife battery, eventually, upon entering literary spaces that represent the depths of Coatlicue's powers—the Cariboo Cafe and Seguin, Texas, respectively—they grasp the magnitude of their oppression and respond with resistance. They reclaim their voice by transforming themselves from Llorona figures who wail at their loss into Gritonas who holler at their oppressors.

Like other Llorona tales of maternal resistance, Viramontes's narrative is rooted within particular historical events, namely the recent wave of dictatorial rule throughout Latin America. Similar to the Indian Llorona in the Reseda account who loses her children to the Spanish ruling class, Viramontes's protagonist, the nameless washer woman, loses her child to the prevailing power structure: she embodies one of the many Latin American women (and men) who has lost a loved one under a totalitarian regime. Viramontes demonstrates how the tactics of these dictatorships elicit responses in the population that mimic La Llorona's unceasing search for her lost children. Because these regimes ambiguously label their victims "disappeared," friends and family can never confirm their loved ones' deaths with absolute certainty. Such ambiguity enables the dictatorship officially to evade accountability and to instill psychological disequilibrium in the community. For the survivors, then, "[t]he disappeared maintains a permanent and imaginary presence" (Schroeder and Giorgi). The washer woman explicitly identifies herself as a Llorona figure who joins others like her in search of her lost children. She says: "It is the night of La Llorona. The women come up from the depths of sorrow to search for the children. I join them, frantic, desperate...wailing" (68).

As one of the disappeared, the washer woman's son Geraldo "maintains a permanent and imaginary presence" in his mother's psyche. The historical circumstances of her life—the military's cruel and confusing tactics—generate her obsession with retrieving Geral-

do. Like La Llorona who endlessly seeks out her children, the washer woman understandably continues to search for her son even when she crosses the border into the U.S. In this tale, La Llorona embodies one of the thousands of Latin American women, such as the famous Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who continue to wail for, shout for, and demand official acknowledgment of the “disappeared.”

Like a mythical ghost, La Llorona wanders through the pages of Viramontes’s text, wailing at the loss of her child while she continues to combat the external forces disrupting her familial life. A victim of patriarchal abuse, this Llorona refuses to be silenced and let her son’s “disappearance” vanish from the official record. Her presence registers the active transformation of familial separation and destruction into familial preservation and reconstruction. Instead of accepting defeat, she reconnects familial ties broken by government policies that sanction war, terrorize people, and create conditions of poverty. This behavior marks the endurance of the Coatlicue state—the incarnation of struggle prompted by acknowledging destructive forces and refusing to fall victim to them.

The fragmented, multi-ethnic world of Los Angeles in the 1980s constitutes the historical framework of “The Cariboo Cafe.” The U.S.’s global economic and political policies have induced worldwide migrations, bringing together people from various social backgrounds in this postmodern city. Viramontes links U.S. foreign policy with Latin American dictatorships by showing the interrelated effects they both have on ostensibly unrelated characters. Both Latin American totalitarian states and the U.S.’s self-serving economic and political involvement in other countries, as in Vietnam and Latin America, disrupt familial unity in this narrative by killing children and creating extreme conditions of poverty. Through the use of a constantly shifting narrative voice, the text explores the lives of a non-Latino working class cafe owner, an undocumented Latina child, Sonya, and a political refugee from Central America, the washer woman.¹⁰ Viramontes links these characters by depicting each of them, to a different extent, as Llorona figures whose central concern in the tales of maternal resistance is to maintain or re-establish family unity so she can protect and care for her children. All of these characters either lose or are threatened with the loss of a child or dependent, and actively attempt, with varying degrees of success, to recuperate or prevent that loss.

The La Llorona narrative converges for all three of these characters in Macky, the young undocumented boy who, on the mythical level, represents La Llorona’s endangered child. For Sonya, he is literally

the younger brother she must protect; for the cafe owner, he represents Jo Jo, his son who died in Vietnam; and for the washer woman, he embodies her “disappeared” son Geraldo.¹¹ Significantly, the threatened child is male, suggesting that La Llorona counters male hegemony not only by protecting her child from tyranny, but also by preventing him from participating in the patriarchal order himself. Like La Llorona who in many tales polices destructive male behavior, such as drunkenness, harassment or rape, by frightening or killing guilty men, this Llorona too attempts to control such behavior by holding fast to her boy and protecting him from the influences of the patriarchal world.¹²

The washer woman most explicitly embodies La Llorona as a resistant maternal figure because she “succeeds” in reconstructing her motherhood (albeit, as we shall see, through death) despite severe violation to the maternal self through poverty and the loss of her only son. In her mind, she can repair the maternal self only by reasserting her ability to protect and care for Geraldo. As the final scene unfolds, we see that in such a brutal environment reconstructing her motherhood takes place on a spiritual level in which she metaphysically reincorporates her son back into her womb, the only place where she can protect him from such hostile and uncaring external forces.

Both poverty and the washer woman’s son’s abduction cause the disruption of the mother-child bond. Poverty leads her to work incessantly, preventing her from enacting her maternal role of meeting her son’s physical and emotional needs. More specifically, water becomes the active disruptive force: “When my son wanted to hold my hand,” she says, “I held soap instead. When he wanted to play, my feet were in pools of water” (70). Since la Llorona is repeatedly associated with water, and often negatively so, this reference to water unmistakably connects the washer woman to La Llorona.

Yet water has different connotations within the range of Llorona tales. While water usually holds positive qualities in Aztec mythology, associated with the Paradise of Tlaloc, this agriculturally focused society deemed excessive water and different kinds of water destructive, as the following transcription of the legend of Tlaloc demonstrates:

It is said that the abode of the God of water had four rooms, and that in the middle of a large patio there are four large jars of water. The water in one jar is very good, and from this jar come the rains when grain and seeds sprout and the weather is good. In another jar the water is bad, and when the rains come from this jar, cobwebs form on the grain and the grain mildews. The third jar contains water that sends freezing

rains; the fourth jar sends the rains that prevent the grain from heading or cause it to wither. (Caso, 41-42)

Consequently, water in folkloric tales of La Llorona holds two meanings: Llorona tales of maternal betrayal interpret the water that surrounds La Llorona as disruptive—water becomes either the source of her victims' deaths or her means of escape; while tales of maternal resistance define the water as a source of rebirth—the Indian children in the Reseda account, for example, escape servitude through drowning. Viramontes's interpretation of water is complex: she capitalizes on the use of water as a detrimental force by associating it with the washer woman's unceasing back-breaking labor. As an index of her life-draining work, water becomes destructive through its excessive, unwelcome presence, interfering with the mother-child relationship, disrupting their bond and, therefore, endangering the child's well-being. Viramontes makes it clear, however, that this excessive water does not constitute an inherent aspect of her Llorona's identity. Rather, it arises from the external material conditions of her life. Unlike versions of the myth that link La Llorona's internal world with the destructive powers of water, Viramontes's narrative associates this harmful water with the dehumanizing economic conditions of the washer woman's *outer* social world against which she struggles.

The dictatorship's terroristic tactics more acutely violate the washer woman's motherhood. Geraldo's abduction, which occurs while he's en route to the corner store to buy his mother a mango, indicates the extent to which the dictatorship infiltrates this woman's life, suggesting that no female space is "private" and safe from patriarchal power. The military even infiltrates her psychological space by making her question her own maternal competence. Momentarily internalizing the version of the myth that portrays her as a selfish destroyer of children, she charges herself with parental neglect and self-centeredness: "It was my fault. I shouldn't have sent him out to fetch me a mango" (68). Her belief that her nephew's pregnant wife won't let her hold the newborn baby because she is a "bad omen" further connects her to the destructive Llorona figure who murders other people's children out of spite or envy. However, the text ultimately overturns this momentary self-doubt by focusing on the washer woman's unswerving commitment to motherhood. The magnitude of her resistance lies in refusing to let go of her relational maternal identity in the face of the dictatorship's non-relational aggressive worldview. Although the dictatorship physically severs her from her son, psychologically she upholds her relational sense of self and continues to search for her son.

Her search ends when she crosses the border into the U.S. and finds Sonya and Macky wandering the streets of LA, lost and without parental care. Since Macky has no adult mother and she has no son, she assumes he must be her Geraldo, searching for her just as she seeks him. She takes the two children to the “Double Zero Cafe”—the endpoint of human survival where the most abysmal of human conditions exist. In this space, ex-cons/junkies OD, vomit and defecate on walls; undocumented immigrants run and hide “like roaches when the lightswitch goes on”; and a bigoted owner, who has lost his sense of self because he has lost his family, calls the police on human beings he can only see as “illegal.” It is a place where an impoverished washer woman from Central America gets shot to death for refusing to let go of the boy she believes is her son. This cafe constitutes Coatlicue’s place—a site of contradiction where life and death, beauty and horror come together: *Coatlicue...es el monstruo que se traga el sol cada día y le da luz cada mañana* (Anzaldúa, 46); *Coatlicue is the monster who swallows the sun every day and gives it light each morning*. In this zone, the washer woman enters “the Coatlicue state” where she is pushed to confront the magnitude and horror of her oppression and respond with equally powerful actions—the acceptance of death in order to maintain her connection with her son. In this space, she finds “beauty,” since she reconstitutes her motherhood by refusing to lose her son again, as well as “horror,” since, in order to do so, she must face her own physical destruction.

In addition, the name of the restaurant, “the Cariboo Cafe,” alludes to a hidden indigenous presence. As Debra Castillo has pointed out, the two remaining letters—“OO,” which give the restaurant the name “zero zero”—presuppose that what is explicitly missing but implicitly present is the *Carib*, one of the first groups of Indians to be conquered by European conquistadors. The missing *Carib* therefore represents the suppression of indigenous peoples and suggests the washer woman’s struggle is located on a continuum with the conquest. As Castillo states, “What remains undefined is the nameless act of violence that has suppressed the *Carib*, as well as the outline of the form the history of its repression might take” (81). By targeting and confronting her enemy within the confines of this cafe, this Llorona figure names the “nameless act of violence that has suppressed the *Carib*” and continues to suppress Latina women today.

The washer woman reconstructs her motherhood in this final scene at the cafe by becoming a speaking subject. She transforms her silence into laughter and howling. Because the objective of totalitarian regimes is to silence their populations—to turn people into objects who submit to the dictatorship—these direct affronts constitute an

act of protest and demonstrate a mode of self-healing. Torturers terrorize their victims by telling them nobody will hear them if they scream and that it is futile to use their voice. Those who continue to live outside of detention do not dare to speak either, out of fear their words will be interpreted as “subversive,” and they too will be taken in for questioning, tortured, and become one of the “disappeared” (SERPAJ xvi-xvii). As one woman who lived through a military dictatorship explained, “The whole country was run like a prison. The actual prisons were merely the punishment cells” (Weschler 92).

One way in which victims of dictatorships can reconstitute their selfhood and at least partially overcome their trauma is to transform the self from the object of repression to the subject of one’s actions (SERPAJ xvi), to move from silenced object to speaking subject. The washer woman’s subjectivity undergoes precisely this transformation. Back in Central America, the first time her maternal self was violated, she was silenced into submission: when her friend Maria insulted the military by referring to them as “babes farted out of the devil’s ass,” she responded with utter silence, checking to make sure nobody heard the affront (71). However, in LA, faced with losing her “child” once again when the cafe owner calls La Migra, she overcomes her silence and directly confronts her oppressors. Equating the INS with the Central American dictatorship (because the INS persecutes the very same people persecuted back home by sending them back to a politically threatening situation), she appropriates Maria’s epithet. Whereas before she was silenced into submission, afraid of the impact of her words, this time she hollers at her oppressors, going even further than Maria by using the second person pronoun instead of the third, confronting her persecutors directly: “To hell with *you* all,” she says, “because *you* can no longer frighten me.... I will fight *you* all because *you’re* all farted out of the Devil’s ass, and *you’ll* not take us with *you*” (emphasis added; 75).

Because of the military’s extreme invasiveness into her maternal world, the only way to reconstruct her motherhood and regain control over Geraldo’s well-being is by returning him to her womb:

She crushes Geraldo against her, so tight, as if she wants to conceal him in her body again, return him to her belly so that they will not castrate him and hang his small, blue penis on her door, not crush his face so that he is unrecognizable, not bury him among the heaps of bones, and ears, and teeth, and jaws, because no one, but she, cared to know that he cried. (74)

She continues to preserve her connection to her son up through her death when she says, "But I hold onto his hand. That I can feel, you see, I'll never let go. Because we are going home. My son and I" (75). Significantly, the text gives the washer woman the last words of the narrative, asserting her connection to her son over the INS/police's fatal violence.

The description of the washer woman's death in liquid terms—as she is shot, she is "blinded by liquid darkness"—again connects her to La Llorona. Because she finds union with her son in the afterlife—she is going "home"—water becomes the medium through which she can actively transform her dismembered self into a unified maternal figure. As Limón has suggested, La Llorona kills herself and her children, usually through drowning, because water represents a place of rebirth.¹³ Unlike the excessive water that comes from her work, however, which functions to cleanse more economically powerful people by washing *their* clothes, this water cleanses her own spiritual well-being; it allows her to discard the mutilation and destruction she experiences in the material world for union with her son and wholeness in the spiritual world.

As a displaced political refugee, the washer woman has no place to call home. Because both her home country and the U.S. constitute hostile, abusive environments, she can only survive in a transmateral world. Believing she is taking Geraldo/Macky with her (although literally he survives) in a continuation of his "imaginary presence," the washer woman embodies La Llorona who kills herself and her children. Yet the killing here is not born out of spite, remorse or envy, but out of a desperate attempt to preserve her motherhood, mirroring Limón's view of the infanticide as "an induced national malaise... produced by those who socially dominate." The political and economic conditions of this particular Llorona's life may not justify her suicidal and infanticidal behavior, but they do set the conditions for such extreme behavior. On a spiritual or psychological plane, at least—the only space available to her since the military has destroyed her physical connection with her son—the washer woman reconstructs and makes permanent her motherhood by refusing ever to lose her son again. Like others who have suffered under the injustices of Latin American dictatorships and who continue to protest for justice, the washer woman, in her own way, declares, *nunca más*—never again.¹⁴

Similar to the washer woman in "The Cariboo Cafe," Cleófilas, the Mexican protagonist of "Woman Hollering Creek," regains her voice by transforming herself from a stereotypical Llorona figure, a weeping victim, to a *Gritona*, a hollering warrior. In contrast to the washer

woman, however, who reconstructs the severed connection with her child, Cleófilas prevents the destruction of the maternal self in the first place by leaving her physically and emotionally abusive husband.

Like her precursor Coatlicue, La Llorona figure in this text—renamed La Gritona (the Hollering Woman)—forces Cleófilas to become aware of her inner power to defend herself by exposing her to life's contradictions: Cleófilas becomes aware of death and destruction, represented by male dominance, as well as survival, practiced by women's resistance to this aggression. La Gritona relentlessly pursues Cleófilas until she recognizes both the source of the violence that surrounds her and the power within herself to defend the maternal self. Notably, Tey Diana Rebolledo's interpretation of La Llorona in her reading of Anzaldúa's poem, "My Black *Angelos*," reflects Anzaldúa's Coatlicue State. Rebolledo writes: "La Llorona stalks the speaker [of the poem] and infuses herself into her as finally La Llorona and speaker *become one*. . . . In spite of the fear, or terror or disgust we feel, in spite of the desire to be 'safe' from this horrifying creature and all that she represents, she is part of us and our culture. She will continue to stalk us and to haunt us until we come to terms with her" (80). Similarly, Cleófilas eventually "become[s] one" with La Gritona by eventually internalizing la Gritona's voice. First, however, she must "come to terms" with La Gritona/ Coatlicue by recognizing the horrible aspects of her culture that constitute part of Coatlicue's duality. La Llorona who "stalks" her embodies Anzaldúa's Coatlicue who induces women to recognize patriarchy and to struggle against it instead of accepting its aggression and falling victim to its violence. For Cleófilas, this means recognizing that patriarchy has infiltrated her own home in the form of a dominating, abusive husband.

However, Cleófilas's initial internalization of several rose-tinted myths—among them the American dream, idealized romantic love, and standard interpretations of the La Llorona legend—represses her ability to listen fully to La Llorona and to recognize the dangers of patriarchal society. These defense mechanisms impoverish her awareness as to whom or what she must confront, thereby debilitating her ability to defend herself and her children. Cleófilas must debunk these illusions in order to gain greater awareness of the external forces attacking her relational self, to recognize that her own husband is her most immediate adversary.

Filled with visions of romantic love and prosperity *en el otro lado*—on the other side of the border—Cleófilas marries Juan Pedro, a working class Mexican-American living in Seguin, Texas. Back in

Mexico, left in charge of a household of seven men after her mother died, her daily life had consisted of “chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man’s complaints” (43). In search of “passion”—the kind depicted in her favorite *telenovelas*—she leaves her monotonous life in Mexico for a man whom she believes will fulfill her every desire. Her illusions, however, fall apart one by one. America does not represent the land of prosperity she had envisioned; her luxurious dreams of fine clothing and a new home are shattered when Juan Pedro won’t save money because he prefers to spend it on payments for his new pickup and won’t take her to a much-needed prenatal appointment because he’s ashamed the doctor will see Cleófilas’s black and blue marks. Her aspirations are destroyed as she realizes this life of “happily ever after” includes a husband who not only deprives her of basic economic needs, but is also a slob, an emotional invalid, an adulterer and, worst of all, a batterer.

Her entrance into this abysmal situation in which all her dreams evaporate marks the place of growth and renewal for Cleófilas. Like the “zero zero place” in “The Cariboo Cafe,” this town by the creek where La Gritona dwells symbolizes the site of Coatlicue, a place of contradictions where the epitome of maternal violation—the beating of a pregnant wife—can be met with maternal self-defense. In Seguin, Texas, Cleófilas comes to terms with the horrible reality of wife battery and confronts it by recognizing her potential as a resourceful mother who escapes her batterer in the best way she can. She becomes aware of Coatlicue’s all-embracing contradictions by experiencing a husband’s abusive behavior first hand and acknowledging life’s malicious underside for the first time. Her lived experience of married life provides her with greater knowledge about patriarchal gender relations, allowing her to shed her previous illusions that welcomed male dependency. Before, ignorant of patriarchal abuse, she willingly walked into the hands of her oppressor. Afterwards, recognizing her man of happily ever after as an antagonist, she makes the self-reliant choice to protect herself and her children by leaving him.

Like Viramontes, Cisneros alludes to pre-conquest culture by suggesting that the mystery of the creek’s name—Woman Hollering—has indigenous roots. When Cleófilas asks about the name’s origins, the townspeople respond with: “*Pues, allá de los indios, quién sabe*” (46); “Well, way back from the Indians, who knows.” The townspeople’s flippant response suggests their inability to comprehend the significance of La Gritona’s indigenous roots, of Coatlicue’s power. Living in a post-conquest world, the town discards its Indian culture. Cleófilas, on the other hand, chooses to listen to the creek with its in-

digenous origins. As the text unfolds, her identification with “the Woman Hollering Creek” helps her to find the necessary strength and ability to move herself and her children out of a life-threatening situation, suggesting that the indigenous origins of the figure can provide important strategies of resistance for contemporary Chicana and Mexican women.

Cisneros transculturates depictions of La Llorona that portray her as a wailing, suffering victim by reconstructing her as a hollering, resourceful figure. Cleófilas herself changes from La Llorona to La Gritona as she transforms her world of pain and suffering into a world of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Upon arriving in Seguin, Texas, she espouses the views of her *telenovelas* that romanticize the anguish that comes with “loving” a man: “Because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the end” (45). Isolated from a more complex social world because houses in Seguin, Texas are so far apart women without cars depend on men for transportation, Cleófilas is wedged between two neighbors, Soledad and Dolores (Solitude and Pains), who spend all their time “remembering the men who had left” (47). The *telenovelas* and these neighbors romanticize male dependency and the pain and suffering such a frame of mind creates. Yet, Cleófilas also lives right next to the creek named after La Gritona, another “neighbor” whose alternative voice she initially cannot hear: “There is no place to go. Unless one counts the neighbor ladies. Soledad on one side, Dolores on the other. Or the creek” (51).

Supported by newspaper stories of countless women who, like her, are abused by men—husbands, boyfriends, uncles or co-workers—Cleófilas steers away from dependency on men and begins to listen to the creek. Her lived experience of her own “dream” delegitimizes the myths about prosperity in the U.S. and romantic love, bringing her even closer to the creek. Cleófilas sees her husband’s betrayal most clearly when he hits her with one of her romantic novels—the only replacement for her *telenovelas* now that she lives in the U.S. without a television. The first time her husband beats her, she is so shocked she doesn’t fight back; she even comforts him as he weeps and repents. But, when he hits her with her “love book,” the very symbol of passionate, caring male love, she cannot forgive him. His act of violence contradicts the male hero’s prescribed behavior as a loving, passionate, and caretaking man, defying the ideology of romantic love contained within the novel. His use of this particular sacred item as a weapon starkly puts into relief the disjuncture between her lived reality and her previously held romantic notions.

Recognizing her husband as her enemy, Cleófilas turns away from Soledad and Dolores and goes to the creek. This *arroyo*, which calls to

her as she sits on its banks with her baby boy, awakens her to her inner ability to protect herself and her dependent children from her husband's abuse. Her determination to resist patriarchal abuse, however, entails the contradictory realization that her most viable choice for survival includes what she most fears: to leave her husband and return to her father's house in Mexico—a safer yet different form of dependency on men.

Notably, as in "The Cariboo Cafe," the child in this Llorona tale is also a boy, again suggesting that her maternal resistance to male hegemony includes holding fast to male children so they do not wander into the patriarchal world themselves. Like the mythical Llorona figure who punishes abusive male conduct, such as drunkenness, rape or harassment, this Llorona also circumvents errant male behavior.

The full potential of La Gritona's vigorous holler does not reveal itself until later in the narrative when Cleófilas meets two women at the health clinic, Graciela and Felice, who help her accomplish her goal of returning to Mexico. The presence of this supportive female community in this Llorona tale undermines standard depictions of the story in which La Llorona steals other women's babies out of envy. Instead of pitting women against each other because of the abuse they experience from men, Cisneros constructs an alternative narrative in which women work together to combat this abuse.

The names of these supportive women, Graciela and Felice—roughly translated as Grace and Happiness—sharply contrast with those of Soledad and Dolores. As these names suggest, Graciela and Felice replace the ideology of male-focused, romanticized suffering, embraced by Cleófilas's two neighbors, with female autonomy and self-fulfillment. Felice, who drives Cleófilas to the bus station, represents the zenith of female self-reliance. Firstly, she owns her own pickup truck—it's not her husband's or her brother's or her father's, as Cleófilas immediately assumes. The fact that she has bought her own vehicle and moreover a pickup—not a Pontiac Sunbird, which are, as Felice explains, "for *viejas*. Pussy cars...not a *real* car" like her truck (55), signals her ability to seize power from a world traditionally reserved for men. Her truck, more practical than a Pontiac, becomes an index of female self-sufficiency in a town where little is accessible on foot and public transportation appears to be insufficient or nonexistent. In contrast to Juan Pedro's pickup, which introduced Cleófilas into a world of confinement and abuse, Felice's truck brings Cleófilas greater liberation by providing her with the crucial transportation she needs to escape her batterer. As part of a community of women who assist each other in overcoming the cycle of female dependency, Felice embodies a relational self whose own self-

sufficiency, materialized in her pickup, benefits the broader female community.

When Felice crosses La Gritona creek and “let[s] out a yell like any mariachi” and “hollers like Tarzan” (55), startling both Cleófilas and her son, she announces her autonomous and defiant sense of self. While Cleófilas had been wondering all along whether La Gritona hollers out of “pain or rage,” she finally learns that this shout registers something else—“a hoot,” a third term embodying the contradictions within the Coatlicue state—an exclamation of a woman’s assertiveness in a world seething with male aggression. Felice’s pickup demonstrates her autonomy, and the Tarzan-like nature of her holler declares her bold, self-protective posture in the face of potential adversaries. In embodying Tarzan, Felice again defies circumscribed gender roles by embracing an element of the traditionally male world, namely an assertive, fearless voice. Like her truck, this voice is not used for purposes of control and domination. Rather, it functions to defend and protect the relational female self.

Whereas Cleófilas does not “holler” within the confines of the narrative, the text suggests she begins to internalize La Gritona’s voice and power. Because Cleófilas escapes one male-centered world to return to another, to a life with six brothers and a father in Mexico, it may be difficult to envision her as a self-reliant and defiant heroine. However, given the circumstances of her life—her pregnancy, her baby boy, poverty, and alienation from U.S. culture and the English language—her decision to return to her father’s house becomes an act of survival. In refusing to generalize about all men by pointing out important differences between Juan Pedro and Cleófilas’s father, the text portrays her father’s home as a viable, safe alternative to living with Juan Pedro. Unlike her husband, her father had never raised a hand to her mother, and unlike a marriage, the love between a child and a parent, according to the text, is more resilient: “when a man and a woman love each other, sometimes that love sours. But a parent’s love for a child, a child’s for its parents, is another thing entirely” (43). When her father tells her, “I am your father. I will never abandon you” (43), Cisneros demonstrates the potency of parental love in non-gendered terms. This statement attests to her father’s steady commitment to his daughter and demonstrates how, like La Gritona, Felice, Graciela, and Cleófilas, he too can overstep gendered categories and embody a relational worldview.

Most importantly, Cleófilas’s return to her father’s home includes an important difference: she returns as a Gritona. The text traces Cleófilas’s increasing connection with La Gritona until, as Rebolledo suggests, La Llorona and the protagonist “become one” and the same

figure. When Cleófilas first arrives in Seguí, Texas, she immediately becomes intrigued by the name of the creek; then she hears La Llorona/La Gritona calling her; and then she meets Felice, La Gritona incarnate, who “hollers like Tarzan.” Finally, Cleófilas herself acquires La Gritona’s voice: “Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of [Cleófilas’s] own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56).

By transposing Felice’s powerful Gritona voice onto Cleófilas, the text articulates Cleófilas’s own ability to protect and care for herself and her children. In this story, Felice does not function as a female inversion of “the knight in shining armor,” saving helpless women from distress. Although she and Graciela assist Cleófilas in achieving her goal, the decision to leave her husband is ultimately Cleófilas’s. Her own persistence and planning get her and her children out of Juan Pedro’s domain: her insistence that he drive her to the doctor gives her the connection she needs with the outside world; her ability to save money, despite the fact she and her husband are in debt, gives her the necessary cash for the bus fares home and suggests a premeditated departure; and her renegeing on her promise to Juan Pedro to keep silent about the battery to the doctor attests to her ability to take the initiative in helping herself by asking for assistance. In short, Cisneros fictionalizes the fact that a battered women will *not* leave her batterer unless she makes the decision to do so herself—unless she finds her own voice.

The final lines of the narrative indicate Cleófilas’s transformation by having “laughter” replace the suffering she previously embraced from her *telenovelas*. In associating water with a “long ribbon of laughter,” Cisneros defines water, which traditionally encircles La Llorona figure, as a source of positive change, overturning standard interpretations of the myth that connect water with death and destruction. In contrast to Viramontes’s use of water to refer to the washer woman’s labor as an external destructive force, but similar to her use of it as a source of rebirth, Cisneros draws on predominant interpretations of water in Aztec mythology as representing a productive realm, a source of vegetation and life. Instead of murdering her children, Cleófilas saves herself and her children from a life-threatening situation through the renewed vitality she finds in the realm of water in the creek. Resembling Anzaldúa’s “Coatlicue state,” Cleófilas plunges into La Gritona’s watery depths and emerges *completa*, continuing to struggle for survival. Her laughter, “gurgling from her throat,” depicts the beginnings of an ongoing affirmation of the self that will eventually surface as her own holler.

Both the washer woman in “The Cariboo Cafe” and Cleófilas in

"Woman Hollering Creek" actively transform external threats of maternal destruction into acts of maternal resistance. Their entrance into "the Coatlicue state" is fictionalized by their entrance into "the zero zero place" and Seguin, Texas, respectively, where they face extreme threats to the maternal self. Instead of falling victim to this aggression, they struggle to reconstruct their motherhood despite their limited options. These limitations, depicted in the ambiguous conclusions to both of these stories, suggest that Latina women are fighting against enormous adversaries: economic disadvantage and dependency on men, totalitarian regimes, the INS, and battery. Even though these endings need not be celebrated, these tales construct Llorona figures who defy victimhood and exercise agency by confronting external violence with their most creative form of self-protection and fulfillment: the washer woman protects her psyche and restores her motherhood within the spiritual world while Cleófilas finds physical safety and economic security for herself and her children within her father's home. Perhaps the inconclusiveness of these narratives indicate, as Cherrie Moraga has suggested, La Llorona's ongoing search "to find and manifest [her] true self[f]," a task that is far from completed given the economic and political conditions of Latinas' lives.¹⁵

Viramontes's and Cisneros's writings demonstrate how ancient Mexican figures such as La Llorona can be mobilized to construct powerful and resilient heroines. Putting these short stories in dialogue with contemporary Chicana feminism as well as folkloric literature on the La Llorona legend enables us to see a culturally specific genealogy of female resistance rooted within pre-Conquest, pre-Aztec feminine representations. The portrayal of a psychic frame-of-mind that strikingly resembles Anzaldúa's concept of "the Coatlicue state" in these contemporary tales suggests that, of the multiple interpretations to the legend, one that continues to survive within Chicana feminist writings is La Llorona as Gritona or as her antecedents, Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue. These figures provide useful models and strategies that encourage change, conflict, and resistance instead of compliance to maternal violation. Moreover, the fact that Viramontes and Cisneros utilize La Llorona figure to differing ends—the washer woman's defiance against her oppressors includes suicide while Cleófilas's resistance involves escape—demonstrates the elasticity of the figure and suggests she can be mobilized for a range of interventions.

La Llorona's ancient weeping may testify to women's pain, but in these tales of maternal resistance this pain-filled wail also embodies a battle cry—a holler prompted by the continuing presence of

Coatlicue who demands confrontation and resistance.

Notes

1. In Spanish “llorona” refers to a woman who wails or weeps whereas “gritona” refers to a woman who shouts or hollers.
2. See Chapters 3 and 4 of *Borderlands/La Frontera* for Anzaldúa’s discussion of Coatlicue.
3. See Anzaldúa 35 and Anderson and Dibble’s *Florentine Codex* for Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s description of Cihuacoatl (3-4). Many scholars have noted the unmistakable resemblance between Cihuacoatl and La Llorona. See, for example, Janvier 162; Obregón 15; and Barakat 290.
4. For accounts of La Llorona murdering out of revenge or jealousy see, respectively, Toor 531, and Leddy 276. For accounts of her murdering her child because she does not love him, see Horcasitas and Butterworth 217 & 212. Sometimes La Llorona simply is depicted as a female bogey-man and no motivation is provided. See Lomax Hawes, 155 or Barakat, 293.
5. Examples in which La Llorona is associated with La Malinche can be found in Leddy 273; Mirandé and Enríquez 32-33; Horcasitas and Butterworth 216; and Paz 86.
6. For some powerful feminist interpretations of La Malinche, see Alarcón, Candelaria, del Castillo, and Messenger Cypess.
7. In many ways my interpretation of La Llorona mirrors Limón’s: to see her as an active female figure, to locate her historically, and to understand her actions as an understandable if extreme response to betrayal.
8. The term can be found in Nancy Chodorow’s work. Subsequently, Valerie Smith carried it to literary criticism in her reading of Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative.
9. Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz coined the term transculturation in order to complexify the more reductive terms acculturation and deculturation and to better understand colonial and postcolonial relations in Cuba. Transculturation suggests that subordinate cultures often take up dominant representations and invent new cultural meanings. The term has since been taken up by Uruguayan literary critic Angel Rama and cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt.
10. Although, according to Roberta Fernández, Viramontes has stated in her public readings and in private conversation that the washer woman comes from El Salvador, the text itself never states this fact (78). I agree with Fernández that Viramontes’s use of the term “contras” suggests, to a U.S.-based audience, that the brutal regime depicted in the text must therefore be the Sandinistas. Viramontes may be using “contra” literally, to refer to a group that is simply “against” the prevailing order (her use of the lower case “c” supports this more general use of the word). Also, in El Salvador the guerillas are generally referred to as “los contrarios”—those against—but the shorter term “los contras” is also used. Nonetheless, I find this term to be a confusing and unfortunate choice of words, with the most unfortunate confusion being to assume that the Sandinistas resemble the ruthless dictatorship depicted in the text.
11. For a more in-depth analysis of Sonya and the cafe owner as Llorona figures, see Carbonell.
12. Drunkards or lascivious men who pursue women are usually the victims in these tales. See, for example, Horcasitas and Butterworth 217. Pérez’s contemporary version of the myth has La Llorona reform two drunk men who harass

- her by frightening them until one of them faints (315-16).
13. Limón 76. Limón chooses to seek the meaning of water as rebirth through Freud instead of through Aztec mythology. Interestingly, both representational systems offer similar conclusions.
 14. The phrase *nunca más* "concluded the memorable opinion given by Attorney General Julio César Strassera...at the trial of Argentinean commanders accused of human right abuses" (SERPAJ vii). It has since become the title of three different books, each confronting the legacy of human rights violations in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil.
 15. For Moraga, "[w]e wander not in search of our dead children, but our lost selves, our lost sexuality, our lost spirituality, our lost sabiduría.... To find and manifest our true selves ('the woman before the fall') what might have to change in the world as we know it?" The eternal wandering of La Llorona symbolizes the vast social and political transformations, on a revolutionary level, that are required in order to overturn standard definitions of Latina womanhood. The ambiguous endings to Cisneros's and Viramontes's stories express Moraga's point about the magnitude, and therefore present incompleteness, of Chicana feminist liberation.

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