A YORK UNIVERSITY PUBLICATION

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

Spring / Fall 2025
Vol. 16

JoAnna Boudreaux, Kate Golding, Jennifer M. Heisler, Crystal Machado, Sheila Martel, Ariel Moy, Usoa García Sagüés, Emily Wolfinger, Diana Aramburu, Rachael Boulton, Marcella Gemelli, Katherine Herrán-Magee, Mariana Trujillo Marquez, Elisabeth Hanscombe, and more

MARIANA TRUJILLO MARQUEZ

Echoes in the Water: La Llorona, Folklore, and the Sacred Geography of Maternal Grief

This article examines La Llorona *as a figure rooted in pre-Columbian mythology and reshaped through the colonial encounter, positioning her at the intersection of motherhood, grief, and environmental memory. Emerging from associations with Cihuacoatl, the Aztec goddess of fertility and childbirth, and tied to the sacred geographies of Tenochtitlan's lakes and rivers, La Llorona embodies both Indigenous cosmologies and the ruptures of conquest. Her cry—"¡Ay, mis hijos!" ("Oh, my children!")—functions as a sonic archive and preserves cultural memory while resisting erasure and echoing through literal and symbolic waters as lament and warning. This study also situates La Llorona alongside Ophelia in* Hamlet *and Imoinda in* Oroonoko *to trace how female and maternal bodies become symbolic sites of loss across time, space, and empire. Water emerges not merely as backdrop but as sacred and political terrain—both generative and destructive—that anchors cultural identity, ecological reverence, and histories of dispossession. Through oral tradition, visual representation, and embodied geography, La Llorona operates as a living archive of Indigenous resilience, carrying forward intertwined legacies of creation, destruction, and survival. By reading La Llorona through a transhistorical and transgeographical lens, this article illuminates how her legend functions as both cultural memory and an act of resistance, adapting to shifting historical contexts while retaining her power as a figure of mourning, warning, and defiance. In doing so, it invites a reconsideration of folklore as an active terrain where environment, body, and story continually reshape one another.*

I cannot recall how old I was when I first heard her cry—not in dreams but from the river, or so they said. In my pueblo, we were warned: "La Llorona will take you if you misbehave." Rivers were more than landmarks; they were passageways to the dead and to stories that clung like mist. Her wail taught

me the silence of women, the mourning of mothers, and grief's haunting power. Rooted in pre-Columbian and colonial histories, the legend preserves Indigenous elements while bearing the traumas of colonization. Though told differently across Latin America, one constant remains: an enraged woman who killed her children and now wanders, weeping. My memories shaped by riverside warnings and inherited fear offer a lived context for seeing her as both myth and method and invite a reading through Indigenous environmental epistemologies that deepens her cultural significance. These memories are not isolated recollections but part of a larger cultural archive in which rivers, voices, and warnings serve as living repositories of Indigenous knowledge. It is from this intersection of personal experience and collective memory that a decolonial reading of La Llorona emerges, situating her legend within broader practices of resistance and epistemic survival.

From this intersection of personal experience and collective memory follows a decolonial reading of La Llorona, rooted in Indigenous studies and drawing particularly on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Through such a framework, La Llorona emerges not only as a folkloric figure but also as a vessel of cultural resistance and epistemic survival. As Smith powerfully asserts, "Imperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly" (21), and in response, Indigenous communities have cultivated ways of knowing that are embedded in narrative practice. These include "humour, poetry, music, storytelling and other common sense ways" that not only convey historical memory but also carry political and emotional force (21). Within this context, La Llorona's haunting becomes more than a cautionary tale; it becomes what Smith calls "'the talk' about the colonial past" (21), a recurring echo that speaks across generations, not from official archives but from the affective and material spaces of oral tradition, grief, and survival. Her grief, or cry, becomes a sonic marker of cultural memory, a lament that resists erasure and reclaims Indigenous presence. Yet it is also a maternal cry—one rooted in the embodied experience of motherhood as both loss and legacy. The story of La Llorona, passed down intergenerationally, reflects motherhood as an affective labour and highlights the social meaning of mothering across the life course: a continual negotiation between nurture and grief, as well as between cultural continuity and historical rupture. This persistent presence aligns with what Simpson describes as multiple forms of Indigenous mobility—movements that are not merely geographic but epistemological and political. Simpson identifies "at least four kinds of mobility," including those embedded in Indigenous practice, enacted as resistance to colonialism, expressed as strategic resurgence, and forced through displacement or diaspora (196–97). La Llorona's ghostly wandering along riverbanks—whether read through the lens of mourning, punishment, or longing—can be reframed as a maternal form of diasporic mobility rooted in

colonial rupture and ecological displacement. Her grief, suspended between worlds, maps a geography of dispossession, but also of presence—a refusal to disappear.

With this decolonial framework in mind, it becomes essential to consider how folklore scholars have conceptualized the environments that stories inhabit. Robert Saint George, for example, frames material culture as the physical environment shaped by cultural behaviour, showing how human action inscribes meaning onto space. Through these perspectives, folklife studies employ interdisciplinary methods to understand the relationship between material objects, everyday practices, and societal structures. Alan Dundes expands these definitions, arguing that folklore is not confined to the past or marginalized populations—it exists wherever people share collective meaning. Folk groups can be as small as families or as fluid as communities connected by shared values or experiences. Dundes reminds us that folklore is not dying but evolving. This evolution complicates documentation: No single informant can represent the full spectrum of a group's folklore, and oral traditions shift from person to person, taking on new resonances as they move. This conceptual flexibility illuminates the dynamic, embodied nature of stories like that of La Llorona. Far from a static tale of caution, La Llorona's cry materializes through rivers, ruins, and rituals. Her voice reverberates as a sonic artifact, her body dissolves into sacred geography, and her grief, embedded in collective memory, persists as a cultural ritual passed from generation to generation. Through this folkloric lens, motherhood emerges at the intersection of body and environment. It becomes a cultural terrain through which legends and literary figures—from La Llorona to Ophelia and Imoinda—carry layered histories of identity, cultural memory, and resistance across geographies and temporalities.

Situating La Llorona within a broader folkloric tradition reveals how such figures not only preserve memory but also continually transform it across time and space. In this light, folklore is not merely a vessel of preservation but a living, adaptive framework—alive in the people who carry the story, the geographies it inhabits, and the multiple retellings that reshape it. I am particularly drawn to how La Llorona embodies a culturally specific form of maternal grief, one inseparable from the landscapes she moves through and from the literary representations that render her visible—or attempt to contain her. Figures like La Llorona, Ophelia, and Imoinda reveal how transatlantic narratives of maternal loss and gendered violence intertwine with environment and memory, where grief becomes both aestheticized and politicized.

These colonial-era "skeletons" of the La Llorona legend emerging in the 1500s and sometimes linked to La Malintzin, Hernán Cortés's Indigenous translator, offer fertile ground for reexamining her from both ecological and sociopolitical perspectives. Her story becomes a site for interrogating Mexican

identity, cultural memory, and the politics of motherhood. If, as Dundes suggests, folklore arises from shared cultural experience, then motherhood, especially as it intersects with body and environment, can be read as a kind of folkloric terrain. This framing invites questions about how maternal figures, particularly Indigenous and Mexican mothers, are shaped by and inscribed upon the landscapes they inhabit. In La Llorona's case, water—both literal and symbolic—becomes central to her embodiment of sorrow, memory, and resistance in pre-Columbian and colonial contexts.

While there are many other versions of La Llorona throughout Latin America, I want to focus on Tenochtitlan, founded in 1325, and what is present-day Mexico City. La Llorona, "The Weeping Woman who appeared in Tenochtitlan in 1509, according to Bernardino de Sahagún's informants" (Winick), is connected back to Cihuacoatl, the goddess closely connected to fertility, childbirth, and motherhood. According to the *Florentine Codex*, written in the sixteenth century by the Spanish Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, in book one, "The Gods," Cihuacoatl is said to be found by night walking, weeping, and wailing, and she was also "an omen of war" (11). Cihuacoatl is further described as being "covered in chalk, like a court lady. She wore ear plugs, obsidian ear plugs. She appeared in white, garbed in white, standing white, pure white. Her womanly hairdress rose up," which was a crown of eagle feathers (Sahagún 11). Cihuacoatl was also known as the Snake-woman: "a savage beast and an evil omen. She was an evil omen to men; she brought men misery" (Sahagún 11). Cihuacoatl—cloaked in white, walking at night, weeping, and bringing omens—lays the mythic and visual groundwork for La Llorona. Her transformation from fertility goddess to spectre of sorrow mirrors the colonial displacement of Indigenous spiritual figures, recast through fear and loss. The white dress shifts from sacred regalia to a shroud of mourning; divine warnings become maternal lamentations. As both patron of childbirth and omen of war, she embodies the Mesoamerican view of women's bodies as sites of creation and cataclysm. La Llorona inherits and intensifies these contradictions, carrying the grief of conquest, the spiritual erosion of colonialism, and the layered complexity of Indigenous motherhood. Her legend is thus not merely folkloric but cosmopolitical, encoding histories of gendered power, colonization, and survival.

Figure 1. This drawing, from the 1570s, appears in the Florentine Codex, and could be the first illustration of La Llorona (image taken from Winick et al.).

The uncanny resemblance in the stories between Cihuacoatl and La Llorona further connects these two women intrinsically. Through her white dress and veil, originating from Cihuacoatl garbed in white, La Llorona lies in a dichotomy between purity and spiritual transcendence, and mourning and tragedy. Her clothing materializes the legend through Mexico's historical dichotomy of womanhood. The white dress and veil generate a transformative dichotomy between the Virgen of Guadalupe (Virgin Mary) and La Malintzin. Gloria Anzaldúa says that "the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* [the Fucked One] to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy" (53). I connect La Llorona's physical garments to the dichotomy between the three Indigenous woman often studied by scholars to each other because the white dress and veil are representative of the purity and innocence associated with la Virgen but also the mourning and pollution linked to La Chingada, also known as La Malintzin (the traitor) who is "the Fucked One," for helping Hernán Cortés and bearing his children. Thus, through her garments and depictions of La Llorona, Anzaldúa links La Llorona's imagery to that of Cihuacoatl, "Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives, [and] antecedent of La Llorona. Covered with chalk, Cihuacoatl wears a white dress with a decoration half red and half black" (57). In doing so, she underscores how La Llorona inherits both the sacred and destructive aspects of Indigenous maternal figures. La Llorona once again is represented through a duality, here between half red and half black; her white dress is represented in the image below. Through these representations, La Llorona embodies the complex interplay of purity and impurity, innocence and guilt, drawing from deep-rooted cultural and

historical symbols. The white dress and veil symbolize a multitude of meanings, merging the sacred and the profane, reflecting a profound narrative of Indigenous womanhood that has persisted and evolved over centuries. This duality captures the essence of La Llorona as a figure who transcends simple categorization, embodying the rich history of Mesoamerican folklore and the enduring legacy of Indigenous women like Cihuacoatl, La Malintzin, and the Virgen of Guadalupe, who derive from Tenochtitlan.

Figure 2. Image from the *Florentine Codex*, Book 1: "The Gods"

Barbara E. Mundy describes what was once known as Tenochtitlan, from around 1325 to 1521 (Mexico's colonization), as follows: "[an] oval island, ringed by lake, [and] the idyllic homeland of Aztlan. The template found its fullest realization in Tenochtitlan itself, which was an island ringed by a lake, which was in turn surrounded by the land of central Mexico, which was then surrounded, or so it once seemed, by the vast seas that stretched out to the east and west forever" ("Ecology" 136). Mundy's description of Tenochtitlan evokes the mythic and symbolic significance of the Mexica's ideal home. The land of central Mexico, surrounded by water, is emblematic of Mexica's integration into the natural environment as a tool and their deep connection to the landscape. The idealization of the land and environment contrasts with Mexico's colonial narratives emphasizing Tenochtitlan's enduring legacy, like the legend of La Llorona. As a folkloric legend, La Llorona resonates even

through Tenochtitlan's mythic sense of home as a mother and myth throughout Mexico. Going back to La Llorona's origin, Cihuacoatl, through unofficial sources, is said to have a son and literally cried a river:

> Mixcoatl, Cihuacoatl's son was the storm god. Some legends say that she left him one day on a path. After some time she repented her action and went back to find her son. But Mixcoatl was gone, with only a sacrificial dagger left at the place she had seen him last. Cihuacoatl cried and her tears were so many that they filled the waters of Lake Xochimilco. Haunted by her pain, she would not leave the area, searching for her son, Mixcoatl, regretting and sorry for what she had done. Between her screams could be heard *"Ecue nocone" ("Oh my son!")*. And so, since the times immemorial the Great Goddess haunted the waters of Xochimilco. (Saadia)

Assuming La Llorona originates from Cihuacoatl, the connection to the Tenochtitlan lake through this retelling creates an innate relationship and reasoning beyond drowning her children in the river as to why she roams bodies of water. In this story, however, Cihuacoatl abandoned her child, and the Tenochtitlan lake, or what is today also known as Xochimilco, came to be. Regardless, the connection to water is embedded through each retelling of this enigmatic woman, as well as the chant or lamentation of "Oh, my children!" These characteristics of La Llorona remain singular through the adaptations and depictions of her story. Through the innate relationship of La Llorona as a mother and the materialization of water, there also lies the important symbol she presents in colonization. Luis D. León says Cihuacoatl is usually represented in various forms in ancient and contemporary Mexican mythology. Part of the story León writes about is how "[Cihuacoatl] was transformed in the cultural imagination into La Llorona during the Spanish conquest of Mexico" (5). The *Aztec Codex* explains the following: "A few years before Spanish ships first landed on the Mexican coast of Vera Cruz in the sixteenth century, a woman circled the walls of the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. Late at night she was heard weeping in mourning for the impending destruction of the great Mexican civilization, and especially for her children: 'My children, we must flee far from this city!'" (qtd. in Leon 5). The destruction of Mexican civilization signalled Mexico's conquering by Hernán Cortés in 1521. La Llorona's cries here become an emblem of warning for the people of Mexico. The Spanish ships arrived through the waters, the lake of Tenochtitlán, which is interlaced with larger bodies of water. These passageways allow for destruction—destruction in the form of colonization and in the form of a woman who supposedly drowned or abandoned her children, resonating a duality of home in motherhood but also malevolent in her ties to water.

The geographical and symbolic weight of these waters invites a broader reading of La Llorona. Anna Perdibon writes on the cosmic and sacredness of rivers and other water sources through ancient Mesopotamian texts: "Rivers are sources of both fertility and destruction, of life and death, of healing and polluting, thus embodying the intrinsic ambivalence of existence with their body of flowing waters" (87). Although Perdibon explores bodies of water through ancient Mesopotamian and not through Mesoamerica, the duality she represents through water still resonates with the Tenochtitlan region, La Llorona, and Cihuacoatl. The duality of rivers as a symbol of creation and destruction facilitates a reading of La Llorona as a legend materializing through the environment. Flowing water represents the fundamental ambivalence of existence, embodying the contrasting and interconnected aspects of the natural world and human experience. Comparably, La Llorona, materialized through water, embodies the emotional ambivalence of human experience—grief, rage, sorrow, and the porous line between madness and mourning.

La Llorona's origin stories are not only narrative inheritances but also spatial inheritances, anchored in what Mundy describes as "representations of space" (Mundy, *The Death* 11) and the lived geographies of central Mexico. Mundy notes that in the sixteenth century, Mexica people "expressed themselves through images and a largely pictographic script" (Mundy, *The Death* 13), a practice visible in the Codex Mendoza where water, causeways, and chinampas situate Tenochtitlan as a porous island city. The "1524 maps … show Tenochtitlan at center, as a porous disk surrounded by a larger ring of water… canals thread through the city" (Mundy, *The Death* 17). These watery encirclements—half red, half black in symbolic depictions—mirror the city's geography and resonate with what might be considered the first image of La Llorona: a liminal figure traversing and haunting water-bound thresholds. For Mundy, "while rulers can die, spaces cannot… spaces endure" (10), meaning the aquatic setting that birthed La Llorona's story remains materially and symbolically potent even after political conquest.

Doreen Massey's relational framework positions the geographies La Llorona inhabits as the result of ongoing social production. As she observes, "We are always, inevitably, making spaces and places. The temporary cohesions of articulations of relations, the provisional and partial enclosures, the repeated practices which chisel their way into being established flows, these spatial forms mirror the necessary fixings of communication and identity" (Massey 347). La Llorona's story emerges from such repeated practices—oral retellings along riverbanks, ceremonial gatherings, and warnings passed through generations—each inscribing motherhood, grief, and danger into the very landscapes she haunts. Yet these geographies are not neutral. "The challenge of the negotiation of place is shockingly unequal" (Massey 334), particularly

in colonial Mexico, where Indigenous women's narratives were reframed within European moral economies. This asymmetry reflects what Massey calls "a failure of the imagination of coevalness" (343), denying "the 'others'… a life of their own" and instead fixing them into prescribed temporal and cultural roles. Within this framework, La Llorona's rivers are not static symbols of loss but contested, living spaces where Indigenous memory, gendered violence, and folklore remain in motion. In Massey's terms, the rivers and plazas La Llorona haunts are not fixed backdrops but spaces continually made and remade through power, memory, and embodied practice. These contested geographies do more than hold her story—they actively shape her form. It is in the uneven negotiation of place, where Indigenous women's narratives have been reframed through colonial lenses, that La Llorona's liminality emerges.

La Llorona emerges as a liminal figure whose presence—like water itself—exists between binaries: life and death, mother and monster, sacred and profane. Victor Turner defines "liminality" as "liminal personae ('threshold people') [that are] necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (95). Liminal personae refer to individuals who occupy the liminal state, suggesting a threshold between them. Those experiencing the liminal state are characterized by ambiguity because they exist outside of the usual classifications of a specific cultural role or position. In other words, during liminality, individuals are not easily categorized within the established cultural norms or roles. They exist in a state of transition, outside the usual societal frameworks, which makes them difficult to define or categorize. Turner further infers that "liminal entities … may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system" (95). Consequently, La Llorona exists in this liminal space where her entity or ethereal persona lingers between life and death. La Llorona is constantly put through a dichotomy of mother and monster, life and death, body and spirit. Death serves as a liminal space personified through the legend and materialized through bodies of water. José Carlos Rovira and Eva Valero Juan explore the sanctity of water through the parallels of La Llorona and Cihuacoatl:

> El análisis de [La Llorona] demuestra que ejerce una importante función persuasiva pues es quien, mediante prácticas de seducción, e incluso pérdida de conciencia, 'cambia la condición existencial de ebrios a abstemios después de sumergirlos en el agua o bien los conduce a la muerte tras precipitarlos a una barranca.' Tanya González, además, observa las coincidencias descriptivas entre la Llorona y Cihuacóatl (la 'mujer serpiente' que aparece en la crónica de Sahagún

> y que realizaba acciones semejantes a las que se atribuyen a la Llorona en el discurso actual), y señala el significado que adquieren el agua y un 'espacio sagrado' como la barranca dentro de la cosmovisión del mundo prehispánico.[1] (22)

Rovira and Juan highlight La Llorona's "función persuasiva," noting how she can transform drunkards into sober men after immersing them in water or leading them to death by plunging them into a ravine. Water here operates as more than a physical element—it is an "espacio sagrado" that, like the barranca, transforms the human condition. Tanya González observes that these acts echo those of Cihuacoatl, the "mujer serpiente" in Sahagún's chronicles, who carried out similar deeds and whose presence was deeply tied to sacred water. Within this frame, water becomes a maternal force: It cleanses and renews yet can also engulf and reclaim. To be immersed in it is to undergo a passage—whether towards sobriety, death, or rebirth. The barranca, like the river or lake, thus serves as a maternal threshold, holding the dual capacity to nurture life and to draw it back into the earth-mother's embrace. La Llorona's presence in these waters enacts a geography of motherhood, calling her "children" home through cycles of creation and dissolution.

The sacred waters and barrancas where La Llorona dwells are not only thresholds between life and death but also reservoirs of memory, holding within them the stories, traumas, and identities of the communities who inhabit their shores. Elizabeth Jelin reminds us that memory is not a static object to be extracted; rather, it is produced by active subjects who share a culture and ethos. Although Jelin focusses on memory through the lens of dictatorships in Latin America, her reading of memory and the politics of struggle that exist in memories of historical injustices, trauma, and collective identity resonates with the bodies of water where La Llorona transgresses. The memory of the legend is thus produced by the lake of Tenochtitlan—a continuous active subject—and the people who continue to keep the legend alive. At the cusp of a liminal and sacred space, La Llorona becomes an artifact. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello's notion of the "global imaginary" suggests that certain objects, far from being simply items of consumption, become vessels that materialize distant worlds and environments (117). While they focus on porcelain objects from China that enabled Europeans to imagine worlds beyond their own, La Llorona and the sacred waters she inhabits can be seen as part of this global imaginary. Water, or specific geographical sites like Tenochtitlan, serves as a portal between worlds—a transitional space saturated with cultural and historical significance, acting as a conduit for the collective memory and identity of Mexico.

The Mexica's sacred imagination, as seen in depictions of Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of lakes, rivers, and storms, reveals the deep cultural connection between water, femininity, and danger. The *Florentine Codex* describes her as

a force that "killed men in water … she made the water swirl; she carried men to the depths" (Mundy, *The Death* 43), echoing the lethal undertones of La Llorona's maternal violence. Iconography shows her seated on a red stool with a torrent of water flowing forth, carrying two human figures swept away "as if in a flood" (Mundy, *The Death* 43). In these representations, water is both life-giving and destructive, a sacred geography that male rulers sought to tame through hydraulic works, "dominating a dangerous female space" (Mundy, *The Death* 45). La Llorona's association with rivers and lakes parallels Chalchiuhtlicue's dual nature—calm in some depictions, unpredictable and deadly in others (Mundy, *The Death* 43). Her cry, like the swirling floods of Tenochtitlan in 1499, is a sonic and emotional deluge, pulling the living towards the depths. In this sense, La Llorona is not only a folkloric figure but a living embodiment of Mesoamerican water deities' liminal and sacred power, carrying forward the intertwined legacies of motherhood, grief, and environmental reverence.

If Chalchiuhtlicue's image embodies the visual and material representation of sacred waters, La Llorona's voice renders that sacred geography audible. Here, the sound of her wailing—"¡Ay, mis hijos!" (Oh, my children!)—becomes an intangible yet enduring artifact, resonating across generations much like carved stone or painted codices. Oliver Douglas shows how material culture became central to folklore studies during the Victorian era, with oral accounts legitimizing the study of physical artifacts. Flora Dennis extends this to the emotional resonance of objects, focussing on a sixteenth-century handbell as a site where sound and memory converge. These scholars reveal how objects and immaterial experiences like sound carry emotional residues, linking the present with historical forms of perception and storytelling. La Llorona's cry functions as a sonic artifact—material not in form but in impact. Her wailing, "¡Ay, mis hijos!", resonates across generations as both warning and lament, embodying grief, rage, and cultural memory. Jonathan Sterne's framework helps to situate this sound historically, reminding us that "the history of sound must move beyond recovering experience to interrogating the conditions under which that experience became possible" (28). La Llorona's cry emerges from specific colonial and postcolonial conditions, where Indigenous women's voices were reframed or silenced in dominant narratives. Her voice persists as an oral inscription that exceeds textual capture, functioning much like Sterne's notion of sound recording's "permanence" as a movement "from wish to practice to technological form" (27)—except here, the technology is the communal act of repeated telling, lodging her voice in cultural memory.

In this sense, La Llorona's call to her children is not merely narrative—it is a maternal act of sonic reaching, a performance of motherhood across temporal and spatial divides. Sterne notes that sound's "connection between sound,

subjective self-presence, and intersubjective experience" (18) positions it as a medium through which listeners feel themselves drawn into relational worlds. The cry's address—"my children"—creates a collective subjectivity, making every listener a potential addressee, a surrogate child. This is where the emotional geography of La Llorona becomes most potent: Her sound courses through rivers, pueblos, and bodies, an "emotional geography" that binds place to feeling. Like Dennis's handbell, which condenses sacred time and space in a single chime, La Llorona's voice is both ephemeral and enduring—heard in the moment yet carried forward as a residue of historical grief. It is an auditory haunting that blurs the thresholds of life and death, past and present, mother and monster.

Furthermore, Stephanie Trigg and Anna Welch offer a useful lens through their exploration of how objects acquire emotional significance through embodied interaction. Drawing on Sara Ahmed, they argue that "relations between object and bodies … take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon" (Trigg and Welch 3). They extend this into environmental discourse, urging us to rethink how bodies and landscapes shape one another across time, particularly through the framework of the Anthropocene. Though perhaps speculative, this approach invites us to consider whether the environment can engage the body reciprocally—much like the riverbank touched by La Llorona and she by it. And let us not forget the children drowned in the river, their bodies equally implicated in the emotional terrain. La Llorona's legend is steeped in affective registers: grief, rage, sorrow, and madness, all inscribed onto the watery landscapes she haunts. Trigg and Welch's notion that objects carry emotional residues—how people felt about them in the past, how they feel about them now, and how those feelings shift over time—resonates deeply with the study of folklore. Folklore, too, is a vessel of emotional transmission: It stores collective fears and longings, reshapes them, and passes them on. This emotional evolution is central to how legends like La Llorona endure.

While La Llorona emerges from Indigenous cosmologies of grief and rage, Ophelia and Imoinda offer early modern literary counterparts whose drowned or spectral bodies reflect colonial and gendered violence in different registers. Their stories converge through the motif of the weeping woman and diverge in how their voices are mediated or erased by patriarchal systems. This also relates to Dundes's definition of folklore as a shared experience. Earlier, I proposed the question of folklore ascending from a shared cultural experience, particularly when considering motherhood and its intersection with the body and environment as a kind of folkloric terrain. We see this in Shakespeare's Hamlet, when Ophelia drowns in a brook after descending into madness. Ophelia's trajectory mirrors La Llorona's, whose rage and sorrow lead her to drown her children and herself. Some scholars have speculated that Ophelia

might be pregnant, and if true, her watery death would resonate even more strongly with the trope of maternal loss and potential infanticide embedded in La Llorona's narrative. As her mind unravels, Ophelia sings, "Young men will do't if they come to't. / By Cock, they are to blame. / Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed'" (IV.5.60–63). Though ambiguous, this moment hints at a sexual relationship outside of marriage and possibly pregnancy—something that, as Lucile F. Newman observes, was capable of "conjuring up images of pollution in the mind of the hearer and suggesting a dramatic change in her character from a former state of purity" (228). The scandalous potential of Ophelia's pregnancy also intersects with what Mary Beth Rose describes as the "revolutionary implications" of female conceptions of motherhood, which were seen as logically incoherent to orthodox sensibilities and thus excluded from public representation (313). In this way, Ophelia's body—and the uncertainty surrounding her maternal status—becomes inseparable from the brook in which she dies, binding her to a broader folklore of maternal grief and watery death.

Gertrude's description of Ophelia's final moments transforms her drowning into an ecological tableau that merges woman and landscape. She begins, "There is a willow grows aslant the brook, / That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream. / Therewith fantastic garlands did she make / Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples" (IV.7.164–69). The willow—a recurring emblem of mourning—frames Ophelia's death within a feminine-coded ecology, much like the riverside haunting of La Llorona. Gertrude continues, "Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide, / And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up, / Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds, / As one incapable of her own distress" (IV.7.173–76). Her singing recalls La Llorona's cry: a sonic marker of grief, suspended between resistance and resignation. Yet Ophelia's immersion in the water is not salvific: "her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death" (IV.7.179–81). Here, Rose's observation that "examining the drama's strategies of participating in certain sexual discourses while avoiding others can illuminate the process by which women's voices are marginalized in the transmission of texts" (314) underscores how Ophelia's death scene operates—simultaneously sensual, tragic, and silent about her possible maternal condition. Both Ophelia and La Llorona inhabit a liminal space where the maternal body and the natural world are entangled, their watery ends articulating a sacred, emotional grammar of loss transcending time, place, and cultural origin.

Through a similar lens, Imoinda in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko embodies a maternal figure whose body is marked by the violence of enslavement and displacement, echoing the spectral grief of La Llorona. Taken from her home and forced across the Atlantic, Imoinda undergoes a liminal passage in which

water functions not as renewal but as rupture. Although her death does not involve literal drowning, her transoceanic journey mirrors the same threshold crossing that defines La Llorona's endless wandering along riverbanks. Behn's narrator recalls how "her Name, Grief wou'd get the ascendant of Rage, and he wou'd lye down by her side, and water her Face with showers of Tears" (61), a gesture that collapses her identity into a singular emotion. In this moment, Imoinda is not remembered for her thoughts or desires but as an object upon which Oroonoko projects his grief—much like La Llorona's name is synonymous not with her life but with the loss that defines her. Both women are bound to waterways, their movements between spaces shaped by forces outside their control. In La Llorona's case, the colonial and patriarchal systems cast her as both mother and criminal—in Imoinda's, the violence of the slave trade. Their grief moves through water, geography, and time, becoming what Simpson calls a form of "diasporic mobility" (196–97)—a maternal passage that resists disappearance by inscribing loss onto the land and water itself. In both cases, the maternal body is inseparable from the landscapes it traverses, and mobility becomes both a condition of dispossession and a mode of survival.

Yet Behn's narrative constrains Imoinda within the paradox of visibility and erasure. Early on, she is introduced as "the beautiful Black Venus" (Behn 14) and later as "the fair Slave" (Behn 38), labels that collapse individuality into iconography and render her legible only through the lens of European beauty standards and white desire. This aestheticization mirrors the way La Llorona's image—mother, murderess, mourner—circulates stripped of historical specificity, her legend shaped by patriarchal and colonial narratives requiring her silence beyond the haunting refrain of "¡Ay, mis hijos!" In both cases, the woman's voice is reduced to a single expression of grief, erasing the complexities of her interior life. The culmination of this violence comes in Imoinda's stylized death scene, where she lays herself down "before the Sacrificer," and Oroonoko "gave the Fatal Stroke; first cutting her Throat, and then severing her yet Smiling Face from that Delicate Body, pregnant as it was with Fruits of tenderest Love" (Behn 61). Her maternal body is transformed into a still life—framed as beautiful, even serene—while the brutality of the act is subsumed into aesthetic climax. This dynamic exemplifies what Marisa Fuentes calls "mutilated historicity" (7), in which the traces of enslaved women survive only as already violated, objectified, and silenced. Though Imoinda is fictional, she occupies the same epistemic space as La Llorona: Both are maternal figures whose bodies are overwritten by narrative demands, their subjectivity sacrificed to sustain cultural, political, and moral orders. In both, motherhood is aestheticized as loss, and their grief is instrumentalized as a site where beauty, violence, and empire converge, ensuring that the woman remains present only as a symbolic body—haunted, haunting, and never entirely her own.

If the stories of Ophelia, Imoinda, and La Llorona reveal how the maternal

body becomes a symbolic site of loss, the waters La Llorona haunts show where that symbolism is anchored—a sacred, storied, and politically charged geography that remembers, resists, and records. Rivers, lakes, and riverbanks do not merely host her story; they shape it, carrying her voice across time and space. In particular, the lake of Tenochtitlan, tied to her earliest origins in pre-Columbian deities like Cihuacoatl, operates as both a spiritual and ecological site of loss, fertility, and resistance. In Indigenous cosmologies, as Mundy and Perdibon have shown, water is both generative and destructive, fluid and sacred. La Llorona embodies this duality, her body and voice extending from the river's edge to the archive, from ancient myth to colonial rupture. Her cry—"¡Ay, mis hijos!"—is more than lament; it is a sonic archive, a vessel of cultural memory that resists erasure. In its echo, we hear both the mourning of a mother and the survival of a people. She inhabits water as a liminal and sacred space, where ecological reverence meets histories of violence and where the living are called to remember. Through oral tradition, visual representation, and embodied geography, La Llorona persists—not as a static figure of folklore but as a living archive of loss, resilience, and resistance.

Even now, when I write her name, I feel her presence—mournful, unyielding. She is the mother I was warned about and the scholar I have become. Her cry has folded into my voice, reminding me that some stories do not end; they circulate, like water carried in the bone, moving through generations, demanding to be heard.

Endnotes

1. "The analysis of [La Llorona] demonstrates that she exercises an important persuasive function since she is the one who, through practices of seduction, and even loss of consciousness, 'changes the existential condition of drunks to abstainers after submerging them in the water or leads them to death after precipitating them into a ravine.' Tanya González also observes the descriptive coincidences between La Llorona and Cihuacóatl (the 'serpent woman' who appears in the chronicle of Sahagún and who carried out actions similar to those attributed to La Llorona in current discourse), and points out the meaning that water and a 'sacred space' such as the ravine acquire within the worldview of the pre-Hispanic world."

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed., Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. Edited by Joanna Lipking. Norton & Company, 1997.

Dennis, Flora. "Material Culture and Sound: A Sixteenth-Century Handbell." *Writing Material Culture History*. Edited by Giorgio Riello and Anne Gerritsen. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 151–57.

Douglas, Oliver. "Material Culture of Folklore: British Ethnographic Collections between 1890 and 1900." 2010. Linacre College, PhD dissertation.

Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*. Indiana University Press, 1980.

Fuentes, Marissa. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Gerritsen, Anne, and Giorgio Riello. "Spaces of Global Interactions: The Material Landscapes of Global History." *Writing Material Culture History*. Edited by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello. Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 111–33.

Jelin, Elizabeth. *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

León, Luis D. "La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.—Mexican Borderlands." University of California Press, 2004.

Massey, Doreen B. *For Space*. SAGE Publications, 2005.

Mundy, Barbara E. "Ecology and Leadership: Pantitlan and Other Erratic Phenomena." *The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahua World in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Edited by Jeanette Favrot Peterson and Kevin Terraciano. University of Texas Press, 2019, pp. 125–38.

Mundy, Barbara E. *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*. University of Texas Press, 2015.

Newman, Lucile F. *"Ophelia's Herbal." Economic Botany,* vol. 33, no. 2, 1979, pp. 227–32.

Perdibon, Anna. *Mountains and Trees, Rivers and Springs: Animistic Beliefs and Practices in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*. Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019.

Rose, Mary Beth. *"Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance."* Shakespeare Quarterly, vol. 42, no. 3, 1991, pp. 291–14.

Rovira, José Carlos, and Eva Valero Juan. "Introducción." *Mito, Palabra e Historia en la Tradición Literaria Latinoamericana*. Edited by José Carlos Rovira and Eva Valero Juan. Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert, 2013, pp. 9–30.

Saadia, Zoe. "Pre-Columbian Americas: Cihuacoatl, The Goddess of the Earth." Zoe Saadia, 27 July 2012, https://zoesaadia.com/historia-en-el-calmecac/cihuacoatl-the-goddess-of-the-earth/. Accessed 16 Aug. 2025.

Sahagún, Fray Bernardino de. "*Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, The School of American Research and the University of Utah, 2012.

Saint George, Robert. *"Material Culture in Folklife Studies." Oxford Handbook*

of Material Culture Studies. Edited by Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry. Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 123–49.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by A. R. Braunmuller. The Pelican Shakespeare, Penguin Books, 2001.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Duke University Press, 2003.

Trigg, Stephanie, and Anna Welch. "Objects, Material Culture and the History of Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Europe." *Emotions: History, Culture, Society*, vol. 7, 2023, pp. 1–8.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, Bloomsbury Collections, 2021.

Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

Winick, Stephen. "La Llorona: Roots, Branches, and the Missing Link from Spain." *Folklife Today*, Library of Congress, 28 Oct. 2021, blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2021/10/la-llorona-roots-branches-and-the-missing-link-from-spain/. Accessed 16 Aug. 2025.

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative