

**من الأمومة المنحرفة إلى الأمومة المصدومة نفسياً:
استعادة شخصية لا يورونا في رواية "لا يورونا: قصة**

حب" لـ Kathleen Culebro

**Motherhood to Traumatized Motherhood:
Reclaiming La Llorona in Kathleen
Culebro's La Llorona: A Love Story**

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الكلمات المفتاحية: لا يورونا، الأمومة المصدومة نفسياً، النسوية الشيكانية، إعادة تشكيل
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intersectionality.**

المخلص

للكاتبة كاثلين أندرسون كوليبرو (2002) *La Llorona: A Love Story* مسرحية تتناول هذه الدراسة بوصفها مراجعة نسوية تشيكانية لأسطورة لا يورونا المكسيكية. وبدلاً من الإطار التقليدي الذي يصور المرأة الباكية كأم منحرفة، تجادل الدراسة بأن المسرحية تعيد تخيل الأسطورة من خلال شخصية إيرما، المرأة المكسيكية العاملة التي تتشكل أمومتها تحت ضغوط الجندر والعرق والطبقة والسلطة الكولونيالية، لتجسد بذلك ما تصوغه الدراسة مفهوماً جديداً هو "الأمومة المصابة بالصدمة": حالة أمومية لا يقوم جوهرها على الاكتمال، بل على عودة الفقد المستعصي على المحو. وبالاعتماد على النسوية التشيكانية ونظرية ما بعد الاستعمار ودراسات الصدمة، يتتبع التحليل كيف يُنتج تهमيش إيرما وصمتها واستلاب طفلتها توزيعاً غير متكافئ للحرز ترفضه المسرحية في الختام. ففي الصورة النهائية، تمسك إيرما ريبوزو قرمزياً فارغاً، في إيماءة تجسد ما تسميه أوسترايكر بإعادة كتابة الأسطورة، محولة الأسطورة من حكاية انحراف إلى شهادة على الذاكرة الجمعية والمقاومة التشيكانية.

Abstract

The article explores *La Llorona: A Love Story*, by Kathleen Culebro (2002), as a Chicana feminist revision of the *La Llorona* myth; it claims that rather than portray the "weeping woman" as a negative representation of the mothers who deviated from the idealized version created by men, Culebro reinterprets this popular legend through the experiences of Irma. Irma is a working-class Mexican woman whose experience of motherhood is shaped by the social positions defined by the intersection of gender, race, and class as well as by colonial power. Irma's experience of motherhood exemplifies what happens to mothers who experience trauma. Mothers who suffer trauma are unable to resolve their loss and do not gain relief from their grief through positive experiences. This leads Culebro to demonstrate how motherhood is a socially constructed entity and shows how society perpetuates the suffering of mothers through both oppression and the perpetuation of the idea that motherhood is an inherently positive and valuable experience. The article further explores how Irma's marginalization, her continued silence, the appropriation of her child, and her resulting grief produce a disparity of grief within the play that Culebro rejects. Ostriker describes how Irma's holding of an empty red rebozo (a traditional Mexican shawl) functions as a form of revisionist myth-making that transforms the original story from one of deviance to one of collective remembrance and Chicana resistance.



Introduction

For centuries, La Llorona, the woman who walks the night crying and who has drowned her children, has haunted Mexico and the Chicano / a Diaspora in the cultural imaginary. Her grief is seen as a crime, and her body is viewed as a body of crime. But could it be that the crime is not the woman's, but the world which created her?

La Llorona: A Love Story (2002), written by Kathleen Culebro, tackles the issue of the myth of La Llorona and turns it into a dramatic performance. This play is set after NAFTA in Mexico, and retells the myth of La Llorona through the character Irma, an everyday working class woman whose maternal body reflects the struggles of gender, race, class and colonialism. It utilizes Chicana Feminism, most notably from Ana Castillo, who critiques the Llorona Complex, as well as Edward Said's Postcolonial critique and Cathy Caruth's Traumatic Theory, this article will discuss the theatrical transformation of the character from a deviant mother to what I am calling a traumatized mother, where the experience of motherhood is defined by the ongoing and physical presence of unfulfilled loss rather than an experience of lack of fulfillment.

The argument is structured in four sections. The first section deals with the myth itself, showing how Chicana feminism has developed this myth into a place for revisionist myth-making and for establishing a shared history. The second part will take the reader into Irma's world the world of the colonial household where "help" is a means of extracting wealth. The third part will include the story of how Irma's child was taken from her and will analyze how motherhood is affected by the difference in spoken grief of white women versus the silent grief expressed by the racialized woman. The fourth and final section of the argument will discuss Irma's physical embodiment of traditional knowledge through the final image of the empty, red rebozo the image is not intended to provide comfort, but to bear witness.

"This Is Not a Story of Jealousy": Revisionist Mythmaking and the Final Reclamation

Long considered a symbolic representation of the deviance of mothers and framed as part of Mexican or Chicana/x/a cultural tradition, the story of La Llorona has long existed within the framework of cautionary literature. In

the most traditional version of La Llorona, she is presented as overwhelming sadness at the loss of her drowned children; her despair becomes indistinguishable from acts of violence and her maternal body is defined by transgressions rather than nurturing. But what if this framing is actually a type of violence? What if La Llorona is not a monster at all, but rather, a witness to her loss and a testament to her despair? It is this very re-imagined notion of La Llorona, as well as the alternate view of La Llorona as a collective history of land seizure rather than an example of individual madness or psychosis, that is the goal of Kathleen Culebro's *La Llorona: A Love Story*. In this introductory portion of the play, I rely on Chicana feminist theories, including those developed by Alicia Ostriker (1982) and Ana Castillo (1994), to establish the piece as part of a larger critical effort aimed at recovering La Llorona from the systems that have condemned her throughout history.

The characters in the play do not use La Llorona just as a folklore figure that represents fear and superstition; instead, they give her a new meaning as a strong symbol of memory, loss, and cultural identity. The traditional La Llorona narrative represents her as a jealous mother or a mother who causes destruction; however, the new interpretation of La Llorona is understood through the Chicana Feminist perspective. This perspective reinterprets the myth of La Llorona, and the play creates an emotional and historical connection to the myth. The new interpretation is an example of revisionist mythmaking, as defined by Alicia Ostriker (1982) as "a way in which stories that are inherited from previous generations can be used for new purposes, where the new meaning has been placed inside an old vessel, as if to provide a new experience" (p. 72), allowing for cultural transformation or change through the existing structure of traditions. The play also offers a challenge to the Llorona Complex as theorised by Ana Castillo (1994): a cultural system that disciplines women who do not conform to the idealised view of motherhood; as women who reject the deviant mother must reclaim La Llorona as a place of collective memory and opposition.

This play changes the classical story of La Llorona by telling it from a perspective that does not depict her merely as a jealous or destructive mother. It also takes away the individual moral framework previously used to define the narrative, creating a contextual framework within which historical domination and conquest have taken place, as shown in the next portion of text:

She grieves for the child that she did have with the Spanish man, for he lied to her (the Spaniard). In the moment of rage, she killed the child by drowning it; however, for all eternity she has walked the streets of the night



crying out for her child, as well as the children of Mexico. No matter how long it has been since the child was drowned, she still sees the exact same scenario relived as the conqueror comes and makes false promises to the people. It is always the children who are the first to pay for the broken promises. This isn't a story of jealousy; it is an entire race of people who were conquered and reduced in value.

(Culebro, 2002, pp. 33-34)

In addition to retelling and thus preserving aspects of the mythical story, this narrative also serves to re-understand the mythical story through a new understanding of colonialism's historical contexts of violence. While it relates many of the same themes as the original, including betrayal and maternal separation, Irma's retelling of this story situates it within a broader historical context of colonialism's destruction of Indigenous peoples through domination and unwarranted promises of support. Through this lens, Irma also demonstrates that the suffering of children is not an isolated and unique event, but rather a continually occurring outcome of colonial domination's unequal power relations. The retelling of this story is therefore a reoccupying of the myth, preserving its original structure but transforming its moral framework. "This is not a story about envy, it is a story of an entire people being conquered," Irma asserts emphatically. The meaning of this story is thus completely different than that found in the original myth. In the past, it has generally been accepted that the female perspective of emotion (anger) displays and expresses unfettered anger and explosive behavior as an individual moral shortcoming; however, we can now view that same uncontrollable rage as the product of structural violence: specifically by focusing on the unfulfilled promise of a conqueror, repeated historical cycles of children suffering as a long history of shared experiences, and the narrative of the myth(s) becomes a collective narrative of devastation rather than an individual account of devastation. The container still remains the same, the liquid contained within is simply different.

The myth of La Llorona also serves as collective memory; thus, the past lives through us, and we experience its effects today. La Llorona represents a collective memory that acknowledges and remembers the impact of colonial violence across generations. This view is consistent with postcolonial theories of memory that illustrate how cultural narratives maintain and reflect the structures of historical oppression and domination in our experiences today. The shift of the narrative from an individual's jealousy to a collective's conquest in Irma's recounting relocates the point of violence from the mother to the colonial structure. La Llorona is no

longer simply a warning for mothers; she witnesses the extent of destruction caused by the conquest.

The analysis of how Culebro's play transforms this critical framework into dramatic action necessitates turning from the myth to the character through which that myth is reimagined. Irma does not just inherit La Llorona; she experiences the conditions that make the mythical figure necessary to her existence: those conditions are shaped through colonization, the nature of gender-based labor, and the illusion of benevolence. It is to these conditions and to the environment in which Irma lives that we will now turn our attention.

"She Warns of Danger" The Maternal Body and the Colonial Logic of Extraction

Kathleen Culebro's *La Llorona: A Love Story* states "help" does not equate to "solidarity"; it is simply an extractive structure that appears on the surface to be a practical response to mutual needs. The story begins with two Americans, Jeffrey and Liz, who want to open their fast-food restaurant chain in the newly created NAFTA Mexico; however, they agree to lease their property to Irma and Carlos (a Mexican couple) who continue living on and maintaining the property. There is no reciprocity between the parties involved (Jeffrey, Liz, Irma, and Carlos), rather, they are engaging in a slow, methodical logic of appropriation. The "logic of appropriation" centers around Irma as a working class Mexican woman who is burdened with the costs associated with this agreement (her body serves as maternal to absorb the costs associated with this agreement). The ultimate outcome is that everyone involved (i.e., the three parties involved) benefits; Irma is the only party who does not reap the benefits of this agreement.

Jeffrey's economic discourse is the belief system which grounds this asymmetry, expressing this concept through the language of consumption. Jeffrey claims that "all 120 million of them," meaning the residents of Mexico, "are hungry for American products" (Culebro, 2002, p. 15). Thus, Jeffrey creates a homogeneous and culturally uniform market out of an entire nation defined by its absence of that for which he claims it "hungry." He further states that these people want "to be like us, exactly like us." In this way, Jeffrey defines American culture as the universal standard with which to measure cultures of difference (p. 15). Much of Edward Said's (1978) work about Orientalism describes this process of defining the non-Western 'subject', or consumer, as an object of discursive production through our constructions and myths of those who exist within a dependent position as an object of need, thereby creating the need for intervention as assistance. Jeffrey articulates this ideology in theoretical terms. Irma experiences this ideology in her daily life. The "hunger" he creates for an



imagined population translates into a demand for physical exertion, for labour, and for a specific living environment each of these characteristics of her female identity represents.

Rhetoric to logic, logic to daily life; it is that logic of extraction that penetrates daily life; it is the way in which extraction enters into & saturates everyday transactions. Jeffrey observes, "Everybody has maids [in Mexico]," thus normalizing hierarchy as culture and not as structural inequality (Culebro, 2002, p. 7). After the reduction is rendered, Jeffrey uses metaphor to explain domestic workers: "they are like microwave ovens and answering machines; you don't think you need them until you get them and can't live without them" (p. 7). His use of the metaphor for domestic workers, which reduces them to the functional, demonstrates how humans are measured only by utility. This process has a long history; Frantz Fanon (1961) wrote about it many years before this play was created: colonial discourse converts the colonized into object, being a body without interiority. However, the text does not allow abstraction to persist. The "microwave" that Jeffrey calls upon is, in his eyes, a woman who not only irons for his wife, but also does everything else around the house and is also available to him constantly. The convenience he enjoys is her exhaustion from using too many microwaves to heat up his food all day every day. The difference between the physical and the ideological disappears when referring specifically to her individual existence.

A Colonial house does not demonstrate a neutral way to organize or use it to show dominance and power over others. Jeffrey explains: "We need to continue with our lives very different." 'Do not touch any areas'; (Culebro, 2002, page 40). This set up does give you intimacy when you are close to each other, but it does require you to set up a lot of boundaries on how you are going to be close to each other. In this space, there has been a separation of differences not recognized, and set in place by the design. For Irma, she sees the boundaries not only as an idea, but also as a form of geolocation; e.g., she and the American couple are both in the same physical area (rooms), use the same cleansing supplies, prepare the same food, and in this shared area there she is very different. She is a host and servant; a home and care giver; and present, but invisible.

Irma absorbs. Carlos has faith in that theory. In his viewpoint, mutual gain exists not because of Irma's lack of utterance, but because of Carlos' momentary positive attitude towards their return to life. "You don't understand!" Carlos screams, "We will be able to live again!" (Culebro, 2002, p. 51). There are many changes, and it is strange how weeks ago they appeared to have everything, and how I thought I had nothing; now, I have lost all sense of how fortunate we really are" (p. 53). Irma and Carlos'

relationship illustrates a temporary return of agency, based on nothing more than Carlos' view of his dependence as an opportunity. Cherríe Moraga's (1983) conception of "internalized oppression" describes this relationship between Carlos and Irma: domination happens as much by what one thinks as it does through coercion by outside forces. Carlos' sense of "luck" represents the degree to which colonial logic has shaped the way he thinks about what he desires. Irma, on the other hand, is not even touched by this illusion.

Her experience of "help" has always been material labor, exhaustion, the continuous surrender of her own resources. She does not believe in the promise. She simply endures it.

The difference between Irma and Carlos is not just economic - it is also a huge gap in how visibility is distributed. Carlos's pain is not only experienced vocally but also by people seeing him suffer, and by the fact that he has lost his job and has to swallow his pride while he washes cars. Interestingly, he also says that his experience of being degraded while he washes a car by a man named Jeffrey is degrading because this man thinks there is only one way to use a bucket, and because Carlos has a college education, he should not be asked to do something as simple as wash a car; "Como si sólo hay una forma correcta de lavar un coche. Tengo una educación universitaria. Lavar un pinche carro no es cirugía cerebral - ni siquiera para un hombre como yo" (Culebro, 2002, p. 18). This encounter definitely has a racial aspect to it; washing the car has become an act of degradation for Carlos. He reacts with defiance against this experience - his protests are theatrical, intentional, and he does this because the deeper cost of precarity for Irma has already been recorded - he displays his outrage through her silence.

For Irma, silence signifies neither a lack of action nor a lack of agency. Rather, like the metaphor Nepantla (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 78) used to define one's mental state of being 'torn between ways,' Irma exists in constant negotiation between two cultural worlds; the host and the servant; between survival and preserving her sense of dignity. She survives by enduring within the contradiction of silence and agency. Therefore, she engages in a daily battle to tolerate the tension of uncertainty. In contrast to Carlos' dramatic resistance, Irma continues to negotiate her existence invisibly, continuously and in deep solitude.

To properly understand where Irma stands requires rejecting the convenience of the single dimension or axis. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality supplies us with just that mechanism. Oppression, according to Crenshaw, is not one-dimensional; rather, it comes in layers. The intersectional experience is "bigger than racism and sexism"



(Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Irma's situation is not influenced solely by her being a woman, or Mexican, or working class, but by the coming together of those dimensions. Irma's work as a cleaner, an ironer, and a caretaker are not just exploited economically but are one simultaneous act of being gendered, racialized, and classed. The boundaries separating productive and reproductive labor are completely blurred. Irma is responsible for managing the household. Irma provides her husband with emotional support, and ultimately, as the following sections will show, she is expected to provide her child in response to her employer's emotional needs. "The danger," as Moraga (1983) said, "is in failing to recognize the particularity of the oppression" (p. 52). The play depicts this particularity with absolute clarity.

The word "help" misrepresents the relationship of power and domination since it represents as charity something that is merely a means of keeping people subordinate to the dominating class. Carlos is able to hang onto a short-lived and fleeting sense of control through the illusion of dependency. Irma, on the other hand, never has this illusion; her experience is not intermediated by expectations and dreams but by the sheer physicality of her work. Because help is discussed in the language of opportunity, it makes it less socially and politically acceptable - therefore also makes the social inequality that is the foundation of dependency appear to be something that is normal and acceptable while at the same time obscuring the violence that creates and perpetuates this social inequality. However, it is precisely because Irma has less faith in the promises associated with the idea of help that she is also the person upon whom the play draws the most heavily to continue to move the symbolic representation of La Llorona forward through her physical, labor and silence. What will arise out of a rupture in silence, an occurrence when the maternal body, pulled away from every attachment, transforms into a locus of inexpressible suffering? With this conundrum in mind, the following section will address both this topic and the nature of motherhood as a form of trauma.

“Leave Luz with her: Traumatized Motherhood and the Appropriation of the Racialized child

Motherhood in *La Llorona: A Love Story* is not a neutral state; it is shaped by the powers that will ultimately shape its expression: patriarchal, colonial, and racial. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between motherhood as an institution (1976) and motherhood as a personal experience. This distinction establishes the basis for understanding the two maternal bodies

staged in the play: the first maternal body (Liz) is constrained, protected, and surveilled — an object of patriarchally defined care that disguises control and the lack of choice as concern. The second maternal body (Irma) is not permitted such parental protection; instead, Irma's maternal body is simply extracted; her labour, her privacy, and her child are not treated as things that should be protected but rather as things that can be exploited. For Liz, the institutional demand made by Rich's theory that women should defer their own desires in order to meet the needs of others develops as a crisis over time during the play. For Irma, there is no unfolding crisis; it is an enduring state of being.

The asymmetric characteristics of this scene are expressed visually in the "blindfold" sequence of the play. Jeffrey's insistence that Liz is giving birth "here, of all places" (Culebro 2002: 27), means that she is surrounded by people who do not look like her, implying that the anxiety about the baby being born here is racially based. In response, he has Liz wear a blindfold; when Liz protests, "I can't live like this. Please, Jeffrey, don't do this to me," Jeffrey uses the language of concern in his response: "I'm doing this for you and for the baby. Trust me. This is the best thing. We have to think of the baby." The blindfold not only limits Liz's ability to see, but also limits her ability to be near racial "others." In this way, the blindfold regulates Liz's proximity to other "races," and denies her the ability to look at the "other" who causes Jeffrey to be "offended." The black blindfold scene presents the clearest visual representation of the asymmetric nature of maternal experiences determined by race. Faced with the reality of pregnancy while in a foreign environment where the local people are very different than Jeffrey and Liz, Jeffrey creates a physical barrier between himself and his wife's belly and the outside world. "This is for you and for the baby," he tells Liz repeatedly, adding, "Trust me; this is the best thing to do" (Culebro, 2002, p. 27). Liz's blindfold project is an example of the materialization of what Adrienne Rich (1976) calls or labels the institutional framework of motherhood, that is, the way in which women's bodies are controlled by others under the pretense of being protected. Control is maintained by caring for someone else. However, it is not what is revealed about Liz, but about Irma's social location that is critical to this moment. Irma, who is present in the same location as Liz, does not need a blindfold to provide her with distance from Jeffrey and Liz. She has been excluded from the private sphere occupied by an American husband and wife, not by material barriers, but by the invisible barriers of race, class, and servitude. She sees it all, but she does not see it all. For Irma, invisibility is not temporary, nor is it a consequence of an encounter with a crisis; rather, it is the structural, permanent condition of the maternal body which must labor in this way of invisibility.



This asymmetry is further exemplified when looking at the time after birth. Jeffrey's lengthy recounting of Liz's labor over 22 hours, including the muted heartbeat, the surgery performed on Liz's body during this time, and the shout, "Bring my baby back!", has been interpreted as a scene of staggering loss (Culebro, 2002, p.52). Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is experienced when the event exceeds immediate comprehension and all ventriloquism of the mother's body is a reflection of her being controlled by the very person who removes her from the family. In this case, the trauma is not how the event occurred but rather where the event goes, as illustrated by the fact that White women and maternal suffering are given narrative weight when telling, hearing, or elaborating on their experiences, but Irma's grief is never given such narrative space. Irma's suffering is felt through Liz's appropriation of her child, Luz, as a therapeutic object to assist in her healing process, but it is never vocalized and instead exists in silence. In witnessing the birth of Luz, all of Irma's pain is experienced in silence. In the objects of domestic life. It will find expression only in the final stage image, where Irma holds the empty crimson rebozo a gesture that speaks because it refuses to explain.

What this dramatic presentation, therefore, conveys is not only the differentiation between two women's experiences of losing their mother but also the inequitable distribution of the ability to identify, grieve and process one's loss. The absence of Irma's mourning is not notable. Irma's grieving is instead located within structural silence; it's there but is subordinated to labor requirements, racial inferiority and/or the obligation for her to provide her services and body to whoever pays for her services or gives her money. This is the basis for what the study refers to as "traumatized motherhood." It's not only losing something that's experienced; it's losing something that can't be talked about - it's there but it is left void of a hearing because of the structures of power in which it occurs. The loss of the child does not end at the stillbirth; it continues, with painful exactness, into the theft of that child by someone else. Jeffrey's command to Irma is succinct, pragmatic and devastating:

"It has been helping her so much to be able to hold a baby. What a godsend. Leave Luz with her as much as you can. It cheers her up" (Culebro, 2002, p. 53).

While expressions like "helping" and "cheers her up" are described positively, the transaction is fundamentally about colonialism. In this sense, the Mexican child becomes an object of therapy and a living embodiment of a remedy for grief that is different from that of her mother. Specifically, Ana Castillo's (1994) critique of the Llorona Complex

applies directly to this scenario because the racialized mother is still expected to sacrifice, lend, or yield. Both her body and her child are thereby already occupied by others. Irma is therefore asked to do both labor and lend her child. For Irma, motherhood is not about being protected: it is something that can be taken from her.

Following this substitution, Liz's awareness becomes the very place where trauma expresses itself in the most direct manner possible. In a discussion with Jeffrey the lines between the missing and the present child are completely blurred.

LIZ: I think this will crush Irma's heart. She is very fond of both of us - in particular, Marina. JEFFREY: Ginger, try to understand that this child is just pretend, and as much as it has been fun to play along..... LIZ; I do not think Irma can take any more - I'm afraid that she will get too attached to Marina. When she has Marina in her arms, I have a very bad feeling about it.

JEFFREY: Their baby is named Luz. LIZ: I already knew that...Poor Luz, what's happened is so terrible. We should hold off on letting them go until Irma has fully recovered emotionally. It would be such a cruel thing to do to them to let them go now.

(Culebro, 2002, p. 56-57)

Liz has not completed the process of grieving for her loss. She has recreated her own reality by "blurring" the line between one child and another, losing sight of who Irma really is while becoming extremely over-identified with Irma, so she is far away from being in touch with Irma. Jeffrey's "correction" that "Their baby is named Luz" is factually true and, on its own, serves no therapeutic function. Caruth (1996) argues that traumatic experiences do not occur in a precise-time frame or in a coherent form. Instead, trauma represents "the emergence of a series of repeated and uncontrolled experiences... and the gradual emergence of intrusive elements (hallucination) and other forms of intrusive phenomena... over time" (Caruth (1996) p. 11). As a result, Liz sees the lost Marina and the living Luz as one entity, while at the same time has become absorbed into a social narrative of white people grieving over a lost child. The delineation of acting-out versus working-through found in LaCapra (2001) adds further clarity to the prior conclusion of this section. Liz is an example of someone who has experienced acting-out in their life due to being forced into acting-out mode as a result of having experienced a Trauma and being unable to separate the lost from what still exists. "Irma will be devastated" (Is projection, not empathy) Is a symptom of Liz's Grief, and has yet to be Past-narratively integrated into Liz's present life.



Irma, however, occupies a different traumatic modality entirely. Her grief is not spoken. It is not projected. It is not narratively elaborated. The play gives Irma no monologue of disintegration, no scene of psychological collapse. Her trauma is structured not as rupture but as endurance. She continues to work. She continues to serve. She continues to hold her child, her labor, her home while the architecture of colonial appropriation closes around her. Her silence is not the absence of grief. It is grief's alternative form: a loss that cannot be spoken because it is subsumed under the demands of labor, racial subordination, and the expectation that her body and her child remain perpetually available for the needs of the dominant.

What the play dramatizes, then, is an asymmetrical distribution of grief itself. White maternal suffering is vocalized, witnessed, narratively centered even, at its most extreme, ventriloquized by a male voice that appropriates it for heroic narrative. Mexican maternal suffering is performed but not narrated. Irma's grief finds no words. It finds no listener. This asymmetry is not incidental to the play's structure. It is the play's deepest critical insight into the operation of traumatized motherhood a condition shaped not only by the fact of loss but by the systematic refusal, along racial and colonial lines, of the right to mourn.

How does a mother survive what Irma has endure? The play does not answer through the narratives that surround white maternal suffering, but through another kind of knowledge one embedded in the folk practices that the colonial mindset dismisses: the needle, the pin, the rebozo. It is the knowledge of belief and it is to this knowledge that the final section turns.

"I Believe in Her": Embodied Knowledge, Countermemory, and the Final Reclamation

The basis of Irma's connection to La Llorona is about faith, not trauma. At the play's outset, when colonialism has not fully unveiled itself, Irma is already influenced by her perception of the legend of La Llorona as a continuing living reality with agency to provide information, caution, and guidance. Rather than representing an inability to understand real life, Irma's conviction in La Llorona embodies knowledge. This knowledge will serve as the foundation upon which Irma will base her eventual reclaiming of La Llorona.

Carlos is going crazy, as shown by the opening exchange of the play in which Carlos and another character are put in opposition to each other

in a very concise manner, based on two ways to interpret the concept of 'real.'

CARLOS: ¡No, mi amor! Es solo viento o un gato en celo. IRMA: Yo sí creo. Y también creo que tú eres un gran arquitecto. CARLOS: (cobardemente) Más cuentos de hadas.

(Culebro, 2002, p. 3)

The four lines highlight not only a difference of opinion over what's making sounds in the night but the two epistemologies of Carlos and Irma. For him, rationally the sound is caused by either the wind or a critter. And for her, he might probably be critiquing other people's belief in the supernatural (such as the wind) because he's better educated or has an easier time interpreting what's happening. Specifically, in her mind, she accepts both, comparing her belief in the existence of the woman he drew (who created the building) to her belief in Carlos' genius as an architect, indicating that both are valid ways of knowing. In effect, by framing his rejection of her perception of the sound as "more fairy tales," he is attempting to end the conversation. The myth, according to Irma, is not just an expression of the past; it is a channel of communication, an expression that warns and shows the form of a danger that is not fully formed or identifiable yet. By stating that La Llorona is "trying to tell you something," Irma shows that myths are not just about remembering events but also about providing information.

Maylei Blackwell (2011) proposed the concept of "retrofitted memory," which provides us insight into what Irma is doing. Retrofitted memory is an example of counter-memory which takes "fragments from prior histories" to create contemporary forms of consciousness (p. 95). Irma's statement about La Llorona being alive and well is more than an act of superstition; it has to do with activating the collective memory and telling the contemporary experience through patterns of unresolved mourning from the past. The fairy tales that Carlos considers to be "meaningless" are actually the ongoing manifestations of a memory that has been passed along for centuries through conquest and separation from the maternal nurturer (the mother figure). This is the same memory that Carlos is referencing when he states that his mother tells him the history of the original act depicted in the La Llorona story. Irma's argument expresses



a belief held by the playwright as well. Not only does the playwright want the audience to see the myth as a significant reference for more than just a series of abnormal individual events, but also as available to use today and into the future.

According to Irma's understanding of the world, she believes that beliefs are not just ideas but that they actually take shape in the physical world through actions. Beliefs become tangible in this way. One clear example of this is found in Irma's use of the needle test to determine if the baby Liz is expecting is male or female. This example demonstrates the merger of the diagnostic and folk traditions since she doesn't distinguish between these two differing traditions.

[Irma] performs the test on Liz to determine that "it's a girl... if it were a boy, it would move back and forth" (Culebro, 2002, p. 35).

Irma recognizes evidence of the needle moving as proof that a medical scan actually took place. In addition, she also does the pinning ceremony so that her body becomes an instrument of negotiation with agents that are not visible to the naked eye; in this way, this type of faith is a physical act that uses the body as a practice instead of using the mind as a means of generating an idea about faith. Irma's relationship with folklore is informed by how Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) defines embodied knowledge as (*la facultad*) as concrete perceptions of reality outside of the rational system; therefore, Irma's function concerning folklore is as a source of action rather than a collection of symbols used to interpret reality. The rebozo, needle and pin are not only words used figuratively; they are also physical tools we have used to assist us in surviving in a world that is inherently unpredictable and where we are often culturally displaced. Each object has the same value as other methods needed to navigate a universe of unpredictable variables, including how we use the manipulative and domesticated processes that we all experience.

Liz, as she observes the Mexican woman's ritualistic practices through an anthropological lens, absorbs Irma's beliefs as she begins to understand them as true. After the baby is born, Liz finds herself in awe:

"That baby looks like me. Oh my God, it came true. She was right... Everything she said has come true. The woodpecker came and brought me good news... I found out I was pregnant" (Culebro, 2002, p. 24).

The development here is remarkable. Liz does more than appreciate Irma's intellect from afar; she incorporates it into her life, correlates her own memories with signs that have been shown to her in the past, and uses a cultural basis to create an interpretive framework for herself. Liz's early history creates the opportunity for her to exchange with the folk and develop a new cultural identity but does not change the fact that the exchange of cultural knowledge is being performed unevenly and asymmetrically. In Liz's eyes, folklore is an additional magical enhancement to her lived experience and validates Liz's existing desires. For Irma, on the other hand, it is a method of existing. All of the objects such as needles, pins, and rebozos, will not only exist as decorations upon Irma's existence; they also form the very comprise of how she manoeuvres her existence.

This difference brings us back to the issue of reclaiming what was lost. On their own, Irma's experiences as an old folklorist do not change the myth of La Llorona, but for her they create a foundation on which to change it. Through the past, Irma continues to preserve a countermemory of native plus folk practices and beliefs which cannot fully be accessed through colonialism because they are located in gesture, ritual and how the body knows that Irma has existed prior to colonization. Therefore, it would seem that either way, Irma has not given voice to the true sense that La Llorona has to give in the play. Throughout Irma's part of the play, she has spoken through her own personal experience in her own words, but it is once again through her body that she ultimately expresses what La Llorona has to give in the play. At the end of the play, the new understanding of La Llorona has been defined not through word, but through visual images, gestures and embodiment, and the final stage image is perhaps one of the most memorable images in contemporary theatre:

"As the light fades... She is dressed in white and holds a crimson rebozo as if it were a baby... She drops all but the end of the rebozo and we see that there is no baby" (Culebro, 2002, p. 60).

The image is devastating in its simplicity. Irma, dressed in white which represents the "weeping woman" of legend, holds the rebozo as if it is the body rather than just fabric. Her gesture is maternal, protective and nurturing. The soul of this image is the shocking realization that there is not a child. The absence of a child in this image is void; it is not filled,



resolved or transcended; it is simply held. Cathy Caruth (1996) states that traumatic experiences are experiences that cannot be represented in the time they are experienced but can later be re-experienced indirectly through fragmented, embodied forms. She demonstrates how the absence of a child cannot be represented in the traditional sense; it can only be 'acted out'. Dominick LaCapra (2001) states that acting-out is the process whereby an individual compulsively and repeatedly acts out a traumatic past. This further clarifies why Irma is holding the rebozo. Irma's holding of the rebozo does not signal closure to her; it signals a return to the trauma of losing a child. She is not moving forward in her grieving process but rather repeating the poor memory as an act of grief. She is reliving it. Yet this reliving is not, like Liz's, a projection that erases the other. It is a performance that makes absence visible and, in making it visible, makes it grievable.

Beyond simply being a symbolic object, a rebozo is not a substitute for a child; it will not become a substitute for a child. It represents not just the presence of the child but the absence of the child, and as this study has demonstrated through multiple sections, a material trace of an experience of mothering that was traumatic. The rebozo is an example of how trauma can exist in one's body (Lühe, 2025), as we have seen in previous sections of this study. Therefore, in this last photograph of Irma as a mother, Irma has created an archive of her loss through the way she uses her body and the cloth, which embody gesture and indicatively connect to one another and to her narrative, rather than as traditional narratives that are integrated into the child through the use of narrative alone. The rebozo is red; red symbolizes life, the blood of life, and the birth of life; and the rebozo also symbolizes emptiness. These opposing qualities of the color (representing life) and the shape (holding nothing) create the tension experienced by traumatized mothers: they have lost their child but continue to feel an attachment; they visibly mourn and demonstrate this loss continuously without ever completing that mourning process.

This last image garner's an enormous amount of effect at the very end of this play is the evolution the play itself went through before this moment took place. Kathleen Culebro changed her original version of the play after its New York Premiere by making the character La Llorona an onstage character, (i.e., visible) to at New York's second premiere she

changed the character of La Llorona to be absent (i.e., invisible) “La Llorona was an offstage Character, and was made an unseen presence suggested by light and sound.” Culebro cited in Fowler, 2007. The change made from being visible to being an absent character reflects the play’s deepest thematic logic. La Llorona transforms from being visible to being absent, being present to being a trace, and being a character to being a condition. Everything about the play that remains will not be a ghost, just an absence that haunts. The empty rebozo (a shawl type garment or large piece of cloth) is a visual counterpart to this revision: it is a presence made noticeable only by its unwillingness to be filled.

The transition from Irma's monologue to the last moment of silence in the play has dismantled Llorona Complex while reappropriating the myth of Llorona as a source of chicana resistance. Irma is not a monstrous mother; rather, she is a mother grieving. Her grief represents more than just herself and is not merely a personal or emotional dysfunction; it is rooted in history, as well as being collective in nature. The grief she exhibits is the grief of a race that has been conquered and devalued, which she previously expressed. Culebro transforms the myth from a moral failure framework to the basis of historical trauma, creating a cultural re-imagining, from a racially differentiated mother challenging power systems, to the silence following her words when they no longer suffice.



Conclusion

This research concludes by showing Culebro's play does not just retell the legend of La Llorona rather it re-occupies the legend of the weeping woman, who has long served as a cultural means of controlling the behavior of deviant women; the weeping woman has a history that continues through representations on stage of a colonial narrative. Irma is not a 'bad' mother but rather she is a 'wounded' mother and the empty red rebozo she holds in the last scene of the play does not represent merely loss but an absence that cannot be erased by time. There is no consolation to be found in the play rather it raises questions such as "how can I carry an absence that cannot be filled?", and "how can the pain of motherhood, as affected by colonialism and racial violence, be articulated?" What this research describes as 'traumatized motherhood' is not simply a diagnosis. The physical survival of the mother is evident in the way in which she carries the wound; she listens to the narrative of the myth; she eventually stands in silence. She serves as a witness to the event. Resistance exists in the form of this silent witness – not through an act of victory – but through the oral testimony – not through sound representations but rather through the dynamism of the physical presence (silent witness) that does not have to erase itself.

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