A Country Full of Lloronas: La Llorona as a Protest Symbol Against Enforced Disappearances in Mexico

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Abstract

La Llorona, or the Weeping Woman, is perhaps the most famous figure of Mexican supernatural folklore. This murderous mother turned into a restless spirit has traditionally been used as a cautionary tale for children; however, she has acquired a new meaning in present-day Mexico. The war against drug cartels that began in 2006 has resulted in an unprecedented wave of violence. The country is currently facing an epidemic of enforced disappearances with thousands of citizens who are detained by the authorities and are never seen again.

Since the Mexican government has failed to address this crisis, activists are raising their voices to help bring justice and closure to the families of the victims. La Llorona has become a symbol of their struggle. This thesis explores how Mexican activists and artists transform La Llorona and turn her into an appealing symbol of protest against enforced disappearance, and how, in doing so, they challenge patriarchal values and colonialism.

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Last but most definitely not least, to my wonderful partner, Ramón, for his unconditional love and support.

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Interviews Conducted

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Name	Date	Location
Nayeli Cortés Castillo	June 19th, 2019	Sanborns Café, Villa de Cortés, Mexico City
Daniela Infante Castillo	June 19th, 2019	Sanborns Café, Villa de Cortés, Mexico City
Jil Love	June 20th, 2019	Interview conducted over Skype. Interviewee resides in Los Angeles, California.
Mari Sainz	June 24 th, 2019	Bosque de Chapultepec, Mexico City
Guadalupe Vallarta Cisneros	August 3rd, 2019	Starbucks, Tabacalera, Mexico City
Luis Infante Castillo	August 24th, 2019	CENART, Churubusco, Mexico City.
Alejandro Capultitla	August 24th, 2019	CENART, Churubusco, Mexico City.
María Luisa Castillo	August 24th, 2019	CENART, Churubusco, Mexico City.

Atl Martínez	August 24th, 2019	CENART, Churubusco, Mexico City.
Julia Klug	December 26th, 2019	Calzada de los Misterios, Mexico City
Korina Ramírez	December 26th, 2019	Calzada de los Misterios, Mexico City

Introduction

Figure 1. Activist Mari Sainz dressed as La Llorona. Taken at Bosque de Chapultepec, Mexico City. July, 2019 (photo by Mariana Esquivel)

The legend of La Llorona (the Weeping Woman) is one of the best-known pieces of folk narrative within the Mexican oral tradition. The basic premise of the story consists of a woman who kills her children and whose remorseful spirit is condemned to wander the earth, crying for

her sins. Every other part of the story: her identity, her motivation, the number of children she had, the way she killed them, and how she died is open for debate and negotiation.

Growing up, I became familiarized with a version of the legend that closely resembles one collected by Fernando Horcasitas and Douglas Butterworth (1963):

> La Llorona was the daughter of a Spaniard and a Mexican Indian. She fell in love with a Spaniard and married him. They had two children. The Spaniard had another woman, and told his wife, 'You are no good. You have inferior Indian blood.' In despair, she killed her children to see if they really had different blood. Then she threw them in the river. Now she goes crying, 'Ay mis hijos!' (215).

Unlike many other Mexican children who heard the story from their family members, I encountered the legend during elementary school in a children's book on Mexican legends and traditions. The story had a profound impact on me when some of my classmates stated that La Llorona was real and that people they knew had seen her or heard her cries. Ever since then, this ghostly presence became a figure that inspired fear and fascination in me.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the contemporary reading of La Llorona within the current Mexican sociopolitical context, specifically within enforced disappearances. While as noted above, La Llorona manifests in several different ways, one of her defining aspects seems to be the murder of her offspring. Nevertheless, in present-day Mexico, she has become a symbol of protest and solidarity for parents whose sons have gone missing as a result of government violence.

When I first encountered her used in this way I was puzzled. I came across a newspaper article that covered the protest of forty-three women dressed up as La Llorona in solidarity with the parents whose sons have disappeared. At first glance I understood the appeal of a grieving

mother to generate empathy towards the parents who are searching for their missing sons. However, to me La Llorona remained a villain who had committed a horrible crime. Therefore, this work explores how performers transform La Llorona and imbue new meaning in her to communicate their message.

To do so, it is necessary to provide an overview of the current situation in Mexico. Since 2006, the country has experienced an unprecedented rise of violence caused by the "war on drugs" strategy implemented by former president Felipe Calderón. This strategy entailed taking the army and the navy out to the streets to fight against drug cartels. However, empowering the military forces resulted not just in more violence - according to Reuters[1], The Washington Post[2] and the Wall Street Journal[3] the estimated number of violent homicides from 2006 to 2018 amounted to 250,000 victims, it also created a vast array of new issues. Enforced disappearances are one of the most alarming.

This crime is defined by the United Nations as "the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State".[4] Soldiers and law enforcement officers were authorized to detain whomever they considered a potential suspect of drug trafficking. This allowed them to operate with impunity. According to The New York

[1] Anthony Esposito, "Explainer: Mexico's Week of Bloodshed. What Is Going On?" *Reuters*, October 18, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence-sinaloa-cartel-explai-idUSKBN1WX2P5
[2] José Luis Pardo, "Opinión: 13 Años y 250 000 Muertos: Las Lecciones No Aprendidas En Mexico," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2019/10/28/aos-y-muertos-las-lecciones-no-aprendidas-en-mexico/
[3] José de Córdoba, Juan Montes, and Yael Martinez. 2018. "'It's a Crisis of Civilization in Mexico.' 250,000 Dead. 37,400 Missing." WSJ. Wall Street Journal. November 14, 2018. https://www.wsj.com/articles/its-a-crisis-of-civilization-in-mexico-250-000-dead-37-400-missing-1542213374.
[4] United Nations, *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 2010,* https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/IntConventionEnforcedDisappearance.aspx

Times,[5] the number of enforced disappearances in Mexico is estimated to be at least 61,000 victims since 2006.

The disappearance of students from the rural community of Ayotzinapa, who were studying to become teachers, has become an emblematic case of this crime. On September 26, 2014, the students vanished on their way to Mexico City. Ironically, they were on their way to protest government-related violence. The case received unprecedented media coverage. Authorities maintained that members of organized crime kidnapped and murdered the students; however, not enough evidence has been provided to support this claim. Thus, the parents of the students continue to search for their missing sons up to this day.

La Llorona comes into play with this case since she has been present in protests and other artistic manifestations in solidarity with the parents from Ayotzinapa. This thesis focuses on two different performances. The first one is the protest of the forty-three Lloronas that took place in Mexico City in 2017. It consisted of forty-three women dressed up as La Llorona who walked along Avenida Madero, one of the main streets of Mexico City, while holding pictures of the forty-three missing students. The second one is the 2018 edition of the theatre play *La Llorona de Cuemanco: Justice for the Fallen*. This play was dedicated to the forty-three missing students and incorporated visual motifs into the makeup of the artists to build a bridge between the legend and the disappeared.

Both performances reinterpret La Llorona in ways that make her resonate with the cause they are protesting. My work consists of both scholarly research and ethnographic fieldwork. Throughout this thesis I provide an overview on the scholarship on La Llorona, her origins and conflation with other legendary and historical figures, as well as her jump into popular culture.

[5] Paulina Villegas, "A New Toll in Mexico's Drug War: More than 61,000 Vanished." *The New York Times*, January 6, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/americas/mexico-drug-war-death-toll.html.

This will illustrate how the legend transcended oral tradition and how mass media played a role in its dissemination.

While my parents never used La Llorona to frighten me into behaving, for many children, the legend is told as a cautionary tale. Since she wanders at night, they should avoid staying out late and risking an encounter with the ghost. “There comes La Llorona, behave yourself ” (Castro 2001, 140; my translation) is a common expression to enact verbal social control through a frightful figure of folklore (Widdowson 1977) in many Mexican households.

Furthermore, the drowning of her children frequently associates La Llorona with bodies of water. Thus, she is said to be seen wandering near rivers, lakes or even the sea. In these cases, the story prevents people from getting close to water at night, regardless of their age. As part of her research on oral tradition in the Northeastern part of Mexico, Mercedes Zavala (2001) recorded a version of the legend that illustrates this.

> They say that many years ago, a lady killed her children. And then she died but had to return, in spirit form, to look for her children, to be at peace. And so, she goes screaming for her children. You can hear her very clearly, at night, near the river that passes, here, through San Ramón. And some say that it is just an echo, but there is not even a mountain for it to echo: it is the soul of that miserable woman, who is looking for the children that she killed in the water. Anyone who passes at night, near the river, even if the water level is low will hear her. And they feel a lot of fright inside, like a chill (28; my translation).

In this version, to avoid La Llorona one should stay away from the river at night, even if the river is running low. As mentioned, the drowning of her children is normally the element that

ties La Llorona to bodies of water, however, in many other versions, performers bypass the drowning completely but still associate La Llorona to bodies of water.

> They say that wherever there are rivers or gutters La Llorona appears. Here, the place where the irrigation ditch is located is called Los Siete Callejones. Not long ago, the wails of La Llorona were heard again. All the families that live on Hidalgo street were talking about it the next morning. Around 3 am they heard her cries and several of them went outside, shivering, and they could see her, she was walking away, like floating, walking over the water. And they said that she is a very beautiful young woman, dressed in white, with long black hair. (Zavala 2001, 30; my translation).

Scholars who have traced the origin of the legend believe that the relation between La Llorona and water comes from her connection to the Aztec deity Cihuacoatl, a fertility goddess, rather than to the drowning of her children. This link will be further explored in this work. The inclusion of bodies of water has also made it possible for the story to become attached to certain landmarks. As noted in the two versions provided above, La Llorona is said to appear in "Los Siete Callejones" or "through San Ramón". This imbues the story with a sense of belonging to a certain place or community.

However, there seems to be an agreement on the ubiquitous nature of La Llorona. As an interviewee of Thomas Janvier narrated in 1910,

> What is most wonderful about this Wailing Woman, Señor, is that she is seen in the same moment by different people in places widely apart: someone can see her hurrying across the atrium of the Cathedral; another one beside the Arcos de San Cosme; and yet another near the Salto del Agua, over by the prison of Belen.

> More than that, in one single night she can be seen in Monterey and in Oaxaca and in Acapulco—the whole width and length of the land apart—and whoever speaks to her in those far cities, as here in Mexico (City), immediately dies of fright (137, 138).

Thus, La Llorona can be found all over Mexico and she poses a threat not only to children, but also to men. Folklorist Betty Leddy (1948) noted that La Llorona can manifest as a siren. These types of stories warn men about the dangers of drinking and cheating on their wives. I collected one version of the legend from a female interviewee that illustrates this aspect of the ghost.

> In Xochimilco, our grandparents have always told us that La Llorona is a woman in white who is wailing and searching for her children. However, or at least this is what my grandmother used to tell me, I should not be afraid of her, because she does not harm women, she only harms men who cheat on their wives or who drink too much. She takes them to the water and drowns them. (Cortés 2019).

These are far from the only functions that researchers have identified when studying the legend. The story acquires new meanings and variations according to its context of performance and the background of the performer.

Other than the grieving woman and the siren, the identity of La Llorona before she became a ghost is also a contested concept. After compiling 120 versions of the story, Fernando Horcasitas identified three main possible identities: (1) The woman condemned by God for killing her children, (2) Malinche, an Indigenous woman who became the interpreter and mistress of Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, and (3) Matlacíhuatl, seducer of men (Miller 63). This last identity was used to classify the tales that depict La Llorona as a siren, since there

are other female supernatural figures that behave in similar ways; Matlacíhuatl being one of them.

All of these variations were noted by researchers who have compiled and tried to classify the legend. The different versions of the story were so abundant, that, by 1949, Ralph Steele Boggs had already devised a classification system for La Llorona texts in his folklore seminar in Mexico (Robe 1971, 110). He based this system on the content of the legend and classified the stories by where La Llorona appears, when she appears, the form in which she appears, why she wanders and what she does to those she meets. Ever since then, several other attempts have been put forward to try to classify the legend primarily based on its function or form (Horcasitas and Butterworth 1963; Robe 1971; De Vos 1996; Ward 1991). However, the story continues to evolve and adapt to new contexts, and therefore it defies any exhaustive classification system.

Early scholarship on La Llorona tried to pinpoint the legend's origin and the ghost's identity (Boggs 1949). My work engages with these studies since the negotiation of her identity is important to performers. Characterizing La Llorona as an Indigenous woman allows for a discussion of colonialism, furthermore it ties La Llorona to Mexico's historical past. However, most of the recent studies on La Llorona within the discipline of Folklore are based in the Mexican American context.

While my work refers solely to the Mexican context, these previous works provide a solid departure point for understanding how La Llorona has been reframed as a victim rather than a villain. Many of these studies (Anzaldua 1987; Limón 1990; Perez 2008) read La Llorona as a figure of resistance that challenges the patriarchal system. To do so, scholars and performers have to reinterpret the story through a feminist lens.

Previous readings of the story portrayed la Llorona as a cautionary tale for women. Just like Martin Lovelace (2001) considers that Jack tales in Newfoundland show young men "how to be"; some scholars have interpreted the story of La Llorona as a tale that shows young women from a Mexican or Mexican American origin how not to be. Mirandé and Enriquez state that "La Llorona is a female who strayed from her proper role as mother, wife, mistress, lover or patriot (…) a woman who regrets her transgression or bemoans having been denied the fulfilment of her role" (Limón 1990, 410). The relationship of La Llorona with men represents a transgression: she conceives children outside of wedlock, her partner might be already married, he might be from a different race or social status than her. Therefore, the lesson of the story is that women's sexual desires are dangerous, and giving into them can cause eternal despair and punishment (Perez 2008). It should be noted that there are many nuances according to the version of the story told, but the underlying message always seems to be that there is a negative consequence to female sexuality. Nevertheless, this reading of the story is actively challenged by my interviewees, as well as by several scholars.

Chicano feminists have reclaimed the figure of La Llorona as an act of resistance and reinterpreted her as a new role model that embodies the rejection of patriarchal structures, such as family and the Catholic church. They also question why her lover never faces any consequences for his actions. In doing so, "Chicanas are recasting feminine cultural symbols to modernize traditional narratives, but they are also addressing contemporary issues" (Perez 2008, 73). Thus, this process of transformation is relevant to understand the one currently occurring in Mexico.

This feminist reading of La Llorona comes into play in Chapter 3, where I tackle the protest of the forty-three Lloronas through ethnographic fieldwork. I conducted five

semistructured interviews with women who participated in the protest. Four of them were conducted face to face in Mexico City and one through Skype, since the participant currently resides in Los Angeles, California. The interviews took place between July and December of 2019. All of my interviews were conducted in Spanish; the quotes included in this work were translated by me.

After reading newspaper articles on the protest, I reached out to the organizer, Spanish activist Jil Love, who has a public Facebook fan page. She agreed to participate in my project, but unfortunately, she could not provide contact information for any other participants since she had moved to Los Angeles and lost touch with them.

The protest was organized through a Facebook event, where Jil put out an open call for women who wanted to participate, therefore many of the participants did not know each other. Thanks to the media coverage of the event, I was able to identify the names of other of the performers who were well-known Mexican activists. I reached out to them through their public Facebook pages.

Activist Mari Sainz responded to my message and agreed to meet me in a public park of her choosing for our interview. To my surprise she showed up dressed up as La Llorona. She insisted that she wanted to show me how La Llorona should look and be interpreted. While Mari knew I am Mexican, the fact that my research was for a Canadian institution made her feel that she needed to illustrate La Llorona for my audience. During our interview she insisted that I conducted a photoshoot with her posing in different places and acting as La Llorona would.

Figure 2. Activist Mari Sainz putting on makeup to look like La Llorona. Bosque de Chapultepec, Mexico City. July, 2019 (photo by Mariana Esquivel).

After our interview, Mari kindly offered to contact Guadalupe Vallarta, another activist who participated in the protest, so I could interview her as well. Guadalupe agreed and I was able to interview her at a coffee shop of her choosing a few weeks after interviewing Mari. These first interviews took place over the summer of 2019.

While many of my emails and messages were not answered, in the fall of 2019 I heard back from activist Korina Ramírez. She agreed to participate in my research, and we decided to schedule our interview over the winter of 2019, when I would be back in Mexico City. Korina kindly contacted activist Julia Klug, who had helped Jil Love to organize the protest.

I was able to interview both Korina and Julia right before a protest in which both were participating. This event allowed me to conduct participant observation since the protest was held in solidarity with the missing students from Ayotzinapa, just like the one in 2017, and Julia showed up dressed as La Llorona.

Listening to the experiences of these women helped me to understand that for them two different Lloronas exist: one from oral tradition, and a new one that speaks about the need of raising one's voice in protest. Guadalupe Vallarta explained this when I asked her what she thought about the choice of La Llorona as a symbol for the protest:

> I thought it was a good idea to use her to represent the parents and their pain, but not in the way that the traditional Llorona is searching for her dead children, because according to the legend she drowned them, and that is why she cries. They [the parents] cry because they are searching for their sons, but they want them back alive. This is something that differentiates the traditional Llorona from the Llorona of current social movements in Mexico (...). This Llorona is about never stop fighting for them and not just for them, but for many other causes, she talks about not giving up. (Vallarta 2019)

While none of my interviewees are related to the students from Ayotzinapa, many of them narrated painful experiences they have had with violence in Mexico. Mari was kidnapped by a criminal gang, Guadalupe's brother was unfairly convicted of a crime and remains in prison to this day, and Julia stated that her son was murdered to silence her activism. La Llorona emerges as a symbol of resilience for them. Her grief is the element that links their pain to the one of the parents from Ayotzinapa; they see themselves in her.

Chapter 3 explores these connections and situates the protest of the forty-three Lloronas within the context of other social movements in Latin America to support the victims of enforced disappearances. These movements, such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina,[6] brought motherhood —a traditionally private role— into the public arena. In a similar vein, the forty-three Lloronas used the grieving mother as a tool to gain the audience's sympathy but went one step further by choosing a figure that is also frightful. Thus, La Llorona plays a dual role, she becomes a symbol of solidarity for the audience and a threat to the authorities who perpetrated the crime.

Chapter 4 engages with the theatre play *La Llorona: Justice for the Fallen*. A postcolonial reading of the legend is better suited to understand how these performers interpret La Llorona. For these performers it is necessary to retell the story from La Llorona's perspective. They portray her as an Indigenous woman, a Xochimilca princess who is raped by a Spanish conquistador. She decides to sacrifice her son as an offering to the gods, but also to spare him from a life of slavery and suffering under the Spaniards' rule.

For this portion of my work, I interviewed six members from the theatre company La Llorona de Cuemanco. The play has been performed every year during October and November for the last 25 years. The show has become a staple of Xochimilco, a mayoralty at the south of Mexico City known for its lakes and canals.

I contacted the theatre company members through their official social media accounts. I heard back from the lead actress, Nayeli Cortés, who agreed to meet me for an interview in July of 2019. However, even after I sent the consent forms and other official documents, she was a little hesitant to meet me when the date came. She messaged me and asked me to send her a copy

[6] Argentine human rights organization created in 1977 by the mothers of victims of enforced disappearances during the Argentine dictatorship period.

of an official ID card where she could see my name and photo. She attributed this precaution to the current insecurity levels in Mexico City. Nevertheless, after I sent a photo of my ID to her, she was very open and helpful. She even offered to bring Daniela Infante along for the interview. Daniela is Nayeli's half sister and her stand-in for the role of La Llorona.

During both interviews I realized that the theatre company had develop a personal connection with La Llorona over the years. They have studied the legend and the different versions that exist. For them, La Llorona represents a perfect figure to connect to their Indigenous roots. This became even more evident in an interview with Alejandro Capultitla, the producer of the play. He stated:

> We have tried to maintain the pre-Hispanic context because it is still very important for Xochimilco, but also because my family name is Capultitla, a Nahuatl last name. We want to preserve our roots. That is why we incorporate the traditional dances and the songs in Nahuatl language (Capultitla 2019)

Conducting interviews with the theatre company turned out to be easier than with the protesters, because all the participants knew each other. Nayeli invited me to their first rehearsal for the 2019 version of the play. There, I had the chance to interview Luis Infante, the playwright; Atl Martínez, the choreographer; and María Luisa Castillo, the director.

Like the protesters, all the members of the theatre company knew versions of the legend different from the one they are performing. However, unlike the previous group, they do not believe that theirs is a new Llorona; rather, they believe that the version from oral tradition comes from the perspective of the colonizers and that it needs to be reinterpreted. Like Luis Infante puts it:

> The official version of La Llorona stigmatizes her, why? Because she was an Indigenous woman. What we want is to give her a voice, to provide a different perspective for the audience and to make people understand that she was also human, she was also suffering (Infante 2019).

Chapter 4 explores how the theatre company incorporates Indigenous elements to their performance to portray it as authentic. It also engages with how by celebrating the pre-Colonial past, the play evokes a nationalistic feeling in the audience that rejects the colonial legacy and romanticizes the Indigenous past. In doing so, the theatre company is "undisappearing" Indigeneity from Mexican identity.

The legend of La Llorona interpreted through a postcolonial lens "realises a postcolonial notion of hybridity that relies on a liminal, ambivalent, and uncanny approach to Mexican and Hispanic history" (Ajuria 2014,140). La Llorona's origin story reflects the anxieties related to the construction of a national identity born from the clash between Indigenous and Spanish. Her ghost, like the colonial past of Mexico, refuses to be put to rest and keeps haunting the nation.

From this approach, the identity of La Llorona becomes relevant. Unlike many of the versions that depict La Llorona as a mestiza[7] woman, the theatre company chose an Indigenous protagonist. Their choice resonates with the students from Ayotzinapa because many of them came from rural, Indigenous communities. The theatre company highlights the fact that the story of La Llorona was misconstrued when told from the perspective of the colonizers. They want the audience to notice the importance of paying attention to who is telling a story.

The parents from the missing students are asking for the same when they protest the official version of the government about what happened to their sons and urge the public to do

[7] A woman of combined Indigenous and European descent.

the same. Their sons were criminalized and depicted by the media as vandals. As anthropologist Mariana Mora puts it, “Such representations fuel perceptions that bodies of young, impoverished, primarily indigenous men exist at the margins of the political community, are devalued in relation to other bodies, can be easily disposed of, and are forgotten” (2017, 68). The play tells the story from the perspective of an Indigenous woman, a marginalized voice, but in presenting her version of what happened, it makes the audience realize that there are always two sides to every story.

Mexican national identity is built upon mestizaje: “the concept and practice of creating a mixed, authentic Mexican nation” (Hellier-Tinoco 2011, 26). This idea erases Indigenous people by requiring them to assimilate into an all-encompassing identity. By choosing to portray La Llorona as an Indigenous woman, rather than a mestiza, the theatre company is letting the audience know that Indigenous people exist and that they continue to be subjected to human rights violations.

Thus, while the play does not incorporate the disappearance of the forty-three students into the script, it builds a bridge between the identity of La Llorona as an Indigenous woman and the students’ identities. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, Nayeli Cortés stated that she feels like the performance is successful when audience members question why events like the one depicted in the play are still happening today.

Furthermore, the theatre company imbues the play with another layer of meaning, since some of the members (mainly the dancers) are practitioners of *Mexicanidad*- a religious movement that focuses on the revival of pre-Hispanic culture and spiritual values (Rostas 2009). Thus, their interpretation of La Llorona as a

supernatural entity differs from the conventional ghost story. In the words of Atl Martínez, the choreographer and spiritual leader of the theatre company:

> La Llorona, the Cihuacoatl, is the energy that cared for (the Indigenous people of Mexico), that announced (the arrival of the Spaniards) and who suffered for the fallen ones, for all of those who died unjustly, for those who were massacred 500 years ago. These things keep happening today, somehow we are repeating history; therefore we are showcasing these patterns, trying to break free from them and to transform them. (Martínez 2019)

Belief is undoubtedly a relevant dimension when it comes to understanding La Llorona. Interestingly, both groups had very different takes on what believing in her entails. While for the actors La Llorona exists as a supernatural entity, based on the interviews I conducted with them, her supernatural aspect is not as relevant for the protesters.

Nevertheless, while the reinterpretations of La Llorona by activists and actors highlight different aspects of the story to communicate their message, they also find convergence points. When asked about why she believes that La Llorona is a relevant figure to protest violence today, actress Nayeli Cortés stated that:

> I believe that we need to understand that La Llorona is not an entity from the past or just an old spirit that goes wandering. La Llorona is alive, and she lives in every woman who does not know where her children are, who has not had the chance of getting her children's bodies back to say goodbye. I get this question a lot in the media; why do I think that La Llorona is relevant today if she has a pre-Hispanic origin? Well, because as long as there are women who do not know where their children are, there [La Llorona] is. That is why she is so real. If you

> ask a mother to imagine what it is like to lose a child, there, just by imagining it, there is La Llorona. We have many Lloronas all over the country. (Cortés 2019)

When asked the same question, activist Mari Sainz gave a very similar answer that highlighted how La Llorona embodies the pain of women who are currently searching for the missing children or who have lost them to violence:

> I believe that La Llorona represents women, women who are victims of violence. La Llorona is a woman who lost her children, we do not see her as a woman who killed her kids, we see her as a woman who is searching for them. As a mother I do not want my daughter to go out and never return; as a grandmother, I do not want my grandkids to become orphans because my daughter might be a victim of femicide (...) Who can speak for those voiceless victims? La Llorona has helped us a lot in that regard. She is something ancient, but she is a character that has left a mark and who is helping us in making people open up their minds. (Sainz 2019)

In the end, while they might not share the belief in La Llorona as a supernatural figure, both groups believe that she is a powerful figure when it comes to conveying a message about enforced disappearances. Perhaps more importantly, they believe that her voice is an ideal tool for questioning the patriarchal system as well as systematic racism and oppression. The fact that La Llorona has been around for more than 500 years only demonstrates that these issues are still present and that she will not rest until they are addressed.

Finally, I believe it is important to acknowledge my personal agenda for undertaking this work. In the words of Steven Zeitlin, "what we study should and generally does emerge from our activist stance" (2000, 5). I chose this topic because as a Mexican citizen I am concerned about what is happening in my country and I am directly impacted by it.

Many of my interviewees were eager to share their stories with me once they knew I was ascribed to a Canadian institution. Their main interest was to gain a broader audience, an international audience, since they feel that Mexican authorities have stopped paying attention to them. I was transparent in assuring them that my work was academic and that it might not grant them the exposure they were after. Nevertheless, they consented to talking to me and therefore I feel compelled to share their message.

Therefore, through this research I hope to raise awareness about the alarming numbers of people who are currently missing in Mexico as a result of enforced disappearances. But also, to contribute by furthering the academic discussion on how folklore can help the audience and performers make sense of situations that are hard to understand.

With this work I want to situate La Llorona in the contemporary Mexican context and illustrate how she is performed nowadays. I do not intend to be a voice for or to give a voice to artists and protesters, they do not need me for that (they already have La Llorona after all). However, I do strive to better understand their message, amplify it, and spread it. Ultimately, I set out to showcase the efforts and commitment of the participants to the causes that they are protesting by providing an in-depth analysis of what La Llorona means to them. In the words of activist Mari Sainz:

> I hope that the whole world feels something every time they see La Llorona, every time they hear her cries, I hope that when they see her, they see people like me, Mari Sainz, who feels this pain, who has lived through it, who wants the whole world to turn and look at us, because we want peace. (Saiz 2019)

Chapter 2. La Llorona: History and Evolution

The ethnographic research for this project was conducted among eleven interviewees —ten of them Mexican citizens and the remaining one a Spanish national. All of them knew different versions of the legend of La Llorona. This chapter focuses on understanding how the story became so pervasive, as well as presenting some of the relevant academic works conducted on the subject and relevant to my thesis.

As part of the questions asked to my participants, I requested for them to tell me the story of La Llorona as they knew it. I initially thought it could be possible that they were familiar with a version from oral tradition where La Llorona was not the murderer of her children. I got several different versions but none that could fully explain how she became a symbol for protesting enforced disappearances.

Guadalupe Vallarta, who participated in the protest of the forty-three Lloronas and resides in Mexico City narrated the following version:

> She was a woman from somewhere in Mexico City. She fell in love with a married man who had a lot of money and she had an affair with him. She had two children, I am not sure if they were two or three, I do not remember that. She falls into despair because the man abandons her, she kills her children and leaves them in a river, I think she drowns them, and then she realizes what she did. She feels so much pain and tries to get her children back, so she starts looking for them, but she goes mad. She thinks the children are alive, but she had already killed them. (Vallarta 2019)

Most of the variants I collected follow a similar pattern to Guadalupe's, however, there were some others that differed significantly, like the ones told by Atl Martínez and Julia Klug. In one of them La Llorona acted as an ill omen, while in the other she behaves like a siren who is harmful to men who go out partying.

The version told by Atl, the lead choreographer of the theatre company goes as follow:

> I remember that they told us, me and my brothers, they told us about La Llorona in Fuentes Brotantes, I live very close to there. Well, there is a very large stone that fell and destroyed many houses, she (La Llorona) warned people. People should have left their houses, but they did not want to, and the stone fell and took many people's lives. (Martínez 2019).

Julia, one of the main organizers of the protest, narrated a memorate describing an encounter that her father had with La Llorona.:

> When I was a child, I remember hearing the story of how my father saw her. My dad used to go out and drink with his friends and they were passing through a cemetery, (…) well, men are easily attracted to women, right? He saw a woman dressed in white, he started following her and when she reached the cemetery gates, she did not go over them, she went right through them. My father says that in that moment his whole body went numb, and when she turned around to see him, he says that she had a face that looked like a horse.[8] (Klug 2019).

This chapter is devoted to discussing where these different versions of La Llorona come from and how is it possible for all of them to coexist. By dissecting the different identities that La Llorona has acquired over the years, it is easier to understand the reasons behind some of the

[8] Julia Klug grew up in Guatemala where tales of the Sihuanaba are common. The Sihuanaba is a supernatural figure who lures men to secluded places and then reveals her horselike face. Her story is often conflated with La Llorona.

recurring elements of the story, such as the presence of water, the prophetic qualities, and the siren aspect.

Finally, this chapter also engages with scholarly works on La Llorona, particularly with those that rely on context to understand how the story transforms. The context of performance is key to understand how seemingly dissonant elements are reshaped into a new version of the story that can speak to the current anxieties of the performers. Thus, in the current situation of violence in Mexico, La Llorona turns into a figure to raise awareness and to gain sympathy, but also into a figure that gives voice to women whom society has tried to silence.

The legend of La Llorona is intertwined with Mexican history. According to the historical period in which the narrator sets the story, the identity of the protagonist varies. Here I will present the most popular names that she has been given in chronological order. It is worth mentioning that in several cases the performers of the legend only identify her as a woman, without any name, just an anonymous female whose soul is condemned to wander the earth. This happens primarily when the story is told as a personal experience narrative. In contrast, when the story is told as a legend, narrators tend to focus on the background story of La Llorona.

In a book published in 1910, writer and historian Thomas A. Janvier asserts that in contrast to the other stories he compiled during his time in Mexico, La Llorona "...is not, as all of the other legends are, of Spanish-Mexican origin: it is wholly Mexican—a direct survival from primitive times" (162). Janvier goes on to reference the work of Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who collected testimonies from the Indigenous population of Mexico during 1555. These testimonies were compiled in the Florentine Codex, also known as the *General History of the Things of New Spain.*

The book contains a series of omens that the Aztecs witnessed before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in their territory. The sixth omen consisted of a woman whose voice can be heard at night crying and wailing because she knows that the Aztecs' downfall is unavoidable. This woman is often interpreted to be a manifestations of the goddess Cihuacoatl. According to some versions of the story, her loud cries and sobs could be heard at night. Sometimes she said: "Alas, my children, we are about to be destroyed" or "Alas, my children, where can I take you to hide you?" (Horcasitas and Butterworth 1963, 209).

Cihuacoatl, whose name means Snake Woman, was a warrior goddess who guarded the souls of women who died during childbirth. These women's spirits were known as *cihuateteo* or *cihuapipiltin*. Trejo and Gómez (2013) explain that these entities were known to travel through the air during certain times of the year and were particularly harmful to children, similarly to how the contemporary Llorona is supposed to harm children who go wandering out at night.

There are several testimonies collected by Spanish friars among the Indigenous population of Colonial Mexico that provide evidence that La Llorona and Cihuacoatl might be the same or, at least, closely related figures. *Monarquía Indiana* published for the first time in 1615 by Friar Juan de Torquemada includes another description of Cihuacoatl that resembles the stories about La Llorona, "she would appear dressed in white. And when she appeared thus, those who saw her considered it an ill omen. At night they would hear her crying and weeping, and those who heard her shared her anguish" (1943, 61).

Horcasitas and Butterworth (1963, 207) cite an interesting piece regarding Cihuacoatl written by friar Diego de Durán in the 1500s. In it, he narrates how Aztec priests would hide a sacrificial knife in a baby's cradle, then they would ask for a woman to bring the cradle to the marketplace and leave it there. When it was discovered by the shopkeepers and patrons of the

market, they would interpret the knife as a divine request from Cihuacoatl, who demanded human sacrifice. In fact, the knife in the cradle was known as “child of Cihuacoatl” (1963, 208).

As Stephen A. Colston has pointed out “in contemporary Mexico, the association persists of the ‘crying woman’ La Llorona, often heard at night, with bad tidings. There appears to be a fusion of the attributes of La Llorona and those of the mother of the Mexica's gods, Cihuacoatl” (1985, 242). The wailing, the white dress, and even the motherly aspect, paint a convincing picture to identify la Llorona as a contemporary version of Cihuacoatl and the *cihuateteo.*

The Indigenous origin theory serves as a claim of ownership against other countries in Latin America who share the lore. Furthermore, understanding La Llorona as a pre-Hispanic character allows for a different interpretation of her story. Such is the case of one of my interviewees, Atl Martínez, who has worked as the lead choreographer for the play *La Llorona de Cuemanco* for the last twelve years. He sees in La Llorona a figure through which he can connect with his Mexica (Aztec) roots, rather than a ghost. Atl describes La Llorona as a form of energy that manifests in people’s lives to warn them about bad things to come. He also uses the names La Llorona and Cihuacoatl interchangeably.

Cihuacoatl is a complex deity. She is also closely associated with two other Aztec goddesses: Coatlicue, the earth, and Tonantzin, the mother. In fact, these three are frequently considered to be the same deity embodying different traits (Anzaldua 1987; Carbonell 1999).

Like Cihuacoatl, Coatlicue is a menacing figure described as having “a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet. As creator goddess, she was the mother of the celestial deities” (Anzaldua 1987, 27). Both La Llorona and Coatlicue are what Jeannie Banks Thomas has described as a “deviant femme”; that is “the antithesis of the traits traditionally associated with femininity, for example, she is a

murdering mother" (2007, 82). Coatlicue embodies motherhood, as the earth, but at the same time, her dual nature turns her into a devouring mother with the potential for destruction (Hall 1978).

In contrast, Tonantzin represents the good mother, the nurturing female. This goddess has been widely studied since she is generally considered to be closely associated to the Virgin of Guadalupe (Leon-Portilla, 1974). In the words of Gloria Anzaldua "Tonantsi became Guadalupe, the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people" (1987, 28).

While the Virgin of Guadalupe is a clearly distinguishable figure from La Llorona, it is necessary to include her here since both are defined by their role as mothers and play a central role in the Mexican collective imaginary. This relationship between them has been noted by other scholars, most notably by anthropologist Jose Limon (1990) who argues that La Llorona along with the Virgin and La Malinche are the three great legends of Mexico, and that all of them represent distinct models for performing Mexican womanhood.

Furthermore, in my own research, I found a direct link between La Llorona, Cihuacoatl, and the Virgin Mary. During my interview with Nayeli Cortés, the leading actress of the play *La Llorona de Cuemanco,* she stated:

> When I first got involved with the play, I started to research more, and here, in Xochimilco, La Llorona is directly linked to the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl. She predicted the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, and she was crying because she was trying to warn the (Indigenous) people about them. (Cihuacoatl) is also directly related to Our Lady of Sorrows, because in the Catholic faith she is the one who is crying for her son (...) So, that is how I discovered that Cihuacoatl,

> La Llorona, Our Lady of Sorrows, are the same figure just interpreted differently. (Cortés 2019)

Nayeli's views highlight the defining characteristic of La Llorona: she is a grieving mother. The deviant and diabolic nature of Cihuacoatl — which La Llorona inherited— might be partly attributed to the sources from which her story has been transmitted. The Florentine Codex, as other ethnographic work conducted by Spanish friars, was devoted to identifying the beliefs of the Indigenous population of Mexico to eradicate them, or at least replace them, through evangelization. As Valdés (2002) has noted, the destructive and terrifying aspects of Cihuacoatl were emphasized to equate her with a demonic force and to portray the friars as messengers of the true God who were sent to the New World to battle against evil. In the words of Domino Perez (2008) they were "turning powerful goddesses into weeping mortals" (96).

While the pre-Hispanic deities outlined here might be the ones most commonly associated with La Llorona, they are far from the only ones. For Robert Barakat (1969), a missing element to link Cihuacoatl and La Llorona is the presence of water. Since La Llorona is often said to haunt bodies of water, Barakat considers that the goddess Chalchiuhtliycue offers a better parallel than Cihuacoatl. This goddess "killed men in water, she plunged them in water as it foamed, swelled and formed whirlpools about them" (1969, 272).

His proposal, however, did not gain traction with other academics or become as popular among performers of the legend. Even though water is a central element in some versions of the story of La Llorona, what truly characterizes the legend is its deviant maternity — motherhood interrupted, violated in some way. Whether it is by dying in childbirth, killing her children, having her children taken from her, or killed by someone else, La Llorona becomes a woman in a liminal state in which she can no longer fit into the idealized category of mother.

La Llorona poses the question: is a mother still a mother when her children are gone? She expresses the anxieties related to motherhood in Mexican culture where, as Sanders asserts, “motherhood has always held primacy in the lives of Mexicans, and that Mexican mothers are noted for their long-suffering, self-sacrificing nature” (2009, 1542). Furthermore, her supernatural existence is directly tied to her subversion of her role as a mother, an idea better captured by either Cihuacoatl, Coatlicue or Tonantzin, than by Chalchiuhtliycue.

Nevertheless, not all scholars agree with the pre-Hispanic origin theory. Bacil Kirtley contends that, “the Aztecs' conception of Cihuacoatl was not consistent” (1960, 163) and provides several examples of other wailing women of folklore around the world who share similar characteristics. In particular, he focuses on the story of *Die Weisse Frau* (The White Lady) since it contains similar motifs to the ones present in La Llorona. According to Kirtley, "the European narrative pattern might have been transmitted to the New World" (161). He goes on to assert that German clergymen might have travelled to Spain, where they shared the story of The White Lady with Spanish friars who, in turn, brought it with them to Mexico.

Perhaps the most compelling component of Kirtley’s argument is that the legend of La Llorona contains values that are generally associated with Western societies. A woman who has children outside of wedlock or who becomes a concubine would not transgress Aztec moral codes in which polygyny and concubinage were accepted (162). The consensus, however, seems to be that the story is a conflation of both European and Indigenous oral traditions. As Robert Barakat asserts, "there can be little doubt that the foreigners confused their legend with a similar one from the Aztecs and, consequently, passed it on to the natives who in turn added their own elements" (1965, 288).

Contemporary scholars like Domino Pérez (2008) contend that the legend was in fact Indigenous and that the European motifs were assimilated later to it, instead of the other way around. Whether that is or not the case, the fact remains that La Llorona is a syncretic product.

This debate about the origins of the legend is deeply rooted in the concept of authenticity. As Regina Bendix has noted, "the search for authenticity is fundamentally an emotional and moral quest" (1997, 7). For the purposes of my research, the Indigenous identity of La Llorona is relevant since plenty of my interviewees — and many others, particularly on social media[9]— reference the pre-Hispanic version of her origin to affirm that the legend is a central element of the Mexican oral tradition, and even more interesting, of Mexican identity.

Moving past the pre-Hispanic origin stories, the next possible identity of La Llorona emerges from the colonial period of Mexico. Her story is frequently associated to that of La Malinche, a very complex character that has acquired a legendary status of her own. This woman — also known as Malinalli Tenepal or Malintzin— was a Nahua woman who was given as a present to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. In the words of Alicia Gaspar de Alba:

> It is a traditional Mexican belief that La Malinche— Aztec interpreter and mistress of Cortés— betrayed her own people in exchange for a new life. It is said that La Malinche bore a son by Cortés, the first mestizo of Aztec and Spanish blood, whom she later sacrificed when Cortés threatened to take the boy to Spain. Some say that the spirit of La Malinche is La Llorona. (2005, 4)

Folklorist Kristina Downs (2008) asserts that La Llorona has become an archetypal figure for the female traitor. According to Downs, “Malinche's son was created through a sexual

[9] A quick search on social media, particularly on the comment section of any YouTube video about La Llorona, will showcase people of Mexico debating with citizens from other Latin American countries on who really “owns” the story. The story of Cihuacoatl is frequently used by Mexicans as an argument that legitimizes their ownership claim.

relationship with a man who was neither of her race nor her husband. This connects her position as mother not only with a standard carnal sin, but with one that becomes deviant and subversive" (403).

The story of La Malinche and Cortés contains several parallels to the one of La Llorona: the affair, the pregnancy outside of wedlock, the betrayal, the abandonment, and finally the death of the child. This version of the legend collected by Horcasitas and Butterworth is a good example of how both stories are often conflated:

> Cortés had a son by Malinche. He had to leave for Spain and wanted to take his son with him. Malinche became ill at the thought of giving him up, and for a while was insane. Nevertheless, she kept her son. When the son was seven years old, Cortés could not wait any longer; he wanted to take his son with him because of the Spanish blood, but not Malinche, who was only his mistress and besides was an Indian. In despair, Malinche killed her son with a knife. She buried him, with herself beside him. When her spirit left her body it cried, "¡Aaayyy!" Since then her spirit wanders all over calling the attention of the people to her anguished cry. The people call her La Llorona. (209, 1969)

The problematic conception of La Malinche as a traitor, a concept originally popularized by Octavio Paz (1961), has undergone numerous revisions. Feminist scholars (Messinger 1991; Romero and Nolacea Harris 2005; Gaspar de Alba 2014) have questioned whether La Malinche had any agency after being sold as a slave to Cortés. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Malinche continues to be depicted as the mother of the first mestizo (a man of Indigenous and Spanish blood) and, in that sense, she is also seen as the mother of the Mexican people.

La Malinche suffers because she does not know what the fate of her son, a child of mixed race, will be. On a symbolic level, the murder of her child can be interpreted as a rejection of assimilation, a process where the Indigenous past —language, beliefs, traditions— were to be buried in favor of Spanish/Catholic values.

In a similar fashion, Enrique Ajuria (2014) considers that "La Llorona can function as a Gothic tool that ends up engulfing and disclosing the very source of anxiety that has been laid aside for the positive construction of Mexicanness: mythicised through notions of betrayal and the ghosting of a long-suffering mother, the Mexican idealises its historical origin as a nation" (136). This post-colonial reading of the legend will be further explored in Chapter 4, since the theatre company purposefully highlights the identity of La Llorona as an Indigenous woman to question mestizaje as an all-encompassing Mexican identity.

Furthermore, the link between La Llorona and La Malinche has been reinforced by popular culture. In 1933, "La Llorona" — the first Mexican horror movie— premiered. In it, three stories set in different times come together to explain a curse that haunts a family and that results in the unexpected death of their sons. The curse can be traced back to the story of La Malinche (Subero 2016).

Motherhood is a characteristic that makes these female figures appealing to the Mexican imaginary, but contrary to the suggestion of some other scholars, this motherhood and its associated suffering are not passive traits. The story of La Llorona is not compelling to Mexican women who protest violence because it represents a "ratification of an oppressive motherhood" (Limón 1990, 409), or because "the frightening figure is obviously intended as a cultural reinforcement to encourage conscientious maternal behavior" (Jordan 1985, 39). Throughout this thesis, I contend that while being a mother makes La Llorona a symbol that is easily

understood within Mexican patriarchal mentality, performers transform La Llorona and subvert the traditional role of a mother by turning her helpless wails into a call for action.

Several printed sources, as well as movies, have further popularized the legend within the Mexican audience. Most of them set the story during the colonial period of Mexico. As Valdés (2002) has noted, this responds to the nationalist writers of independent Mexico who romanticized the immediate past of the country as a time of superstitions and supernatural events. As any newly independent nation, Mexico had to build an identity. Writers and poets advanced the ideological agenda[10] of the country by publishing stories that were part of the oral tradition. La Llorona was a preeminent figure in many of these publications.

The poet Juan de Dios Peza and the historian Vicente Riva Palacio published a collection of legends in 1885 titled *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas*[11]. Their version of La Llorona is written as a poem where the protagonist is a beautiful woman named Luisa. She is poor and lives alone. Men of different social status try to gain her affection, but she ignores them. However, late at night, she sneaks out of her room to see a Spanish noble man named Don Nuño de Montes-Claros. Eventually, Luisa runs away with Nuño, they have three kids and move into a small house far away from everyone else.

As time goes by, Nuño becomes distant and stops visiting Luisa. In a desperate attempt to understand what is happening, she goes out to search for him and finds him in his old house. Luisa is surprised to discover that there is a big celebration and learns that Nuño has married a Spanish woman. Heartbroken, she goes back to her home, takes Nuño's dagger and uses it to kill her kids. Luisa is detained by the authorities and sentenced to death. The poem ends by narrating

[10] At the time there was a heated debate on the quality of these publications, positivists considered them to be harmful since they perpetuated superstitions among Mexican people.
[11] Five of the legends in this collection, among them La Llorona, were first published in 1882 in the newspapers *La República and El Nacional*.

how Nuño died that same day and, ever since then, a woman in white can be seen wandering and wailing at midnight.

This version of the legend stresses class conflict, as well as the transgression of social values. Both themes are recurring elements in the story of La Llorona. In early printed versions such as this, authors frequently include their own value judgments. The neighbors and others who know Luisa are scandalized by her condition of single woman living on her own, then she is harshly judged by the same people for running away with a man of a higher social status, and lastly the crowd that clamors for her death and gathers to see her execution. The author's moral teachings remained a central element of various versions of the legend, and the class or race difference between La Llorona and her lover became focal points of the narrative.

In contrast, current performers of La Llorona intend to elicit compassion and sympathy from the audience. Both study cases for this project shift the narrative to provide an alternative point of view. The theatre play recreates the whole story from La Llorona's perspective, while the protesters rely on signs and banners to let the audience know that they are not the villains of the story.

Peza and Riva Palacio's version of the story was widely spread and reproduced, and the names Luisa and Nuño stuck. They were used in Carmen Toscano's play "La Llorona" in 1959, which was adapted to film one year later by René Cardona. In 1963, a comic book magazine titled *Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia* became available in newspaper kiosks and magazine stands all over Mexico (Valdés 2002). The widely popular publication devoted its first number to the legend of La Llorona. Their version replicated the story of Luisa and Nuño.

It is not uncommon to find the same names in oral tradition as well, like this version of the story collected by Arturo Ramírez (1997) demonstrates:

> My mother told bits and pieces of La Llorona (or weeping woman) and her story throughout my childhood. At times, however, she might tell a virtually complete version of the legend. [...] My mother would also do a haunting wail that gave us an idea of what La Llorona's wail was like. At times, La Llorona was called Luisa by my mother [...]. Luisa [...] was a young indigenous poor girl of the lower classes. [...] So beautiful was she [...] that she came to the attention of a Spanish nobleman [...] who was part of society's upper-crust [...]. The two fell in love, and set up [...] in a kind of 'casa chica' or common law marriage. Their idyllic relationship continued and prospered and they had several children [...]. After a while the young military officer was to be married to a white upper class lady, someone who was his social equal. [...] The very thought of the possibility of marrying Luisa was totally out of question – there was the matter of her social rank, and she was an Indian. [...] It was then that the problem of the children arose. (Ramírez 1997, 21).

Perhaps the only other written version of the story that acquired such widespread popularity was the one by historian Luis González de Obregón. In 1922, he published *Las calles de México. Leyendas y sucedidos. Vida y costumbres de otros tiempo* where he included a selection of legends attached to certain streets of Mexico City. González linked the identity of La Llorona to La Malinche but stated that the ghost is mostly known by the name of Marina— the Spanish name given to La Malinche when she was baptized into the Catholic faith.

Oral tradition and popular culture nurture each other and thus the versions published by historians and chroniclers became part of the repertoire of storytellers. Over the years, the legend of La Llorona has been published in numerous anthologies, children's books, and other works of fiction. The list of publications is far too long for me to fully represent them in this thesis.

Nevertheless, I want to mention another common motif present in many variants of La Llorona: the idea that she is a siren, dangerous to me who are drunkards or cheaters.

While neither the protesters nor the actors seem to engage with this motif in their respective performance of the legend, I wanted to include it since it is recurrent in oral tradition. In fact, Horcasitas and Butterworth (1963) identified this prototype of the story as one of the most common among the 120 variants they compiled. Within my own research, three out of my eleven interviewees brought up the siren aspect of La Llorona. One of them came from María Luisa Castillo, the producer of the play *La Llorona de Cuemanco:*

> During the Colonial period there was a woman who fell in love with a Spaniard, but the Spaniard betrayed her and married a Spanish lady. When she realized what had happened and found him with his wife, she, from so much pain, so much sadness, took her children and killed them. And then she killed herself. That is the colonial version of the story but, for example, in Oaxaca there is also one, there is one Llorona and she has another name, but that Llorona takes men, she is very beautiful, very beautiful. She finds them in the roads, and she takes them with her. (Castillo 2019).

While María Luisa did not know the name for the Llorona from Oaxaca, it is possible that she was referring to Matlazihua. Michael Kearney (1969) conducted his ethnographic research in Ixtepeji, Oaxaca where he found out that the Matlazihua, a supernatural figure from Zapotec folklore was also known as La Llorona. Matlazihua disguises herself as a woman known to the person that she is trying to lure, guides them to a secluded place and attacks them.

Furthermore, Horcasitas and Butterworth (1963) recorded two versions from the Yucatan peninsula where La Llorona is said to be the same figure as the Xtabay from Mayan folklore.

The Xtabay is a very beautiful woman with long, black hair who appears to men and lures them into the jungle or close to water. Once there, she reveals her face —sometimes horse-like, sometimes a skull or just described as hideous— and kills them.

At the beginning of this chapter, and in this same line of thought, I included the version of the story narrated by activist Julia Klug. In it, she mentions how her father saw a ghostly woman in white, whose face was horse-like. It is worth noting that Julia grew up in Guatemala, where the story of La Sihuanaba, another supernatural figure with a woman's body and a horse's face is very popular.

Herbert Halpert noted that "each geographical and cultural area tends to ascribe supernatural legends to its dominant supernatural figure" (1971, 50). In this sense it is possible that the name of La Llorona became attached to other less famous female supernatural figures, and that is how she acquired siren qualities. Thus, while the siren aspect of La Llorona is popular in oral tradition, it seems like it is linked to regional variants of the story.

As mentioned earlier, based on my ethnographic work, the siren motif does not seem to come into play for protesters and actors who use La Llorona to protest enforced disappearances. However, in the case of the protesters, La Llorona does retain a menacing aspect to her, similar to the siren that lures men to their doom. Protesters dressed up as La Llorona want to lure the authorities out of their offices to get answers from them and hold them accountable.

I have outlined here some of the possible identities of La Llorona; they are far from the only ones. In fact, most of the time the protagonist of the story is an anonymous woman. As Obregón (1922) points out La Llorona could be a young woman in love who died right before the wedding, a widow crying for her orphans, a dead wife who came back to say goodbye to her husband or a woman murdered by her jealous partner.

The purpose of outlining these identities, as well as her presence in popular culture is to attest to the importance of the legend in Mexican collective imaginary, as well as to understand how widespread the legend is. Furthermore, her conflation with Aztec deities, historical characters, and other folkloric figures illustrates how intertwined La Llorona is with Mexican identity.

Scholars who have compiled stories of La Llorona have tried to classify them according to their structure (Boggs 1949; Robe 1971), others have tried to identify the subcategory of the legend genre in which different versions may fit (Ward 1991), but the majority of the works have focused on defining the function of the legend.

Gail de Vos (1996) provides a good summary of the most frequently cited functions of the story: (1) To warn children about the dangers of staying out at night, particularly near bodies of water; (2) a socializing agent for married couples, since it warns spouses to respect their marriage vows; (3) a socializing agent for young mothers as it reinforces the "message on the maternal role of mothers" (367); (4) a socializing agent for romantic young females, since they learn about the perils of falling in love with "wealthy young men" (367); (5) a socializing agent for males, prompting them to be faithful to their wives.

While useful for broader analysis, these functions are not exhaustive. The wide variety of versions of La Llorona and the flexibility of the story illustrate how it continues to defy classification attempts. Furthermore, functions vary according to the context in which the story is told, but also on the background of the performer.

The works by Pamela Jones (1988) and Bess Lomax Hawes (1968) focus on the context of performance of the story. Lomax Hawes interviewed girls between 14 and 16 years old in a juvenile detention center located in Los Angeles, California. Jones interviewed Mexican

immigrants in Oregon at a facility to assist pregnant and postpartum women. The conclusions of both studies on the function of the story are diametrically opposed.

Lomax Hawes found that in all the versions told by the girls at the detention center, La Llorona was clearly identified as the villain. She was always described as the murderer of her children, and the children's gender —when mentioned—was always female. Following Vladimir Propp, Lomax Hawes asserts that the loss of the children in the narrative symbolizes lack. Since they are never found, the lack can never be liquidated which leaves the story in a constant state of disequilibrium, a common feature of contemporary legends.

She concludes her analysis by saying that the girls in the detention center are lacking "a road, a door, a mother, a child, a place in the world" (169) and that therefore the story of La Llorona resonates with them. They can either identify with La Llorona or her children, but what matters is that the legend reflects the "essential unwholeness of their condition." (170)

In contrast to the girls interviewed by Lomax Hawes, Jones' participants believed that La Llorona was as a woman who deserved sympathy, and whose children most likely died accidentally. In the words of Jones, while the narrators acknowledged the negligence of the woman, they "stopped short of calling her a murderess" (200). Jones goes on to suggest that, for her participants, La Llorona's story functioned as an escape valve for the stress of family life. Through it, performers "express their unconscious anxieties about taking care of their children" (208).

Both works showcase how a legend can have opposite readings for different groups of people. As Jones puts it "the Llorona is an endlessly changing legend, modified by storytellers to address themes central to their psycho-social development and lifestyles" (197). Thus, La Llorona can shift from victim to predator according to who is performing the story.

Alicia Schmidt Camacho's (2004) work engages with a version of the legend that reflects broader sociopolitical anxieties of the performers. She conducted her research among female factory workers in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México. This town located in the border with the United States became infamous in the 90s due to the high number of poor immigrant women who were being murdered. While researching this wave of femicides, Schmidt Camacho came across a variant of the story of La Llorona that reimagines the protagonist as a factory worker who falls in love with her American boss. Their illicit affair results in her pregnancy. She goes on to deliver stillborn twins that show terrible signs of birth defects. The woman kills herself and her spirit is said to wander near the Río Bravo, the natural border between Mexico and the United States.

During the time that this version of the story was circulating, the effects of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were transforming labor for women in border towns of Mexico, like Ciudad Juárez. American factories opening in the Mexican side of the border attracted by cheap labor, offered employment options for women who were previously confined to domestic work.

Schmidt Camacho considered that the story reflected the views of the dominant classes from Ciudad Juárez who disapproved of women entering the workforce. These women who now had a steady income and were moving "beyond the sanctioned spaces of patriarchal supervision" (2004, 29) were often accused of engaging in prostitution. La Llorona is punished by losing her children and her partner for transgressing the social norms, thus her story serves as a cautionary tale for these working women.

In this regard, Schmidt Camacho notes that the story "chillingly prefigures the dominant discourse about the victims of the feminicidio, the Mexican government's cynical claim that the

murdered girls and women courted their own deaths as sexual deviates and prostitutes" (29). She then goes even further to assert that La Llorona might not really represent the factory workers, but that rather, if "La Llorona could speak she might identify with so many mothers in Juarez and Chihuahua who have lost their daughters to inexplicable violence" (31).

This illustrates an interesting point relevant to my own work. There is a difference between the story told about La Llorona and what La Llorona is saying. That is, the story collected by Schmidt Camacho is a story told about La Llorona from a patriarchal perspective in which she is clearly to blame for her actions. However, as the researcher puts it "if La Llorona could speak", we would see the story from her perspective and our understanding of her might change.

The protesters and actors interviewed for my work make La Llorona speak. Instead of reproducing a story about her, they embody her and tell the legend from her perspective. In doing so, they want the audience to understand that who tells a story matter. As Schmidt Camacho speculated, when La Llorona speaks she identifies with the parents of victims of violence.

Thus, performing La Llorona as a symbol of protest not only makes sense in this context, but it also infuses the story with new meaning. Many of my interviewees draw a line between La Llorona from the legend as they know it, and La Llorona they are performing. Guadalupe Vallarta emphasized this difference after telling the version of the story included in the introduction to this chapter. She states, "that is the legend that I know, the current one, the Lloronas from today, well, that one is about searching and finding (their sons) alive, that is why they cry." She refers to La Llorona in plural, equating her to the mothers who are searching for their sons.

The sentiment was echoed by other participants who stated that Mexico was a country full of Lloronas. Luis Infante said, “There are so many Lloronas right now, so many mothers crying for their missing children (...) that is what makes this (legend) relevant.” Thus, the testimonies of these women become new versions of the story and reframe the ghost exclusively as a grieving mother in search for her sons.

Whether it is the theatre play which rewrites the story of La Llorona to justify the murder of her child, or the protest where the murderous aspect is completely absent, the legend is constantly transformed to give meaning to the events that have caused a deep impact in the lives of people and the general public. This dynamism attests to the importance and relevance that La Llorona has in Mexico’s social context. A story that has remained a central part of the Mexican oral tradition for more than 500 years may seem to exclusively convey anxieties related to the past, however as Cruikshank asserts “good stories from the past continue to provide legitimate insights about contemporary events” (2000, 44).

Therefore, one of the elements that makes La Llorona an appealing symbol for protesters is her persistence. As activist Jil Love puts it,

> Even if La Llorona is killed, discredited, insulted, beaten, she will never stop until she finds her children. That is very important, because La Llorona may be a ghost and such but she never rests, she does not rest until she finds her children. She represents hope, she represents the mothers because they are the *lloronas*, and even if they try to put them aside, erase them, discredit them and such they will not stop. (Love 2019)

Before moving on to the next chapter, it is worth noting that the work of Domino Perez (2008) previously engaged with the concept of La Llorona as a political figure, and as a symbol

for various social issues. Perez explored how through the subversion and revision of La Llorona's story, Chicana feminists turned her into a figure of empowerment. Through an interdisciplinary perspective she looked into how the story was adapted by Chicano artists to "interrogate misogyny, classism, or colonialism" (5).

While not strictly from a folkloristic perspective, Perez's work is extremely self-reflective and transcends oral narrative by focusing on how La Llorona manifests in art, material, and popular culture. Her research focuses on the Mexican American community in the United States. Even though the context of our research differs, her assertion that La Llorona is the perfect intercultural ambassador to promote dialogue between diverse communities that share this lore rings true, specially when one considers the artistic manifestations put together by the Mexican American community to protest social causes that incorporate La Llorona.

The theatre play "La Llorona, Weeping Women of Echo Park" directed by Henriette Brouwers and performed at the Echo Park United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, California consisted of several women who told stories about how they had to leave their children behind to immigrate to the United States, or who got deported back to Mexico and separated from their children. The 2018 protest organized by the group Las Maestras Center for Xicana Indigenous Art & Thought Practice, also used La Llorona to speak about the pain caused by massive deportations of immigrant families prompted by the Trump administration.

Thus, while immigration and enforced disappearances differ, it is undeniable that the grief of a mother who cannot find her children can speak to different causes. In the case of Mexico, press and social media have extensively covered the struggle of mothers who are coming together to try to find their missing sons and daughters. Unable to get any responses, the mothers of those who have disappeared have founded collective organizations like *Las Rastreadoras del Fuerte,*

Sabuesos Guerreras, and *Colectivo Solecito* to follow anonymous tips, and search for their missing sons and daughters. Wearing t-shirts that read "I will search for you until I find you," they can be seen, shovel in hand, searching for mass graves where their relatives might be buried. Their stories, their grief, and, perhaps above all, their unwavering resolve to find their children resonate with the legend of La Llorona.

Throughout this chapter I pointed out some of the identities that La Llorona has acquired through popular culture and oral tradition. Cihuacoatl and La Malinche are the two figures most commonly associated with her. These three women have a voice that is meant to be heard. Whether as a prophetic wail, a desperate cry, or as a translator who can bridge the gap between the conqueror and the conquered, the voices of these women are powerful. In the following chapter I explore how protesters use La Llorona's voice to speak out against enforced disappearances.

Chapter 3. The grieving mother as a protest symbol

On March 4th, 2017, women dressed up as La Llorona in solidarity with the parents of the missing students of Ayotzinapa. The protest was organized by Spanish activist Jil Love, known for her artistic performances to support various social causes. Through social media, Jil reached out to Julia Klug, an experienced and well-known human rights activist.

Through a Facebook event, they recruited women who wanted to participate in the protest. Jil and Julia bought fabric for the dresses, activist Mari Sainz (who also happens to be a seamstress) made ten dresses from scratch and many other women brought white dresses they already had.

All the dresses were stained with coffee and dirt to make them look worn out, just as the protesters pictured La Llorona's dress to look after wandering for so long. They painted their faces white and drew dark circles around their eyes. They covered their faces with veils and held votive candles with pictures of the forty-three missing students, as well as Mexican flags.

The forty-three women walked in a silent procession through *Avenida Madero,* one of the main streets in Mexico City. When they got to the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*, a landmark of Mexico's capital, they uncovered their faces and broke the silence. They started shouting mottos associated with enforced disappearances, such as ¡*Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos!* (“They took them alive, alive we want them!”).

A crowd of people gathered around them, cameras, and cellphones in hand, to take pictures of the Lloronas. The protesters formed a circle in the ground with the candles they were holding, and placed the pieces of the Mexican flag in its center. Afterwards, they read poems and manifestos in support of the missing students and their families.

The protest drew the attention of the public and the media.[12] At first glance, it is evident that the organizers chose La Llorona for the visual impact the characterization offers. Nevertheless, there are many other underlying elements that make La Llorona an appealing symbol of protest. This chapter focuses on understanding this new reading that the legend has for the protesters and the audience. It will also discuss the appeal of folklore to communicate ideas, generate empathy, and advance an agenda.

Most of the women who dressed up as La Llorona to participate in the protest did not know each other. They saw the post on Facebook and decided to join. To this day, the Facebook event page is still online, and it is possible to read participants' comments expressing their interest to get involved.

Jil made most of the posts asking women to participate, and to bring white dresses if they had them. In case they did not, she offered to buy white fabric, and, with the help of other activists, they would make dresses from scratch. Julia Klug dressed up as La Llorona and rode Mexico's City subway, holding a sign, inviting people to participate in the protest.

On the day of the event, Jil asked all the participants to show up at different times at the place where she was staying. There they dressed up and got their make-up done. Each of the Lloronas received a votive candle with the picture and name of the student that they were representing.

[12] Interestingly, it was mainly the foreign press that covered the protest. Mexican media was mostly absent. Some of my participants considered that the Mexican media did not cover the event because it openly spoke against president Enrique Peña Nieto.

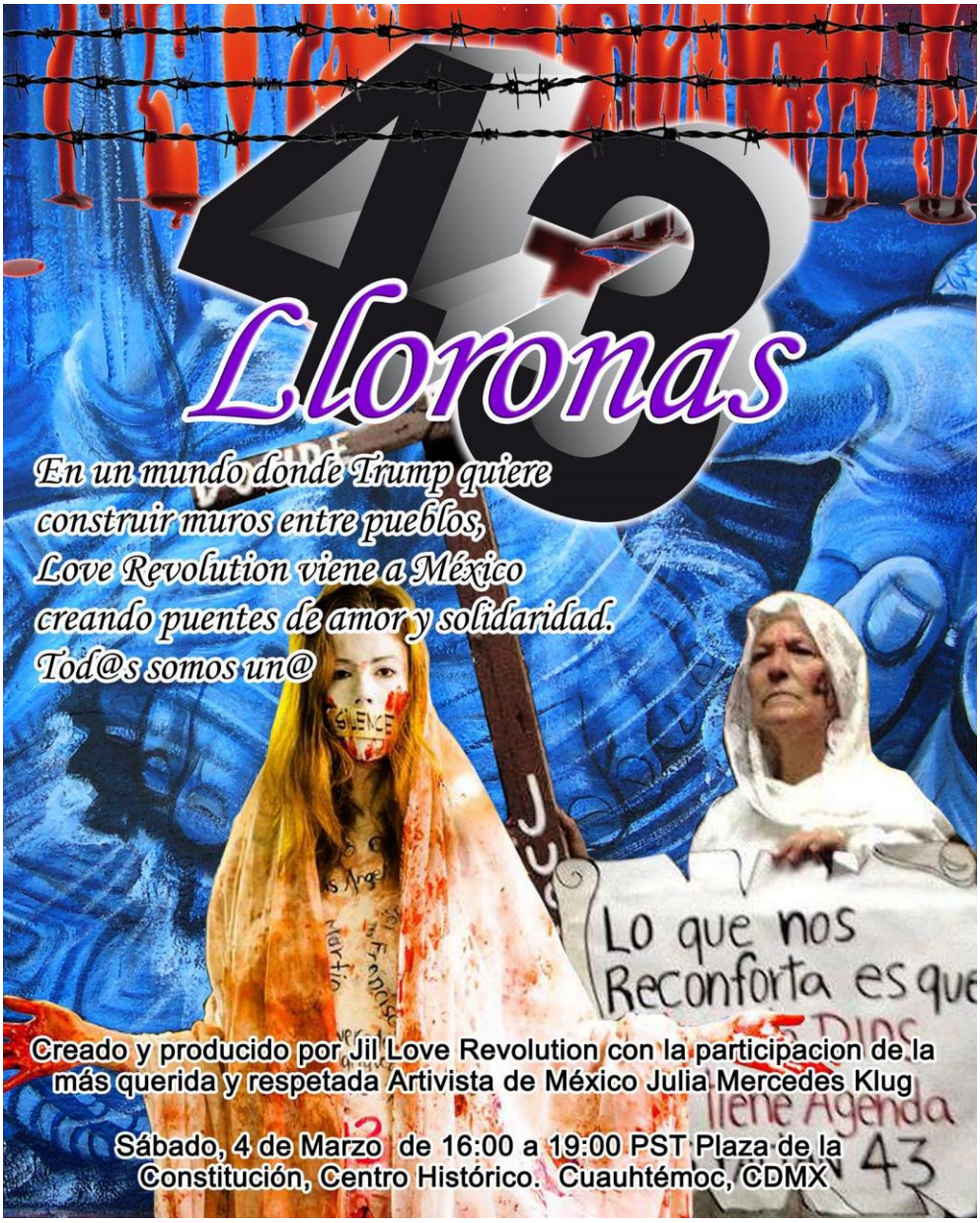

Figure 3. Flyer promoting the protest of the forty-three Lloronas featuring Jil Love (left) and Julia Klug (right). Taken from the Facebook page of the event.

The age range of the women involved varied widely, with the youngest one being fourteen and the oldest one sixty-five. For my research, I interviewed five of the protesters, ages ranging from thirty to sixty-five. They are all activists who have been involved with different social causes, but who came together to protest the case of Ayotzinapa.

Julia Klug, who is 65 years old and one of the organizers, has been involved in activism since 1997. During our interview, Julia narrated how she was a victim of sexual abuse by a Catholic priest when she was a girl. For years she was afraid of speaking out, but since she participated in the first public demonstration against the Catholic church, she has found her calling.

She raises awareness about different social issues by crafting colorful and striking costumes that she wears during protests. Julia states,

> I joined the fight for justice for other people, finding justice for the missing students of Ayotzinapa is something that I carry with me, within my soul (...) I did not go out to the streets to fight because someone from my family was murdered. I was already fighting for others when they killed a member of my family to silence me, because my voice is loud, it is clear, and it rises against the injustices committed by the church as well as of the government. (Klug 2019)

To Julia, La Llorona is “a symbol of pain, anguish, and love." She told me the story of her son, a military pilot who died in an accident. Julia believes that her son’s death was planned by the government. Afterwards, she stated that at least unlike the parents from Ayotzinapa, she got her son’s body back. She said, “I know that I have him, I can pray for him, bring him flowers or candles, but the parents of the forty-three do not know where their children are or if they are still alive.”

Nevertheless, it is inevitable to think that Julia is protesting not only for the forty-three missing students, but also for her son. This was a common thread among my interviewees. While none of them were directly related to the students from Ayotzinapa, many of them narrated painful experiences of their own, related to violence or human rights violations.

Figure 4. Activist Julia Klug at Mexico's City subway holding a sign to invite people to the protest (photo by Jil Love)

Activist Mari Sainz recalled how she experienced violence as a child and abuse in her marriage. In Tamaulipas, her home state and one of the most violent places in Mexico, she found herself in the middle of gunfire while picking up her daughter from school. Mari recalls how listening to her daughter say, "Mom, I do not want to get killed," was her breaking point. While

her husband worked, she would sneak out to protest violence. She met other activists and became more and more involved with "the fight," as she calls it.

Mari divorced her husband and started traveling to Mexico City to participate in workshops and courses on activism and human rights. She says that, at first, in the protests, she was "just one more," but she wanted to be noticed. She remembers how she saw journalists taking pictures of people who had flashy signs and decided to start making her own; the response was immediate. The signs turned into costumes, which came naturally to Mari since she works as a seamstress to support her family. Mari says that what appealed to her about La Llorona was that,

> When you dress up as her, it is not just wearing a costume, it is representing a feeling because when you represent pain, a pain that you have felt, that you have lived through, that you have seen in the mothers and the fathers (of the missing students) it feels like you are the mother searching for your sons who are missing. La Llorona has moved me deeply, she is engraved in my soul, in my heart. (Sainz 2019)

La Llorona becomes a powerful rhetorical symbol that frames their message. Her story contains enough elements that resonate with the protester's cause and experiences, while her popularity makes her easily recognizable for the audience. This is what makes La Llorona a powerful protest symbol.

The protest of the 43 Lloronas is far from the only public demonstration that has taken place in support of the missing students from Ayotzinapa. In fact, the lyrics to the folk song "La Llorona" were modified and the song was sung at various protests. However, the protest of the

forty-three Lloronas was the first time in which this character was embodied by performers and became the focal part of a demonstration in Mexico.[13]

Throughout this section of my work, I intend to analyze what makes La Llorona a powerful rhetorical tool appealing to protesters. By embodying her, protesters reframe La Llorona through a feminist lens. Thus, they become what Casey R. Schmitt (2013) has described as "a vernacular counter public—a group resisting official doctrine or authority but one also, like any other, defined through shared symbols of values" (393).

Before focusing on La Llorona it is worth briefly exploring what makes folklore appealing to protesters in general. The key to this question lies within the concept of tradition. Folklore allows for a connection with the past, the realm of the familiar. However, traditions can be transformed and reframed. Their dynamic nature turns them into a powerful rhetorical tool capable of addressing new, unexplored scenarios. As stated by Dorothy Noyes (2016) tradition "accumulates resonance from the history of its uses, exceeding the intentions and awareness of the immediate users" (132). In this same line of thought, Henry Glassie (2003) proposes that tradition can be defined as people's "creation of the future out of the past" (176). Since the nature of tradition is to be continuous, change cannot be its opposite; thus, oppression understood as "the intrusion of a power that thwarts the course of development" (2003, 177) is what ultimately opposes tradition.

Acts of protest and resistance against oppression resemble Victor Turner's conception of social drama in that they "are potential turning points in social situations where the social order gets deconstructed, debated, and reformed" (McFarland 2004, 1251). Turner (1982) asserts that

[13] In December of 2014, the *Coalición Latinoamericana en Solidaridad con Ayotzinapa* staged a protest in front of the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles, California. An activist dressed as La Llorona denounced government violence. The protest can be seen here: https://youtu.be/ke4oAeFiuKY

social dramas consist of four phases: breach, crisis, redress and reintegration or recognition of schism. Protests occur as part of the redress stage; when members of a group are making sense of a crisis and invoke a familiar framework of interpretation by "restoring the past" (12). That is, they take events that took place in the past and situate them in a contemporary context to be reexamined. In this sense, tradition becomes a useful resource to make sense of the crisis.

Performance has a transformative nature. Through it, traditional framings are reframed, and new meanings and symbols are generated (Turner 1982, 79). While expressive folklore has the capacity to reflect on current social issues by making them recognizable (Abrahams 1968), the context of performance transforms the text and imbues it with new meaning. Folklore can also be aesthetically pleasing and entertaining; Christine Garlough (2008) asserts that these qualities are precisely what makes it a persuasive tool. She states that folklore "draws the audience in and renders them more open to the argument that is implicitly advanced" (187); a desirable outcome for protesters.

Thus, La Llorona, a popular figure of Mexican folklore, emerges as an attractive symbol to communicate the protesters' message. She puts a familiar face on enforced disappearances, an issue that may not be new, but remains hard to understand. However, this familiarity is only superficial. The audience may recognize La Llorona when they see her, but they must draw their own intertextual connections between the legend and the disappearance of the forty-three students from Ayotzinapa. In her study on Afro-Cuban religious storytelling, Solimar Otero (2015) finds that the audience listening to the stories or participating in misas "are forced to participate in co-constructing the meaning and impact of the narrative" (198). In the same way, protesters are presenting a new reading of La Llorona that renders her uncanny for the audience;

the familiar figure of oral tradition is repurposed and presented in a new, unfamiliar context. Like Otero (2015) puts it, “interpretative passivity is simply not an option” (198).

The protest of the forty-three Lloronas is inscribed into a broader Latin American tradition of public acts of resistance. Enforced disappearances were a common terror tactic used by Latin American military dictatorships during the 1970s to keep dissidents under control. The Argentinian case is probably the best well-documented since it resulted in a remarkable resistance movement by grassroots human rights organizations. *Las Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* are groups of women who "presented themselves simply as harmless mothers looking for their children" (Taylor 2002, 163). They walked in circles around *Plaza de Mayo*, the main square of Buenos Aires, Argentina, wearing white scarves to symbolize their missing sons and daughters. Their model of peaceful resistance resonated not only with the Argentinian public but also with other movements in Latin America and the world.

Authoritarian governments justified the detention of young dissidents for their rebellious actions, labeling them as violent and dangerous. In contrast, these women were exercising their traditional role as mothers, a role often socially conceived as harmless. The government would have a hard time portraying them as dangerous or threatening, while their identity as mothers granted them the sympathy of the public opinion. As Taylor puts it, "What could be more natural, (...), than women looking for their missing children?" (1997, 84).

This is an image that can be easily understood within the patriarchal order of society, not just in Latin America but all over the world. Elaine J. Lawless (1987) found that women employ maternal and reproductive strategies to defuse whatever threatening aspect a woman in a position of power might represent. By presenting themselves as mothers, women can gain the influence that otherwise might be hard to get.

In contrast to other feminist movements that began in the 1970s, the collective organizations of mothers looking for their sons were not trying to subvert the traditional roles ascribed to women. They were protesting because by taking their children, the State had made it impossible for them to perform their traditional role. As noted by Maier (2001) it is not only their children that disappeared but also their identity as mothers.

By taking their domestic, private role into an open, public space, these women politicized motherhood. Furthermore, their model of resistance was replicated by several other organizations around the world. Acts like the incorporation of pictures of the disappeared became a powerful symbol of resistance by showing the faces of those that the authorities tried to erase.

The protest of the forty-three Lloronas replicated not only the strategy of incorporating the pictures of the forty-three students to the demonstration but is also appealed to the idea of the grieving mother to inspire compassion and solidarity. To discredit the protest movements in solidarity with Ayotzinapa and to justify the violent reaction of the authorities involved in the disappearances, the Mexican government portrayed the missing students as rebellious and troublemaking through state-sanctioned media. The day following the disappearance of the students, the state newspaper *Diario de Guerrero* (The Guerrero Daily) included an article that read, “The action by the State police and the military against the Ayoztinapa vandals is worthy of applause” (Mora 2017, 69). The students were criminalized to deter public opinion from supporting their parents and to justify the actions of the government. This victim-blaming also pointed the finger at the mothers of the missing students. The portrayal of the students as criminals results in a reproaching of their mothers “for exercising an inadequate maternity having produced a socially inadequate son" (Maier 2001, 49). This builds an interesting bridge to the story of La Llorona. Oral tradition presents her as a villain who killed her children; like the

mothers of the disappeared she is also stigmatized for failing to perform her role as a mother adequately. Thus, in this sense La Llorona resonates with the criminalization of the mothers from Ayotzinapa.[14]

Protesters are performing an alternative version of La Llorona in which, even when she was not the one who harmed her children, she is still held accountable for their disappearance. Diana Taylor (2002) considers that "performance...works to transmit traumatic memory, drawing from and transforming a shared archive and repertoire of cultural images" (166). The forty-three Lloronas managed to transform La Llorona through their performance by naming the culprit of the crime. Through their chants and claims, they proclaimed ¡*Fue el Estado! (*It was the State!*)*. It follows that this Llorona, like the mothers from Ayotzinapa, is innocent. Their portrayal of La Llorona resonates with the story of La Malinche, in that she is negatively portrayed without any regard of the external circumstances surrounding her. La Llorona is guilty by omission, she failed to protect her children and keep them alive, but she is not a murderer. This transformation not only allows for the audience to feel sympathy towards La Llorona, but also makes them question if she is judged fairly.

When I interviewed Jil Love, the main organizer of the protest, about why she had decided to use La Llorona she recognized that, initially, she had no clear idea of what she wanted to do. Jil had previously staged a protest in front of the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles, California. She arrived completely naked and wrote the name of the forty-three missing students all over her body. During that event, she told the media that she would stage another artistic performance to support the cause directly in Mexico.

[14] Human Rights organizations like Amnesty International have urged the Mexican government to stop the criminalization of both the missing students and their parents. Policemen have violently suppressed the protests of the parents from Ayotzinapa by calling them vandals.

The idea of using La Llorona came to her as a "download from the universe" when she realized that La Llorona was "a very Mexican thing" through which she could convey the message of a mother searching for her missing kids. She also saw an opportunity to "humanize the monster" by making her a central part of the performance.

The initial focus of my research was precisely to understand how La Llorona had been transformed from a monster into a woman who inspires sympathy. Through interviews with participants, however, it became clear that while La Llorona is an effective means for portraying maternal suffering, she has not lost her scary and threatening meaning either. She plays a dual role, evidenced in the two stages of the protest.

First, the forty-three Lloronas represented women being silenced, they hid their faces behind a veil and covered their mouths with tape. But when they got to *Palacio de Bellas Artes*, they uncovered their faces and started shouting. They turned into a threatening figure and gained a voice that allowed them to speak up against injustice. In the words of Bauman (1971), through this transformation La Llorona became an "instrument of conflict as a mechanism contributing to social solidarity" (38).

Figure 5. The forty-three Lloronas walking though Avenida Madero (photo by Multimedios)

However, the protesters are so aware of the appeal that the image of the suffering mother holds for the Mexican audience, that they did not address at all the fact that La Llorona is also a scary figure. Not once in the interviews did the aspect of a ghost coming back to haunt the perpetrators come up, since they fully rely on the appeal of a grieving mother to gain the support of the audience.

Activist Guadalupe Vallarta hints at a potential threat that La Llorona may symbolize: "(La Llorona) is about fighting for those sons alive, it is not just leaving them there, assuming they are dead, and leaving them there. It is about keeping on fighting for them, and not just for them but for many others." While La Llorona encourages women to fight, the ghostly, supernatural threat that she represents remains absent from the narrative.

Folklorist Christine Garlough (2011) considers that a feeling of uncanniness frequently underlies protests against authorities. She takes the figure of the zombie as an example —a popular supernatural creature in the 2011 protests in Wisconsin— and asserts that it "presented a

powerful visual representation of the uncanniness of the political and social climate" (355). La Llorona speaks to this same feeling of unfamiliarity.

As Dorothy Noyes has noted when describing legend as a genre, "the legend may stage uncanny irruptions of the past into the present, bringing uncomfortable old news back into light" (2016, 147). In this sense, La Llorona brings back the disappearance of the students and confronts the audience with something unfathomable. A ghost roaming the streets in broad daylight evokes a similar feeling to the idea of forty-three young men vanishing without a trace.

The fact that the protesters chose a ghost to advance their cause can also be read as a way of highlighting the importance of collective memory when dealing with enforced disappearances. Historically, when confronted with this crime, authorities denied that they played a role in it. In the case of Ayotzinapa, the government provided a version of what happened to the students without any evidence to support it. They claimed that the students had been caught in the crossfire between rival gangs, and that their bodies were later incinerated at a municipal dumpster and therefore could not be found. This was done to urge people to move on and to stop them from uncovering the role of the authorities in the crime.

A ghost as a memory that keeps coming back resonates with the liminal state in which the parents of the disappeared students find themselves. Are their sons dead? Are they alive? This uncertainty delays their grieving process and does not allow them to find closure. As a spirit that is unable to move on and is condemned to wander the earth until she finds her children La Llorona is the embodiment of grief. As Kay Turner puts it, "grief's performance is without formality, without acceptance: grief is a cry, a wail, a howl, a flowing of tears" (2009, 161). Furthermore, as Gillian Bennett (1999) has discussed, ghostly presences are a common occurrence in the lives of people dealing with loss; in her study conducted among groups of

Manchester and Leicester widows, this sense of presence was normally associated with benevolent manifestations of a loved one. La Llorona does not quite fit into this category, but then again, neither do enforced disappearances resemble a normal process of loss and mourning.

In the previous chapter, the identity of La Llorona and her profound entanglement with Mexican identity was discussed. By using a well-known symbol of Mexican folklore, the protesters are also appealing to Mexican identity. They represent the Mexican people, a task that should be fulfilled by the government, but which it has failed to carry out.

During our interview, activist Julia Klug stated that the pieces of the flag that the Lloronas were holding represented not only the forty-three students but "pieces of *patria"* (homeland) that had been torn by the authorities. By using these symbols of Mexican identity, the protesters appeal to "a collective nostalgia, to a sense of shared knowledge and to in-group solidarity" (Schmitt 2011), which helps them legitimize their claims and gain the audience's sympathy.

In the eyes of the protesters, Mexican authorities have failed to perform the essential functions of a government: protecting its citizens, being accountable and transparent, providing justice, guaranteeing the well-being of its citizens. Thus, just like La Llorona's partner fails to fulfill his promises in the legend, the Mexican State betrays its citizens by becoming the source of the violence —or at least an enabler of it.

The use of the Mexican flag and even the choice of La Llorona imbue the protest with a nationalistic sense. The protesters are representing something authentically Mexican. In fact, the nationalistic feelings that the protest evoked became a source of contention between Jil Love, the foreign organizer, and some of the Mexican participants. During our interview, activist Guadalupe Vallarta said that while she enjoyed participating in the protest, she could not help but

question, "Why do we wait for someone who does not know our culture to come and transform what we know? We can do the same as Mexican women, but if it had been only us, there would not have been any media coverage" (Vallarta 2019).

The disagreement between Jil as a foreign activist and some of the Mexican participants focused mainly on a ritual that Jil incorporated to the protest and which resembled the offerings of flowers and candles associated with *Día de Muertos*. During our interview, Mari Sainz mentioned that this ritual angered the parents of the missing students, since their sons are missing, not necessarily dead. Mari also brought up the fact that Jil was the only one wearing a black dress, a color that traditionally indicates mourning, while the rest of the Lloronas were dressed in white. Furthermore, this set her apart from the other women who participated in the protest, making her stand out in the protest, and in the media coverage of the event a fact that did not sit well with some of my interviewees.

Figure 6. Jil Love dressed in black, walking along the forty-three Lloronas (photo taken from Jil Love's public Facebook page used with her permission)

Activist Mari Sainz went on to state,

> It was her (Jil's) idea. (The ritual) meant something different for us because we know our culture. She is a foreigner who thought it would be attractive to make a circle of roses, but she does not feel what we feel when we do that. Look! I even get goosebumps talking about it! Because when we do it, when we offer flowers or light a votive candle, we really feel it. (Sainz 2019)

Richard Bauman has addressed this esoteric/exoteric tension by stating that, "folklore performance does not require that the lore be a collective representation of the participants, pertaining and belonging to all of them. It may be so, but it may also be differentially distributed, differentially performed, differentially perceived, and differentially understood" (1971, 38).

Thus, it is possible for the protesters to have a different reading of the elements incorporated into the performance.

Even if they were not entirely on board with the strategies chosen by Jil, Mexican activists agreed to participate in the protest because, for them, it is essential to create awareness and spread the word against enforced disappearances internationally. This resonates with my own fieldwork experience. My interviewees were particularly interested in participating in my research since it was conducted for a Canadian institution, and therefore their work could potentially reach a broader audience.

While the ritual became a contentious space, there is something to be said in favor of memorialization within the context of enforced disappearances. Collective memory is important to ensure that the authorities accept their role in the crime, to stop it from happening again, and to ensure that those who tried to be erased remain present. In this sense, the performance of the Lloronas shares certain aspects with commemoration, such as spontaneous memorials. Jack Santino (2006) asserts that these memorials "share a component of addressing a social issue, of trying to convince people, of trying to make something happen" (1). This echoes the sentiment behind the protest of the forty-three Lloronas, however, even when it is possible to perform rituals to memorialize the students, there should be a clear distinction between those performed for the dead and those who have gone missing.

Furthermore, Kay Turner reflects on spontaneous shrines and considers that "when a break has occurred with the reality we believe is ordained, or at least expected, memorial making acts to combine ephemerality with tradition in a gesture towards recovery through remembrance, through attachment to the past in hope of a future" (162). This brings the discussion back to the breach that occurs in Turner's social drama and the strategies used to make sense of an event

hard to understand. Spontaneous memorials and protests are both forms of performance that speak to the need to redress the breach that takes place in a social drama.

Thus, from Jil's perspective the ritual made perfect sense, while for the Mexican protesters, its similarity with *Día de Muertos* rendered it inappropriate. For this thesis's purpose it is worth noting how nothing of the sort occurred when Jil chose La Llorona as the main figure of the protest. The fact that so many Mexican activists and volunteers agreed to participate illustrates that they find in La Llorona an appropriate figure to protest enforced disappearances.

La Llorona managed to "establish a sense between a "real" situation and its artificial embodiment" (Abrahams 1968, 148). Guadalupe Vallarta, one of the forty-three Lloronas, said that she had not thought much of the performance at first. Since she has been involved with activism for a while, to her this was just another protest to show her support to the parents from Ayotzinapa. However, when the protest began, she realized La Llorona's impact on the audience.

> When we went out to the streets, it was shocking (...) that was when I realized the impact of what we were doing, because before I thought well, it's just La Llorona, but it was right then when I realized how important she was. (Vallarta 2019)

During my interviews with the participants, my primary focus was to understand what La Llorona meant to them within the context of enforced disappearances. However, revisiting the interviews, it became apparent that La Llorona has a meaning for them that transcends this subject. At the beginning of this chapter, I presented some of the experiences that participants identified as defining moments for their involvement with activism. These stories, while not directly linked to the disappearance of the forty-three students from Ayotzinapa, shine a light on the appeal of La Llorona as a protest symbol for other causes.

The fact that she is a woman who defied patriarchal oppression and refused to stay silent resonates with the protester's experiences. Transforming her story represents an act of resistance against "systematic efforts to silence or criminalize the behavior of resistant women who refuse to adhere to socially prescribed gender roles" (Perez 2008, 79). Furthermore, questioning the "official" version of the story where La Llorona is a villain makes sense to women who have experienced the corruption and failures of the Mexican judicial system.

Figure 7. Activist Guadalupe Vallarta being interviewed right after the protest (photo by Ivonne Ojeda)

Such is the case of Guadalupe Vallarta. Her involvement with activism began in 2007 when her brother Israel was accused of being the leader of a high-profile kidnapping ring. This was a highly mediatized case; the special operation to catch the gang was broadcasted on TV. Later, authorities had to admit that the operation had been staged for the purpose of putting on a show for the press.

One of the supposed accomplices of Israel was Florence Cassez, a French citizen. The French government got involved and pointed out the several inconsistencies in the case built against Florence and Israel. Thanks to media and diplomatic pressure, Florence was set free in 2013. However, Israel remains in jail waiting for a new trial, after he provided proof of being tortured to confess a crime that he did not commit.

Throughout this chapter I have outlined some of the elements that make La Llorona an appealing symbol to protest enforced disappearances, as well as possible connections between her story and the protester's personal experiences. However, I keep going back to her voice as the most powerful element within the protest context. After all crying and wailing are her defining traits.

Like activist Korina Ramírez stated, La Llorona extends an invitation to, "people who do not want to speak up or cannot speak up, we want to invite them to uncover their faces and to raise their voices alongside us." Korina, who describes herself as a "dissident teacher and activist" has been a rural teacher for nineteen years. Her activism is therefore mainly related to education. She got involved with the Ayotzinapa protests because the forty-three missing students were studying to become teachers, and she saw herself in them.

In turn, I see in all my interviewees a resemblance to La Llorona not only because they refused to be silenced, but because they persist. Through their performance, La Llorona's "pain-filled wail also embodies a battle cry" (Carbonell 1999, 71).

Chapter 4. La Llorona in Theatre

The play *La Llorona de Cuemanco* has become a landmark of Xochimilco, a mayoralty in the southeastern part of Mexico City. Every year, at the beginning of October and through November, the theatre company founded by the Capultitla family stages the story of La Llorona. The setting of this play makes it unique.

Xochimilco is an area of Mexico City popular with both locals and tourists for its canals. People visit Xochimilco to ride a *trajinera* (traditional wooden boat with colorful decorations) and sail through the canals while they listen to live Mariachi music and eat Mexican food. The stage for *La Llorona de Cuemanco* is a small island located in one of these canals.

Actors greet the audience members in the pier and escort them to their *trajineras*; from there, they set sail until they arrive at the island and watch the play from their boats. The same theatre company has staged the show for more than 25 years. Each year the script changes to attract a new audience and surprise those who have already seen it, but La Llorona remains the central character of the play.

Figure 8. A trajinera (traditional boat) taking the audience to the stage of La Llorona (photo by La Llorona de Cuemanco)

Since 2010, the company has dedicated the play to contemporary social issues. My research focuses on the version of 2018, titled *La Llorona: Justicia para los Caídos* (La Llorona: Justice for the Fallen). This play was dedicated to the memory of the student massacre of 1968 and to the forty-three students from the rural school of Ayotzinapa.

Enforced disappearances are not incorporated directly into the plot, but visual clues can be found on the actors' body paint and makeup. For example, the numeral 43 is drawn with red paint on the hands of the actress playing La Llorona and on the torsos of the dancers.

Figure 9. Actress Daniela Infante characterized as La Llorona, with the number forty-three drawn on her hands (photo by La Llorona de Cuemanco, used with permission)

Like the protesters from the previous chapter, the theatre company considers La Llorona to be an appealing symbol to engage with enforced disappearances. However, they emphasize different aspects of her story. La Llorona from the play advocates for a reconnection with the Indigenous past of Mexico; her story gives people the chance to heal the present by understanding the past.

For this portion of my work, I interviewed six members of the theatre company. Unlike the protesters, who in many cases did not know each other outside the context of the protest, this was a close-knit group. Furthermore, over all the years they have spent working on the play, they have developed a special connection with La Llorona.

Each year, *La Llorona de Cuemanco* changes its script to better encompass whatever social cause it is endorsing. According to the playwright, Luis Infante, they choose a different variant of the story and slightly tweak the narrative: “In the past, we have staged the version where she is a woman who falls in love with a Spanish man, just like in the version of the story

most of us heard as children, but we have decided to depart from that and tell the story from an Indigenous perspective." (Infante 2019)

By telling the story from the perspective of an Indigenous woman, the play challenges colonialism. The incorporation of elements that evoke the students from Ayotzinapa and the student massacre of 1968 builds a bridge between colonial oppression and human rights violations committed by the Mexican government.

Choosing to depict La Llorona as an Indigenous woman responds primarily to the need for imbuing the story with a perceived authenticity. This is achieved through evoking the distant, historical past of Mexico. However, their choice also responds to the immediate context of the theatre company. In 1993, the Capultitla family was approached by the local ministry of culture and asked if they would be interested in developing a show or event in the pier of Cuemanco to attract tourists. Right away, they knew that this would be a great opportunity to celebrate their Indigenous heritage. Alejandro Capultitla, the executive director of the play, stated: "We have tried to maintain the pre-Hispanic context because it is still very important for Xochimilco, but also because my family name is Capultitla, a Nahuatl last name, we want to preserve our roots."

According to the National Institute of Geography and Statistics, in 2015, there were 415,933 inhabitants in Xochimilco; 12.4% of them, that is more than 50,000 inhabitants, self-identified as Indigenous. It is important to stress that by Indigenous, I am referring to what can broadly be described as Nahua. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the legend of La Llorona is often related to the pre-Hispanic past of Mexico and traced back to the codices and writings of the missionary friars that first arrived in the country.

Thus, La Llorona would draw the attention of the public due to its popularity, while allowing the theatre company to celebrate their Indigenous heritage. The choice of the story was

also related to the unique landscape of Xochimilco. Since La Llorona is usually seen near bodies of water— most versions of the story state that she drowned her children —the canals provide an ideal setting for the play.

The play relies heavily on set design, makeup, and costumes to communicate the idea of a story set during the Conquest period. The main stage consists of a pyramid, and the actors wear traditional Indigenous regalia. However, the incorporation of Indigenous elements goes beyond costume and makeup.

The members of the theatre company consider that the dancers are what turn the play into an authentic celebration of their heritage. The dance component is such a relevant part of the spectacle that all my interviewees insisted on the importance of the role of Atl Martínez, the choreographer and lead dancer of the play, whom they also identified as their spiritual leader.

Figure 10. Traditional dancers performing in the main stage of the play (photo by La Llorona de Cuemanco, used with permission)

This idea of authenticity holds a central role for the play since the theatre company uses it to set itself apart from other shows that capitalize on the scary aspect of the legend. They are aware of the appeal that horror stories have, especially during the dates close to *Día de Muertos*, but for them, the play is about transporting the audience to Mexico's historical past.

La Llorona from the play is a Xochimilcan princess who refuses to surrender to the Spanish conquistadors. To subjugate her, a Spanish soldier rapes her. She gets pregnant and gives birth while the people from Xochimilco are about to surrender to the Spaniards. As a last act of defiance, she kills her child as a sacrifice to Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec god of the underworld. The lead actress, Nayeli Cortés, describes the murder of the child as follows: "She does it precisely to stop him from suffering at the hands of the Spaniards, but also to stop them from taking the child away from her, away from their land. Her sacrifice is an act of love, of madness. She asks Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, the lords of the underworld, to take him with them, to take him with his ancestors" (Cortés 2019).

In their version of the legend, the act of killing the child can be read as a rejection of mestizaje. Mestizaje has historically held a central role in the nationalist agenda of Mexico; it is an effort to "whiten people in order to create a newly authentic Mexican nation" (Hellier-Tinoco 2011, 201). By murdering her mestizo child, La Llorona actively refuses to play a part in this process and, therefore, she has been portrayed as a villain in most versions of the legend.

Furthermore, perpetuating the idea that Mexico is a mestizo nation erases the identity of the many Indigenous groups in the country. As Mariana Mora (2017) has noted mestizaje creates a broader systemic issue; it "generates the prevalent common-sense notion that if there is no such thing as race, racism fails to exist" (70). Thus, La Llorona from the play not only refuses to be whitewashed, but also denounces the prevalent racism towards Indigenous people in Mexico.

Unlike La Llorona from the protest, in this version, the audience knows for sure that she murdered her child. This does not necessarily turn her into a villain. As Domino Perez (2008) puts it absolving la Llorona from the murder takes away her radical act of resistance. However, the context of the play allows for the audience to engage critically with her story and question her intentions and motivation. The play showcases the culpability of her abuser and the oppressive forces that drove her to her breaking point. By doing this, it is possible to understand La Llorona as a nuanced, complex figure rather than just a villain.

As Victor Turner (1982) noted, the proximity of theatre to life "makes of it the form best fitted to comment or 'meta-comment' on conflict, for life is conflict" (105). Along the same line, folklorist Christine Garlough considers that the work of community-based theatre is "political, and its appeal is often rooted in folklore" (2008, 167). Thus, a playful performance may prompt the audience to reflect upon serious social issues, as they draw the connection "between elements of the play and sources of conflict in sociocultural milieus" (Turner 1982, 105).

In her study of the Dance of the Old Men[15] and the Night of the Dead in Michoacán, México, Ruth Hellier-Tinoco (2011) finds that the bodies of those who engage and perform certain activities are objectified through the gaze of tourists. This reinforces the notion of them being authentic, folkloric, and rural. Such bodies are then attractive and picturesque for tourist consumption.

The depiction of Indigeneity in *La Llorona de Cuemanco* urges the audience to feel proud and celebrate the Indigenous heritage of Mexico. However, by incorporating protest symbols to these "authentic" bodies (i.e., drawing a number forty-three on the torsos of the dancers), the

[15] The Dance of the Old Men is a folk dance performed by the Purepecha people of Michoacán, Mexico. The dancers use traditional clothes and wear a mask that symbolizes "the old God", Huehueteotl.

play is also prompting the audience to understand the contradiction between this celebratory discourse and reality.

Figure 11. Traditional dancer characterized as Mictlantecutli, the Aztec god of death (photo by La Llorona de Cuemanco, used with permission)

Atl Martínez, the main choreographer, is a practitioner of *Mexicanidad,* a religious movement that emerged in Mexico during the 1960s. The aim of *Mexicanidad* as a religion is "the revival of the spiritual values of the ancient Mexican culture" (González 1996, 5). Practitioners strive to revindicate and recreate the pre-Hispanic past of Mexico (Rostas 2009).

During our interview, Martínez stated, "We are traditional dancers[16]; our families are part of the Mexicanity tradition; it is like our religion. *Mexicanidad* is our way of life, our language,

[16] The dancers of the play belong to the *concheros* or Mexica dance tradition; they are "men (and, to a lesser extent, women), in costumes loosely based on pictures of Mexica warriors and dancers from the old codices" (Rostas 2009, xi) who perform ritual dances to the rhythm of drums.

our medicine, our cosmovision. To us, La Llorona is a guardian, energy that reminds us about all of those whose blood was shed." (Martínez 2019)

In this sense, *Mexicanidad* can also be interpreted as an active effort to bring back an identity that has been erased by the Mexican State in its pursuit of modernity. It is easy to draw a parallel between the goals of *Mexicanidad* and the efforts of the parents of the missing students, who are trying to bring back their sons. The stories and lives of the forty-three students were erased by the government, not for the sake of modernity, but for the pursuit of a "safer" country.

The play makes the audience question why Indigenous bodies are "devalued in relation to other bodies, can be easily disposed of, and are forgotten" (Mora 2017, 68) and why is society being complicit with the violence inflicted upon the "remnants" of that idealized past. Violence, whether colonial or political, continues to be inflicted mainly upon the bodies of Indigenous people in Mexico.

Folklore as a discipline has long accepted tradition as a dynamic concept (Toelken 1996); a traditional story can be transformed through performance to communicate new meanings. As Richard Bauman (1992) noted in his performance-oriented analysis of folklore items, "performance always manifests an emergent dimension" (42) with no two performances being identical. For him, the debate lies in whether the traditional element determines performance against "how much flexibility, interpretive choice, or creative opportunity rests with the performer" (42).

As previously discussed in this thesis, the legend of La Llorona is a staple of Mexican folklore, so much so that the local Congress submitted a bill to the Ministry of Culture to declare its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mexico City. This might falsely give an impression of the text being inflexible, something static that needs to be preserved. On the contrary, it is precisely the

flexibility of the story, its ability to be adapted and transformed, that makes it current and pervasive.

When the audience watches the theatre company's rendition of La Llorona, they find in it enough identifying elements that resonate with the story they know. In fact, the main transformation of the story is a matter of perspective. It is told by La Llorona, rather than by the colonizers. This shift from perspective allows for a reassessment of La Llorona's "established position as a cultural villain" (Perez 2008, 76). Her negative reputation is the result of other people telling her story. In this sense, there is a connection to the forty-three students from Ayotzinapa. The rural school of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero has gained notoriety from its history as an epicenter of Indigenous movements and armed rebellion.

Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez were two former students who became guerilla leaders during the 1960s and 1970s. They both had communist ideals and demanded fairness of treatment to the rural and Indigenous communities of Guerrero. The Mexican army assassinated Cabañas. Vázquez died in a car crash; however, the circumstances of the event remain unclear to this day.

These historical events are frequently cited to criminalize the students from Ayotzinapa and even to justify the violation of their fundamental human rights. Like La Llorona, the rural school of Ayotzinapa and its students have been historically talked about in very negative terms. Conservative sectors of the Mexican public opinion have even gone as far as to state that the students deserved what happened to them for being too rebellious.

In this sense, the play serves as a reminder of the importance of paying attention to who is telling a story. As Luis Infante stated, "The official[17] version of the legend of La Llorona

[17] Luis Infante considers that the story of La Llorona as a woman who killed her kids because she was betrayed by her lover is the "official" version, in the sense that it is the most common rendition of the legend.

stigmatizes her, why? Because she was an Indigenous woman. What we want is to give her a voice, to provide a different perspective for the audience, and to make people understand that she was also human; she was also suffering" (Infante 2019). By changing the perspective, the audience is presented with a new version that allows for La Llorona to be seen in a different light. The same occurred once the version of what happened to the students of Ayotzinapa was contested by non-governmental organizations; the public was made aware of the inconsistencies and half-truths presented by the government.

The parents of the missing students contested the government's version of what happened to their sons. Authorities maintain that the forty-three students were kidnapped by members of a drug cartel, murdered, and incinerated in an open sky dumpster. This is how they justify the fact that no human remains have been found.

The Mexican Human Rights Commission hired an independent group of international experts to investigate the case. These researchers demonstrated how it was impossible to reduce forty-three human bodies to ashes in an open sky space and put forward several other inconsistencies of the report provided by the government. The administration of former president Enrique Peña Nieto refused to accept the report of the international experts and dismissed them.

The questioning of stories that seem set in stone constitutes an act of resistance and rebellion. If the story of La Llorona can be transformed by presenting it from a different perspective, so can the version of what happened to the forty-three students. In choosing La Llorona to communicate a message about enforced disappearances, the theatre company demonstrated what Christine Garlough (2008) has described as rhetorical competence. By reinterpreting and appropriating a folkloric text, actors get an appropriate response from the audience.

The transformation and reframing of La Llorona has been part of a long process for actors and producers. Nayeli Cortés believed that La Llorona was an evil spirit before she got involved with the play. As preparation for the role of La Llorona, and prompted by the traditional dancers, she researched more about the legend and discovered the connection that the story has to the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl.

In Nayeli's words, her research made her understand that, "Cihuacoatl, La Llorona, and Our Lady of Sorrows are all the same figure in different historical moments and seen from different perspectives." Nevertheless, it was her performance of La Llorona that ultimately changed her perspective about her. Nayeli recalled how, during a particularly emotional rendition of the play, she realized the impact that La Llorona has. On that day, they were performing the play at a female jail. She mentioned how, at first, she felt nervous because she had no way of knowing how the inmates would react to the play. Then, during a monologue in which La Llorona is saying goodbye to her child, Nayeli stated that, "all the inmates' faces had tears on them, and that's when I felt very dumb, because I was trying to portray a type of pain that these women experience in their daily lives." This was the breakthrough moment for Nayeli.

Performance "involves moments of self-recognition and requires putting ourselves at risk" (Garlough 2008, 170). Playing La Llorona is no easy task. Daniela Infante, the stand-in actress for La Llorona narrated the pressure she felt when she had to substitute for Nayeli. "You have to respect her [La Llorona] because she is an important part of Mexican culture. Playing a bad role, you cannot imagine the consequences of that! Even performing badly at an interview, or not getting her wail right… that could be the end of you. It is very important to respect this iconic figure of Mexican culture" (Infante 2019)

The long-lasting relationship of the theatre company with La Llorona has allowed for them to develop a deep connection to her. In fact, their portrayal of the legendary ghost as a caring mother goes beyond the stage. They have taken La Llorona to the streets to help with different social causes. After the earthquake that devastated large areas of Mexico City in September of 2017, for example, the actors visited Xochimilco's most damaged areas and brought food and monetary donations for those in need. People were grateful to La Llorona for her help and eager to take pictures with Nayeli, who was dressed up as her. The involvement of the theatre company with these events informs the public perception of the audience about La Llorona.

It is through this new meaning that the play manages to question previously held beliefs of the audience as well as of the actors. And in doing so, a traditional folk narrative like La Llorona becomes a powerful "demand that we do not remain indifferent to the suffering and needs of others" (Garlough 2011, 170). In this sense, it is relevant to note that *La Llorona: Justice for the Fallen* was not only evoking those who went missing, but also the women who are searching for them. Luis Infante stated during our interview that La Llorona is an ideal figure to speak about the present context of violence in Mexico because "there are many Lloronas right now, so many mothers crying for their missing children, this is what makes this (legend) relevant."

One can argue that no matter how her story is reframed, the fact remains that La Llorona is a murderer. I argue that rather than undermining her appeal as a protest symbol, this makes her even more powerful since her story showcases that reality is always nuanced. The "incendiary potential" of theatre, as Brinda Mehta (2014) calls it, lies in that it "cannot change the world (but) it is dangerous because it reflects it" (27).

The effectiveness of the play stems from the fact that it makes the audience question when or if violence is justifiable. As Garlough (2008) puts it, reframing a traditional narrative to give it new meaning "create(s) opportunities for shared meaning through discourse and allows individuals to engage with aspects of tradition and authority in a way that calls into question legitimacy without complete dismissal" (172).

The theatre company presents a version of La Llorona that resonates with the expectations of the audience while introducing new elements that advance their agenda. The audience is given a wide variety of clues that they can interpret intertextually, whether it is the number forty-three in the hands of La Llorona, the title of the play, or the cries of a suffering mother. Allowing for the spectators to build these bridges between the legend and the current social issues makes the message way more potent than presenting them with a new version where La Llorona is free of any guilt.

By setting the story in the past, the play manages to portray the anxieties derived from colonialism and racism as were experienced then and leads the audience to understand that these issues are still present today. In the words of Mehta (2014), "The transformative reframing of trauma as creative expression, and abjection as social protest, underscores the resisting and resuscitating power of theater." The choice of a well-known folkloric text situates the audience within a familiar frame that allows for a traumatic experience to be better understood while rooting itself in the authenticity derived from historical past.

After the show, spectators are welcome to meet and greet the actors. Nayeli Cortés related how some people comment on how impressed they are by the lights and the stage or talk about how proud they are about their heritage. However, some others ask her, "Why are the same

things still happening today? Why are they still murdering us? Why are they still trying to erase our roots?" When these questions are asked, she feels that her performance was successful.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the play also contains a ritual dimension. Ritual, according to Turner (1982), is "a synchronization of many performative genres" (81). It could be argued that the whole play falls into the category of ritual; nevertheless, there are certain components that the actors identify as being distinctively sacred or holding a different meaning. This is important because the performance of such elements imbue the play with another layer of meaning.

Before every show, the dancers perform a ritual dance and ask for the permission of La Llorona to perform her story. This is the moment that signals the beginning of the performance. Turner noted that stage drama falls into a liminoid category, rather than a liminal one. While the social status of the audience members will not have changed by the end of the performance, the play still prompts a sense of connectedness (or communitas) in them.

Figure 12. The cast of La Llorona de Cuemanco.Traditional dancers and lead actress Nayeli Cortés (photo by La Llorona de Cuemanco, used with permission)

The dance serves a twofold purpose: it frames the performance as something sacred and evokes the historical past of Mexico. The audience's perception of history will be changed by the time the performance is over. This new understanding of the past will impact the way they understand the present. In the words of Victor Turner, "To look at itself, a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection. To do this, it must set up a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and, if need be, remodeled and rearranged." (1979, 468).

By engaging with the colonial past, the theatre company manages to turn La Llorona into an effective protest symbol that evokes voices that have been consistently ignored, or people whose stories have been told from the perspective of oppressive powers. During the performance, the play manages to bring back those who have disappeared by "writing history

through the body, for as words act as substitutes for missing bodies, then even more potent is the idea of a live body substituting for missing bodies" (Hellier-Tinoco 2011, 201).

The play prompts the audience to raise their voice as La Llorona did and continues to do so. Through their performance, actors turn La Llorona into a symbol that reminds us of "the necessity of acting against oppression, but she also teaches us how to use our voices, whether wailing in protest or shouting in liberation, so that we may actively shape new cultural and social realities" (Perez 2008, 72).

Conclusions

La Llorona has acquired new readings relevant to the current sociopolitical context of Mexico. Judging by the historical sources that trace the earliest versions of the legend to the country's pre-colonial past, it is a story that has remained relevant within the collective imaginary for more than 500 years. While many of the ideas presented in this thesis are only applicable to the Mexican context, the story's pervasiveness allows for a broader analysis of legend as a narrative genre.

Legends' unique characteristics have puzzled researchers for years since they possess traits that defy classification attempts. However, these attributes play a crucial role in their ability to adapt to different sociopolitical contexts and make the narratives prevalent. As part of the concluding remarks of this thesis, I will look into the legend's defining traits as a genre and into how the story of La Llorona fits into them.

Timothy Tangherlini (1990) surveyed the scholarship on legends in his article "It Happened Not Too Far from Here...": A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization. In it, he highlighted the significant breakthroughs and obstacles encountered by folklorists when studying the genre. Tangherlini began by noting that several scholars consider the legend to be "formless," particularly compared to other narrative genres, such as folktales. This issue about the form of the legend had been previously tackled by Linda Dégh (1965) who considered that the inability to pinpoint the legend's morphology came from improper collection techniques and the editorialization of the narrative texts compiled.

In response to Dégh, Gillian Bennett (1987) and Bill Ellis (1987) acknowledged that, while she was right in her observations, both the collection and transcription of a legend entailed various challenges. For Bennett, the main problem lies in the impossibility of replicating the natural context in which a legend is told. For Ellis, the text's transcription can be an issue since a

legend should be transcribed verbatim; otherwise, researchers deal with "legend summarising" rather than legend telling.

The research presented here focuses on the performance of a legend rather than on its textual analysis. However, Bennett's and Ellis's assessments come into play since this research engages with context issues. I was not present during the 2017 protest of the forty-three Lloronas; therefore, I could not capture the performance within the natural context that Bennett suggests. Nevertheless, two of the protesters dressed up as La Llorona for our interview without being prompted to do so, which allowed for an assessment of the audience's reaction to their performance. The interview with Mari Sainz took place at a public park chosen by her; thus, the performance context can not be described as natural since it was a far cry from participating in a public protest. Even so, she insisted on walking through the park and posing for pictures to show me how La Llorona behaves. Her performance allowed for an interaction with an audience, people who stopped to take pictures of her or just identified her as being La Llorona by waving at her and saying, "Look, it is La Llorona!".

On the other hand, Julia Klug agreed to meet me right before another protest to support the forty-three students from Ayotzinapa. She showed up characterized as La Llorona. While this instance better resembles Bennett's induced natural context, it is still worth noting that Julia's decision to portray La Llorona at this protest was directly related to my presence. In both cases, my research impacted their performance.

Figure 13. Julia Klug dressed as La Llorona, ready to participate in a protest on the day of our interview (photo by Mariana Esquivel)

The case of the theatre play poses other interesting questions. While I was not present at the 2018 play, several of my interviews took place at a rehearsal of the play's 2019 version. Thus, my fieldwork allowed for an observation of the performance of La Llorona. However, it is harder to assess if my presence impacted the context since the play's goal is to be seen by an audience, and the actors were following a script. Furthermore, regardless of my research, the

play and its rehearsal would have taken place. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the stage and costumes transform the actors' performance; thus, in a sense, I could not replicate the natural context in which the play takes place, what Pravina Shukla has identified as ““the magical moment”, an intense feeling of authenticity, of being momentarily transported in time and space” (2015, 129).

As for issues with transcription, while both protesters and actors shared a version of the legend that could be transcribed verbatim by using Ellis's technique, this thesis focuses on the physical performance of La Llorona, her embodiment. This puts forward the question of how to translate physical representations of legends into written elements. Furthermore, it queries how a legend's performance can be transcribed when there are only visual clues (white dresses and makeup) that allow the audience to draw an intertextual connection to a story. The legend does appear to be formless in this case, or, more accurately, it defies to conform to a single form.

While these questions undoubtedly represent a challenge for Folklore as a discipline, the diversity of forms in which a legend like La Llorona manifests plays a role in its persistence. The mere image of a woman dressed in white prompts the Mexican audience to draw intertextual connections that identify her as La Llorona. As stated above, during the interviews with Julia and Mary, numerous bystanders identified them as La Llorona, without being given any sign that these women were representing the legendary figure other than how they dressed.

According to Bill Ellis a group may reduce a legend to a simple allusion to one of its distinctive elements, known as a metonym, which stands for the whole text (2001, 65). In the case of the protesters a woman in a white dress was enough to recall the whole legend. However, the image of a woman in white is not always necessary to evoke La Llorona, other metonyms are also able of evoking the legend. For example, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in

the states of Jalisco and Nayarit, Mexico, people drove around their neighbourhoods at night, playing the cries of a woman on full volume in their speakers. They did it to frighten their neighbours and stop them from going out by making them think that La Llorona was around.[18] In this case, no image was necessary to represent her, only the cries of a woman in the middle of the night. When La Llorona appears in the form of a metonym we are unable to collect the legend in a finished form and can only "reconstruct the implied text only by surveying the cultural uses of the metonym" (Ellis 2001, 65).

Thus, La Llorona can coexist in these multiple forms for anyone familiar with this narrative tradition. Herbert Halpert considered that "each geographical and cultural area tends to ascribe supernatural legends to its dominant supernatural figure" (1971, 50). It is undeniable that La Llorona is a dominant supernatural figure in Mexico; therefore, the next step is to understand how she has become so popular and prevalent. It is useful to look into the concept of ecotypification introduced by Carl Wilhelm Von Sydow and defined as "a process of cultural adaptation of tradition" (Hasan-Rokem 2016, 110).

Tangherlini points out that the legend is an extremely elastic narrative with a "high degree of ecotypification" (1990, 377). The process of ecotypification can manifest in several ways; it ranges from the narrative becoming attached to a particular geographic landmark to the inclusion of significant variations "to fit the needs of the culture and its tradition" (1990, 378).

The cases presented in this thesis show how, even in the same place, Mexico City, a legend adapts differently to a given environment. When performed in Xochimilco, the story appeals to Indigeneity and the celebration of heritage; in the downtown area of the city, close to

[18] CPS Noticias, "Se aparece La Llorona en varias ciudades el país", April 15th, 2020. https://tribunadelabahia.com.mx/se-aparece-la-llorona-en-varias-ciudades-del-pais-33221

governmental offices, it deals with empowerment and the need to hold authorities accountable. Other meanings drawn from the Mexican American context and put forward by several researchers (Jones 1988; Lomax Hawes 1968; Perez 2008) were explored in earlier chapters. Therefore, the concept of ecotype remains an essential analytical tool since it "addresses probably the most central issue raised in all theories of folk narrative research, namely, the dialectics between stability and change" (Hasam-Roken 2016, 113).

Ecotypification is closely related to historicity, another trait that researchers have pinpointed as a defining element of the legend as a genre. In the words of Tangherlini, "the believability of the narrative is underscored by the historicization of the account" (1990, 379). Thus, when a legend conflates with local history, it is often perceived as authentic, which impacts its endurance. This thesis's initial chapter noted how La Llorona had acquired diverse identities throughout the years and places where her story is told. Many of these versions portray La Llorona as a historical figure. In particular, her association with Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl and La Malinche strengthens her ties with Mexico's Indigenous past.

Her conflation with La Malinche is particularly relevant for understanding why some tellers consider La Llorona's story to be a historical text. However, it also turns the story's analysis into a more complicated endeavour since La Malinche is a character who has acquired legendary status as well. As Kristina Downs notes, "La Malinche served as a symbol of the female traitor, the woman who rejects her own culture in favour of the foreign aggressor and of the sexually loose woman" (2008, 403). Nevertheless, feminist activists and scholars have reclaimed and revalued her story; in the same way, La Llorona's story was repurposed. Furthermore, both women gave birth to mestizo children, which links them inextricably with Mexican identity.

That La Malinche is an Indigenous woman is relevant because, as previously stated in this thesis, for the theatre company, Indigeneity is a central component of what makes La Llorona an appealing protest symbol. When writing on La Malinche, Gloria Anzaldua considers that "The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer" (1987, 22). This statement echoes the sentiments of the theatre company on La Llorona since their performance of the legend questions her criminalization for the sole reason of being an Indigenous woman whose story was told by the Spaniards.

Thus, pairing La Llorona with a historical figure confers believability to the story and gives it a sense of belonging. If La Llorona and La Malinche are the same, then La Llorona is unquestionably Mexican. This is important because part of her rhetorical appeal comes from her identity as a woman whose story intertwines with Mexico's historically defining moments. Her story is sometimes set during the pre-Hispanic past, the colonial period, or even during the Independence war.

Nevertheless, as Tangherlini points out, "Simply because (the legend) is often performed as "true," the narrative content itself is not necessarily an actual reflection of historical events" (1990, 379). Historicity reinforces the traits of identity and belonging in La Llorona, but it still allows the narrators to transform the text. In fact, according to Judith Pollman, "Stories apparently need an association with a place or a date, an object or a person, to be believed, and to be transmitted, even if such stories can also be transplanted to another context when that suits the needs of the storyteller" (2017, 121). Thus, ecotypification and historicity impact the believability of the legend without hindering its flexibility.

La Llorona makes sense to the audience when placed in this new discursive context as a protest symbol; she is transformed but retains her historical significance. If she was a woman

present during turbulent times such as the Conquest or the Independence war, she could also be present amid the war against drugs and the wave of violence plaguing Mexico. For some legend tellers, La Llorona's sightings are related to danger since she acts as an omen of impending doom, which resonates with the country's current state of affairs.

The next element that Tangherlini (1990) considers relevant for studying legends is their belief component. Belief was identified by legend scholar Linda Dégh as the defining trait of the genre. In her words, "the legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief" (2001, 97). This is one of the most complex dimensions of the genre.

Elliot Oring contends that "almost everything entails belief" (2008, 128) and, as an alternative, proposes that legends engage with the rhetoric of truth. That is, they make "a claim about the truth of an event" (2008, 128). This statement is a particularly helpful annotation since belief is a dimension often conflated with supernatural elements. By engaging with truth, it is possible to grasp better the diversity of beliefs that legends may encompass.

The two groups of participants interviewed for this research had very different takes on what believing in La Llorona means. None of the protesters considered her to be a real supernatural entity. On the other hand, all the theatre company members manifested their belief in her, and many of them narrated having supernatural encounters with her. This difference impacts their relationship with La Llorona. However, this research focuses not on the belief in La Llorona as a ghost but instead on the appeal of her story as a powerful tool to protest against enforced disappearances.

Both groups think it is true that La Llorona embodies the pain of a woman who has lost her children and whose voice has power. They believe that her suffering reflects that of the parents searching for their missing sons in present-day Mexico. Therefore, as Linda Dégh puts it,

"The only qualification for a legend-teller is a fascination with the world featured by the legend and a deep concern with its messages" (2001, 316). Whether they believe in La Llorona as a supernatural entity does not come into play when choosing her as a protest symbol.

La Llorona is an iconic and multidimensional folk form that promotes self-reflection, creates a sense of community, and raises awareness among the audience members (Garlough 2013, 189). Her story is compelling to the protesters because it incorporates several contentious topics related to womanhood and motherhood performance under a patriarchal system. It is appealing for the theatre company because it also speaks about racial inequality and the injustices that Mexico's Indigenous people continue to face. In Elliot Oring's words, the legend has "an emotional resonance" (2008, 157). In choosing her as a protest symbol, performers display cultural and rhetorical competence.

Finally, Tangherlini (1990) considers that legends serve as a "reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs" (385). The story of La Llorona functions as a cautionary tale about deviating from society's expectations. In this sense, the story resonates with the machismo and patriarchal values still prevalent in Mexican society. The consequences of consenting to premarital sex are deadly for the protagonist of the legend.

The story also contains a message on motherhood and how it should always be performed selflessly. If a woman refuses to accept motherhood and the burden it entails, she will be punished forever. Nevertheless, the participants interviewed for this thesis have imbued the legend with new meaning.

La Llorona is so efficient for conveying the message of the protesters to the audience because, in the first place, the story allows for debate and negotiation. The woman kills her children, but she only does it in response to her lover's betrayal. Thus, her actions exist in a gray

area in which the listener can decide whether she is the only one to blame or not. For the actors, La Llorona's story is presented from an Indigenous perspective, which questions the criminalization of the main character.

These new readings presented by the protesters and the theatre company stir the listener in the direction of absolution. The context is also crucial to achieving this transformation, for even the most conservative sector of society who might still find in La Llorona a tale that reinforces traditional values of motherhood, can sympathize with the grief felt over the loss of a son.

Mexican media continuously reports on the collective organizations of mothers who are searching for their missing sons and daughters all across the country. The mothers are the main subjects of videos, pictures, and even documentary films. They are seen roaming through the countryside, crying and screaming whenever they find the bodies of their missing family members in mass graves. These images have permeated into the collective imaginary of the Mexican audience. Thus, these women have become the contemporary Lloronas.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, the grieving mother as a powerful protest symbol has a long history in Latin American grassroots movements. The *Madres de Plazo de Mayo* from Argentina and *the Comité ¡Eureka!* from Mexico in the 1970s are great examples of how women who were invisible within the public sphere became the "spokespeople for the disappeared" (Taylor 1997, 198). However, La Llorona did not become a relevant symbol for these protesters.

The reason lies in the fact that these early movements did not mean to subvert the patriarchal structure or question any of the traditional values associated with motherhood. These women were trying to make their pain visible; they demanded the government to return their missing sons so they could go back to performing their roles as mothers. In this sense, choosing

La Llorona as a symbol of protest made no sense. La Llorona's story becomes a powerful tool only after it has been reinterpreted and questioned through a feminist lens — or a postcolonial one in the case of the theatre company.

However, as Taylor (1997) noted, the notion of motherhood held by the participants in these early protest movements became politicized over the years, just like La Llorona's story was repurposed by Chicano feminist writers and scholars. Until both of these transformations took place, incorporating the legend into the protests made no sense. Motherhood acquires a contested meaning since it "often seems to be a focal point where axes of tradition and modernization cross" (Davids 2017, 14). This reassessment of motherhood and how it is performed is what allows for La Llorona to acquire new meaning.

Susan E. Chase and Mary Frances Rogers consider that mothers are often frustrated "not by their mothering or their children, but by the lack of support they receive and the price they are expected to pay for their maternal commitments" (2001, xv). What they are describing fits perfectly with La Llorona's story: she kills her children in frustration and anger when it becomes clear that she will not have any support from her partner, not because she hates them. Furthermore, according to Nicole Sanders, "Mexican mothers are noted for their long-suffering, self-sacrificing nature" (2009, 1542).

Linda Dégh asserts that legends are ideology-sensitive and therefore coerce "people to think, to philosophize, to contemplate, to argue, and to debate" (2001,313). I have stated that La Llorona appeals to protesters and actors after being reinterpreted through a feminist or postcolonial lens. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the audience understands the performance in the same way. The multiple possible interpretations of the story are what makes it so powerful.

As stated above, even if those who witness the protest fail to interpret La Llorona as a symbol of women raising their voices in empowerment, they can still draw meaning from the grieving mother searching for her kids. It is also possible for them to interpret La Llorona as a menacing presence that is haunting government officials for answers. All of these possible interpretations resonate with the agenda of the protesters. More importantly, by prompting the audience to draw their reading of her and how she relates to the disappearance of the forty-three students, protesters force the audience into an internal process of debate that reinforces their message.

In contrast to the protesters, the theatre company's version of La Llorona provides the audience with a fully developed story; it also allows for debate and interpretation. As actress Nayeli Cortés recounts, audience members reach out to her after the play and comment on whether they felt proud to be Mexican or upset that the Indigenous people of Mexico are still being subjected to violence today. Mexican identity becomes the site for contestation in this version of the story. The debate's focus turns to whether the audience members celebrate Indigenous heritage as part of their identity or question whether Indigenous people have been othered and marginalized since the Conquest. In both cases, the play makes them side with the forty-three missing students, whether by creating a sense of kinship or understanding that they are not treated equally and fairly.

As stated in Chapter 4, by promoting mestizaje as the Mexican nation's foundational myth, Indigenous people were virtually erased by incorporation into an all-encompassing Mexican identity. Therefore those members of the audience who feel the need to celebrate Indigenous heritage after seeing the play are most likely buying into the national myth that

highlights certain idealized indigeneity elements. This does not hinder the message of the actors. If anything, it promotes a sense of identification with the Indigenous other.

On the other hand, those who question why Indigenous people —like the students from Ayotzinapa— are still subjected to violence in the country, find in La Llorona from the play an embodiment of this ongoing abuse. Her child's murder is downplayed by her immediate circumstances, while telling the story from her perspective makes the audience empathize with her. Thus, in this context, La Llorona contains another contentious dimension: what does it mean to be Mexican? Her portrayal in the play underlies the ever-present conflict of Indigenous vs Spanish. As Enrique Ajuria Ibarra puts it, La Llorona represents "a phantasmatic obsession with national identity" (2014, 136).

By setting the story within the arrival of the Spaniards to Mexico, the actors are bringing back the past and questioning Mexican identity as a product of mestizaje. Being Mexican does not erase Indigenous identity. Thus, a postcolonial reading of the legend addresses the problems that emerge when a culture tries to bury its colonial past (Ajuria Ibarra 2014). La Llorona comes back to remind the audience that the legacy of colonial violence is still present today.

Furthermore, this unearthing or "undisappearing" of the past echoes the mottos associated with the public demonstrations and protest art related to enforced disappearances. *Nos quisieron enterrar, pero no sabían que éramos semillas* (They tried to bury us, but they did not know we were seeds), and *Ni perdón, ni olvido* (Neither forgive, nor forget) are two iconic phrases used by artists and activists in support of the parents from Ayotzinapa. Both of these phrases suggest a retrieval of the old, the return of something that was supposed to remain hidden or to be forgotten.

In this sense, the supernatural dimension of La Llorona becomes relevant. Whether the audience or the performers believe in her as a real supernatural entity, the image of a ghost evokes feelings of unease. This relates to their liminality. As Ulo Valk puts it, "Ambiguous as they are, ghosts reside in liminal spaces between memory and oblivion, present and past, belonging and unrootedness, life and death, existence and non-existence" (2018, 110). The between and betwixt state resembles that of those who have disappeared. They are gone, but without a body or evidence of what happened to them, it is impossible to ascertain that they are dead.

Without a body, the parents cannot perform the corresponding rites of passage, and therefore there can be no closure. As noted in Chapter 3, the parents were upset about the lighting of candles and flower offerings for their sons during the protest. No funerary rite should be performed for them; they are not dead but missing.

However, while La Llorona's performance for the parents and the protesters does not symbolize a rite of passage, it does create a sense of *communitas*, understood as a spontaneous "bond that unites people beyond any formal social tie" (Robledo Silvestre 2014,8) for the audience. The shared social experience of those who witness the protest or play allows them to make sense of the marginal status of the disappeared by framing them through a ghostly figure. A ghost comes back to haunt. Moreover, as Avery F. Gordon puts it, "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (2009, 8).

Emilio Crenzel (2020) has conducted extensive research on ghosts and enforced disappearances in Argentina. He analyzed memoirs, interviews, and documentaries in which

family members of those who went missing during the military dictatorship narrate their experiences with the supernatural. Crenzel concludes that while ghostly manifestations may be seen as disturbing, they "strike up dialogues and prompt reflections that place the ghosts within a shared political community that dissipates any disturbing element" (2020, 260).

Crenzel's work resonates with mine since it outlines a possible future avenue of research. As far as I am aware, no academic work has focused on the supernatural experiences that the parents of the missing students from Ayotzinapa may have experienced. This probably stems from the fact that the case is relatively recent compared to the disappearances from Argentina, which took place in the 1970s. If ghosts are understood in the literal way that Esther Peeren suggests, "the dead reappearing in some sort of perceptible form to the living" (2014, 3), asking the parents if they have seen the ghosts of their missing children can be insensitive and offensive.

In this sense, La Llorona emerges as the perfect answer to capture the meaning of a ghost within a disappearance context. She embodies liminality by being undead, but she is not there to represent the missing students as ghosts; she represents their absence. She also represents the grief of the parents. La Llorona captures the pain and uncertainty of how to perform parenthood once a child has gone missing. Furthermore, as Gordon (2009) asserts, while ghosts represent loss, they are also "alive" to speak. The ceaseless wails of La Llorona reflect the unwavering voices of parents and activists who refuse to be silenced.

Nevertheless, future research that sets out to tackle ghostly presences and supernatural experiences of the parents of those who have disappeared could shine a light on belief as a coping mechanism in the context of enforced disappearances, just like Gillian Bennett (1999) has done through her work with widows from Manchester. A preliminary overview of this work line suggests that those who have missing sons and daughters recount having dreams in which the

person who has disappeared comes to visit them. In an interview with a local newspaper, Juliana Villegas, the mother of one of the forty-three missing students, stated that she has recurring dreams where she sees her son wearing torn clothes, lost, and unable to find his way back home.

This is not an isolated case. A report on the students' disappearance's psychological impact revealed that several parents stated having similar dreams. Some others admitted to having consulted psychics and shamans to get an answer on the whereabouts of their missing sons (Antillón Najlis et al., 2017). Supernatural options emerge as a possible response to an event that is hard to process, such as the disappearance of a loved one.

The reasons that make La Llorona an appealing protest symbol for enforced disappearances have been outlined throughout this thesis. The purpose of this research was to understand how a murderous mother turned into a symbol of solidarity. The answer is twofold: the context of performance and the flexibility of the legend. The context of violence in Mexico and the enormous amount of people who disappear daily have normalized the existence of collective organizations of women searching for their missing sons and daughters. The story of La Llorona, a popular piece of folk narrative, allows the audience to interpret these women's struggles through the legend's framework.

The legend has been reclaimed by protesters who make the audience question if La Llorona is the story's villain. This repurposing of the text evokes a sense of uncanniness by making the familiar legend become something unfamiliar. In the words of Dorothy Noyes, "Reshaping and revoicing the familiar reveals the news of a differential perspective" (2016, 146). The spectators are forced to draw a connection between La Llorona and the parents from Ayotzinapa. Within this process of negotiation, La Llorona acquires a new meaning. The

audience can either interpret her as a grieving mother or a woman raising her voice for justice; both readings resonate with the protesters' agenda.

For the theatre company representing La Llorona as an Indigenous woman builds a bridge between her identity and that of the students from Ayotzinapa. It makes the audience realize that Mexico's Indigenous people continue to be marginalized and erased to this day. In both cases, La Llorona is meant to disturb, to provoke an emotional response. The message becomes powerful since the spectators have to draw their intertextual connections between the legend and the disappearance of the forty-three students.

An important motivation for this thesis was the lack of academic publications on La Llorona from a Mexican perspective within Folklore. Most of the materials available center around the Mexican-American community. This is relevant because, as stated, the context of performance heavily transforms La Llorona's meaning. The work of Domino Pérez (2008) encompasses several readings of the legend from the Mexican-American perspective. However, in recent years new public demonstrations and interpretations of La Llorona have emerged within this context.

The Trump administration and its immigration policy prompted a wave of mass deportations and family separations, which sparked several protests. La Llorona was part of some of them. In 2018, Las Maestras Center for Xicana Indigenous Art & Thought Practice at UC Santa Barbara enacted a two-day performance titled *Un Llanto Colectivo* (A Collective Cry) in San Diego, California, against the separation of immigrant families. They stated that La Llorona inspired them since her story parallelled the struggle of these families.

For Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, "Donald J. Trump is the United States Llorona" (2019, 292). These authors adopt the version of the story that depicts La Llorona as a villain and

find an echo of her cruelty in Trump's actions. They assert that just like La Llorona drowned her kids, Trump's immigration policy caused several children to drown in the river that divides Mexico and the United States. Delgado and Stefancic go on to state that Trump's foreign policy is "redolent of Lloronic flourishes," and consider that, "If one closes his or her eyes, one can almost imagine Trump in a long white robe, pacing along the banks of the Seine, the Rhine, or the Thames at dusk, berating the local citizenry for allowing into their lands multitudes who will be unreconstructed aliens living in their midst…" (2019, 294).

In the same way that new interpretations of La Llorona have continued to sprout in the Mexican-American context, other social movements have also adopted her story in Mexico. She has also become a symbol to denounce femicides. The lyrics to the folk song "La Llorona," adapted by journalist Pedro Miguel are sung in feminist protests against gender-based violence all over Mexico. As this verse of the song illustrates, La Llorona turns into a victim of femicide in this context:

Ay de mi llorona, llorona, mi niñita mexiquense;

Te fuiste para la escuela, llorona, te encontré en el forense;

Quieren matarte de noche llorona, quieren matarte de día;

Te matan los delincuentes, llorona, te mata la policía.

(Alas llorona, llorona, my little mexiquense girl;

You left for school, Llorona, I found you at the morgue;

They want to kill you by night Llorona, they want to kill you by day;

The criminals kill you, Llorona, the police kills you)

SnowApple, a band from The Netherlands, performed this version of the song. It was then used by visual artist Adriana Ronquillo for an animated short and presented alongside activist Norma Andrade in the Museo Memoria y Tolerancia in Mexico City. Andrade is the founder of *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Our Daughters Back Home), an organization devoted to supporting the mothers of daughters murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

La Llorona can also represent incarcerated women. The short documentary film of 2016, *La Mentada de la Llorona*, illustrates how the legend can become conflated with female prisoners' testimonies, who feel that the Mexican judiciary system has failed them. The film connects several personal narratives to the case of a woman called Artemia, whose 3-year-old daughter was murdered by her partner. Artemia went to jail because the authorities considered that she had failed to protect her daughter. The documentary explains how Artemia is an Indigenous woman who faced violence on a daily basis and considers that her sentencing was unjust. Throughout the film, the wails of La Llorona can be heard in the background. At the same time, statistics show how being a woman and being poor increase the chances of being wrongfully convicted or of getting a harsher sentencing.

My work focuses on the importance of La Llorona's legend within the Mexican context and her intertwining with Mexican identity. However, her story is well-known in all of Latin America. Thus, there are several other contexts in which the legend is resignified. The case of Guatemala illustrates this. In 2019, the movie La Llorona directed by Jayro Bustamante, contextualized La Llorona's story within the trial of an old military leader accused of committing human rights violations against Mayan groups in Guatemala. In the film, La Llorona is an Indigenous woman who works as a housekeeper and comes back from the dead to get revenge for her people's abuse and killings by the Guatemalan army.

Guatemala was also the stage for a one-person protest. A person dressed up as La Llorona stood outside the national parliament and inquired what the Guatemalan government was doing against COVID-19. Instead of asking, "Where are my children?" the protester can be heard screaming, "Where is the money?"

Thus, the flexibility of the legend allows for its adaptation to multiple contexts. The work presented here solely addresses the possible readings of La Llorona to protest against enforced disappearances in Mexico. However, as shown by these other examples, there are many other countries and subjects in which La Llorona becomes a relevant figure to convey a message.

This work addresses the different readings that protesters and actors draw from the legend of La Llorona. While both highlight distinct aspects of the story, they both chose her because she is attractive for the audience. In the case of the protesters, they were aware that dressing up as her would garner not only the public's but also the media's attention. As for the theatre company, in the words of the play producer, Alejandro Calputitla, "La Llorona sells". Thus, it would be naive to dismiss the fact La Llorona is visually striking and has marketing value.

However, it seems like the unifying motive that draws performers to her, rather than to any other ghost, is her voice. Her unwavering cries demand that the audience listens to her. Whether she provokes compassion or fear, La Llorona does not leave the spectator feeling indifferent. That is why her story has remained so powerful over the years. The concluding remarks of activist Mari Sainz capture this sentiment perfectly:

> Every time people see La Llorona I want them to feel something. I want them to cry, to cry for me, to cry for the parents who have missing children, to cry for those who suffer injustice. You might be doing fine today, but you do not know if

tomorrow it might be your turn. I want people to love La Llorona, to protect her, because she is lending her voice to all of us. (Sainz 2019)

Figure 14. Mari Sainz on the day of our interview, posing as La Llorona (photo by Mariana Esquivel)

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