8. La Llorona’s Ancestry: Crossing Cultural Boundaries

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La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, is probably one of the most popular cultural icons in the Mexican-American culture. Myth, fantasy, and perhaps some history have merged into creating such a well-known archetypal character, whose appearance in Francis Edward Abernethy’s *Legendary Ladies of Texas* attests to her popularity. A few common essential details of La Llorona exist regardless of geographical region: a cultural or racial difference between the lovers, the killing of a child or children, and ultimate madness. Ambiguity exists regarding the physical appearance of La Llorona, ranging anywhere from a beautiful woman dressed in white to a horrifying monster clothed in black, or even to death itself. Essentially, La Llorona fits a pattern: she had a sexual relationship with a man outside her social class, which produced a child or children; he abandoned her for a woman from a higher social status; she killed her children, usually by drowning; and now she haunts water areas looking for the souls of her dead children so that she can find peace and enter the kingdom of God. The legend of La Llorona has been used to teach lessons in the Hispanic culture: to young Hispanic females not to fool around outside their social class, to young children as a scare tactic to gather into the home before dark, and to wayward husbands not to stray outside their marriage. Although the legend of the Hispanic La Llorona probably originated in the European culture, she has crossed cultural boundaries with similar legends appearing in the Philippino, German, Greek, and Jewish cultures, providing some of the most interesting variations of the legend.
A typical Hispanic version of La Llorona appears in *Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest*. In this version, a Mexican widow is left with three small children who became a burden to her social life. She left them alone while she pursued an escape from her responsibilities by going to fiestas. The children cried frequently because they were hungry and because the mother beat them. When she grew tired of hearing them weeping and begging for food, the woman placed them in a sack and dragged them to a nearby river where she dumped their bodies. She heard the crying and pleading of the children, but she turned a deaf ear. She continued her dissolute life until her death, at which point she appeared before God for judgment. He condemned her to roam the rivers until she found her children. She would not find rest until the end of the world.¹

The first appearance of La Llorona may have been in 1502 in Mexico before the appearance of Hernando Cortés and the Spanish conquistadores. The Mayas, in what was then known as Meso-America, heard a woman crying a forewarning about some terrible occurrence upon the land. The Mayans heeded the warning and retreated into the forest, thus escaping most of the brutality of the Spanish influence.² Meanwhile, Moctezuma supposedly received word of the premonition; however, he was not convinced of the impending danger because Cortés’ appearance resembled that of their God Quetzalcoatl.

In the Aztec version, Doña Marina/La Malinche is associated with La Llorona and at times merges with her. According to Blea, Moctezuma sent a group of women as a peace offering to the conquistadores, but the females were distributed among the men as gifts with Doña Marina going to one of the soldiers. When the soldier discovered her abilities with languages, he informed Cortés who then assumed possession of her. Because he used her knowledge of the land and of the people to help him conquer the empire, she has been referred to as *La Malinche*, or Traitor. However, the circumstances surrounding her assistance seem clouded in ambiguity since there is no clear knowledge about her involvement with Cortés.³
Supposedly, myth takes over history as the story reveals that Doña Marina had a son by Cortés. When he was ordered to return to his wife in Spain, Cortés naturally wanted to take his son with him. In one version, he does take his son with him. In another, Doña Marina refused to part with her son, and fearful that the youngster might die on the voyage she performed the ultimate sacrifice, condemning herself as she drowned him to ensure that his spirit would remain in his homeland. The worst thing that could happen would be that her son would die away from his land, and his spirit would wander and never rest. The account continues that when Doña Marina died, God would not allow her through the gates until she returned with the soul of her son. Legend has it that her son’s soul had floated away, and she continues to wander the river and its tributaries on a relentless quest.4

According to Rick Hernandez, the Philippines have at least two versions of La Llorona: the Siren and the White Woman. In the first, some believe that the Weeping Woman was a siren, similar to a mermaid, who gave birth to children who were mer-people like her. On their fourteenth birthday, they chose whether to become human or to remain mer-people. On one occasion, one of her children chose to become human but was inadvertently killed by fishermen. Now whenever a child drowns or disappears, many believe that the Weeping Woman has taken her revenge. When they hear her wailing at night, they realize someone has drowned. Another version presents the White Woman, “the stealer of souls.” Very beautiful and alluring, she lives among the clouds of fog that drift along at night, enticing men to follow her into the mists where they are lost forever. Belief has it that she steals the soul of a young girl every year during a May parade. The wind heard howling at night is her crying.5

A variation of La Llorona appears in German folklore, as well. John O. West provides a brief account in which a peasant girl, deceived and then abandoned by a naughty nobleman, gives birth to a child. In a rage, she killed their child, stabbed the father to death with his own sword, and then hanged herself. Supposedly, she
returns to haunt the place of the double murder.\textsuperscript{6} In another German legend, the White Lady (Die Weisse Frau) emerges as a ghostly figure, haunting the castles of the dynasty of the Hohenzollern and brings bad luck or foreshadows misfortune.\textsuperscript{7} After the death of her husband, the Countess Kunigunde wished to marry Albrecht von Hohenzollern, who reportedly stated he would if not for “four eyes between [them].” He meant his parents, but the Countess misinterpreted and thought he meant her two children. Determined to kill them and make it appear as if they died naturally, she used a “golden needle” to pierce their skulls. Punished by her conscience, she went before the Pope in Rome, who promised her forgiveness if she devoted her life to monastic work. In some versions of the legend, she died in her attempt to establish a monastery, while in others she did found a monastery but died shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{8} Legend has it, she continues to haunt the castles of the Hohenzollern dynasty as a malevolent specter.

Two Greek versions associated with La Llorona include the stories of Lamia and of Medea. According to Greek mythology, Lamia, one of Zeus’ paramours, produced several children from her liaison with the god of gods. As usual Hera, Zeus’ wife, found out about the affair and in a jealous rage killed Lamia’s children. Hera punished Lamia for her relationship with Zeus by making Lamia unable to close her eyes so that the horrifying image of her dead children would continuously haunt her. According to legend, Lamia’s grief turned her into a monster, who in revenge stole and devoured the children of other mothers. Zeus pitied Lamia and granted her the ability to remove her eyes and put them back, thus allowing her rest from her grief.\textsuperscript{9} Lamia has the face and breast of a beautiful woman and the body of a serpent.\textsuperscript{10} She is sometimes referred to as a male or a hermaphrodite, but she is believed to have the ability to change herself into a beautiful young woman. Like La Llorona, Lamia wreaks vengeance on other women by stealing their children from them. In addition, both women find no rest from the loss of their beloved children.

A second Greek relative of La Llorona is Medea (431 B.C.). Euripides’ drama of the same name presents a story of revenge as
Medea assists Jason to steal the Golden Fleece, betrays her father, leaves her country to follow Jason, and then is herself betrayed. In Corinth, Jason lives with Medea, and the couple produces two children. But he abandons her to marry a princess, explaining that the royal marriage will benefit them all. In retaliation, Medea murders their children. Euripides’ masterpiece reveals how anger and jealousy consume the powerful Medea, who is torn between her love for her children and her hatred for their father. She explains the murders as a sacrifice on her part because she refuses to allow her enemies to exact revenge on them. Her act is similar to Doña Marina’s, who likewise drowned her son to assure his spirit remain in his homeland.

From Jewish folklore comes one of the oldest and most interesting connections to La Llorona in the form of Lilith, the first woman created by God, and thus the predecessor of Eve. According to Ausubel, Adam and Lilith never found peace together because she refuted Adam’s claim to be her superior, in particular in having to lie beneath him. She argued that because they were created simultaneously from the same dust, they were equal. She insisted there was no justification for his supremacy. Rather than accept subjugation, Lilith left Adam to live alone by the Red Sea, where she found peace making love with satyrs, minotaurs, and centaurs. Subsequently, Adam appealed to God, who sent forth three angels to persuade Lilith to return. The woman preferred life without a mate like Adam, to giving up her integrity and independence. The angels threatened her with death for her refusal, but she provided a logical response: “Don’t you know, I’ve been created for the purpose of weakening and punishing little children, infants and babes? I have power over them, from the day they are born until they are eight days old if they are boys and until the twentieth day if they are girls.” Angered by her defiance, the angels grabbed her with intentions of drowning her, but Lilith promised that if she entered a home where a woman was giving birth and she saw an amulet on each wall bearing the angels’ names or images, she would spare the newborn. They let her go, and God thus created Eve as Adam’s mate. Since then, Lilith roams the
world, “howling her hatred of mankind through the night and vowing vengeance because of the shabby treatment she had received at the hands of Adam.”

According to Lilly Rivlin, “In medieval Europe (especially Germany), Lilith became a popular man-devouring creature, a threat to Christian and Jewish homes. She is the envious estranged wife and mother who covets other women’s children and threatens to steal them, unless prevented by charms.” Like La Llorona, Lilith also underwent a physical change from a beautiful woman to a hag, who preyed on sleeping men. She appears in numerous guises. At times, she is a wicked harlot and the pinnacle of evil. She serves as a scapegoat for both men and women to blame unexplained desires and frustrations. She can also be a female demon and move in the night, “visiting women in childbirth and trying to strangle their newborn babies.” Women who deviated from the norm of being submissive and showed characteristics of being outspoken must be Lilith in disguise; otherwise, there was no other explanation.

Myth and fantasy blend in the creations of such a fascinating character as La Llorona. And while many Hispanics claim La Llorona as their own, her ancestry blurs cultural boundaries as similarities abound in other versions of women much like her. In most instances, her name is associated with evil; however, ambiguity abounds in her legend, and new perspectives tend to view her as a victim.

Endnotes

3. Ibid. 31.
4. Ibid. 32.
8. Ibid.
12. Ibid. 593.
13. Ibid. 594.
15. Ibid. 114.