Chicana Feminism and Horror: Fear La Llorona

Orquidea Morales
University of Texas Pan-American

This paper will document how La Llorona is depicted in horror movies particularly in the 2007 film *The Wailer 2: La Llorona 2*. I will use a Chicana feminist framework to read *The Wailer 2* and its illustration of La Llorona particularly as this portrayal is related to La Llorona as a cultural symbol for Chicanas. This movie, and others like it, trivializes how Chicanas have re-theorized La Llorona. For Chicanas, La Llorona is a cultural icon, descendant of La Malinche and Aztec Goddess Cihuacotol, who represents women’s voice and agency. While Chicana literature and horror movies are two very different mediums, it is important to look at how they are related and what effects portrayals of La Llorona in horror can have on Chicana’s re-theorizing of this important cultural icon. I argue that a close reading of La Llorona in *The Wailer 2* is necessary for various reasons. First, there are very few representations of Latin@s in film, especially in horror. As such, the few portrayals of Latin@s in film tend to carry the burden of representation regardless of whether they are accurate or not. In the case of *The Wailer 2*, Latin@s are represented as drunks and womanizers. Women, like La Llorona fall victim to machista norms. bell hooks explains that “whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (hooks 2). As such, *The Wailer 2* not only reflects and teaches misogynistic views, but it also distorts the legend of La Llorona. Second, the people who already believe these stereotypes and patriarchal norms are more likely to watch the movie than read Chican@ literature. The discourse on screen can have a negative effect on Chicanas as a whole. Hooks explains how “movies do not merely offer us the opportunity to reimagine the culture we most intimately know on the screen, they make culture” (hooks 9). *The Wailer: La Llorona* and *The Wailer 2*’s remakes of the legend of La Llorona reinforces stereotypical beliefs of the “other,” in this case Mexicans, Mexican Americans and women. Finally, a critique of horror movies in general is important from a Chicana feminist perspective since very little research has been done in this area. Through this Chicana feminist lens, I critique *The Wailer 2* and how it creates and portrays gender particularly as it relates to La Llorona as a cultural symbol for Chicanas. I also explore how this movie and others like it jeopardize and/or trivialize how Chicanas have retheorized la Llorona.

Meeting La Llorona- Folklore and Culture

The legend of La Llorona has been around for centuries as part of the folklore in both Mexico and the U.S. She has transcended borders, time and mediums. Representations of La Llorona range from music and coffee to literature and film. Because the story has been retold so many times, there are different versions. Here, I present the legend of La Llorona as I learned it from my mother.

There was a woman that lived in a small town in the border with the U.S. She was young and beautiful but very poor. One day while walking in the market she saw a handsome American man. She fell in love with him. The man promised her the sky and the moon so they could be together. When she discovered she was pregnant her parents kicked her out

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1 My mother was born and raised in Reynosa, Mexico. The legend she told us is the version known in northern Tamaulipas. In the U.S. the versions are different depending on the context.
of the house and she had to go live with her American lover. When the baby was a year old, he abandoned her to go back to his life in America. The girl was left alone without any money and a home. She tried to go back home but her parents had disowned her. Desperate, she tried to cross the river to get to her lover. While trying to cross, she accidentally drowned her baby. She died of sorrow a little later. The legend says that her spirit still roams the river crying for her lost child and if you go out at night by yourself to the river she will come and get you.

This weeping woman in white has been part of the Mexican and Mexican American psyche for a very long time. This particular version of La Llorona is very different from other versions where the drowning of the child or children is not an accident. In these other, more common versions, she drowns her children as a form of revenge against her lover and to please her new lover, who is usually not the father of the children, or to save her kids from being taken away from her by the father. This version, La Llorona as a murderess, is the more commonly accepted and well-known. This legend “teaches boys to see women as temptresses, embodiments of a malevolent sexuality that could cause them to lose their souls and control of their bodies” (Perez 28). While the Mexican version I know teaches women not to have sex before marriage, the second version teaches men that women and female sexuality is something to be feared and as such, it is also something that needs to be controlled.

Re-thinking La Llorona: Chicanas, Feminism and Horror Films

In his book, The Labyrinth of Solitude, Paz theorizes and tries to explain why and how the Mexican identity was created. His book, however, does not allow women to be part of this identity creation process. They are, in fact, relegated to being one of the three Mexican mothers, La Llorona, La Virgen and La Malinche. In his book he explains how “En suma, chingar es hacer violencia sobre otro...lo chingado es lo pasivo, lo inerte, y abierto, por oposición a lo que chinga, que es activo, agresivo y cerrado. El chingón es el macho, el que abre. La chingada, la hembra, la pasividad pura, inerme ante el exterior” (100). Here, the feminine is always la chingada, the fucked. Paz explains how La Malinche is also known as La Chingada since she, through her body and her voice, allowed the destruction of the Aztecs. She, being la Chingada, allowed her body and her culture to be raped. Her children, the mestizos, are a consequence of her allowed rape. La Llorona, in some legends, is played by La Malinche who, after Hernan Cortez, the Spanish conquistador, threatens to leave her and take their kids with him, decides to drown her children to prevent their loss. The merging of these two legends allows for La Malinche and La Llorona to be seen as the ultimate cultural traitors by writers like Octavio Paz. His discourse keeps these icons of femininity locked in a space/place where they cannot defend themselves against these accusations and where they are constantly “chingadas.” The constant assaults on these icons, along with the veneration of the Virgin Mary, maintain strict gender norms that permit, and sometimes encourage, the objectification, displacement and disposability of women and their bodies.

Chicana writers in the U.S. have made it a project to reclaim La Llorona, La Malinche and the La Virgen de Guadalupe from this oppressive framework. La Llorona, in particular, has been reconceptualized by many writers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa in her book

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2 In short, to fuck someone is to do violence on another ... the fucked is the passive, inert, and open entity as opposed to the entity that is the fucker, who is active, aggressive and closed. The fucker is the male/masculine, he is the opener. The fucked, is the female, purely passive, what is most inner no contact with exterior.
Borderlands-La Frontera: The New Mestiza explains how Chican@'s have three mothers: “All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two” (52). La Llorona, for Chicanas, is the voice who cries out against injustices. As the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl she wailed out for her children, the Aztecs, who according to the prophecy, were destined to die. Cihuacoatl was also goddess of “the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives” (Anzaldúa 57). Many people believe the legend of La Llorona is a descendent not only of Cihuacoatl, but also of La Malinche, or La Chingada. Anzaldúa describes Cihuacoatl and La Llorona as one, both are “traveling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself. […] I’d like to think that she was crying for her lost children, los Chicanos/ mexicanos” (60). La Llorona becomes the symbol not only of loss but also of wanting. She searches for her children: the Chicanas who have been lost and assimilated into American culture and is the voice that tries to remind us of our indigenous past and our mestizo present. In her book There was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture, Domino Renee Perez expands on La Llorona. She explains, “She is mother, sister, daughter, seer, and perhaps goddess, yet in all instances she is a woman who is condemned to either foresee or bemoan the fate of her children, biological in the tale but emblematic of the Indigenous people militarily, politically, and culturally displaced by the conquest” (18). Historically, La Llorona is tied to the conquest. Today, however, she has broken these chains and moves from Aztec goddess to a contemporary Chicana figure present in literature and film.

It is important to look at La Llorona in film because films transmit cultural norms and values as well as cultural folktales and archetypes. Films reach a larger, more diverse, audience than literature and as such have the power to teach and create culture. Horror movies, in particular, borrow folktales from different cultures and through their use of archetypes, like the evil woman, want to penetrate into our subconscious and scare us by reflecting, in a very subversive way, our deepest fears. Horror movies have the ability to problematize what society represses and oppresses. In a patriarchal society, sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is one of the greatest and most feared taboos. Sex and death are an integral part of the horror film genre because “sexual behavior and its ultimate purpose, children, are quite clearly the antithesis of death. If one is to examine death, then one must examine sex” (Hogan xii). They are linked through the female body because women, through childbirth, are able to create life, while the monstrous female, or the uncontrollable female sexuality, is the killer of masculinity. Perez explains how La Llorona is “known for her mutable manifestations, which range from ghostly hag to beautiful seductress, a number of cultural productions emphasize the latter, thus reinforcing her position as a sexual object and particular threat to men” (Perez 25). Women, like La Llorona in the The Wailer 2, are monstrous figures who prey upon the sexuality of others or who use their sexuality to entice. In the The Wailer 2 we see la Llorona become both the object of desire as well as the destructive monster; she is the archetypal evil woman.

What I am proposing here is not just a feminist reading of these films but a Chicana/Latina feminist approach of the horror genre. Feminist ideology critiques representations of gender and how patriarchal and dominant norms are part of the filmic discourse both in front of and behind the cameras. The problems of representation in film are magnified when looking at how Chicanas/ Latinas and their bodies are often portrayed in film. A thorough analysis of The Wailer 2 will look at how the film perpetuates “the subordination and exploitation of women [where] they present gender hierarchy or genderized roles and relations
[...] as normal in the discourse of the film” (Freeland 205). The Wailer 2, through the objectification and distortion of Latina bodies and discourse, perpetuates female gender roles in a patriarchal/machista society.

Scaring La Llorona: The Wailer 2

The Wailer 2 was released as a straight to DVD production by Amigo films, a subsidiary of the larger Laguna Productions Company in 2007 to mixed reviews. It was directed by Paul Miller and written by Rafy Rivera, who also wrote the first installment. Laguna Productions was founded in 1993 to specifically serve the Latin@ market: “Laguna became the first studio to identify the growing demands for new Spanish cinema and spearheaded the creation of original content for distribution throughout Mexico, Puerto Rico and the continental United States” (About). It is necessary to point out that this film was made by this production company with a Latin@ market in mind. Especially because The Wailer and The Wailer 2 provide very problematic portrayals of Latinas and of the Mexican culture as a whole. They used a legend that the public would be familiar with, La Llorona, and altered it to suit not only an American ideology of Latinidad but also a dominant male view of gender roles. In their article “Buscando para nuestra latinidad: Utilizing La Llorona for Cultural Critique,” Shane T. Moreman and Bernadette Marie Calafell explain how the new genre of film “the Latina/o film departs from ethnic centered films… toward a larger mainstream focused on palatable Latina/o genre” (310). Given this goal to appeal to a larger mainstream Latino/a market, this new genre has the potential to white wash and alter representations of Latin@s to make them more marketable in the U.S. to white audiences while at the same time maintaining their core Latin@ audience who are familiar with the themes and language used. In the case of The Wailer 2, Mexican culture is “othered.” Throughout the movie there are abundant stereotypical representations of Latin@s including drunken men, corrupt and inefficient police, witchcraft, religion and loud festivals. Through this “other,” the viewer knows who to identify with. The only relatable characters are Professor Sheen the suffering American father, Salvador, the young Mexican that speaks English well “for a local”, and Julie, the virginal, lost American daughter.

The Wailer 2 begins with newspaper cutouts with headlines from which we learn about the missing Americans who were found slaughtered in a small town in Mexico. We then are introduced to Sheen a professor and father of one of the missing girls, Julie. He, after visiting a psychic, finds out that his daughter is still alive in Mexico but is possessed by an evil spirit, La Llorona. He goes back to Mexico in search of his daughter. There he enlists the help of a young taxi driver and anthropology student, Salvador.

The portrayal of women in The Wailer 2 is also very problematic because it locks women within the patriarchal/machista paradigm. All of the women in the movie can be placed in the virgin/whore dichotomy created and enforced by patriarchal norms. La Llorona is the mother, although in this movie there is very little mention of her children and she is also the whore who uses her body to entice and trap men. Julie is the virginal beauty who needs to be saved from La Llorona and her overt sexuality. In another scene, the audience is introduced to the three religious who combined become the virginal holy mother sent by the church to aid Salvador in his struggle to save the soul and body of an innocent young woman trapped by the overtly sexual Llorona. Finally, the film also includes the shaman/witch who is a whore who lies, and who, through her magic, tries to control men’s desires. Both La Llorona and the witch are social deviants that deserved and received punishment. Julie and the trinity are saved and allowed to continue living within the roles allowed by the patriarchal society.
It is also interesting to note that in The Wailer 2, women have little or no agency since they are not allowed to speak, literally and figuratively. La Llorona, as theorized in Chicana literature, is a symbol of women’s voice, with her constant wailing, and in some cases screaming, she is decrying the injustices Chican@’s face. Anzaldúa explains how “wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse” (55). The character of La Llorona in the film, however, does not practice this same agency since she is reduced to animalistic growling and howling. When she is allowed to utter the famous lines “ay mis hijos” it is only to entice men. This phrase and her crying are like siren calls emitted only to hypnotize and lull men into a false sense of security before showing her true, monstrous, face. Wailing, in this instance, is no longer a form of protest but rather an empty cry bellowed out by a one dimensional character created by the masculine expectation of what a female villain should be.

La Llorona and reconfigurations of La Llorona provide a great opportunity to question social norms and pushed boundaries. Perez explains how “contemporary Mexican American and Chican@ cultural producers who represent la Llorona reconfigure the power relations between La Llorona and her lover, conflate La Llorona with powerful Aztec goddesses, subvert traditional narratives to allow the Weeping Woman to transcend her tragedy, and draw La Llorona into futuristic landscapes” (3). I argue that The Wailer 2 does not allow for La Llorona to grow. On the contrary, like other horror movies, it maintains and disseminates patriarchal norms. By using a story that already labels women as transgressors, the creators of The Wailer 2 are objectifying women and the Chicana/ Latina culture as a whole.

The objectification of Mexican women is overt in the domino tournament scene in the film. Salvador’s uncle dreams about winning the domino tournament, both for the money and the bragging rights, and goes to the small, cramped bar to play. Men drink and play while young, dark women dance. Their bodies are not only a commodity but also become billboards selling “Socha”, the beer sponsoring the tournament. A sexy, seductive voice can be heard, “¿A quién le gusta Socha?” “Who likes Socha?” The name of the beer is repeated rhythmically by the women and as they gyrate around the room, the camera focuses on their tight shirts that have the word “Socha” imprinted on it. Through the visuals, it is obvious that Latina’s bodies are available for the taking. This commodification and denigration is not just visual, but also audible since the rhythmic repetition of “Socha,” the name of the beer begins to sound a lot like a Spanish slang word for vagina, “chocha.” This play on words is not subtle and most Spanish speakers will be aware of the meaning. The constant repetition of “Socha” by the women while the men gawk and salivate over their bodies is a constant reminder that female bodies, whether it be in horror movies or a machista society, are seen only as sexual objects to be possessed, used and then discarded. The women in this scene seem to break cultural norms by dressing and acting provocatively, but in reality, they are within the cultural limits because they are not sexually liberated. On the contrary, they have no control over their own sexuality. They are complacent and docile because they don’t question these gender norms nor do they exact any power over their sexuality, and are, therefore, allowed the role of whore/puta, in the virgin/whore dichotomy.

The scene where the Professor and Salvador first meet is very interesting because the story of La Llorona is introduced by the Professor. We see a group of taxi drivers, all male, sitting around at a local taqueria eating and flirting with the waitress, who is warned by her

3 “Oh my children” in other versions she asks “Where are my children?”
mother to stay away from the men who only want one thing. Professor Sheen walks up to them asking for a ride and only the youngest man in the group, Salvador, speaks to him in English and can help him. After a quick exchange, Salvador agrees to drive Sheen to wherever he needs to go. During the drive, The Professor shares the story of his daughter with Salvador. La Llorona/Julie is described by her father as modern day Medusa siren, that entices men with her wail, but when men look into her hypnotic eyes, they are unable to stop themselves from desiring her. She uses their weakness to devour them. Most importantly, however, The Professor knows that La Llorona, who he describes as evil and conniving, is killing men through Julie’s sexual/sensual body. She is using his daughter, who he believes to be pure and virginal, and turning her body into an object of desire. As a father, it is hard for him to accept his daughter’s sexuality and it is easier to accept that her actions are a result of possession than a natural desire. His daughter’s sexuality scares him because it is something he can no longer control and understand.

The visual representations of La Llorona/Julie are very complex. She is young, in a tight fitting, low cut white dress. We are first introduced visually to La Llorona through the male gaze of two drunken men who see her walking down a dark alley and approach her. They inspect her body and take her low wails as an invitation to touch and kiss her. Once they are most vulnerable, with their eyes closed and pants down, she turns into the monster and decapitates both men. La Llorona is objectified and groped by these men and when trying to defend herself, she is seen as a monster. She is portrayed as an animal, literally devouring men. Her face shifts from the virginal Julie to a horrible monster with sharp teeth and empty black eyes. In a later scene, La Llorona/Julie is also seen devouring a drunken man what comes up to her as she is kneeling over a well. As he approaches her he places his hand over his gun, hinting at the level of violence he is willing to use if need be to possess the beautiful body he sees before him. She, with her back to him, lets him grab her and kiss her. He puts his finger in her mouth, an act that is metaphorically represents sex and it is here where La Llorona reveals her other face and, once again, with her long, sharp teeth she bites his finger out and spits it out. The camera angels shift in this scene so the audience gets a close up of La Llorona’s face before and after the transformation and to the now severed and bloodied finger. This scene can be interpreted as a re-telling of the vagina dentata myth where women are believed to have a toothed vagina that will castrate men. Here, La Llorona symbolically castrates this man who wanted to take advantage of her. By doing so, however, she does not gain any control over her sexuality nor does she gain agency since as the scene ends, she returns to being just a body looking for another victim. La Llorona, throughout the movie, is reduced to grunting and other animalistic sounds, she never finds her voice. Her killing spree continues while her father and Salvador look for a way to save Julie’s soul.

A pivotal scene in the film is when the professor finds out that the only way to save his daughter is through an exorcism. Salvador and the Professor go to the river, taking with them a rosary and holy water to combat La Llorona’s evil. Visually, this scene is reminiscent of J-Horror films where the woman comes out of the water with her long black hair covering her face. As she emerges, dripping wet, her hair parts to reveal Julie’s innocent face. She timidly begins calling for her dad and enthralled by her beauty, the professor cannot look away and whispers “Julie you are so beautiful.” He is now trapped in La Llorona’s spell and can no longer control his actions. Slowly he moves towards her and touches her breasts. This act of incest is

4 J Horror is a general term coined to describe Japanese horror movies that have similar characteristics including the use of female ghosts, water and technology.
forgiven, in presented as the daughter’s fault since it was her sexuality that provoked his actions. Like in real life instances of rape and incest, it is the women that are portrayed as the cause not the victims. This incest is allowed because Julie, after being possessed by La Llorona, has crossed the boundaries permitted for women and as this new sensual/sexual entity can be punished to restore social norms. In this scene the professor becomes the victim not the aggressor when La Llorona/Julie once again transforms into the monstrous female and pulls his beating heart out of his chest. The exorcism, or restoration of social norms, has failed in this scene since it is La Llorona/Julie that comes out victorious.

When she goes to attack Salvador, she is unable to because he has the holy water and crucifix. Salvador, or Chava, is an interesting character. He is a college graduate that went back to Mexico to live with his uncle to help him drive the taxi. After the failed exorcism he returns home and finds that his father has been murdered by La Llorona. Enraged, he runs to the church to ask for help in his quest to save Julie and kill La Llorona. There, he encounters three older women, the trinity, who are all dressed in long black dresses that cover their entire bodies and are also wearing black veils. The trinity speaks to him and tells him that only he, with their help, can save Julie since he is good. It is up to the three religious, pure women to help Salvador save Julie’s soul. Salvador, which means savior in Spanish, is an appropriate name for this character, the hero of the story that is given, by divine providence, the ability to save Julie’s soul from disappearing into La Llorona’s sexual monstrosity. Salvador, in the discourse throughout the entire film, is portrayed as a “good man” that takes care of his aging uncle and helps a desperate father. He, unlike other male victims of La Llorona, has remained unflappable, never succumbing to the enticing sexuality of La Llorona. Salvador is very similar to Final Girls in traditional slasher films in the U.S. such as Nightmare on Elm Street and Halloween. Final Girls are usually women that, because of their lack of sexuality or their perceived virginity, are allowed to survive while their promiscuous friends, both male and female, are murdered as punishment for their transgressions. Final Girls become the heroines of the slasher films since they are allowed to combat and defeat the monster. In The Wailer 2, it is Salvador who plays this role. He is not morally corrupt and has maintained acceptable social and gender roles, and for this he is rewarded, in this case by the trinity of women, with the strength necessary to fight La Llorona, the transgressor. In the end it is the male, Salvador the savior, who is chosen to liberate the beautiful Julia from the clutches of the sexuality and animalism of la Llorona.

After the exorcism, Julie collapses in Salvador’s arms and the perspective of the camera quickly shifts to allow the viewer to see things from the point of view of la Llorona, now an evil spirit roaming for its next host. After inspecting various targets, including two blind men, two “mujeres decentes” she chooses a woman with long black hair that is wearing a thin, almost transparent, white dress. This new host body is with the shaman/witch performing a spell to make a man love and desire her. Both the shaman/witch and the new host are portrayed as transgressors who deserved to be punished. The host is, through magic, trying to control a man which cannot be allowed. The discourse changes at the end when it is this gender norm transgressor who is picked by la Llorona unlike her first victim, Julie, who was portrayed as a good girl that did nothing to deserve the curse. Through this possession scene, not only does the director provide an opportunity for a sequel, but we also learn that La Llorona, and the threat he presents to men and masculinity will continue to exist as long as women move outside the permitted gender roles. Once women, like La Llorona, use their sexuality in non-permissible

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5 Mujeres Decentes are women that follow patriarchal norms. They dress conservatively and are not sexual.
ways then masculinity is in danger and because of this, her evil needs to be stopped by tightly regulation said norms.

**The Future of La Llorona**

Films have the ability to transmit and create culture. In the case of *The Wailer 2*, the legend of La Llorona is used in a way that promotes and maintains patriarchal cultural norms. La Llorona, in this film, is mutilated and loses all the power Chicana writers and theorists have worked so hard to give her. In her essay “Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films,” Cynthia Freeland explains how there needs to be a shift “onto the nature of film as artifacts that may be studied by examining both their construction and their role in culture” (204). *The Wailer 2*, which was made specifically for the Latin@ market needs to be looked at as a reflection and a reinterpretation of culture and as such needs to be critiqued for its inability or unwillingness to present a more nuanced take of La Llorona. This movie had the opportunity, through La Llorona, to question existing patriarchal norms and their effects on women. What it does instead, through its objectification of women and the maintenance of the virgin/whore dichotomy, is that it places Mexicanas/Chicanas back in Octavio Paz’s theory of La Llorona and La Chingada. The women in *The Wailer 2* are forced to stay within the allowed societal norms and those that do not comply are vilified and punished for their transgressions.

A more thorough Chicana feminist analysis of La Llorona in American horror films needs to be done to understand if the portrayal in *The Wailer 2* is systematic and symptomatic of a larger discourse of gender in horror. Barry Keith Grant explains that horror is constantly linked to gender since “whether one prefers to examine horror films in terms of universal fears or historically determined cultural anxieties, issues of gender remain central to the genre. For gender, as recent theory has argued, is, like horror itself, both universal and historical, biological and cultural” (7). La Llorona is such a strong icon because of her ability to move through borders and exist in different mediums. Now that she has found her way into American horror cinema, it is important to analyze and explore how she fits into this already polemic genre where issues of gender and femininity are already played out. Her role in horror should be looked at not just through a feminist perspective but rather through a Chicana feminist perspective since only through the combination of these two frameworks can we have a more thorough and nuanced understanding of La Llorona.

**Works Cited**


