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## “Women Who Wail”: An auto-ethnographic study of four Latina educators and the heroínas who shaped their understanding of critical pedagogies

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**Abstract:** The lore of La Llorona, the woman who wails, is a pervasive archetype in Latin American cultures. While stories vary by country and region, the most common telling is associated with Mexican folklore, in which an anguished woman cries for her drowned children—in some retellings, their death results from her murderous rage at being betrayed by her lover; in others their deaths result from an accident. These stories have traditionally served as cautionary tales, often positioning Latinas as tragic forces within their communities (Morales, 2010); however, Chicana scholars have reconceptualized La Llorona to symbolize a feminist power. This autoethnographic study reflects on the lore of La Llorona as a metaphor for a Latina’s “resistance in society” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.33) or as Morales (2010, p.3) states, “the voice who cries out against injustice”. Specifically, through the application of Chicana/Latina feminist and critical epistemologies, the authors explore the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, Nela Martinez Espinosa, Dolores Huerta, and Nisia Floresta— Latina feminist authors and politicians, who have used their voices to fight injustices within their communities. Furthermore, the authors reflect upon how these heroines have influenced their own identities as “women who wail”—as feminist Latina educators who work toward a pedagogy for social justice.

**Keywords:** La Llorona - Latina resistance - feminist power - critical epistemologies - activism - pedagogy.

[Abstracts in spanish and portuguese on the pages 289-290]

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## Introduction

The lore of La Llorona, the woman who wails, is a pervasive archetype in Latin American cultures. While stories vary by country and region, the most common telling is associated with Mexican folklore, in which an anguished woman cries for her drowned children—in some retellings, their death results from her murderous rage at being betrayed by her lover; in others their deaths result from an accident. These stories have traditionally served as cautionary tales, often positioning Latinas as tragic forces within their communities (Morales, 2010).

However, Chicana scholars have reconceptualized La Llorona to symbolize a feminist power, one that resists and fights against the hegemonic and patriarchal forces working against her. Perez (2008) notes that reinterpreting the myth of La Llorona “for resistance involves, in part, identifying the ways in which cultural producers... imagine La Llorona as a figure that resists oppression directly or inspires others to do the same” (p. 72). This reconceptualization of La Llorona offers a new way of envisioning *la heroína*. La Llorona as heroína acknowledges Latina leaders as unapologetic in their attempts to effect change and affirm their cultural, linguistic and feminist identities. Furthermore, La Llorona’s wails, her act of resistance, is emblematic of Anzaldúa’s assertion that in order for Latina feminists to “break[...] down the male/white frame (the whole of western culture),” we must “turn to our own kind and change our terms of reference” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 114). Thus, in much the same way that La Llorona’s presence and wail are defining marks of her iconography, Latina activists commit their being, both “body and soul,” to fight for social justice and enduring systemic change (Anzaldúa, 2009, Simerka, 2000).

This autoethnographic study reflects on the lore of La Llorona as a metaphor for a Latina’s “resistance in society” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 33) or as Morales (2010) states, “the voice who cries out against injustice” (p. 3). The following autoethnographies capture the authors’ own identities as “women who wail,” as feminist Latina educators who work toward a pedagogy for social justice. Each autoethnography has a distinct voice, indicative of our diverse lived experiences and our distinct Latin cultures. Furthermore, through Chicana/Latina feminist and critical epistemologies, the authors explore the heroínas that influenced their identities and development as educators: Gloria Anzaldúa, Nela Martínez Espi-

nosa, Dolores Huerta, and Nisia Floresta— Latina feminist authors and politicians, who have used their voices to fight injustices within their communities.

## The Claim of Women Who Wail through the Heroic Legacy of Nela Martínez Espinosa

### Interpreting La Llorona from Ecuador

La Llorona, the weeping woman, truth or legend, myth, or reality. I recall when I was a little girl, my father reunited my siblings and me to tell us stories, tales, and folktales, which were common of his time. But certainly, there were stories he told us that we were so delighted by knowing about them to the point we completely lost track of time. Among his repertoire of tales, there were the most legendary and representative of Ecuador such as *Cantuna y su pacto con el diablo*, *Los orígenes de los Canaris*, *El Guagua Auca* (Martínez, 2011), however, La Llorona was one of my favorites because the way my father narrated it conveyed mystery, curiosity, suspense, and even fear.

At that early age, I did not know this myth was a famous Mexican legend of pre-Hispanic origin, which became popular in colonial Mexico. Even these days it is commonly associated with Mexican folklore (Perez, 2008). Moreover, it is known that although La Llorona's narrative has many variations according to some Latin American countries, the core facts are always the same. In this perspective, the Ecuadorian version from my father's telling was of a tall, stylized woman dressed in white, whose facial features could not be distinguished just like her feet were not visible; it seemed she walked without touching the floor. He told us La Llorona suffered from the abandonment of her beloved husband to such an extent she went mad and killed her son by drowning him in a river. After she had done such a terrible deed, she quickly recovered her sanity and went to the river in search of her baby. Then after several days, she found her little child dead and missing his little finger. Immediately, after having that sad image of her dead baby, it made her shed tears until she killed herself. But her death did not end with her agony, my father said, because her spirit was in pain as punishment for her awful crime. For this reason, La Llorona walked crying inconsolably every night asking for her son and her classic, disturbing cry was "Oh, my children!" My father's account highlighted that in full moon night La Llorona wandered sobbing and tormenting people with her moans.

Reflecting on those far-off days, I was merely a novice listener of stories, tales, and chronicles, who enjoyed learning legendary Ecuadorian stories from my father, grandparents, school teachers, and other people from my community. I failed to see the Ecuadorian Llorona narrative would take a different course when the figure of this fantastic character would intervene and donate a transcendental effect on the wailing of memorable Ecuadorian heroines such as *Marieta de Vintimilla (1855-1907)*, *Blanca Martínez de Tinajero (1897-1976)*, and *Dolores Veintimilla de Galindo (1829-1857)*. In particular, the effect of the ceaseless wailing of Nela Martínez Espinosa (1912-2004), which symbolized the starting point for the voice of Ecuadorian woman to be heard.

I can say with confidence that I have come a long way without giving much thought to the fabulous legendary stories I heard in my youth; they could have coexisted within the first stages of my education. As hooks (1994) mentions that in one of her Tony Morrison seminars, she was disturbed by the conviction of an English professor that "conventional ways of critically approaching a novel could not coexist in classrooms that also offered new perspectives" (hooks, 1994, p. 32) Yet a new perspective from La Llorona emerged from the first time I had the opportunity to immerse myself in Nela's autobiography through her book, *Yo siempre he sido Nela Martínez Espinosa* (Martínez, 2018) and *El epistolario entre Nela y Joaquín: Una mirada desde la intimidad* (Páez, 2010). It was at that moment a metaphorical intertwining emerged between the distressing laments of La Llorona with the desperate cries for equal rights of Nela Martínez.

My analysis of the structure of La Llorona narrative is the first step to approach the proposals of distinct positions of feminism and its resistance in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, hooks, 2000; Wing, 1997). In Latin American cultures, La Llorona is a symbol of the unknown and fantastic contained in life and death, of the paradoxical and beautiful ambivalence of the human. La Llorona is a woman in love, reciprocal and at the same time rejected. She is a brave woman who breaks the canons of her time and is, at the same time, a victim of them. She is a mother and the executioner of her children. Her actions represent life and death; love and spite; fright and prize. La Llorona is sometimes Criolla, Mestiza, Indigenous, or Spanish, who disembodies each and every woman who loves, suffers, struggles, cries, and waits day by day for the liberating event of her life, which brings the tranquility and happiness that it is sought, longed for, and built.

Therefore, when analyzing the beginnings of feminism in Ecuador in the first half of the twentieth century, Nela Martínez, like La Llorona, walked incessantly wailing for Ecuadorian women's needs, rights, and demands for their voices be recognized as human beings capable of assuming a social, political, economic, and educational position within Ecuadorian society. Feminism was not a univocal concept but was expressed in different ways, with a multiplicity of discourses (Campana, 1996; Goetschel, 2006; Pratt, 1995). In the sense it was not a structured movement capable of developing centrality, it was more appropriate to conceive of it as a result of force fields in which the heroines had different positions according to the situation, as well as their individual characteristics, their social condition, the different political, social and cultural contexts, national and international (Goetschel, 2006). Ecuadorian heroines assumed a feminist position as they sought recognition as subjects, as well as the expansion of their rights. It can be said what characterized them was their interest in having a voice and participating in the construction of the nation.

### **The Courageous Wailing of Nela Martínez**

Nela Martínez is one of many Latin American heroines who managed to engage a dominant male audience and demanded women broader participation in the political sphere and defended the need for the recognition of their freedom, autonomy, and individual rights. While on the one hand, not only at home but at work, the lives of Ecuadorian women should be governed by principles such as service, honor, decency,

obedience, and respect for male authority; on the other hand, changes related to the dynamics of social life and political and cultural reforms were taking place (Lind, 2003). It was in this context of the early twentieth century some women fought for access to education and work as fundamental demands. It was, at the same time, a struggle for autonomy. In the magazine *La Mujer*, Ugarte de Landívar (1905) exposes this notion in a very clear way in which the Ecuadorian woman following the universal movement, comes out of her lethargy, protests her misery, and asks for knowledge that makes her capable of earning a living independently; she asks for schools, workshops, equal education; she requests that those who have ignored her take care of her more than they have done so far (Goetschel & Chiriboga, 2009; Ugarte de Landívar, 1905). Nela's autobiography, *I have always been Nela Martínez Espinosa* (2018), is an affirmation of the need to build citizenship for women much more so when they come from conditions of exclusion due to their origin, class, socio-economic status, and skin color.

When Nela writes:

*La educación contemplaría su iniciación socialista evidente. El feminismo requiere creación. Sólo la educación nueva puede salvar a la mujer. La colectividad, la mayoría es y ha sido esclavizada. Esta esclavitud no tiene el bendito dolor de sentir. Sienten pocas, esta es una gavilla apenas de almas de mujeres. Las que trabajan, las oprimidas por el hambre, las necesidades que se entregan por el fin más inmediato abandonadas ya, caen en la degradación moral... Con educación, el trabajo ampliamente concedido iría restando esta inferioridad que nos sujeta dominante en la miseria...ya no deseable en la reproducción como simple producto orgánico, sino maternal en creación altísima de hijos, de sociedades y culturas (N-1931053; Páez, 2010).*

It drives me to reveal I was one of those women heirs of the education of the nineteenth century, influenced by the Church at all levels (Spring, 2005). That education of the colonial period where the Spanish conqueror instituted the instruction in two directions: an elitist, destined to prepare the administrators of the colony's possessions; and another oriented to the Christianization of the Indians (Carper & Hunt, 1984; Fraser, 2016). The programs of teaching were a replica of the European schemes of an encyclopedic and bookish character under the sign of the Christian religion (MacDonald, 2004). This was applied to the homes of the upper class of Spaniards, *criollos* and *mestizos*, in the universities, catechist schools, and schools of art and trade. This educational structure still considered women in a secondary role where the Catholic Church had a functional concept of women that obeyed its cohesive role within the family.

This functional concept of women was very real since the women of the family had lived it and some were still living within this doctrine, including me. I say this because of the way I was raised in my home, school, and society. I still remember my grandmother's favorite words for me, "the prototype of being a good woman is: the perfect married, queen of the home, devout, good mother, and a good wife." This concept corresponded to an ideological discourse on the domestic, where the Catholic Church was its most insistent spokesperson (MacDonald, 2004) and that not only the generational women

in my family were part of, but also all Ecuadorian women. Given this perspective, instruction in educational establishments, public or preferably private, was not aimed at training scholars or scholars, but pious women; wise but in handling domestic chores, experts in needlework.

### **Empowered Women through Martínez's Legacy**

This is why I celebrate Nela Martínez, the heroine who was inspired to change the nation through persistent wails for women's equal rights. With her revolutionary ideology, she fought incessantly toward social justice in Ecuador and raised rights not only for Ecuadorian women but also for women around Latin American (Martínez, 2018; Páez, 2010). She always transmitted solidarity and humanistic messages, those being her ideals with which she lived and died, with a passion to fight, and a brave heart to survive. She is a heroine who demonstrated that we women were capable of participating directly in society and contributing significantly to history. With her patriotic legacy, Nela has inspired me and other Ecuadorian women to join in the formation of the nation by being an educator with a brave heart. It has always been my philosophy that the words educator and social activist are synonymous. As a strong leader, poet, writer, true teacher, liberating cause in defense of the people in the "great constitution," Nela Martínez taught us we needed to be prepared for the changes toward a modern economy, social, political, and moral society. Through her activist ideology, I and most Ecuadorian women have been inspired to prepare to face changes in our society by educating ourselves not only for work but also to achieve personal autonomy. Nela has taught us that the degree of development of a country is measured by the degree of freedom women have in that country. My freedom I have obtained through my persistent academic preparation until becoming an educator impassioned by social justice in the educational context. By thinking about this, and the ongoing fight for women's equal rights in Ecuador, Nela motivates Latin American women to rise up because there is no possibility of retiring while there is much to do. As a writer and poet, Nela has inspired me to preserve my ability to dream, to be a mother, good citizen, educator, advocator for quality education in my community, and be optimistic of my future.

### **Gloria Anzaldúa's *Conciencia* as Liberation: My Journey in Learning to Wail for Resistance**

#### **Interpreting *La Llorona* from Puerto Rico**

I remember hearing the story of *La Llorona* as an adolescent, when my family went to visit family in Puerto Rico. As a fan of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (Schwartz, 1991), I enjoyed nothing more than to listen to my aunts recount the story of *La Llorona*, a story that excited me for the possibility of a chance encounter, as well as the thrill of dancing with the afterlife. It wouldn't be until years later that I would ask my mom to retell

the story of La Llorona to me, after coming across her in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland, La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). As an adult, the story of La Llorona resonated as a phantom of my youth, reduced to a feeling and faded memory. My mother's retelling brought her back to me:

*Recuerdo que mi bisabuelo nos reunía en la noche a todos los chiquillos y nos contaba la historia de la Llorona. Nos decía que la Llorona era una mujer que salía llorando en el medio de la noche, que se veía en el medio de la carretera y que de allí caminaba hacia el puente donde se sentaba a esperar por los transeúntes para pedirles "pon a ride". Él la describía vestida de traje blanco que lucía como trapo y que tenía un pelo negro bien largo. Nos relataba que cuando un conductor paraba para darle el pon, ella se montaba en el vehículo, y que era muy conservadora. Pero que al pasar frente al Cementerio desaparecía sin que el conductor se diera cuenta, parara el automóvil o abriera la puerta.*

*Yo no recuerdo a mi bisabuelo que haya hablado de su origen ni la razón porque lloraba. Le pregunté a mi mamá si había escuchado sobre la razón porque lloraba y me dijo que ella nunca escuchó sobre la razón de su llanto. (Montalvo, 2020)*

The Puerto Rican Llorona, or at least the one of my mother's retellings, shares many similarities to her Mexican counterpart: she's been seen wearing white; she comes out at night to lure the living with her presence and wails; she's depicted as villainous in her seduction, a harbinger of death. Other versions further connect the Puerto Rican Llorona with La Llorona de Mexico by identifying her as an indigenous woman whose heart was broken by a Spaniard and she subsequently drowned her children in a fit of despair (Fernandez-Colins, 2019). The implications of this archetypal iconography would further unite our cultures by a legacy of colonial imperialism—patriarchal geo-political forces that position Latinas, specifically indigenous women, as entities to be conquered for the sake of the status quo.

### **Defining My Identity as a Latina Educator: Learning to Wail from my Heroine**

Anzaldúa's life and writings invite the reader to experience the world in ways that honors "the connection between body, mind, and spirit"—in ways that, at times, defy classification, while being intensely personal and honest (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 7). Anzaldúa's work expands numerous careers: a teacher in the Alamo Independent School District in San Juan, TX; a "liaison between the public school system and migrant farm workers' children" in Indiana; a feminist/Chicana/queer theorist, poet, writer, and lecturer (Anzaldúa, 2009, pp. 325-335). Central to her creative and theoretical work is agency: in taking the "existing myths... that disempower us" and "rewrite[ing] them" so as to "motivate us to work actively for social change" (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 11). Pérez (2005) notes: "Decades ago Gloria Anzaldúa comprehended what many of us spend our lives attempting to grasp—that colonization may have destroyed our indigenous civilizations but colonization could not eliminate the evolution of an indigenous psyche" (p. 2).

Her work refuses to settle in the fissures of oppression—it insists on breaking through those barriers toward what she calls “la conciencia de la mestiza,” toward “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” that allows us to transform those paradoxes “into something else” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.79). Her theoretical and epistemological contributions offer other Chicana and Latina feminists transformative power—not to shift into whiteness, but to shapeshift into our own being and coalesce into a unified movement toward social justice and equity.

As a Puerto Rican woman raised in the United States, I find that I return to Anzaldúa’s (1987) observation of La Llorona as a metaphor for a Latina’s “resistance in society” (p. 33). She notes:

Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse. These collective wailing rites may have been a sign of resistance in a society which glorified warrior and war and for whom the women of the conquered tribes were booty. (1987, p. 33)

Neither Mexican nor Chicana, I feel a kinship in these words, and in reflection, I can see the urge to wail, to stand up against racism, even as I simultaneously wanted to assimilate as deeply as possible into a lulled Midwestern existence. When I was 15, I recall standing in the McDonald’s line, waiting to order with my mother. In Spanish, we were talking about what to order, when I heard a group of teenage boys behind us talking. One of the boys shouted, “Look! These two can’t speak English!” and the rest of the boys erupted in raucous laughter. My mother’s face was etched in shame, fear, and embarrassment. I don’t know what contortions my face made, but I remember the heat of my blood, the rapid pace of my breathing. We both fell silent, but when it was our turn to order, I made sure to speak in my clearest standard English. I spoke loudly enough for them to hear, and then I turned to smile. I was never a fighter, but I never backed down either. At the time I equated my ability to speak English as my power—my way of challenging stereotypical representations of Hispanics.

Yet, in my early urges to wail, I too was short-sighted in what constitutes reclaimed power. Reclaiming agency cannot be done by assimilating into the status quo; it cannot be done by being the model minority. It wasn’t until my third year as a high school English teacher that I became acquainted with Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, and I was challenged to re-envision my wail—to begin the process of reclaiming all of my bodies of knowledge, my cultures, and my languages. As part of an anthology we reviewed for adoption, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” challenged me to revisit my complicated relationship with race, language, and identity (Anzaldúa, 2005). In asserting English as the language of my power, I denied Spanish as the language of my home and greatest joys.

Anzaldúa did not function in this false dichotomy—she asserts her languages, the languages of many Chicanos, by listing them, defining them, exploring their etymologies, and literary and intellectual space for their existence and celebration. “Linguistic Terrorism,” was my mirror, a reflection of my lived experiences:

In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue through-out our lives... If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 58)

I internalized that I had "a low estimation of my native tongue," afraid to celebrate my Spanish, use it freely, in fear of making others uncomfortable or drawing unwanted attention to myself.

I had "a low estimation of me" and I saw that most clearly in her words.

I needed this mirror as a Puerto Rican woman and as an educator. How many times had I demurred and backed out of arguments in order not to come across as a feisty Latina? Did I do anything to engage my students in critical reflections on race, language, and culture? My cultural mirror reflected a portrait of myself living in shadows, silent in the fear of being seen as "radical" or political. Indeed, education is, as Freire (1985) asserts, a political act—one with moral responsibilities and consequences (p. 188). In particular, education is enmeshed in the politics of hegemony, in which social constructs play the specific role of maintaining a specific social order often at the expense of another (Giroux, 2011, p. 69). I first taught "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" to my juniors, understanding that to do so, may very well be internalized by others as a political act, but also recognizing an essay that celebrates expression and languages was also liberating and thought-provoking (Anzaldúa, 2005). I presented the text as an emancipatory act—one that encouraged my students not only to celebrate their languages and cultures, but also to make room for the languages and cultures of others. Like La Llorona's wails, I attempted to mold my pedagogy to address social inequities in all of their complexities—to impart in my students the relevance of their languages and cultural contexts and to challenge them to make room for multiple voices. I did not always succeed. The truth is that engaging in education as social justice can be tiring, and at times, I didn't have the will to "wail" to fight another battle. Yet, I always returned to my central purpose: to engage my students in real issues in ways that affirm human dignity.

When I look at my mother's retelling of La Llorona, I am reminded of Anzaldúa's assertion that "you are the shaper of your flesh as well as your soul" (2009, p. 125). La Llorona was more than her soul, which the ancient Nahuas believed "was a speaker of words" (p. 125). In my mother's retelling, La Llorona was also temporal, a body—"a doer of deeds" (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 125): "vestida de traje blanco que lucía como trapo y que tenía un pelo negro bien largo" (Montalvo, 2020). Standing in the middle of the road or sitting patiently on the bridge to Lajas, her presence wouldn't be ignored whether by the passersby or by the Boriquas, who would tell her tale at funerals and other celebrations. Critical pedagogy demands of educators the same persistence in both flesh and soul. Anzaldúa (2009) writes:

In our self-reflexivity and in our active participation with the issues that confront us, whether it be through writing, front-line activism, or individual self-development, we are also uncovering the interfaces, the very spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect. (p. 125)

While not addressing educators, specifically, engaging in critical pedagogy is the process of "active participation" in facing that which "confront[s] us"—in using both our words and physical presence to do so (Anzaldúa, 2009, p.125). As a teacher, that meant engaging in reflective practice to examine my own cultural blind spots and modeling that practice for my students. For my students, that meant embracing learning as an act of social justice, one in which they can engage in their world in ways that are more nuanced, self-aware, as well as caring of themselves and others.

## **The Brazilian "La Llorona"**

### **Interpreting The Brazilian "La Llorona"**

In Brazilian culture, the equivalence of the Mexican La Llorona is "A Mulher da Meia-Noite" (the midnight woman), or "a Bela da meia-noite" (the midnight beauty), also "a Mulher de Vermelho, Branco or Preto" (the woman in red, white or black), depending on the vest she was wearing the night of her appearance. The legend tells the story of a young woman who doesn't know she died and now walks on the city streets. The woman is stunning; she has a seductive body and wears a red or white dress and charms the lonely men who are drinking at a bar. She invites the men to take her home and bewitched by her beauty, they accept. Then they realize they are left in a cemetery while she disappears by the church bell warning it is midnight. The reason the woman is walking around and scaring the people is not very clear in the Brazilian folklore. Some relate the sufferings of La Llorona, her abandonment from her husband, and the killing of her two sons. Some say the woman is the soul of a pretty woman who died on the day of her wedding.

### **Two Women Ahead of their Time**

I was born in a privileged world. I am Brazilian mixed blood, European, indigenous, and African Brazilian. I became an educator because I was inspired by my mother, daughter of Italian and Belgian second-generation immigrants whose story influenced my path to understand and fight for the educational rights of those who have been marginalized by society. She, at the same time, was inspired by Nisia Floresta, the precursor of Brazilian feminism, who was also a writer and a poet. Floresta was the first educator from the nineteenth century who advocated teaching girls not only homemaking skills, but also language arts, science, religion, and social studies.

My mother went to a Catholic school. It was expected from her either to become a homemaker or a teacher. At the age of fifteen, due to her poor performance at school, she was sent to a boarding school. She thought she wasn't smart enough, being an introvert, and not confident she was capable of finishing school. After two years of boarding school, she was back at her Catholic school and completed high school with a teaching certification. As she started her first teaching job, she knew she wanted to transform the

lives of children from what she learned to appreciate in herself—what she overcame in her schooling and achieved. She taught at an impoverished public elementary school, and after six years of teaching, she was nominated principal. The year she started as a principal was 1978, during the military dictatorship (1964-1985). In 1971, the new education law was written and one of the changes noticed was the quality decline of public education due to government funding cuts to public schools. In conjunction with this, private education was supported and subsidized with public money to accommodate the children of the elite. My mother taught and managed a school in which children had barely enough resources to eat and dress. Most of the children didn't have shoes, and she, with other teachers, would collect bags to put on the children's feet while they waited for shoe and clothing donations. Being my mother, the daughter of a businessman in town, she decided to use the influence of her last name to go to the military headquarters and ask the captain in command to send soldiers to make repairs and paint the school building.

When I examine the past, starting in the nineteenth century when Nisia Floresta Brasileira Augusta was born (her real name was Dionisia Pinto Lisboa, born on October 12, 1809), women were relinquished to the position of wife and mother. They were deprived of education, a place in society, and when they worked, their role resumed to domestic chores in houses of privileged high society families. When I look back at the first half of the twentieth century, women in Brazil were placed into categories: first, women from the traditional family educated at home to read, write, and how to become a wife. Second, women from low-income families who had a very controlled life by their family members and who culturally would not receive any formal schooling since it was not needed. Besides, an educated girl was considered audacious and not marrying material. The third category were the women, mostly from the lower class, that did not follow the rules and were the outcasts of their families (a possible "Mulher de Vermelho"). Finally, in the second half of the twentieth century, most of the women were like my mother, i.e., they went to school and became teachers, secretaries, or learned a profession in which serving was the main trait.

As I correlate the lives of my mother, the "Mulher da meia-noite," and Floresta, it is clear to me how these three women had to fight for their place in society. The values imposed and taught to young boys and girls in such a restrictive community that is Brazil included respect, honesty, obedience, and hard work. But for the girls, it was not only expected but also learned from their mothers and grandmothers to be submissive, delicate, pure, well versed in homemaking skills, and manual crafts (Biasoli-Alves, 2000). According to Biasoli-Alves,

These values are labeled traditional and clearly show what is expected of a boy and what is desirable for a girl. In other words, education was not only made different, but it also allowed the distinctions to be well marked. (2000, p. 234)

The three women had to be dauntless and, at the same time, fight with passion for their rights to bring social justice and equity, whether for women or underprivileged children. As for my mother and Floresta, they interfered in the social and political life of their time. Floresta was a courageous woman who married her first husband at age 14 against her will and abandoned him a year later. Her central theme as an educator and feminist was

the education of women and their participation in society. She was also a fierce fighter for the rights of women, the indigenous, and slaves. Her first book, published in 1832, *Direitos das Mulheres e Injustica dos Homens* (1989) (*Women's Rights and Men's Injustice*), was a compilation and assimilation of the book from the English writer Mary Godwin Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1974). Nisia's book is a personal report in which each word is lived, and the concepts appear to be extracted from her own experience. The intentionality of the book reveals the author's personal and political project, which is to interfere in society at the time (De Oliveira, 2016).

In 1838, Floresta founded the Colegio Augusto, a school for girls in which she started to integrate her feminist thoughts into education. The school offered a pedagogy with innovative methods and content. The content did not limit students to learning sewing and good manners, as was common at the time. The studies included subjects such as foreign languages, calligraphy, history, geography, religion, mathematics, Portuguese, music, dance, piano, drawing, and sewing. According to Eggert, Nisia fought for a school where intellectual competence was part of the daily lives of women. "She conducted the students' education in a unique way that was not always well accepted by society; she had been accused of inciting women of having a posture considered masculine" (2012, p. 438). She published an 1853 book with pedagogical content in which she visualized the education of Brazilian women. The book, *Opusculo Humanitario* (Floresta, 1989), first described the conditions of women and several countries around the world with the intent to question the Brazilian authorities about their commitment to the education of women, since the government called itself liberal (Eggert, 2012, p. 439) As Floresta (1989) points out:

The lack of a good education is the leading cause that contributes to the woman, amid the corruption of society, to lose her north, which is none other than morality. Always trying to arrest her intelligence, weakening her senses, they disable her to occupy herself, as she should, first of all, care to purify her heart, which she can never advantageously achieve if her intelligence remains uncultured. (p. 60)

From the perspective of a still conservative society, I see her commitment to the education of women as reliable, even if I consider that her fight privileged a specific class of society, the elite, at that point. She felt persecuted by her ideas and due to health treatment her daughter had to undergo, she decided to move to France, where she later died. Eggert concludes that "what she advocated was dignity for the education of women, and in this case, of the wealthy women of their century" (2012, p. 439). Considering during the time period, education was not subjected much to discussion and women were still transparent in a patriarchal society, Floresta brought awareness and made a difference in society for equal opportunity in education for men and women as well as for the rights of women in the community.

As a student, researcher, and future scholar, I first acknowledge the past because history is crucial to understand and define the present and the future. My learning experiences and reflections on these three courageous women influence my praxis as an educator. I

am not only proud of Floresta's and my mother's contributions to the education of my country, but I am also inspired by their heroic struggles and fights to accommodate the needs of women and children in such an unequal society.

## **"Sí Se Puede": The Wailing of a Chicana Social Justice Icon, Dolores Huerta**

### **Interpreting the New Mexican La Llorona**

The folklore of New Mexico is unique like its culture. The blending of three histories, Mexican, Spanish, and Native American frame the culture of the Land of Enchantment. The story of La Llorona has always been ironically enchanting. As a little girl, my third-grade teacher, Señora Sanchez, told our class of a beautiful woman who heaved her children into an arroyo to avenge the affair of her husband. Upon realizing her actions, she jumped into the arroyo to save her children only to perish, herself. We were told she was buried under the State Capitol building in Santa Fe. Our maestra's story continued with the haunting detail she roamed the arroyo at night, crying in agony for her children. Another legend told in New Mexico was that of a woman who lost her husband in war. Upon learning of her husband's death, she drowned her newborn baby in a nearby stream. When she realized her horrific actions, she escaped to the New Mexico mountains never to be seen again. The legend says that after dark, she roams the streams looking for her baby. It is said she will never find rest until she finds her child. I was always told if I didn't get back home before dark that La Llorona would take me. My abuela told me of a woman she believed was La Llorona, dressed in a veil she saw outside a church whom was the same woman that had died a week earlier. Although we knew of this weeping woman, as children we would walk by the arroyo in the middle of our town listening for her weeping and hoping to catch sight of her so we could have a story of our own to tell our friends. The notoriety of this legendary woman is often used as a way to deter bad behavior in children as well as emphasize the proper behavior of women (Simerka, 2000). As a modern Chicana educator, I must expand and redefine the symbol of La Llorona beyond the traditional role of marriage and motherhood (Simerka, 2000). As Latina/Chicana women in the field, it is our duty to re-examine our history as well as write about the women who wail for social justice.

### **The Wailing of a Social Justice Icon**

"*Sí se puede*" (Yes you can), is a loud cry echoed for over five decades. This unapologetic wail that signifies social justice was introduced to the United States by Dolores Huerta as she fought alongside Cesar Chavez leading huelgas that would improve the wages of farmworkers and the livelihood of their families (Felsenthal, 2017; *Time*, 2020). A fellow Nuevo Mexicana, Dolores was born in Dawson, New Mexico in 1930 (*Time*, 2020). As a young child, her parents divorced and moved to California. Dolores' father was farmworker

turned legislator and her mother was a community activist, who also aided farmworkers with reasonable rates to stay in her hotel as they worked (*Time*, 2020). She always excelled in school and eventually became a teacher in California. Dolores left her teaching career and became an activist for the farmworkers in her community of Stockton, where she co-founded a chapter of the Community Service Organization (CSO) in 1955 (Felsenthal, 2017). It was through her work with the CSO that she met Cesar Chavez. In 1972, their shared passion of assisting farmworkers led Dolores and Cesar to co-found National Farm Workers Association that is now known as the United Farmworkers Association (UFA) (Felsenthal, 2017; *Time*, 2020). This was the first labor Union in the United States that organized and advocated for farmworkers' rights (Kelly, 2020).

Throughout the 1960s, their diligent work and persistence influenced legislation that would aid farmworkers and their families in receiving improved wages and assistance. They were instrumental in enacting the Aid for Dependent Families in California in 1963. Although they helped secure aid for the families, low pay and limited protection for farmworkers was still prevalent across the country ("Dolores Huerta," n.d.). Dolores defied ethnic and gender bias and led the 1965 Delano *huelga* by California grape workers that resulted in a nationwide boycott of grapes (*Time*, 2020) Huerta led the contract negotiations for the farmworkers (Michals, 2015). The many *huelgas* and boycotts led to the enactment of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, which improved the pay, benefits, and protections for thousands of workers ("Dolores Huerta," n.d.; *Time*, 2020).

Dolores was the Vice-President of the UFW until 1999; as Vice-President, not only did Dolores organize workers and negotiate contracts, she advocated for safer working conditions that would eliminate the use of harmful pesticides in the fields where the farmworkers labored daily (Michals, 2015). In an interview in 2017, Dolores said, "We need a feminist to be at the table when decisions are being made so that the right decisions will be made" (Godoy, 2017). Dolores has always unapologetically and bravely negotiated her way to the table and continues to fight for farmworkers and other social justice issues through her foundation, the Dolores Huerta Foundation.

Dolores has received a number of awards and Hall of Fame inductions across the country. Upon receiving the highest civilian award in 2012, the Presidential Medal of Honor from President Barack Obama, she referred to her work as a social justice leader. She said,

The freedom of association means that people can come together in organization to fight for solutions to the problems they confront in their communities. The great social justice changes in our country have happened when people came together, organized, and took direct action. It is this right that sustains and nurtures our democracy today. ("Dolores Huerta," n.d.)

Dolores is an important social justice icon to so many Latinas/Chicanas because the importance of community is the foundation of every *lucha* she defends.

Although her *huelgas* and boycotts proved to be successes with the passage of key legislation, sadly, we are still fighting for our agricultural workers. According to the latest numbers from the CDC and the White House, 53% of the approximately 2.5 million agricultural workers are Hispanic ("COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,"

2020; Ordoñez, 2020). This percentage merits emphasis because agricultural workers are deemed essential workers by the federal government in the time of COVID-19. In 2020, forty years after the passage of key legislation to protect agricultural workers, limited measures to protect our hard-working hermanos exist, as hundreds of them have tested positive for COVID-19 and died after being exposed in meat packing facilities across the country. The currency of these issues is telling of our time. The essential workers I speak about are the padres and familiares of the children that will fill the classrooms when we return to our new normal in the fall or winter. These facts lead to my persistence as an educator to advocate for my students and their families.

### **Dolores' Cry Turns Into My Cry**

When Dolores explained why she left the classroom, she said, "I quit because I can't stand seeing kids come to class hungry and needing shoes. I thought I could do more by organizing farm workers than by trying to teach their hungry children" (Ostorga, 2018). My plight is similar to Dolores in that I left the classroom to fight for the families I serve, the families that have been historically marginalized and inequitably served by our education system. I turned to academia to deepen and expand my knowledge and build upon the theories to research ways to be an agent of change in the realm of family engagement.

As a former elementary school educator, I was introduced to Mexican and Central American culturas that spread across the South Valley in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Although, our race was the same, my ethnicity and cultura were different from the families I served in my classroom. *Mi alma* would not only be shaped by the culture of my Northern New Mexico roots, but it would now be as I was influenced by the humility, nuances, and diverse dialects of Spanish that surrounded me. I was enamored with the community I served and as time went by, we built *confianza*.

As I became more involved in my school community, I had the opportunity to work for an after-school program that invited families to share their funds of knowledge as well as assist them with literacy skills in their home setting. The reciprocity of learning was profound, and my view of my families changed. Although I knew knowledge comes in different forms, the wealth of wisdom they brought and the consejos they shared will forever change the way I envision family engagement in schools. I was able to say with confidence that the families who dwelled in my school community were my families.

With this lack of understanding, family engagement opportunities in schools do not match the assets our families possess because the cultural and literate identities they possess are not validated in our public school system. Our families' identities are shaped by cultures and languages that are largely discriminated against in our country daily. In the most recent times, our families are afraid to speak their language or expose their cultural traditions because of fear of discrimination or, in some cases, detainment leading to deportation. Castellón, Rivarola and López (2017) affirmed this analysis by reporting, "Marginalized communities now find themselves in a state of constant terror, as we try to make sense of how to navigate, live, and merely exist in a world where our

livelihood is constantly under threat" (p. 936). They discuss the collective reality and coping mechanisms of Latino, specifically immigrant, communities around the nation. Again, the idea that trust is less existent because of the effects of the socio-political climate makes it even more difficult for teachers and schools to connect with our families. The fear as well as the biased attitude emboldened by these policies affect the dispositions of the officials and teachers of the Latino/Chicano families they serve. It turns into a stronger battle against the Other, which in this instance, are the families I partnered with in my former school community.

Through the famous ethnography by Guadalupe Váldez (*Con Respeto*), we learn of the unfair perceptions schools have of my families. Instead of attempting to understand their experiences, they try to ensure the children succeed in the academic setting (1996). The education system, oftentimes doesn't value the knowledge or skills brought by families of diverse learners as being important in student academic growth; they feel what these students bring from their homes is subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999). Instead of utilizing students' rich backgrounds and experiences, they try to provide resources that will assimilate and acculturate them to what is acceptable in the dominant educational schema (Váldez, 1999). The misunderstanding and lack of validation of identities of our families contribute to the absence of relationships with the school systems. The deficit lens of our Latino/Chicano students and families continues to persist as embedded racism although our population continues to grow.

Like Dolores felt a kinship with the families for whom she advocated, I feel that same kinship with the immigrant and Chicano families that send their children to school daily. My plight to educate teachers and reform family engagement in schools is more important than ever. Dolores once said, "We as women should shine light on our accomplishments and not feel egotistical when we do. It's a way to let the world know that we as women can accomplish great things!" (Comas-Díaz, & Vasquez, 2018, p. 3). Like Dolores, my fellow Nuevo Mexicana, was the feminista at the table making decisions on behalf of the children and families she served, I too strive to be the feminista at the table making collaborative decisions on behalf of the children and families I will serve in the future.

## Conclusion

Delgado-Bernal (1998) discusses how a Chicana feminist epistemology (CFE) exposes human relationships and experiences that are often blurred by the traditional patriarchal position. Our heroines are illustrative of this exposure, their legacies challenging the patriarchy within their societies in the fight for equity and agency in all facets of life. At the turn of the 20th century, Nela Martínez Espinosa fought tirelessly in Ecuador for women's rights regardless of their origin, class, socio-economic status, and skin color—a foundation that has empowered generations of Ecuadorian feminists to continue her work toward social equality. Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical and cultural contributions to feminist, queer, and Chicana epistemologies have expanded the feminist paradigms in the United States, which have traditionally been positioned within white, cis, and privileged

contexts. Her work has given voice and agency to Chicana and Latina feminists in the work toward social justice. Nisia Floresta dedicated her life work as an educator and feminist to ensuring the education of women and their participation in society, fighting for women's rights, including the rights of indigenous and enslaved women in the 1800s in Brazil. Dolores Huerta fought alongside Cesar Chavez for equitable wages for farmworkers, and continues to work toward social justice and change. Their feminist wails exposed, in the best of ways, the lived experiences, struggles, and will of their communities.

Indeed, these women's wails were not tears, although social justice does not come without sacrifice or struggle. Rather, their wails echoed as advocacy, poetry, essays, speeches, among other creative and intellectual endeavors. In an excerpt from her poem, *The Postmodern Llorona*, Anzaldúa (2009) writes:

The apparition smelling of sulphur, smoke  
has shed her ancient mythical white dress  
for white jeans and a white sweatshirt  
with the words SERPENT WOMAN  
in fluorescent lime green. ...  
La Llorona writes poems.  
The dismembered missing children are not  
the issue of her womb—she has no children.  
She seeks the parts of herself  
she's lost along the way. (pp. 280-281)

In this version of La Llorona, she is no longer a tragic figure. Time and knowledge have transformed her into us—into jean and hoodie wearing Latinas, into women seeking parts of ourselves. We've changed our terms of reference, looking toward our cultures and heroínas, in defining our own power as Latina educators. While our individual autoethnographies tell portions of our stories, our collective voices speak to a shared *Latinidad* (San Miguel, 2011). The tales of La Llorona live differently in our respective cultures; however, she wails nonetheless. It's within this wail—this common experience—that we define our heroínas, our pedagogies, and our shared commitment toward social justice.

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### **"Mujeres que lloran": Un estudio autoetnográfico de cuatro educadoras Latinas y de las heroínas que las influenciaron para comprender pedagogías críticas**

**Resumen:** La tradición de La Llorona, la mujer que se lamenta, es un arquetipo generalizado en las culturas latinoamericanas. Si bien las historias de la Llorona varían según el país y la región, la narración más común está asociada con el folklore mexicano, en el cual una mujer angustiada llora por sus hijos ahogados; en algunas versiones, la muerte es el resultado de su ira asesina al ser traicionada por su amante; en otros, la muerte es el resultado de un accidente. Estas historias han servido tradicionalmente como cuentos de advertencia, a menudo posicionando a las latinas como fuerzas trágicas dentro de sus comunidades (Morales, 2010). Sin embargo, los especialistas chicanos han reconceptualizado a La Llorona como símbolo de poder feminista. Este estudio autoetnográfico reflexiona en base a la historia de La Llorona como una metáfora de la "resistencia de la mujer latina" en la sociedad (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 33), o como afirma Morales (2010, p. 3) "la voz que clama contra la injusticia". En especial a través de la aplicación de la teoría feminista Chicana/Latina y la epistemología crítica, las autoras exploran los trabajos de Gloria Anzaldúa, Nela Martínez Espinosa, Dolores Huerta y Nisia Floresta, las cuales como autoras y políticas Latinas feministas han utilizado sus voces para luchar contra las injusticias sociales en sus comunidades. Además, las autoras reflexionan sobre cómo estas heroínas han influenciado sus propias identidades como "mujeres que se lamentan", como feministas Latinas educadoras que trabajan por una pedagogía en favor de la justicia social.

**Palabras clave:** La Llorona - resistencia de mujeres Latinas - poder feminista - epistemologías críticas - activismo - pedagogía.

### **"Mulheres que choram": um estudo autoetnográfico de quatro educadoras latinas e as heroínas que os influenciaram a entender pedagogias críticas**

**Resumo:** A tradição de La Llorona, a mulher que lamenta-se, é um arquétipo geral nas culturas latino-americanas. Embora as histórias de La Llorona variem por país e região, a narração mais comum está associada ao folclore mexicano, no qual uma mulher angustiada chora por seus filhos afogados; em algumas versões, a morte é o resultado de sua ira assassina por ser traída por seu amante; em outros, a morte é o resultado de um acidente. Tradicionalmente, essas histórias servem como contos de advertência, muitas vezes posicionando as Latinas como forças trágicas em suas comunidades (Morales, 2010). No entanto, especialistas chicanos reconceptualizaram La Llorona como um símbolo do poder feminista. Este estudo autoetnográfico reflete sobre a história de La Llorona como uma metáfora para a "resistência das mulheres Latinas" na sociedade (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 33) ou como Morales (2010, p. 3) afirma, "o voz clamando contra a injustiça". Especialmente a través da aplicação da teoria feminista chicana / latina e da epistemologia crítica, as autoras exploram os trabalhos de Gloria Anzaldúa, Nela Martínez Espinosa, Dolores Huerta e Nisia Floresta, que como autoras e políticas feministas Latinas usaram suas vozes para combater injustiças sociais em suas comunidades, e os autores refletem sobre como essas heroínas influenciaram suas próprias identidades como "mulheres que lamentam-se", como educadoras Latinas feministas que trabalham para uma pedagogia em prol da justiça social.

**Palavras chave:** La Llorona - resistência das mulheres Latinas - poder feminista - epistemologia crítica - activismo - pedagogia.

[Las traducciones de los abstracts fueron supervisadas por el autor de cada artículo]

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