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## La Llorona and Rhetorical Haunting in Mexico's Public Sphere

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### ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes how two public performances (a 2017 protest and a yearly play in Xochimilco) adapt the legend of la Llorona for a rhetorical haunting of Mexico's public sphere. Rhetorical haunting is defined as a community-based rhetorical tactic that conserves and transmits a community's painful memories, memories that contest official versions of the past. La Llorona as rhetorical haunting asks the public to keep contested memories alive as an act of communal protest and defiance of the dominant institutions that wish for the public to forget.

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On a chill November night in 2019, I sat inside a trajinera<sup>1</sup> over the canals of Xochimilco and watched the play *La Llorona en Xochimilco* come to life. The Llorona<sup>2</sup> in front of me was different from the one I knew as a child. Mine had been the frightful spirit of a selfish mother who drowned her children for the love of a man. On rainy nights, as my mother told me, la Llorona would appear crying for her lost children and taking any child she found wandering alone. On this night, however, la Llorona was a courageous woman who became a restless grieving spirit after witnessing the demise of her people at the hands of Spanish conquistadores. I listened intently as Nahui, the indigenous woman who was to become la Llorona, sang in Nahuatl and walked slowly into the cold water as a final act of resistance. The lights dimmed to near darkness. The conductors who had navigated us to the secluded area suddenly banged the roofs of our trajineras, startling the audience. A new Llorona appeared. Her face was covered by a long white veil and she seemed to be floating over the lake as she finally cried out that familiar cry the audience had been waiting for: ¡Ay, mis hijos!

The Xochimilco play added a new dimension to la Llorona by giving her a backstory, but the play is not alone in repurposing the cultural icon. In March of 2017, Spanish activist Jil Love led a procession with forty-three women dressed as la Llorona in Mexico City's Plaza de la Constitución ("el Zócalo").<sup>3</sup> To embody la Llorona, each woman wore a long, off-white stained dress and a matching veil. Underneath their veils, the women's faces were painted pale white with black paint around the eyes. Many of them had their mouths covered

by a piece of tape with the number “43” written over it, and all of them held a unique prayer candle with the picture and name of one of the young men who disappeared in September of 2014.<sup>4</sup> Love’s “Procesión de las 43 Lloronas” was a performance-protest intended to remind the public of the Mexican government’s responsibility regarding the disappearance of forty-three students from the all-male Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers’ College in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. The students, who were disappeared while in police custody, have become emblematic of Mexico’s corruption and violence against its own citizens. The procession brought together this tragic memory with the cultural imagery of la Llorona and became a public act of collective grief, one where the political message was deeply entwined with the audience’s cultural memory.

The Xochimilco play and the procession used la Llorona to engage with – and circulate among their audience – memories of collective trauma and contested truths. In the procession, the official story of what happened to the 43 was publicly challenged when the women and their audience performed a symbolic search for the missing and participated in a public act of collective grief. Meanwhile, the play’s use of allegory connected the memories of colonial violence to state corruption and violence against its citizens. By recalling a Mexican history that dominant discourses have attempted to erase or sanitize, these events publicly performed haunting memories as acts of resistance. I call this action a rhetorical haunting and define it as a performative public recollection of injustice to challenge dominant discourses that attempt to bury the truth. In what follows, I situate rhetorical haunting as a community-based rhetorical tactic at the intersection of critical memory and embodied memory – two practices tied to the conservation and transmission of knowledge among marginalized communities. I then analyze how each performance rhetorically haunted dominant discourses by transmitting their respective political messages through an embodiment of la Llorona. This kind of rhetorical action provides communities an opportunity to empower themselves – by transforming the haunted into the haunters – and challenge audiences to join them in protesting and challenging oppression.

### **Rhetoric and Exorcising Hauntedness**

Haunting serves as a useful trope to point to concepts and situations defined by an ephemeral nature, the blurring of presence and absence, and a connection to trauma. In rhetorical studies, haunting is commonly used as a rhetorical device – usually a metaphor – and as a state of existence. For example, in *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education*, the authors use haunting as a metaphor that explains how whiteness in U.S. culture is always present even in its absence (e.g., whiteness is implicit in “American,” and “woman,”) (Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe 2017, 3–4). Since trauma caused by white supremacy is both visible and invisible within

U.S. discourse, the rhetoric of whiteness haunts U.S. society. Likewise, Roger Aden (2018) uses “haunting” as a metaphor and a state of existence for the U.S. National Mall because although the preferred narrative of U.S. ideology is highlighted, remnants of hidden or buried memories that complicate and contradict that ideology still exist (7–8). In Aden’s study, the physical manifestation of U.S. ideology is haunted by the “ghosts” of “[s]lavery, economic inequality, racial injustice, patriarchy, [and] neoliberalism” (217). Yet the haunting that Aden describes does not simply exist: hauntings are carried by communities who must conserve and communicate memories of trauma and injustice. Collective memories of traumas are not carried equally among the people of a nation. For some, injustices are a history of little consequence to the present; for others, injustices continue to haunt their collective memory and lived experience. Memories that haunt communities are unwelcome, painful recollections that torment those who remember. This is because hauntedness “cannot be considered apart from the notion of *trauma*,” since the “traumatic experience is a repetitious reliving of a difficult event” (Foss and Domenici 2001, 241). In that sense, communities that experience and survive trauma are haunted (they are on the receiving end of a haunting).

Although haunting has been used in connection with rhetoric, it is not commonly considered a rhetorical action in and of itself. But rhetorical haunting is an action, one that incorporates communal practices of knowledge-conserving and knowledge-transmitting. The act of remembering, even when painful, is an act of resistance and the choice to communicate those memories to the broader public changes the relationship between communities and haunting. So, the haunted can become the haunters when they transmit memories of collective trauma and pain onto the public sphere in a quest for change and justice. Rhetorical haunting recalls collective memories of trauma as an act of survival and resistance (knowledge-conserving) and performs them in public spaces with the purpose of haunting back and demanding change (knowledge-transmitting).

The first defining feature of rhetorical haunting is a critical memory focused on collective experiences of trauma and injustice (knowledge-conserving). Critical memory is a practice that emerges from the Black public sphere and is defined as the purposeful recollection of past events or people with the intent of challenging dominant institutions that suppress the histories of marginalized groups. Critical memory is “the very faculty of revolution” (Baker 1994, 3), because “memory that is *critical* not only hurts and outrages but also produces critique, strategic collaboration, intervention, and public-sphere institutions, such as Ida B. Wells’s newspaper for the people” (Baker 2001, 19). Houston Baker (2001) writes that this kind of memory “compels the black intellectual . . . to keep before his eyes (and the eyes of the United States) a history that is embarrassing, macabre, and always bizarre with respect to race” (10). In that way, critical memory has ties to hauntings because marginalized communities

must remember and protect the painful pasts that the nation attempts to erase. Yet what Baker describes in critical memory also includes a commitment to “accord critically and memorially with the best of our past,” to remember the courageous black writers who have disrupted and intervened “in America’s ‘clearance’ and derogation of the black majority” (Baker 2001, 73). Thus, even though critical memory has ties to trauma, it is also about remembering moments of strength and unity. Rhetorical haunting, on the other hand, is specifically tied to the critical memory of trauma and injustice. Not all critical memory invokes a rhetorical haunting, but all rhetorical hauntings are rooted in critical memory.

The second defining feature of rhetorical haunting is the practice of embodied memory (knowledge-transmitting), what Diana Taylor (2007) calls the repertoire. Taylor argues that since the colonization of the Americas, dominant discourse has favored the archive (recorded knowledge) over the repertoire (embodied knowledge expressed through ritual, dance, and spoken language). The privileging of archival knowledge is based on the misconception that embodied knowledge disappears, and it is a continuation of the colonial tradition of invalidating indigenous nonwritten forms of knowledge. But embodied memory does survive, and it transmits “communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next” (Taylor 2007, 20). Rhetorical haunting, then, is an embodied and critical memory, a performance wielded by and for marginalized communities to transmit the haunting of past traumas onto those institutions of power that attempt to bury the past. Rhetorical haunting temporarily exorcises the hauntedness from within the community onto the public sphere – onto dominant institutions that must reconcile with the public display and audiences that are challenged to remember injustice as real and present.

Rhetorical haunting is an action separate from *la Llorona*. Rhetorical haunting is a community-based action while *la Llorona* is a myth which forms part of Mexican cultural heritage.<sup>5</sup> Yet the performances analyzed here merged rhetorical haunting with *la Llorona*’s symbolism for a purpose. This may be because the aural, ritual, and performative nature of her story already places *la Llorona* as part of a Mexican repertoire. This makes her story adaptable to new contexts because the “repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (Taylor 2007, 18). The variability of *la Llorona* stories works so long as most of the core elements are present: a mother or mother-to-be, a deep betrayal, water, the death or loss of children, and the presence of a female grieving spirit. Even when storytellers add new elements or perform her story in new ways, they must do so within the context of past traditions.

As a cultural symbol of loss and restlessness familiar to Mexican audiences, the pairing of her story with a political message adds a cultural mythos to that message. *La Llorona* ties contemporary political issues depicted in the performances onto “a living chain of memory and contestation” within a much older

tradition (Taylor 2007, 49). In other words, the blending of rhetorical haunting and la Llorona translates the political into a cultural language more easily understood by audiences. Contemporary political issues become part of a greater cultural memory of struggle, grief, and survival that belongs to many Mexican people. And, just as the political message is rearticulated as a collective struggle through her image, the public and political setup also rearticulates the significance of la Llorona. Although hers is an established discourse in domestic spaces, the move to the public sphere repurposes the Llorona mythos as part of a community activism. Thus, while rhetorical haunting relies on knowledge-conserving and knowledge-transmitting, the specific rhetorical components unique to la Llorona contribute to making these performances public acts of knowledge-making because both message and mythos are changed through their joining.

### Channeling Ghosts in the Public Sphere

The “Procesión de las 43 Lloronas” publicly challenged what was officially presented as the “historic truth” of what happened to the forty-three missing students. In 2015, Mexico’s attorney general Jesús Murillo Karam concluded that local police and gangs were responsible. Karam stated that the 43 were “deprived of freedom, deprived of life, incinerated and thrown to the San Juan river in that order; that is the historic truth” (Imagen Multicast 2019, 0:57–1:08).<sup>6</sup> However, independent experts studying the physical evidence contradicted Karam’s “truth,” leading many people to believe that what happened that night was covered up by the government (Wattenbarger 2019). The events in Iguala represent a highly contested public memory of trauma that the procession engages with and performs through the imagery of la Llorona – in particular through the displays of public grief and a symbolic search for the missing.

Although traditional stories have la Llorona walking alone, in the dark, and in remote spaces, the performance had the forty-three lloronas walking in unison with their audience, in broad daylight, and through el Zócalo – one of the busiest parts of the city. During the procession, the women walked barefoot a little under a mile from el Zócalo to el Palacio de Bellas Artes. Because of its connection to la Llorona, who is said to wander for all of time, the act of walking barefoot symbolized a long and restless search for a lost child. Since the audience also walked alongside the lloronas, they became participants in that symbolic search and shared in a collective act of grief. Grief, however, was not grief over the dead but rather grief over unreconciled loss. The difference is important because “rituals for burying the dead . . . help discharge the burdens of history . . . and can be seen as technologies for public forgetting” (Aden 2018, 98). In a tragedy that reached international audiences, a public forgetting was the desire of Mexican authorities who quickly closed the case. This is why Karam, when questioned about inaccuracies, “walked away saying, ‘Ya me

cansé' (I've had enough)" and why "former president Vicente Fox publicly told ... [the families] to 'get over it'" and when the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (GIEI) "asked to search the nearby military base ... [t]heir request to continue investigating was officially denied by Mexico, and the group was informed it needed to leave the country" (Taylor 2020, 138–39). A public act of mourning the dead would have functioned as a letting go or moving on, precisely what Mexican authorities wanted the families and the public to do. A public act of grieving and searching, on the other hand, haunted the public sphere reminding Mexican authorities that the pain is still there, that the search is not over, and that the public wants justice.

Since the women's mouths were covered by tape, the *lloronas* remained silent during their walk. While the expected "Ay, mis hijos!" cry is iconic in *Llorona* stories, it was absent in this event. Instead of the expected wailing of *la Llorona*, the rhetorical function of "Ay, mis hijos!" was relocated onto the number "43" as the metonymic representation of the tragedy, the pictures of the students' faces on the votive candles, the embodiment of forty-three mothers searching for their children, and the audience's chanting. During the time the *lloronas* remained silent, the public that walked alongside them chanted: "Ayotzi vive, la lucha sigue" or "Ayotzinapa lives, the fight continues" (Love 2017, 1:35–1, 47). At other times, the chant was "Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos" or "Alive they were taken, alive we want them." Phrases that reject the "historic truth" that the students were killed the night of their disappearance and make a public vow to continue demanding justice. Since the silent walking *lloronas* were accompanied by public outcries, it was the audience's voice that replaced *la Llorona's* cry.

In Mexico, the number "43" is now recognized as a visual/audible synthesis of the tragedy and so, in the 2017 procession, *la Llorona* imagery was revised to embody the rhetoricity of the number. For example, the audibility of the number when chanted by the audience was connected to the visibility of the number written over the pieces of tape that covered the women's mouths. Because the *lloronas'* silence gave way to the audience's voices, these two elements constituted one rhetorical action. Similarly, since the photos of the forty-three students were carried by the forty-three women dressed as *lloronas*, together they symbolized that each young man was individually searched for and grieved. The pairing of *Llorona* imagery with the repetition of "43" across different modes haunted the surrounding space by calling attention to the physical absence of the students' bodies and their powerful presence in the public's memory. The procession relied on the mythology of *la Llorona* as a shared symbol of grief and joined it with the real pain and outrage over the forty three in order to perform and wield a collective grief where "actions and words and gestures remain[ed] linked to a growing alertness, a critical consciousness, about the sources of tragedy and loss" (Rivera Garza 2020, 43).

A byproduct of using *la Llorona* as an expression of grief for the forty-three missing students is that the performance evokes feelings that momentarily break down social boundaries of class, race, and the rural/urban divide among Mexicans. As Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza (2020) explains, grieving “breaks us apart, indeed, and keeps us together” and communicating that grief is an “exercise in dissensus” that reconfigures what is possible (8–9). For the majority of the audience, however, the loss is not personal, it is symbolic. Unlike the grief experienced by family members and friends of the missing, collective grief is a socio-cultural construction that comes about not by the loss itself but by the significance of the loss to the social group (Gravante 2018, 17–18). Tommaso Gravante (2018) explains that, when it comes to the 43, collective grief and trauma is born out of a sense of empathy and solidarity. However, it is worth noting that while the mythos of *la Llorona* expressed a collective identity through shared loss and pain, it cannot erase the effects that bigotry and prejudice play on Mexico’s most vulnerable citizens. Expressions of Mexican identity are as nuanced and complex as any other national/ethnic identity.

In a similar manner, the annual Xochimilco play represents another culturally salient expression of Mexican identity. *La Llorona en Xochimilco* is a cultural event rather than a political one and returns *la Llorona* to the early sixteenth century when the Xochimilco people first met the Spaniards. The way the play presents the Spanish conquest closely matches how it is situated within dominant narratives about Mexico’s indigenous roots: it presents a story of heroes (a long-gone native population) and villains (conquistadores) whose tragic meeting resulted in the racial heritage of modern Mexico. This common narrative is troublesome because it identifies indigeneity as a history rather than a present, it erases racial diversity in Mexico and thus makes it easier to ignore racism in the country, and often simplifies colonization as a sad historical event that led to social and economic advances (rather than an ongoing violent practice). Since the conquest of Mexico is familiar to audiences and because the play relies on that familiarity, rhetorical haunting is subtle but not absent. Resistance is present in the way the play incorporates or pays tribute to historical events in which power is questioned. For example, when discussions of land rights are met with violence or when the Spaniards (symbolic of hegemonic power) inflict violence against women or massacre innocents, there is an implicit charge against Mexico for its continuation of these crimes. Returning *la Llorona* to the conquest and reflecting modern issues in a colonial setting leaves the audience haunted by the parallels of state and colonial violence.

Since the play is located over a body of water, audiences are asked to board trajineras that operators move to an isolated location over the canals of Xochimilco. Although audience movement in this event is much more limited than it was in the 2017 procession, the boat ride symbolizes a kind of traveling through time for the audience. Not only because the boat ride ends facing



a patch of land where a large and colorful pre-Hispanic style pyramid acts as the main stage, but also because the water system that surrounds the stage “constitutes the only reminder of traditional Pre-Hispanic land-use in the lagoons of the Mexico City basin” (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). After the conquest, Spaniards who didn’t care to learn about their new environment drained the lakes of Mexico City and destroyed the intricate water systems that native populations had so carefully maintained. In Xochimilco, a series of canals and a bit of the original lake remain, making it one of the few remaining natural bodies of water in Mexico City. While this history is not entirely visible, the effects of that destruction continue to haunt Mexico City in the form of flooding, droughts, and pollution (Delavega 2020). This is a perfect example that “what happened in the past may remain in the present and continue to linger into the future” (Aden 2018, 212). The play does not directly call attention to this physical haunting, but the choice of location is deliberate. In the official website, the location is referenced various times as part of the setting that makes the play unique and allows audiences to “look back on a Mexico that was and will continue to be present in Xochimilco” (“Inicio,” n.d.). The tragedies that occurred because of colonization are hidden by the hustle and bustle of tourism. Yet these memories remain, operating like a ghost: present across the land and water but absent from the public’s sight. The Xochimilco waters therefore establish both an ethos for the play and a physical rhetorical haunting of the space.

The Xochimilco play continues the haunting by calling attention to the plot’s parallels with Mexican history. The plot shifts slightly every year so that names of characters, elements of the story, and the relationship between la Llorona and characters around her are all adaptable. This mutability of the plot allows for the kairotic. The play is often dedicated to Mexican historical events chosen due to special dates and anniversaries. For example, the 2019 show “Tierra y Libertad” or “Land and Liberty,” was linked to the 100-year anniversary of Emiliano Zapata’s assassination. Likewise, in 2018, the play subtitled “Un Cuarto de Siglo, Justicia para los Caídos” or “A Quarter Century, Justice for the Fallen” was especially meaningful because it commemorated two anniversaries: the “quarter century” since the theatrical play was first performed, and the 50th anniversary of the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City. The 2018 play also paid tribute to the forty-three missing students who were making their way to a yearly march in honor of the ’68 massacre when they were disappeared. The connection between these two tragedies represents a loop of violence in Mexico’s public memory. By calling attention to the cycle of state violence, the assassination of a historical figure, and the tragedies suffered by indigenous people during the colonization, the 2018 and 2019 plays merged the cultural onto the political.<sup>7</sup>

Every year the play incorporates political memories in subtle ways that are easy to miss for those without sufficient knowledge of Mexican history. This

makes the memorial aspect strictly focused on an insider audience. While the performances can be enjoyed by anyone, citizen or tourist, the intended audience is specifically the Mexican public. Audience members without proper context would likely miss many of the allegorical aspects of the play. In the 2019 show, for example, Emiliano Zapata was commemorated through the character Yaotecatl, Nahui's brother and leader of the people of Xochimilco. Just as Zapata fought for land reforms that would redistribute lands to peasants who worked the land, Yaotecatl verbalized this same desire: the Xochimilcan people who work the land they live on should own that land. In this context Zapata's cause was reinterpreted as an indigenous fight against the Spaniards. Because the play relied on these parallels between Zapata's cause and colonial history, the audience was haunted by both histories and asked to reinterpret issues of land rights as a continuation of colonial violence. In 2018, "Justice for the Fallen" incorporated visual cues in similar ways to the 2017 procession. Painted on the torsos of the indigenous characters were the numbers "68" and "43" – both metonymic representations of state-sponsored violence against student protesters. Some characters had the numbers painted over their entire torso while others had smaller numbers that were visible only in black light during the performance of an indigenous ceremonial dance. Later in the play, these indigenous characters are massacred by Spanish forces when they stand up to fight for their rights. The plot and the visual reminders thus come together to symbolize and perform different iterations of the same crime: a cycle of violence experienced by young students calling for reforms to their government (e.g., the 68 and 43) as well as indigenous people who demanded justice for their communities.

The inclusion of these critical memories provided a rhetorical haunting for audiences. Flashes of modern and historical truth interrupted the theatricality of the show to assert that the performed pain and injustice represent something real. To forget is to accept the cycle of violence, to remember is an action that disrupts that loop. The annual play thereby rhetorically haunts its public by making the cycle of violence visible. Colonial violence set in the sixteenth century mirrors the present-day violence experienced by Mexico's citizens. As viewers watch the Spaniards' genocidal attacks against the people of Xochimilco, the audience is asked to remember the countless deaths and disappearances in Mexico – especially when visual and aural cues in the play nudge that connection. In that way, notions of traditional temporality are blurred so that what was past is present and colonial violence gives way to state violence.

### **One Llorona, Two Lloronas, Forty-Three Lloronas**

The rhetorical centerpiece of the two performances is in the embodiment of la Llorona in public spaces. In some ways, both events are engaging with the same Llorona – a familiar, ancestral spirit that feels a pain so intense it sustains her

throughout eternity. Yet, each performance also takes her symbolism and makes it unique to their rhetorical situation. In the Xochimilco play, for example, there are two lloronas presented to the audience: Nahui the living woman who is destined to become la Llorona, and the grieving spirit that the audience thinks they know. The two are even played by different actors. Although technically the same character, the living version of la Llorona is new to the public because most Llorona stories anonymize her. In most traditional stories, she is just a scorned woman, an enraged woman, a woman with big emotions and little complexity. Every year the play gives la Llorona a backstory, a move that is classified as a recuperation or “re-turning” since it “takes her back to a time before the defining moment in her life so that we may consider or recuperate who or what she was before becoming the Llorona we know” (Perez 2008, 109). Through recuperation, the play revises the audience’s understanding of the spirit woman they thought they knew.

In 2019 (as in earlier years) *La Llorona en Xochimilco* emphasized the role of memory by situating the play as a collective memory that belongs to the audience. The play began with the image of two large deities (one male and one female) projected onto the pyramid. Addressing the audience, the unnamed female deity set the tone for the play when she announced, “from the most profound collective memories, one sad and ancestral voice rises. The ancient citizens of Xochimilco heard her cries and wondered: why does she cry and who has caused her such pain?” (Publiación 2016, 2:10–4, 22). The questions that opened the play are answered in a similar way each year: la Llorona’s pain comes from the violence of colonialism. This is a revision to the knowledge most of the audience has. In most traditional stories, la Llorona cries over pain that she inflicted on herself by killing her children. However, the oldest known version of la Llorona (found in Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex) presents a different version – a spirit woman who cries over the coming death and destruction that the conquest will have on the Mexica. In that way, Xochimilco performances recover an important piece of communal knowledge (that la Llorona cries because of colonialism, not because she was a violent mother) and provide audiences with a different understanding of what la Llorona represents to the Mexican public.

Taken together, the variations of plot each year present a spectrum of violence experienced by the Xochimilcan people at the hands of the Spaniards that range from religious oppression to imprisonment, rape, murder, and genocide. Although the setting is in the early 1500s, the violence depicted is not entirely presented as part of the past. Hauntings disrupt and blur divisions between what is present and what is absent, which also includes time. Ross Chambers (2004) explains that hauntings have an essence of untimeliness because “of a baffling experience of time as, conjointly, the separation of past and present and their continuing copresence (e.g., in the form of flashback)” (191). Because the violence of colonialism is expressed as an allegory to modern tragedies, past and present time is both disrupted and co-present. For example, the 2018 version incorporated sexual violence against Nahui who was raped and impregnated by one of the Spaniards.

The choice to incorporate sexual violence was tied to the theme of the fallen, which in addition to being dedicated to the students who died in 1968 and the forty three who were disappeared in 2014, was also dedicated to all women who have died and disappeared because of femicides in Mexico. In the 2018 version, the audience's knowledge of sexual violence during the conquest of Mesoamerica was compounded with the violence against women that exists in modern Mexico. The haunting of violence and time asks audiences to recognize how the violence of colonialism morphs into the modern day. As Diana Taylor (2020) explains (when writing about Guatemala), "Conquest gave way to colonialism, colonialism to colonality, dictatorship to so-called democracy. The names only distract momentarily from the continuity of brutal practice" (118). This sentiment is the rhetorical haunting performed by the play. Violence and time are disrupted to show viewers that what they may consider to be past is also present.

In every production of *La Llorona en Xochimilco*, one of the most anticipated scenes is the drowning of the protagonist. In 2019, this scene occurred after Nahui witnessed the death of her people and her brother Yaotecatl. Nahui, who was pregnant at the start of the play but has now delivered her child, returns and calls upon a preconquest goddess for protection and help. The goddess along with other female spirits appear, taking with them Nahui's newborn son. It is then that Nahui delivers her final soliloquy as a living woman. Here, the living Llorona condemns the violence the Spaniards have imposed upon her people and promises that she will cry and scream until their pain is heard and justice is served. She cries to the audience that she will be the spirit of the water, the heart of the land, that she will be la Llorona. These words are not only a rhetorical haunting in that they express that justice has not been served, they also take a well-known cultural story often told in the home and imbue it with a new political insight. La Llorona exists because injustice in Mexico has not ceased. After the play, the audience can continue to associate the cries of la Llorona as a haunting rooted in the violence and injustice that those with power inflict on those without. If audiences can accept that revision, then stories of la Llorona become a legacy that connects us not just across space but across countless generations.

Just as the play uses the embodiment of la Llorona to recontextualize what she means to the Mexican public, Love's performance-protest uses the embodiment of forty-three lloronas to recontextualize how the audience understands the missing forty-three students. While the procession incorporates the rhetorical elements used in other protests (photographs of the students and the number "43"), the one missing element is the use of empty school desks. Typically, the use of forty-three empty desks makes visible the identity of "student" shared by the missing (Jean 2019, 105). Love's procession leaves out the desks that are often used in other memorial events but makes up for this with the forty-three lloronas. The lloronas rhetorically highlight the identity of the missing as sons rather than students by calling attention to maternal grief. In most newspapers and academic studies, including this one, the 43 are referred to as "43 missing

students.” In other places they are referred to as the “Ayotzinapa 43.” In the first, it is their identity as students and teacher-students that is highlighted. In the second, it is their identity as residents of Ayotzinapa that is emphasized. The lloronas instead highlight the mother figure. Just as la Llorona grieves for her lost children, the mothers of the forty-three young men grieve and search for their children.

The focus on the maternal is further expanded by a short performance given by one of the women. Just as the play incorporated a soliloquy by Nahui, the procession used one of the lloronas to deliver a monologue directed to a lost child and intended for the greater public. This short performance voiced emotions that storytellers and listeners might imagine la Llorona felt and also expressed political anxieties that many Mexican citizens have likely experienced. The llorona from the procession voiced the fears of a mother who does not know what has happened to her son, asking “Where are you, my son? . . . How alone you are, I know you have cried in fear” (“43 Lloronas” 2017, 0:04–0, 24). In addition to imagining the missing son’s experience, she expressed maternal pain that “saddens me, maddens me, and breaks my soul” (“43 Lloronas” 0:42–0:49). Individual pain then gave way to a greater collective pain: “The mothers of Mexico cry because they have robbed them of life” (“43 Lloronas” 2017, 0:49–0, 55). The robbed “life” represents not only the literal loss of children for Mexican mothers but the loss of life for all Mexicans who have been victims of violence. The “they,” or perpetrator, is left unnamed in the procession, just as the real “they” in the case of the forty three remains unknown. Visual cues, however, identify the state as a likely perpetrator. Throughout the walk, for example, torn pieces of the Mexican flag were carried over the wrists of each of the women. Once the lloronas reached Bellas Artes, each woman discarded their piece of the flag into a circle made up of lit candles (the ones with the student faces). One of the lloronas later explained that the candles signify hope that the young men will return home and the torn pieces of the flag represent a piece of our children because “they ripped a piece of our flag, a piece of our nation/homeland” (Love 2017, 2:50–3, 05). By incorporating a torn Mexican flag, the performance points to the possibility of either a state-enforced disappearance or an apathetic, ineffective State that cannot protect its people. Perhaps both. As Rivera Garza (2020) argues, “the growing violence that is practiced in Mexico today” is a result of the state putting aside its responsibility to the people (20). The procession rhetorically haunted the space it occupied by highlighting the continuation of injustice – much like the Xochimilco play – and visually located that injustice in state institutions.

### **Knowledge and Haunting**

Those who study the rhetoric of haunting understand that the power of this rhetoric is in maintaining and communicating memory. Ross Chambers (2004)

explains that the rhetorical problem of haunting is “how to parlay the hauntedness of one’s relation to the dead into a haunting that will affect the living, waking them from the self-absorbed ignorance in which they live” (189). This is the same problem that marginalized communities face when trying to communicate collective memories of trauma to an apathetic public with a cultural inaudibility, “[a] willed or unconscious rejection ... [and] unwillingness to hear” what these communities have to say (Chambers 2004, 6). As one of the lloronas in the procession explained during an interview: “we see that here, in Mexico, the people are indifferent and it doesn’t seem to hurt them, what these parents are suffering over the disappearance of their sons” (Love 2017, 2:18–2, 29). Acknowledging and remembering collective trauma is indeed a difficult task. But as so many have pointed out, conserving and communicating this knowledge is an act of resistance and survival because “[t]he language of pain allows those who suffer ... to articulate an inexpressible experience as an intrinsic criticism against the sources that made it possible in the first place” (Rivera Garza 2020, 6). In the case studies analyzed here, the inaudibility of the political messages was made audible by the familiarity of la Llorona. She is a “cultural touchstone, a means for us to connect as a Greater Mexican community in spite of all our differences ... ‘a cohesive force that allows for the development of identity, solidarity, and strength’” (Perez 2012, 155). La Llorona gives audiences a culturally relevant symbol with which to read the political messages of both events because there is something familiar even within the new articulations of her story.

Both rhetorical hauntings revised the significance of la Llorona for the Mexican public and in doing so empowered the audience who participated and accepted these revisions to reimagine themselves. Because “La Llorona lore is one place from which many of us draw an understanding of our own cultural identities ... these stories can also serve as the place where we reimagine her in order to reimagine ourselves in the face of an ever-changing cultural, social, and political landscape” (Perez 2008, 110). In the rhetorical hauntings presented in Mexico City, la Llorona brought attention to injustices but she was also reimagined as a spirit of agency, survival, and resilience. When Nahui walked into the cold waters of Xochimilco to be transformed into la Llorona, she did so as an act of resistance against the Spaniards. It was an act intended to preserve the memory of the past and, through the echoes of her cries, communicate that memory across generations. When the forty-three lloronas brought attention to maternal grief and their very presence challenged state institutions and public forgetting, la Llorona was reimagined as a force that survives violence in order to haunt the dominant institutions that victimize the people. These rhetorical hauntings thus change la Llorona from a frightening figure that haunts the Mexican people to a resilient spirit that carries the pain of the people and signals ways in which the public can continue to resist abuses of power. In the end, rhetorical haunting is not about fear but about having the courage to remember.

## Notes

1. Trajineras are adorned rectangular boats used in the canals of Xochimilco and navigated by a single person with a long wooden stick similar to a gondola.
2. For those unfamiliar with la Llorona, it is the story of a young woman of humble origins who is abandoned by her lover (and the father of her children) when he decides to marry a more suitable (richer and whiter) lady. In a fit of rage and despair the woman drowns her children and herself. Sometimes the drownings are an act of vengeance to punish her former lover; other times the drownings are an act of desperation when she realizes she and her children have been abandoned. Her remorse and grief over the death of the children turn her into the terrifying spirit that roams Mexico, Latin America, and many southwest regions of the U.S.A.
3. I learned about the performance protest months after the fact but was able to study it via pictures, news clips, as well as audience and participant videos published online.
4. The night of their forced disappearance, the forty three students and their classmates commandeered buses with the intent of getting to Mexico City for a yearly march in honor of the 1968 massacre. For unknown reasons, the students from Ayotzinapa were chased and shot at by local police until three of them were tortured and killed (along with three other bystanders) and forty three of the students were arrested and put into police vehicles. The next day, the students were nowhere to be found.
5. U.S. American scholarship about la Llorona is commonly situated within a Chicana perspective. Books that feature extended discussions on la Llorona such as Domino Renee Perez's *There was a Woman*, Debra J. Blake's *Chicana Sexuality and Gender* focus their analysis on a Chicana literary tradition. This is due in part to the growing presence of la Llorona in Chicana art, literature, and other creative works. Numerous Chicana writers have contributed to a body of prose that reclaims la Llorona as a Chicana feminist symbol in response to the legend's traditional patriarchal functions. The scarcity of scholarship on the Mexican Llorona may leave readers to assume that Llorona stories have gone unchanged in Mexico, remaining traditional patriarchal narratives. The public events analyzed here indicate that la Llorona is dynamic in Mexico as well since her story can question colonial histories and criticize state institutions.
6. All quotes from YouTube videos are originally in Spanish but quoted in English with my translations of the material.
7. My analysis of the Xochimilco play is focused on the 2019 version (where I was present), and the 2018 version (based on videos, promotional material, and news stories I collected).

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