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**Abstract:**

Historically, people have used legends across cultures as a means of transmitting moral values and socializing the young while providing a source of entertainment and education to their listeners. Contemporary versions of legends have the ability to provide insight to the underlying worldviews, which are shaped by the cultural context within a particular timeframe of history, that inspire revisions of a particular legend. In this essay, I use the methodology presented in Domino Perez's *There was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (2008) to examine a story told by one of the characters in Jorge's Ainslie's novel, "Los Pochos" (1934), as a revision of the legend La Llorona that serves as a non-traditional historical narrative of the effects of Westernization on the native population within the missions of Alta-California. I argue that the areas of revision within the telling demonstrate a transitioning worldview of the villagers of San Fernando del Rey that is shaped by the cultural, societal, and historical contexts of Spanish Colonialism within mission communities of Alta-California.

## A Cry for the Lost:

### A Transitioning Native Worldview in Colonial California

Traditionally, the Chicano community has employed oral folklore as a form of both entertainment and education for its listeners and its sharers. Legends in particular reveal insight to historical places, figures, and events through their incorporation of accounts of figures and objects such as kings, ghosts, and treasures. In Jorge Ainslie's serialized novel "Los Pochos" (1934), which provides the account of a family who immigrates to the U.S. from Mexico during the Mexican Revolution, a character within the story, Abuelita, is the purveyor of such folklore in her local community. She shares a haunting story of a woman who is violently punished by the friars and priest of the Mission of San Fernando del Rey for a sin she committed. In this essay, I will use the methodology presented in Domino Perez's work, *There was a Woman: La Llorona from Folklore to Popular Culture* (2008), to examine how Abuelita's story deviates from the traditional legend of La Llorona. I argue that these deviations point to an underlying worldview of subjugation and stagnation held by the residents of post-colonial Mission communities. This worldview was shaped by the historical context of the Franciscan Friar movement within the Mission setting during the period of Spanish Colonialism in California. Further, I will discuss the societal implications that Abuelita's oral narrative has on both the residents and visitors of the San Fernando community in the novel as well as on the way in which oral forms of Chicana literature of the early United States statehood period of California, starting in 1848, is merited.

Generally, the legend of La Llorona tells the tragedy of an indigenous woman who captures the love and affection of a wealthy Spanish man. Though they never marry, she bears several illegitimate children with this man. With time, he decides to leave her to pursue a socially appropriate marriage with a woman of the same socioeconomic status. The indigenous woman is

overwhelmed with devastation and cannot afford to provide for her hungry children, so she drowns them. As a result, the woman is forever cursed to mourn the death of her children by roaming along bodies of water, crying out, “My children, my children!” Although this particular telling of the legend is one of many existing variations, for the purpose of the essay, this is the one I will use for my comparative analysis (Elenes Ch. 3; Rebolledo 62-63; Rebolledo and Rivero Ch. 5). A significant recurring theme of this legend is the high cost for sexual sin that a woman must endure for engaging in sexual relationships outside of marriage and conceiving illegitimate children. Common elements of this legend include the following: a woman of native descent, a socially unacceptable romantic relationship, the presence of a body of water, penance, loss, weeping due to devastation, and the death of a child.

These basic characteristics signal several striking similarities between La Llorona and the story told by Doña Librada Garcia, otherwise known as Abuelita, to the children of the San Fernando community in Ainslie’s *Los Pochos*. During a culturally significant moment in the text, the children gather around Abuelita, pleading for her to share one of her stories. As she begins her narration, the children’s curiosities are piqued, and they draw closer to her in a synchronous, well-rehearsed manner, indicating that this act of oral tradition, where experiential knowledge gained from the world is passed from one generation to the next, is of great importance within this community. The story that Abuelita tells is set within her early years at the Mission of San Fernando del Rey, where she lived with her husband, the mission’s water carrier. In this story, a group of priests and friars descend into a water well in the middle of the night, and they later emerge with a woman dressed in white who is bound in rope and clings to an infant. As the clergymen gather in a circle around her while the woman lays on the floor, they chant the words “[s]uffer, sinner, suffer” repeatedly and pray (Ainslie 82). Finally, one of the priests grabs her

infant and kills him by bashing his skull into the pole of the well in order to “water the earth with the blood of the fruit of [her] sin” and “put an end to all sinners” (Ainslie 83). The story ends with both the woman and Abuelita screaming in a shared sense of agony and mourning over the loss of the woman’s child (Ainslie 83).

The similarities between Abuelita’s story and a more traditional telling of La Llorona are quite clear—both include a woman who must pay for her sexual transgressions that have yielded an illegitimate child, emphasize the enforcement of penance, and display weeping and devastation as a result of the death of a child. As author Domino Perez argues in her work, *There Was a Woman*, a revision of La Llorona must consist of a co-mingling of a conservative construction and a revisionist representation; it is precisely the coexistence of traditional and contemporary elements that allow for a complete analysis of the cultural source, a source that enables these revisionist representations to take place (38). While Abuelita never titles her story “A Revision of La Llorona of San Fernando del Rey,” it is clear that it does contain a co-mingling of conservative and contemporary elements of the legend. By examining the ways in which Abuelita’s story deviates from the conservative construction of La Llorona, we are given insight to a local Mexican American worldview that transitioned from one of relative freedom and expression to one of social and cultural subjugation and oppression, as it is shaped by the historical context of the Spanish Colonial period in California.

The first major deviation in Abuelita’s story is its unique setting, which ultimately hints towards the Llorona character’s identity as a Native woman living in San Fernando during the Spanish Colonial period. In a traditional telling of La Llorona, the setting rarely extends beyond the village, or homeplace, and the river. In Abuelita’s telling, however, the setting takes place within the parameters of the mission. This may be because the mission serves as both a village

and home for the woman. Additionally, the presence of the well serves as the major source of water to the mission, just as a river would to a village alongside it, further indicating that the mission fulfills the traditional setting elements of the village, homeplace, and river. In viewing the mission as the woman's dwelling place, we are able to make the connection that this woman is one of the Native women who was part of Native community within the Mission of San Fernando del Rey, where a large emphasis was placed on the conversion of Native people to Christianity.

In this process of conversion, the sacrament of penance and the ritual of individual confession were used as practices to re-orient the thoughts and behaviors of the Natives (McCormack 395-396). The extent of this conversion process' effects can be seen in the Native woman's submission to the clergymen's chanting, as she bows on her knees, repents, and even lifts up her child to the priest (Ainslie 81). The murder of her child, an act referred to as the watering of the earth "with the blood of the fruit of [her] sin" to "put an end to all sinners" reinforces the priests' belief that only by sacrificing innocent blood can the Native woman be absolved of her sins—namely, her Native practices of fluid sexual expression—and help her to embrace the strict Christian practice sex within the covenant of marriage (Ainslie 83). Ultimately, the sacrifice of the infant serves as an analogy for the sacrificing of an old Native worldview for a newer, European-dominated worldview to be passed on to her following generations. For this loss of her child and culture, the Native woman cries.

A second major contrast between Abuelita's story and a traditional telling of La Llorona is the character who determines the fate of the women's sins. In both the traditional legend and the story told by Abuelita in *Los Pochos*, the outcome of her sins remains unchanged, as her innocent child is still murdered. However, in Abuelita's story, the character who determines this

outcome and ultimately carries out the murder is not the Native woman herself, but rather the priest of the Mission. The very prospect of this actually occurring within history is alarming, but one cannot help but wonder if there is some validity to this account. Although Abuelita initially presents this story to the children as “one of her many stories of specters and ghosts,” what is most chilling and off-putting about her story is the haunting accuracy and historical veracity of some details (Ainslie 80). Throughout chapter four, Ainslie reveals facts to his readers about the San Fernando Mission, such as its name, location, and the dates of its foundation and secularization. These facts, when cross-verified with other historical essays and documents, reveal that Ainslie does indeed provide a well-informed account of the California Mission San Fernando del Rey.

While it is well known and widely documented that the San Fernando del Rey Mission was founded on September 8, 1797 (Ainslie 72; Johnson 252) and the secularization of the Mission occurred before the arrival of Colonel John Frémont in 1847 (Ainslie 94; Johnson 277), there is a large amount of information lacking within the San Fernando Mission registers surrounding the lives of those who were born and those who died within the mission, including information pertaining to an individual’s genealogical relationships and birthplace within the mission community (Johnson 266). Furthermore, it was not uncommon for the Spanish colonists and mission officials to engage in sexually abusive and illicit relationships with the Native women of the mission (Johnson 277; McCormack 411). This lack of historiographic documentation within mission registers, when coupled with the judicial accounts of illicit sexual encounters between Native women and the Spanish colonists, raises the issue of illegitimate children being born but never documented within the mission. Such may be the case with the Native woman we encounter in Abuelita’s story.

The story does not provide any background information that could lead to the identity of the child's father for a reason. As Native women were forced to bear the entire fault and shame of their sexual encounters, their sense of autonomy diminished as their gender and racial subordination increased. Furthermore, as the novel suggests, the fates of their children and future generations were "snatched" from their arms and placed into the hands of the priests, who served as paramount figures of the European ideologies of that time (Ainslie 83). Overall, the Native women of the Californian missions encountered a devastating loss of control over the lives and practices they had once known and the lives and practices their children would never be able to fully know. Therefore, it is not just for her loss, but the losses faced by her fellow Native women that the Native woman mourns.

At the end of her story, Abuelita says that "the mother screamed, as did I, and I covered my eyes in fear," since she allegedly witnessed the events that took place (Ainslie 83). Though she may have covered her eyes that night due to the horrors before her, throughout her 80 years of life, her eyes remained open to the losses faced by the Natives and people of Mexican descent caused by the Western regulation of their pre-colonial worldviews. She mourns for her people of the town who are, "with the reserve and passivity carried in their indigenous blood, always sad and sullen" (Ainslie 80). Although she often complains about the people of the town and their poor spending habits, saying that she is "so tired of these damned souls," she has never left the village, as if bound by a sense of familial obligation to protect and care for the members of her community, many of whom she has seen come into the world owed to her role as a midwife, one of the countless roles she assumes within the San Fernando community (Ainslie 75).

Abuelita's character stands out among others within Ainslie's text because she defies the normative gender roles and societal expectations associated with the many occupations that she

fills. The text reveals that not only is she a midwife, but an innkeeper and a restaurant owner who often allows people within the community to come and eat meals through a credit system. In other immigration tales written within this time period as *Los Pochos* such as Daniel Venegas' *The Adventures of Don Chipote* (1928), the highly respected and feared merchants who sold their goods on credit are often men of great power, and the whole objective of their business is to maximize their financial gains, regardless of the debt their customers acquire in the process. The same cannot be said for Doña Librada. While her roles put her in a position of financial authority and influence, her objective remains to look after her people and ensure that they still have a meal in front of them, even if they are spending their money the wrong way and have to buy a meal on credit. In one instance, she harshly jokes that she is tempted to stop offering her customers credit so they could "die of hunger of hunger all week and learn their lesson" (Ainslie 75). Even so, she desires for them to learn live better ways of living within their given circumstance. This ultimately speaks to her fundamental role as the community's teacher, a role best fulfilled through the telling of her oral lore, through which she protects, warns, and educates the community of a worldview that once was and the worldview that now is.

By examining Abuelita's role as a female storyteller and knowledge-giver in the post-colonial time period, we are better able to unpack the significance that her story about the woman in the well has on the members and visitors of the San Fernando community as well as Chicana literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 1900s, most women, especially poor women of Mexican descent and Native women, did not leave written accounts of their narratives due to the lack of available schooling and high illiteracy rates among the population (Rebolledo and Rivero 13). The level of Abuelita's education and the community's education is confirmed by Ainslie when he reveals that Don Fernando, a character who knows how to read and write,



must help Abuelita settle the written credit balances on customer accounts and provide receipts for those who the text describes as lacking reading and writing skills (Ainslie 75). Because she cannot read or write, Abuelita utilizes oral storytelling to provide insight to the experiential knowledge she has gained during her time at the San Fernando Missions. Her stories take the form of legends and myths—forms of oral tradition that are used in various cultures to transmit moral values and tell the audience how they should live, how to distinguish correct behaviors from incorrect, and how to identify the traits considered desirable by a group or society (Elenes 97; Rebolledo and Rivero 189).

What separates Abuelita from her listening audience in *Los Pochos*, the children of the San Fernando community, is that she is of Mexican nationality. Because she is one of the eldest in the community and California was annexed by the United States following the Mexican American War in 1848, the generations that followed after her in San Fernando were U.S. born and considered “*pochos*,” a term that Abuelita uses to refer to “kids that are Mexican but are born *gringos*” (Ainslie 92). While this term is mostly used in an endearing and playful manner throughout the text, it has developed several negative connotations over time. In Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), she writes that a “*pocho*” is often referred to as a cultural traitor, one who speaks English or speaks an Anglicized version of Spanish (55). The word “traitor,” as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “one who betrays another’s trust or is false to an obligation or duty, or a person who betrays his or her country.” The children who are referred to as *pochos* in the text do not betray their ancestors’ homeland and culture intentionally, however. Their betrayal is a result of the dominance of European ideas that infiltrated the San Fernando community with an unyielding permanence during the Spanish colonial era. Much like the woman at the well, whose infant—a symbol for

the continuation of her culture and traditions—was lost at the hands of the European priest, the children of San Fernando, their parents have experienced a similar loss that is as seemingly permanent as death. Why, then, does Abuelita continue to share her story of the woman at the well? What good does it do to tell the story of a death of a child, culture, or worldview if it cannot be reversed? The answer lies within Abuelita's name.

Doña Librada, whose very name means “freed woman” tells her stories to educate, enlighten, and empower her listeners. After a lifetime of witnessing the oppression and subjugation of her people, she raises her voice not because it is convenient for her or she simply feels like it, but because her position of authority and respects allows and compels her tell their story in order for it to survive. With her oral narratives, Doña Librada paints a side of history of the Californian missions and the Native people that dominant historical narratives ignore.

Ainslie's later novel, *Los Repatriados* (1935), a sequel to *Los Pochos*, reinforces the alarming lack of accurate representations within the written accounts of Native life within the Californian missions. One character in the novel, Profesor Filemón García, spent a large portion of his time in Los Angeles studying the history books of the Alta Californian colonial period. His character often reports and perpetuates the negative stereotypes of the Native communities, referring to them as wild, savage, and violent threats to the settlers (*Los Repatriados*, Ch 2. Lines 73, 78, 83-84).

Doña Librada's stories, then, are vital to the creation of a “balanced narrative” of this people group that embraces a whole-sided picture of human truth (Haas 11). Lisbeth Haas, in her book *Saints and Citizens: Indigenous Histories of Colonial Missions and Mexican California* (2013) implores the inclusion of narratives of the indigenous peoples in historical narration (11). Produced through a lens supportive of Native concerns, Doña Librada's stories allow her

audience to understand the histories of indigenous people outside of normative structures influenced by the colonist thought (Haas 11). For the children of the community, this means understanding their ancestors in a way that extends beyond the disabling stereotypes placed on them, which over time, have become ingrained in the way that they view themselves. For the audience of Ainslie's novel, this means recognizing the importance of meriting sources of non-traditional historical narratives that may be overlooked, either because their form or author does not fall within traditional intellectual standards of appropriate historical documentation. These include narratives found in oral form whose authors are Chicana storytellers who have had to resort to the oral transmission of their histories because they could not write. Ainslie's novel demonstrates it is necessary for the visitors of the San Fernando to realize that the people of the community are not limited by the boundaries set by colonial influence, nor should they be treated according to the gendered and racialized standards colonialism has implemented. Finally, the story shows that while death cannot be reversed, there is liberation to be found in moving forward from but never forgetting one's cultural roots.

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