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# “Got Llorona?” Teaching for the Development of Symbolic Competence

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Cultural and literary texts are used in the foreign language classroom to support learners' language development, cultural awareness, and reading comprehension. While classroom activities frequently facilitate a literal understanding of facts and events, these texts offer another potential level of analysis: symbolic dimensions, which focus on how meaning is constructed in the texts in relation to their historical and political contexts, to the readers' own positionality and subjective experiences, and to the cultural values and beliefs that are attached to these meanings. This paper explores how to teach these symbolic dimensions through an exploration of the notion of symbolic competence. Using personal experiences teaching the legend of La Llorona in a university-level Spanish classroom, I explore two interrelated questions: 1) Can the legend of La Llorona offer insights into theorizations of symbolic competence?; 2) Can theorizations of symbolic competence be applied to the teaching of La Llorona in order to facilitate learners' critical reflections on its symbolic dimensions? Three project-based classroom activities will be discussed to illustrate teaching for the development of symbolic competence.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the beginning and intermediate levels of the foreign language curriculum learners increasingly engage with cultural and literary texts. This engagement gives them the opportunity to further develop their language skills, to explore cultural understandings, and to improve their reading comprehension. In addition to comprehending the literal level of the text, the plot, learners have the possibility to interrogate the larger cultural, political, and social meanings that it constructs. This is the symbolic dimension of textual meaning-making. As Kramersch (2011) explains, the word *symbolic* refers to “not only to *representations* of people and objects in the world but to the *construction* of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, and values through the use of symbolic forms” (p. 7). Critically reflecting on this symbolic dimension opens the possibility for learners to become aware of and to interpret cultural narratives and frames; to challenge established meanings and privileged worldviews; to explore understandings of themselves as historical subjects with their own cultural beliefs and values as they interact with those of others; and to critically reflect on the power of language to construct these realities and subjectivities. But how can we teach this symbolic dimension? How can we facilitate learners' critical awareness of it and its implications?

This paper argues that teaching this critical awareness requires the development of learners' symbolic competence. This argument is illustrated by an example of teaching the legend of La Llorona in an intermediate university-level Spanish classroom. The goals are to explore two interrelated questions: 1) Can the legend of La Llorona offer insights into

theorizations of symbolic competence?; 2) Can theorizations of symbolic competence be applied to the teaching of La Llorona, and other cultural representations, in order to facilitate learners' critical reflections on its symbolic dimensions?<sup>1</sup>

## TEACHING THE LEGEND OF LA LLORONA

According to the colonial version of the legend, as presented in the Spanish textbook *Pasajes* (2009), there once was a young woman who lived in Mexico City. She was a *mestiza*; she had an indigenous mother and a Spanish father. This woman fell in love with a young Spanish captain of pure blood. Even though she was warned that he would never marry her, she and the captain had two children together. Time passed, and she saw her handsome captain less and less. Concerned, the young woman visited his beautiful house. Upon her arrival, she observed a party and realized that it was an engagement party: her beloved captain was marrying a Spanish woman. She begged him to marry her, but he, arrogant and proud, threw her out of his beautiful house, telling her that he would never marry her because of her indigenous blood. She returned home and, blaming her children for what had happened, she took them to the lake and drowned them. She waited, but when she realized that the Captain would never return she regretted her actions, and she went back to the lake and killed herself. It is told that since this time the young woman, now known as La Llorona, can be seen wearing a white dress and veil, appearing in churches and, more frequently, along the banks of the lake where she can be heard moaning and weeping.

The learners in my intermediate-level Spanish classroom read this legend and completed comprehension activities. In the final, culminating activity, they explored their reactions to the legend while practicing the subjunctive. A male student remarked in Spanish, "It was absurd that La Llorona killed her children." The student's sentence was perfectly structured and it demonstrated comprehension of the main tension of the story.

The student's judgment reflected a literal interpretation of the legend: La Llorona kills her children because she blames them for her unrequited love. Yet I wanted students to go beyond this literal understanding, to consider what meanings were attached to her; how these meanings were constructed in the text; and how they might relate to the learners' own lived experiences. To interrogate this symbolic dimension requires a consideration of the historical and subjective context that created La Llorona, as a story, as a historical subject, and as a cultural representation. This involves asking additional questions: How and why had La Llorona been constructed as a hysterical child murderess? What meanings were attached to her as a *mestiza* woman and to her lover as a Spanish man with "pure blood" in a colonial context? Was the killing of her children a symbolic act of revenge or of liberation? What symbolic violence had been carried out on her? What do students' own reactions to the 'absurdity' of her actions reveal about their own positionality and that of a broader U.S. cultural perspective?

The judgment that La Llorona's actions were "absurd" felt like a closure, a dismissal. Yet I realized that it could also be an opening that pointed to the endless potential for new meanings. On the one hand, perhaps this closure was due to the underlying structural goals of the discussion activity: to practice the subjunctive. As such, the activity itself could have foreclosed the type of exploration that I wanted to encourage. On the other hand, I also

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<sup>1</sup> The word *llorona* comes from the verb *llorar*, to cry, so *llorona* refers to a weeping or crying woman.

realized that, as the instructor, I had not prepared my students to engage in this type of analysis, to become aware of and to critically reflect on the symbolic dimensions of the legend.

## LA LLORONA AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE

Kramersch (2011) discusses the notion of symbolic competence in relationship to a third place:

It is the capacity to recognize the historical context of utterances and their intertextualities, to question established categories like *German, American, man, woman, White, Black* and to place them in their historical and subjective contexts. But it is also the ability to resignify them, to reframe them, re- and transcontextualize them and to play with the tension between text and context. (Kramersch, 2011, p. 359)

To explore the symbolic dimension of the legend of La Llorona requires the capacity to question the categories of *mother* and *woman* as gendered identities in relationship to both race and class (as they were constructed in a particular historical, political, and social moment, namely, that of colonialism) while reflecting on how these categories were resignified anew in a different context, the classroom.

Numerous additional theorizations of symbolic competence have been explored (see Hult, 2014; Kramersch, 2006, 2009, 2011; Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008; Vinall, 2012). These definitions, like those already cited, highlight the operation of symbolic competence through subject positioning, historicity, and the creation of alternative realities, which ultimately lead to the ability to “reframe human thought and action” (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008). However, symbolic competence still remains something of a nebulous concept, particularly at the level of practice. As I contemplated the notion in relationship to my students’ exploration of the symbolic dimensions of the legend of La Llorona, several of my own concerns came to the fore:

1. *How do we recognize symbolic competence?* What does it look like? What are its features? How do we know when someone has it?
2. *Where do we find symbolic competence?* Does it reside in the individual learner as a “thing”? Is it an ability that can be possessed? Is it something we automatically possess through our first language? Or, does it exist in relationships, for example, between the text and the context, the individual and his/her environment, the first and second language?
3. *What new meanings emerge for teaching and learning?* How do we teach for the development of symbolic competence? How can we assess it?

These questions prompted a further investigation of the legend of La Llorona. The legend has been passed down from generation to generation since the time of the Conquest, and today it has a ubiquitous presence in Mexican and Chicano cultures. The story has been

recontextualized across time and space, and it has been (re)presented through numerous texts and modalities, creating a multiplicity of images, representations, and meanings. From its original form as oral legend, the story has been reborn in movies, popular songs, graphic novels, poetry, short stories, and paintings. In each of her appearances, La Llorona has been resignified as a historical subject, born anew. In the colonial story, she is a hysterical child murderess, and she has frequently appeared as a horrifying child stealer. La Llorona has also appeared as the incarnation of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, who, prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, warned the indigenous peoples of their impending death. She has been resignified both as a sacred woman who, in killing her children, protected them against the social and political forces that would destroy them, and as a protective figure who does not harm children at all but instead saves them from danger.

Each of these rebirths occurs in historically specific moments and for different purposes. Some of these resignifications reify traditional cultural understandings of gendered and racialized identities and social relations. Some of them also interrupt and disrupt these traditional and fixed understandings, reframing the story and La Llorona herself. The resignifications offer oppositional discourses that critically question colonialism and patriarchy in what could be understood as a mournful search for social justice (Sandoval, 2002). For example, the Llorona mural project in the Mission District of San Francisco, realized by Juana Alicia,<sup>2</sup> represents La Llorona as a feminist political icon who resists globalization, multinationalism, and patriarchy while mourning environmental destruction. Her story has also been commodified. La Llorona has become a commercialized Latino pop icon that sells coffee, and she has even been featured in a "Got milk" commercial. Finally, as a cultural representation, La Llorona exists alongside and in dialogue with other representations of crying or grieving women who mourn other forms of loss in numerous cultures, both in the Americas and around the world.

In her countless manifestations La Llorona is constantly transformed, from a vain woman and a bad mother to a transgressive figure, struggling against and defying the power structures that colonized her, as a woman, as a *mestiza*, and as someone from a low social class. There are three specific features of this critical exploration of La Llorona that I believe are relevant to an understanding of symbolic competence:

1. **Relationality:** The meanings of La Llorona do not reside in one text, in one historical moment, in one modality, or in one storyteller or listener but in the relations, reframings, and dialogues that emerge between them. In the same way, symbolic competence is not a "thing" that can be acquired or possessed but instead is a relational construct. As such, teaching for symbolic competence necessitates what Kern (2015) calls a relational pedagogy, a critical reflection on the meanings that emerge through interaction: across texts and modalities, across historical moments, across geographical boundaries, and in relationship to the viewers, the listeners, and the creators. It implies inhabiting these in-between spaces so that learners cross these boundaries and critically reflect on the meanings that emerge in the process.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Llorona project, visit [www.juanaalicia.com/la-llorona-project-san-francisco/](http://www.juanaalicia.com/la-llorona-project-san-francisco/).

2. ***Transgression***: La Llorona is a transgressive figure in that she has crossed many borders—be they linguistic, cultural, historical, or textual—and has defied many power structures. Those same power structures have also figuratively crossed her, attempting to tame her defiance and transgression by commodifying her, for example. Teaching for symbolic competence requires that learners also transgress boundaries, as they reflect on themselves, their own worldviews, and the languages they use. According to Pennycook (2006), a transgressive pedagogy involves problematizing ways of thinking and doing. It also entails a profound and methodical investigation of how we come to understand ourselves, our history, our culture, our knowledge, and our experiences, and how the boundaries of our thoughts and practices can be traversed (p. 42).
3. ***Potentiality***: Each new meaning that emerges from La Llorona points to the potential for another, in what becomes an endless process of resignification, recontextualization, and reframing. For this reason, it would be impossible to know or to interrogate all of the meanings attached to La Llorona. I have attempted to capture this impossibility in the title of this paper, “Got Llorona?,” an obvious reference to the Got Milk commercial that simultaneously works to question the finality of this “getting,” this closure of meaning. Symbolic competence is not a finalized ability that one consistently applies but a potentiality that can be unevenly distributed. There are contexts in which it is employed and others in which it is not. The goal in teaching for the development of symbolic competence is to become aware of its potentiality as learners develop their communicative, analytical, and interpretative potentials. These potentials are then applied not only to understand and respond to social situations, texts, and events but also to shape and to frame the very interactional contexts in which learners engage. Symbolic competence also implies an awareness that these social situations, texts, and events are socially, politically, economically, and historically situated and imbued with ideological meanings that have very real material consequences. The goal is to recognize the potential to create new meanings and to decide when and how to act on this potential.

These features of the legend of La Llorona—relationality, transgression, and potentiality—are relevant to any cultural representation constructed through text. For this reason, I use them to venture my own working definition of symbolic competence: the potential to become aware of and critically reflect on and act on the crossing of multiple borders between linguistic codes and cultural meanings, the self and others, various timescales and historical contexts, and power structures. These border crossings, like the La Llorona legend itself, include translation from one code to another, transfer from one modality to another, transliteration from one mode to another, and transposition from one subject position to another. I now consider how to facilitate learners’ exploration of the symbolic dimension of La Llorona through three project-based teaching activities that are designed to facilitate learners’ own border crossings and the development of their symbolic competence.

## TEACHING LA LLORONA FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE

I will discuss three project-based teaching activities to demonstrate how learners can develop and explore the highlighted features of symbolic competence—relationality, transgression, and potentiality—through the teaching of La Llorona. The first part of my discussion focuses on the theoretical design of the activities in relation to overarching goals and focal questions. The second part contains a detailed description of each of the projects, including their specific goals, the texts utilized, and their procedural implementation in the classroom.

### Project-Based Activities: Theoretical Design and Focus

Consistent with my definition of symbolic competence, all of the project-based activities facilitate critical reflection on La Llorona at multiple levels: as story, as historical subject, and as cultural representation, as highlighted in Table 1. The goals of this critical reflection are for learners to consider how La Llorona has crossed multiple borders: across modalities, languages, cultures, and time. In the process, learners become aware of their own positionalities vis-à-vis these borders and the contextual realities that construct as well as frame them. By exploring the potentiality of transgressing these borders, as La Llorona has, learners begin to recognize how power operates through the construction and operation of these borders. At the same time, learners consider the new meanings that emerge in relation to the text, the context, and their own lived experiences.

Table 1  
*Goals of Project-Based Activities*

GOALS: Learners critically reflect on <i>La Llorona</i> ...		
... as story ... as historical subject ... as cultural representation	across texts across time and space across modalities across cultures across languages	in relation to students' own cultural and historical positionality.  in relation to larger social, political, and economic realities and power structures.

To achieve these overarching learning goals, each of the three project-based activities is organized around a focal textual question, as summarized in Table 2. In order to analyze the multiple layers of meaning, learners explore textual interpretations in connection with their own experiences. Therefore, the classroom analysis includes a self-reflective dimension in which learners think about their own changing identities and positionalities and the new meanings that emerge. Although the three focal textual questions are interrelated, each one is designed to target a specific feature of symbolic competence: relationality, transgression, and potentiality, as will be demonstrated in the discussion of the specific pedagogical procedures.

Table 2  
*Focal Questions for Project-Based Activities*

<b>FOCUS: Learners interpret multiple layers of meaning</b>		
<i>Textual Analysis</i>	<i>Self-reflective Dimension</i>	<i>Targeted Feature of Symbolic Competence</i>
1. How can we recognize La Llorona? 2. Where do we find La Llorona? 3. How can we reframe La Llorona, and what new meanings emerge?	1. How do we recognize ourselves? 2. Where do we find ourselves? 3. How can we reposition ourselves, and what new meanings emerge?	1. Relationality 2. Transgression 3. Potentiality

**Project-Based Activities: Description of Implementation**

The three project-based activities are presented and discussed separately. In order to explore the meanings that emerge in the relations between and across texts, historical representations, and geographical boundaries, all of the projects are based on multiple textual and visual representations of the legend of La Llorona. The project descriptions begin with a consideration of these texts, with a short excerpt provided from one of these texts as an example. Each of the three projects is presented in two parts, and the discussion includes specific learning objectives, classroom procedures, and a description of implementation and rationale.

All of the projects are designed for learners at an intermediate proficiency level. Not all of the texts are in Spanish, in order to invite cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons and analysis. However, most of the activities are intended to be completed in the target language, Spanish. The projects can be used sequentially, over the course of many class periods, or they can be divided and incorporated at different moments throughout the semester. Finally, teaching for the development of symbolic competence involves becoming aware of the potentiality of meaning-making and, therefore, it may not be necessary to incorporate all of the project-based activities to begin to discover this potentiality.

**Project-Based Activity 1: How Can We Recognize La Llorona?**

**La Llorona** (excerpt)

La Llorona, the feminine  
 haunts us if we fear her  
 comforts us if we understand.  
 La madre who grieves  
 at bringing children into a world  
 that may destroy them  
 and will kill them.  
 La Llorona, contradiction  
 of life and death,  
 who sacrificed her children  
 to haunt the weak

and comfort the living.  
La mujer sagrada<sup>3</sup>

(Quiñonez, 1993, p. 219)

The focus of this first project-based activity is relationality, as it facilitates an analysis of how La Llorona can be recognized across multiple constructions that interact in dialogue with each other and with learners' own personal identifications with the texts. To this end, the project incorporates various textual and visual representations, such as: 1) the colonial text from the *Pasajes* textbook (Bretz, Dvorka, Kirschner, & Kihyet, 2009) as previously summarized; 2) a children's book written by Gloria Anzaldúa (1995); 3) Juana Alicia's mural painting in the Mission District of San Francisco; 4) the popular Mexican folk song entitled "La Llorona";<sup>4</sup> 5) the "Got milk?" television advertisement;<sup>5</sup> and 6) the poem "La Llorona" by Naomi Quiñonez (1993), an excerpt of which is quoted above. The project centrally involves critical reflections on the representations of La Llorona and, therefore, it assumes that learners have previous exposure to the texts and have completed appropriate comprehension activities. This project-based activity has two specific learning goals, which will be discussed separately.

The first learning goal is for learners to analyze differences and similarities in constructions of La Llorona across texts and modalities in order to become aware of how they are interrelated. The specific pedagogical procedures are presented in Figure 1. All of these procedures are group-based, rely on collaborative learning principles, and are sequenced so that learners move from concrete textual information to abstract ideas. Overall, the activities incorporate multiple means of representing information—orally, visually, and in writing—to both facilitate this movement and to allow for the development of multiple skills while supporting language development and use.

- A.** Learners work in groups of four to describe one textual or visual representation (assigned by the instructor), noting what they consider to be its noteworthy features. They then group these features; learners can decide on how to organize them or the instructor can provide categories. Possible organizational categories might include: 1) physical attributes of La Llorona; 2) secondary characters and their relationships to La Llorona; 3) plot sequence and/or primary events; 4) languages used in the telling as well as how and when each language is used; 5) geographical features and setting; 6) intended audience.
- B.** Learners decide which features of their text are the most significant and represent them in visual or textual form on a poster board.
- C.** Poster boards are hung around the classroom. Learners circulate and review each one, noting on a piece of paper the features that they find interesting, characteristics that are similar or different, and/or ideas that are unclear.

<sup>3</sup> *Madre* is 'mother' in Spanish; *la mujer sagrada* translates as 'the sacred woman.'

<sup>4</sup> For an example, see the YouTube video of the Chavela Vargas version: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFD-HxPpP\\_U&list=PLDF3ACF542CF1E2DE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFD-HxPpP_U&list=PLDF3ACF542CF1E2DE)

<sup>5</sup> This advertisement is available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=erhsuXTyDww](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erhsuXTyDww)

- D.** Each group briefly presents their poster board; class members then ask clarifying questions or request additional information. Throughout the presentation and discussion, learners are instructed to add additional items to their notes. Once finished, the whole class identifies similarities between the representations and distinct or variable characteristics (e.g., Llorona kills her children or does not; there are different reasons for killing her children; the story takes place in one specific location or multiple locations; the text employs multiple languages for differing audiences, etc.). To conclude, the class considers any contradictions that emerge between the features.
- E.** Learners return to their group and describe the emotions that they associate with each of the representations discussed. They identify specific passages in the texts or features of the images that embody, express, or provoke these emotions.
- F.** As a whole group follow-up, learners explain how these emotions are related (or not) to the features identified on the poster boards for each of the texts.

Figure 1. *Part One Pedagogical Procedures (Relationality)*

In Procedure A, learners identify the salient features of their assigned text and/or representation, including questions of main characters, their relationships and motivations, plot sequence and events, and setting. By organizing these features on a poster board (Procedure B), learners begin to analyze their significance while simultaneously considering how they would represent the features textually or visually, a process that mirrors their process of creation. Procedures C and D require that learners reflect on the similarities and differences across representations, guiding their explorations of La Llorona's transformations as story, historical subject, and cultural representation. With the support of the instructor, Procedure D encourages learners to consider the meanings and the contradictions that emerge through their juxtaposition. Finally, in Procedures E and F, learners begin to explore their own emotional identifications with the various texts in order to consider how these identifications are embedded in and constructed through the language used, textual features employed, and/or images portrayed. This final procedure also serves as a transition into Part Two of the project-based activity, in which learners consider their own positionalities.

The second learning goal is for learners to become aware of how they position themselves in relation to the textual and visual representations of La Llorona and how this positioning relates to their interpretations of the texts. The specific pedagogical procedures are presented in Figure 2.

- G.** Individually, learners select the representations that they most identify with (either for aesthetic, emotional, political, or other reasons) and write a brief statement that explains why (using as support the features described on the poster boards and the emotions identified/associated with/elicited by them).
- H.** In pairs (ideally based on students' selection of texts in part G), learners discuss the selected text and share their statements. Using this information, they consider what they think La Llorona represents in the text and what she represents for them personally.

- I. Students share their interpretations with the whole class. As a final step, the class considers what is left unresolved or unspoken in the text or in their relationship to the text.

Figure 2. *Part Two Pedagogical Procedures (Relationality)*

Procedure G is an individual, reflexive activity in which learners interact with a self-selected text as they elaborate how or why it speaks to them. At the same time, through their own identification, they are considering their positionality with respect to the text and its meanings. For example, they may most identify with the representation of La Llorona in the Quiñonez (1993) poem cited at the beginning of this project description, relating to the mother's fears and sense of helplessness in the face of social or political realities, which may resonate with their own lived experiences. After sharing these personal statements with a partner in Procedure H, learners' own self-reflections become the basis for their interpretations of the text and the analysis of its possible meanings. These interpretations are shared in Procedure I, as the class also considers the textual or personal meanings that remain incomplete or unresolved, thereby opening a space for further exploration in the second project-based activity.

### **Project-Based Activity 2: Where Do We Find La Llorona?**

#### **Mountain Angel** (excerpt)

She tried to gather pieces of her life, they wouldn't fit  
 Beside the tiny grave deep in the woods is where she'd sit  
 Talking to the child, herself, to him, who knew for sure  
 Possessed they say by Satan's insane lure  
 High a'top the mountain, for years they say she's seen  
 Looking down upon the town where she had once been queen  
 She'd sneak around the playground, watch the little children play  
 They'd see the crazy lady then run away  
 They say she roamed these hills for years, wearing not a stitch  
 The lovely mountain angel now thought to be a witch  
 She made those wailing mournful sounds  
 That you could hear for miles  
 Long after she laid down upon her baby's grave and died

(Parton, 2001)

The focus of the second project-based activity is transgression. Learners explore the power structures that have operated on La Llorona as story, historical subject, and cultural representation, as her legend has crossed linguistic and cultural borders that are gendered, racialized, and class-based. As this project-based activity also features two interconnected goals, it will be presented in two parts.

The first goal is for learners to become aware of how larger power structures operate in the Llorona texts through an analysis of the specific spaces/places and times represented in relationship to the characters and the main conflicts. The texts utilized for these procedures are the same as for those used in the first project-based activity. This consideration of space

and place also allows learners to explore the larger geographical and historical contexts of both the texts' creation and the plot settings. The pedagogical procedures are presented in Figure 3.

- A.** Learners work in groups of four to identify all of the references to specific places that they can find in their assigned text as well as the spaces where the events occur. For each of these spaces/places learners write a brief description of the scene in the text (e.g., what characters are present, what events take place, etc.).
- B.** As homework, learners find visual representations of the places/spaces identified.
- C.** In the following class, learners present their images of the places/spaces, describing what is represented and what happens in each of them according to the text. A complete list is compiled on the board.
- D.** In their groups, learners discuss the following questions: Who acts or speaks in these places/spaces? What is the relationship between the actors? Who has power in these relationships? How is this power relationship represented? Does this power relationship change in the different places/spaces where the characters interact? Do these places/spaces give the characters power? In what ways?
- E.** As a follow-up, each group presents one of the spaces/places and their analysis to the class for further discussion. Afterwards, learners consider how these power relations reflect larger constructions of class, gender, race, and so on, and the implications for La Llorona when she attempts to cross them. As a culminating question, learners consider why these women cry.

Figure 3. *Part One Pedagogical Procedures (Transgression)*

For Procedure A, learners work with one of the assigned texts to identify the places and times that are referenced and to describe what happens in the text in each of them. These spaces/places might be general, for example, colonial streets, a beautiful colonial house, churches, a middle-class home, a rural village, a body of water, a ranch, etc. or they may be specific, such as the border between the United States and Mexico, the Río Grande, or a particular village. Using the lists that they generate, in Procedure B learners find visual representations of these spaces and places on the Internet or in books. As many of the spaces and places are not concretely identified in the texts, these images do not necessarily need to be historically accurate; they can reflect how learners' imagine them to be. For example, learners might find an image of any colonial street (which would exemplify narrowness and a sense of confinement) or any Spanish colonial house (which would capture opulence). For the Juana Alicia mural, learners might search for newspaper images of women protesting in Cochabamba, Bolivia (many of these media images show the unarmed indigenous women in the streets being confronted by armed military men). In the next class period, learners complete Procedure C, in which they present and describe these images and compile a list of them. For Procedure D, learners analyze the operation of power in these spaces/places based on the visual images and the textual events that occur. Prior to beginning this group activity, the instructor can take one example from the list and model an analysis. An alternative would be to select a space on students' campus or in their own city

and discuss the same questions asked about spaces/places in the texts: Who can be there? What can you do there? What can you not do?

The follow-up discussion, Procedure E, encourages learners to reflect on the relationship between these spaces/places and constructions of gender, race, and class. Juxtaposing the images can further highlight these relationships. For example, the representation of a light-skinned family living in a middle class house in the United States that is concerned about having milk stands in contrast to the representation of predominantly poor, indigenous women in Bolivia who are concerned about having access to clean water. As a final consideration, learners explore the real or imagined consequences of transgressing these power structures: What are the possible consequences for the indigenous women who decide to protest a multinational company? What happens to a poor *mestiza* (woman) who enters an opulent colonial house to demand that her Spanish lover of pure blood marry her? What are the possible consequences for a young Latina (girl) who trespasses on a white rancher's land in the Southwestern United States in order to look for herbs for her sick mother, as in the Anzaldúa story? This discussion culminates with the question of why these women cry, which would include both textual motivations and larger social, political, cultural, and/or economic considerations in relationship to the implications of transgressing boundaries of class, gender, and race. This question also serves as a transition to Part Two of the project.

The second goal for this project-based activity is to analyze other representations of crying ghost women across linguistic and cultural borders while considering their historical contexts of production and reception. For this reason, this part of the activity relies on other representations of crying or weeping women from the United States and around the world. Possibilities include: 1) Dolly Parton's (2001) song "Mountain Angel," cited above; 2) La Llorona de Los Angeles, as portrayed in the movie *Mulholland Drive* (Edelstein et al. & Lynch, 2001); 3) the Greek myth *Medea* or any of its contemporary versions; 4) the Japanese Noh play *Izutsu* (Brazell, 1998); 5) the Korean folktale *Janghwa Hongryeon jeon*; 5) other Chicano representations that include La Llorona, such as Ana Castillo's novel *So Far from God* (2005).

- F.** Individually or in pairs or groups, learners select a representation of a crying or weeping ghost woman from a cultural group in the United States or from another country. Learners research and analyze representations of the ghost woman they have selected, using the following guiding questions to examine her significance: 1) How is the weeping ghost woman depicted? Why does she cry? How is she similar to or different from La Llorona? 2) What is the specific setting? What other historical, political, or economic information about this context is included or might be important to understand the plot? 3) What is the main conflict? Who has power in the story and who doesn't? How is this power demonstrated? What is this power based upon? How do these power relations contribute to the conflict? 4) What does this weeping ghost woman represent for the learners?
- G.** Learners present their analysis to the class. Afterwards, the whole class considers whether or not these varied ghost women represent similar things or critique similar power structures. Finally, students consider what the alternatives are to crying for each of these women.

Figure 4. *Part Two Pedagogical Procedures (Transgression)*

Procedure F is a research project that learners complete individually, in pairs, or groups outside of class. Learners apply the analytical and interpretative skills developed through their previous textual interpretations of the figure of La Llorona (the first project-based activity) and their analysis of the operation of power through the spaces and places depicted (the second project-based activity) to analyze their selected text. The guiding questions will facilitate this process, although learners will be responsible for deciding what information is important to know or to consider based on the particular features of their selected text. It is possible that learners identify with the cultures depicted or speak the languages in which the texts were originally written and, in this case, they should be encouraged to personalize their analysis. For Procedure G, learners present their analysis, highlighting the most significant or important features in comparison to La Llorona. The whole class returns to the question of why the female figure cries and also considers alternatives ways of reframing the stories: Is there another option for these women besides crying?

### **Project-Based Activity 3: How Can We Reframe La Llorona, and What New Meanings Emerge?**

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#### **Prietita and the ghost woman** (excerpt)

Prietita saw people with flashlights. The next thing she knew, Miranda was running toward her. Prietita hugged her little sister. ‘Thank you all for coming to look for me,’ she said.

‘How did you find your way out of the woods?’ asked Doña Lola.

‘A ghost woman in white was my guide.’

‘La Llorona!’ said Prietita’s cousin, Teté. ‘But everyone knows she takes children away. She doesn’t bring them back.’

‘Perhaps she is not what others think she is,’ said Doña Lola.

(Anzaldúa, 1995)

The final, culminating project-based activity focuses on potentiality. In the previous project-based activities, learners have explored numerous recontextualizations, resignifications, and reframings of La Llorona and other cultural representations of weeping ghost women. Using this intertextual analysis as a framework, they now consider the potentials involved in creating their own representation of La Llorona. The goal is to become aware of and interpret their own framing, the meanings that they construct, and how they have constructed them. The pedagogical procedures are presented in Figure 5.

- A.** Outside of class, learners construct their own version of the legend of La Llorona. There are no restrictions on what learners can or should do, but they do need to make some important decisions regarding:
1. *modality*: learners can produce a written text, visual representation, song, poem, dramatic representation, etc.
  2. *setting*: the story can be set anywhere in the world
  3. *events*: students can determine the events and the plot of the story as well as its sequencing

4. *representations*: learners do not need to follow any particular cultural representation of La Llorona previously discussed in class
  5. *language*: learners can write in any language(s) they choose
- B.** Learners prepare a written reflection in Spanish of their version of La Llorona in relationship to others studied in class. Learners use the following guiding questions, when relevant, which reflect the types of analysis already completed through the previous activities:
1. What do you consider to be the most noteworthy features of your representation? How are they constructed in the text through language, images, etc.? Why are these important to you?
  2. How are these features similar to or different from other representations of La Llorona or weeping ghost women studied in class? Why have you chosen these particular features?
  3. Where are you? Do you see yourself in your representation or are you outside the text?
  4. What spaces/places does your representation occupy? Who speaks in these spaces? What power structures operate, and how do they influence the events depicted?
- This written statement can be formally evaluated based on: clarity of the ideas, demonstrated comprehension of basic analytical and interpretative considerations developed in class, and students' elaboration of the framing of their version and its justification (including setting, plot, representations, power structures, etc., when relevant).
- C.** As an optional follow-up, learners complete a "gallery walk" in class, in which they collectively present their texts with a brief synopsis based on their analysis.

Figure 5. *Pedagogical Procedures (Potentiality)*

For Procedure A, learners work individually or in groups outside of class to prepare their own representations of La Llorona. The follow-up in Procedure B is a written reflection on their representation. The guiding questions invite learners to give thought to how they have framed the story, what meanings they have constructed, and how they have constructed them. This reflection can be formally evaluated, as it is through this writing exercise that the three components of symbolic competence—relationality, transgression, and potentiality—emerge. Finally, these representations and their meanings can be shared in class through a culminating "galley walk," Procedure C, which allows learners to explore the varied meanings and representations produced.

## CONCLUSION

I do not mean to suggest that I have in any way "gotten symbolic competence," as indeed my definition and my explorations are open-ended. However, in returning to my student's statement, "It was absurd that La Llorona killed her children," I feel better equipped as an instructor to facilitate his analysis of the symbolic dimensions of the legend: to critically reflect on why he felt that it was absurd; how he was positioning himself in relation to the power structures that operated in that historical moment; how he understood constructions of gender, class, and social relations in the text and in relation to his own cultural representations. Finally, I hope that all learners would be able to consider how the story of

La Llorona has been and can be reframed and the new meanings that emerge. I look forward to incorporating these project-based activities in my own classroom in order to further assess their impact in terms of student learning and to consider students' own reactions to these projects.

It is important to point out that this framework for teaching the symbolic dimensions of texts is not limited to the teaching and study of one cultural representation, that of La Llorona. Indeed, in other language and culture classrooms there are other iconic characters, texts, or historical subjects that are frequently taught. The same critical questions are applicable: How are these cultural representations recognized? Where are they found? How have they been or can they be reframed, and what new meanings might learners explore/encounter in the process?

Ultimately, teaching texts for the development of symbolic competence offers learners the potential to become aware of and to challenge established meanings and privileged worldviews. A pedagogy of symbolic competence can facilitate the recognition of how social, political, and economic structures have historically created and reinforced restrictive boundaries of space, personhood, and national affiliations, among others. Languages and cultures themselves can offer means to transgress these restrictive boundaries, to inhabit differing positionalities, and to create new meanings.

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