

# Cultural Narratives and Counterstories: Examining Representation in “Prietita y La Llorona”

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## ABSTRACT

Stories can be a powerful medium through which to simultaneously reinforce and counter oppressive discourse. This article examines Gloria Anzaldúa’s children’s book, *Prietita y La Llorona*, as a counterstory method within the larger genre of Latinx children’s literature. Counterstories are a powerful method used by Critical Race and feminist theorists to center the delegitimized experiences of marginalized communities. Drawing on theories around discourse, representation, and intersectionality, the article explores the ways in which Anzaldúa counters cultural narratives that diminish community cultural wealth and women’s positions as agents of knowledge through the characters of Doña Lola and La Llorona.

*Su abuela decía que La Llorona se aparecía en la noche por los ríos o las lagunas  
llorando por sus hijos perdidos y buscando a otros niños para robárselos.*  
—“*Prietita y La Llorona*” (Anzaldúa 1995)

*The racism I would later recognize in my school teachers  
and never be able to ignore again I found in the first western I read.*  
—“*La Prieta*” (Anzaldúa 2009a)

Storytelling is fundamental to our families and communities; it supports the transmission of family history, ideas, knowledge, and values from one generation to the next. Storytelling is, on one hand, funds of knowledge—“historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for the household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al. 2005, 72). As part of a larger network of cultural capital, stories and storytelling “construct a sense of belonging and identity that may support the ability of the family to participate in society (Bourdieu 2003, Delgado Bernal 2001, Martínez-Roldán 2005, 507, Yosso, 2005). On the other hand, storytelling also (re)produces cultural narratives transmitting hegemonic discourses that socially define what is “normal” and marginalize that which is “Other” (Anzaldúa 2007, Said 1978, Bourdieu 2003).

As the Other is (re)represented through cultural mediums, like literature and storytelling, dominant discourses are reproduced. Therefore, “attention to the politics of representation has been crucial for colonized groups globally in the struggle for self-determination” (hooks 1990, 72). Given the importance of children’s books as pedagogical tools to develop children’s literacy and their role in a larger schooling and socialization process, examining and challenging the “politics of representation” is especially significant in children’s literature, which can ignore and/or misrepresent marginalized groups and their experiences (Barrera and Quiroa 2003, Martínez-Roldán 2013). It is imperative to critically examine the ways in which these texts traverse the simultaneous reproduction and contestation of subjugating narratives.

Researchers in education have highlighted the importance of curriculum that both draws on students’ “funds of knowledge” and engages them in critical considerations around race, gender, and other intersecting identities (Yosso 2002, 2005, Moll et al. 2005, Medina and Martínez-Roldán 2011, Fránquiz, Ávila, and Lewis 2013).

With growing trends for multiculturalism in education, researchers and educators are called to critically reflect upon and unlearn oppressive discourses (Saavedra and Salazar Pérez 2012). In fact, today's sociopolitical contexts of xenophobia, misogyny, and disinformation require these conversations in our schools. This article attempts to address this need by examining Anzaldúa's (1996) illustrated children's book, *Prietita y la Llorona/Prietita and the Ghost Woman*, as an example of the ways in which children's literature can be counterstories resisting pervasive discourses, and re-centering other points of view. Anzaldúa's story counters dominant representations that question women's morality and delegitimize their knowledge. I examine the positioning of two characters—La Curandera and La Llorona--both within the story and historical, dominant cultural narratives to understand the ways in which Anzaldúa re-represents or re-creates the narratives surrounding these characters.

## ***Prietita y La Llorona: A Children's Book***

*Prietita y La Llorona* is an illustrated, dual-language (English and Spanish side-by-side), children's book written by Gloria Anzaldúa. The protagonist, Prietita, is a young girl growing up in south Texas. Her mother has fallen ill, and Prietita seeks the advice and knowledge of her mentor, Doña Lola, a curandera (healer). Doña Lola sends Prietita on a journey to the King Ranch, a dangerous place where intruders are met with gunfire, to find a rue plant, which she needs for the remedy. After getting lost and seeking the help of the area's animals, Prietita encounters La Llorona, the infamous ghost woman of la frontera about whom she has heard stories from her grandmother. Although initially frightened, Prietita asks La Llorona for her help in finding the rue plant. La Llorona guides Prietita to the plant, then to safety, and disappears. The story is comprised of all female characters with the exception of Prietita's cousin, Teté, who appears and speaks towards the end of the story.

*Prietita y La Llorona* has been analyzed by scholars in various ways. Hartley (2010) focused on the character of la curandera as Anzaldúa herself challenging colonialist violence. Fránquiz et al. (2013) used the book to explore the interactions between bilingual teachers and their students through the concept of nepantla. Together, these analyses help to better understand the ways in which discourse is used to address power and subjugation. Through this article, I hope to contribute to this valuable, on-going conversation by studying the text as an effective counterstory method useful to schools, families, and teacher educators.

## ***Storytelling: Discourse, Representation and Intersectionality***

Discourses of colonization and patriarchy have sanctioned the oppression of marginalized groups, particularly that of women of color (hooks 1990, Anzaldúa 2007, Collins 1993). Citing Foucault, Hall (2008b) described discourse as a system of representation and defined it as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing—the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment (72). It is through discourse, for example, that the West has been normalized as a civilized, Christian, European entity while simultaneously producing a deviant, savage, indigenous Other in need of colonization and salvation (Said 1978, Spivak 1988). The politics of representation rely upon controlling the image, and thus the identity, of a group. Ultimately, this is an issue of power. Power over who represents the image, for what purpose, and to whose benefit (Delgado Bernal 1998, hooks 1990). Said (1978) argues that “culture, of course, is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent” (7). It is through consent that the Other becomes represented, defined, and subdued.

Consent breeds an internalized oppression. For Anzaldúa (2009), subjugated groups can be accomplices who participate in the reproduction of oppressive ideologies. In her essay, *La Prieta*, Anzaldúa (2009) writes: It is difficult for me to break free of the Chicano cultural bias into which I was born and raised,

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3 *The King Ranch is located in south Texas. Some have interpreted Anzaldúa's use of the King Ranch as a physical metaphor for the violence of colonialism given how European colonizers seized the land (Hartley, 2010).*

and the cultural bias of Anglo culture that I was brainwashed into adopting. It is easier to repeat the racial patterns and attitudes, especially those of fear and prejudice, that we have inherited than to resist them (48).

She underscores that the racial and gender constructs created by European and U.S. colonizing powers have seeped into the ways “women and Third World” groups define themselves (48). Therefore, it is not only mainstream narratives about marginalized groups that need to be disrupted. Intra-group cultural narratives are pervasive too, and must likewise be contested. For Critical Race theorists (CRT) and feminist scholars of color, counterstories have become an effective method for defying oppressive discourses.

## ***Counterstories and the Intersectionality of Representation***

Counterstories are a “method of telling a story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse—the majoritarian story” (Solorzano and Yosso 2001, 475). Counterstories not only center the experiences of otherwise marginalized groups, but also offer complexity to the intersectionality of their identities, particularly race/ethnicity and gender.

CRT and feminist scholars of color emphasize an interlocking system of intersectionality and subjugation where race, class, gender, and other identities converge (Collins 1993, Delgado Bernal 1998, Solorzano and Yosso 2001, Yosso 2002). Collins (1993) explores the “matrix of domination” where an individual can simultaneously have membership within both subordinated and dominant groups. Delgado Bernal (2001) looks at “mestiza consciousness” as deriving from a multiplicity of experiences, including race/ethnicity, gender, bilingualism/biculturalism and spirituality. Anzaldúa (2009) wrestled with her competing racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities and offered “the bridge” as a metaphor for how she tried to connect these identities, but conceded that there could be great contradictions in navigating these at the same time.

Additionally, Anzaldúa (2007) warned against the cultural narratives of her Chicana community, highlighting the ways in which language, permeated by male discourse, aimed to control women’s actions, bodies, and identities.

Counterstories, however, centralize the agency, knowledge, and voice of people of color within the intersection of other identities. They defy dominant ideologies and legitimize the experiential knowledge and cultural wealth of otherwise silenced communities (Delgado Bernal 1998; Dixon and Rousseau 2005; Yosso 2005). This is especially true for women of color whose gender and racial identities (among others) can doubly reinforce their marginalization. Collins (1993), for example, argues for centralizing Black women’s identities as “agents of knowledge” whose knowledge and experiences function within “spheres of influence” that make them vital to their communities. Delgado Bernal (1998, 2001) names Chicana feminist epistemologies and “pedagogies of the home” as central to Chicana ways of knowing and stemming from experiences at the intersection of issues of language, race/ethnicity, gender, and social class, and home/community practices. As Hartley (2010) points out, Anzaldúa also understood that women, like curanderas, hold important knowledge, essential to their communities, that has been delegitimized by colonization (137). This is where the power of counterstories truly lies—their ability to challenge oppressive discourse, and then re-center and legitimize who and what has been erased.

For our future generations, re-claiming the cultural wealth of their ancestors is important. Counterstories must be constant and systematically present for our children, especially as they navigate xenophobic, homophobic, and misogynistic contexts that undervalue their identities and the contributions and resources of their communities. Children’s literature has the power to counter majoritarian discourses in schools, communities, and society.

## ***Latinx Children’s Literature: A Trajectory of Politics and Activism***

In schools, children’s literature is an important pedagogical tool. Yet, many Latinx children do not

see their community experiences reflected in their storybooks. In cases where Latinx experiences are visible, these can be diminished to negative language and cultural stereotypes (Barrera and Quiroa 2003, Martínez-Roldán 2013). Latinx authors have responded to these omissions, misrepresentations, and the strong tradition of storytelling in Latinx culture by writing children's books, in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, that speak to the multidimensionality of the U.S. Latinx experience (Ada 2003).

Given the dearth of children's literature written by, for, and about Latinx communities, writing these stories is in itself political. While not all Latinx children's authors focus on the political, there is a history of Spanish-speaking communities producing children's literature to address critical ideas that can be traced in part to Jose Martí's *La Edad de Oro*, a children's literary magazine. Martí, a Cuban revolutionary, used the publication in the 19th century to address issues of social justice and highlight the Americas' common indigenous heritage as central to a unified Latinoamericano identity (Ada 2003, Martínez-Roldán 2013). Today, U.S.

Latinx children's literature often remains focused on cultural expression and political activism and shows characters navigating complex situations and spaces (Medina and Enciso 2002, Medina and Martínez-Roldán 2011). Therefore, U.S. Latinx children's literature often bestows opportunities for critical conversations among and between teachers and students (Fránquiz et al.

2013, Zúñiga 2015). As a genre, Latinx children's literature can be counterstories that confront dominant ideologies and narratives long taken for granted as truth, and make classrooms into transformative spaces. Just by existing, these books already challenge a status quo that limits the publication of Latinx-centered stories; however, many of these books, like *Prietita y La Llorona*, actively seek to engage and challenge their audience.

## ***“Reading the Word and the World”***

I examined the story through the two main story characters —La Curandera, and La Llorona — by first looking at their positioning in the story and juxtaposing these with their positioning in more traditional cultural narratives. Positioning is about the ways in which identities are created and (re)created across contexts and interactions (Davies and Harré 1990). Positioning was studied through the narrative text and each characters' dialogue and/or actions.

This included surveying sociolinguistic devices like honorifics, which name status through language (Keating 1998). My guiding question for analysis was: In what ways does Anzaldúa rerepresent or re-create the narratives surrounding La Llorona and La Curandera?

Freire (2007) argues that we read the word to read the world and vice-versa. As the interpreter of this text, there is a need to offer insight to the ways in which my world, influenced by my experiences and intersectionalities, shape my reading of the text, including the oppressive discourses that I have internalized in the process (Delgado Bernal 2001, Saavedra and Salazar Pérez 2012). I was born and raised bilingual in Anzaldúa's Rio Grande Valley. My education was in English, centered around Eurocentric curriculums, and at mostly white institutions of higher education. Family conversations, especially with my abuelitas, were in Spanish. This proved critical in my ability to learn from them and their stories.

During this analysis, I considered the role of spirituality and medicine in my upbringing, especially growing up on the Texas U.S.-Mexico border. As a child, I spent weekends with my abuelita paterna in Mexico. She went to mass often wearing a veil, lit candles to her saints, and used remedios to cure empacho (painful belly aches believed to stem from food sticking to the stomach wall) and susto (paralyzing fear after a traumatic event). I also regularly visited my abuelita materna, who was not an avid church-goer, but identified as a “woman of faith” with particular veneration for La Virgen María. Trained by her mother, she had been a midwife and sobadora (used massage as a way to heal) in the Rio Grande Valley. She had remedios for empacho, mal de ojo (evil eye), or other ailments. In retrospect, my grandmothers' wisdom and conocimientos were important “funds of knowledge” in my family stemming from generations. Also, both my abuelitas were great storytellers! They often shared their encounters with the unexplained, the spiritual world, and La Llorona! It is through these lenses that I offer my interpretation of Anzaldúa's text.

## ***La Curandera y La Llorona: Challenging Narratives***

Like other Latinx children's literature, Anzaldúa explores themes of community, spirituality, and healing that "disrupt Western notions of religion and colonialism which sought to displace indigenous beliefs and practices," such as curanderismo (Medina & Enciso, 2002, 42). Additionally, she re-creates the story of La Llorona and challenges her representation within Latinx culture and discourse as a "mala mujer" or bad woman. It is important to highlight that Anzaldúa's writings and others' analysis suggests that Prietita, La Curandera, and La Llorona are versions of Anzaldúa herself (Hartley 2010, Anzaldúa 2009a, b). In her various writings, from children's books to short stories to poems, she has used these as metaphors to challenge dominant discourses around race/ethnicity, patriarchy, colonialism, and indigeneity. For this analysis, I will focus on two characters that help our protagonist, Prietita, find her way.

### ***La Curandera***

The dominant, Western narrative surrounding curanderismo is typically one of pseudoscience and the occult. An excerpt derived from an archived article from Time Magazine best describes the way in which curanderismo has been delegitimized by the U.S. medical community.

Finally, the curanderos should be enlisted as health aides. They can be given short courses to qualify as practical nurses (...) and allowed to wear uniforms or badges, and to dispense simple medicines. They should serve as go-betweens for doctors and nurses and Mexican-American patients. Then, at last, they will bring their patients to clinics and hospitals, where they can get modern scientific treatment—by whatever name (Time, 1961).

The article presented solutions as to how best to deal with curanderismo practices along the U.S. Mexico border and provide "modern scientific treatment" to the local community. The solution here is to "dress up" local curanderos and place them within Western medical contexts. Unfortunately, Western science and medical discourse often fails to realize that elements like curanderismo are situated culturally and historically in Latinx communities. Therefore, to simply transpose curanderas to hospital settings is insulting to their practice and the deep connection they hold with their community. Curanderas function within "spheres of influence" where their knowledge and expertise is sought and needed by local families (Collins 1993). Yet, such delegitimizing practices are routine for colonizing powers attempting to challenge notions of truth, knowledge, and authority within local, colonized communities (Schieffelin 2000).

Anzaldúa's Doña Lola is part of a network of cultural capital upon which local families rely upon for medicinal cures and remedies. Doña Lola is clearly a respected member of the community who is sought out in time of need. Upon hearing of her mother's sickness, Prietita immediately goes to Doña Lola for help.

*—Doña Lola—dijo Prietita con mucho respeto—, usted conoce todas las plantas curativas de este valle. Mi madre sufre de la vieja enfermedad otra vez. Hay algún remedio que la pueda ayudar? [“Doña Lola,” said Prietita respectfully, “You know every healing plant in this valley. My mother has the old sickness again. Is there any remedy that can help her?”]*

Prietita employs honorific language like “doña” and “usted” when speaking to Doña Lola. Furthermore, she addresses her “respectfully” or with “mucho respeto.” Keating (1998) states that honorifics are used to signify status, like eldership, and honor, which comes with having accrued what Bourdieu (2003) has termed social capital (400). Therefore, Doña Lola embodies respect and honor as Prietita's elder and as a wise, knowledgeable woman.

Doña Lola, as a curandera, commands the respect of the local community, which she knows well (“Usted conoce todas las plantas curativas de este valle”). She is a valuable resource. Prietita does not hesitate to ask Doña Lola for a remedy to help her mother's sickness. She knows that if anyone can help her it is Doña Lola with her knowledge and experience. Collins (1993) argued for a re-conceptualization of power focused on Black women's "spheres of influence" (i.e. family, church, etc.) and their experiences

as “bloodmothers, othermothers, and community othermothers” (616). Anzaldúa too viewed la curandera as an embodiment of indigenous knowledge (Hartley 2010). Such non-Eurocentric notions of women, community, and healing are at odds with Westernized values, and give a legitimate voice to women of colors’ experiences and ways of knowing. Likewise, curanderas function within their own “spheres of influence” drawing on home/community pedagogies that re-conceptualize a Latinx-centered notion of family and community that draws upon local resources as part of a larger network of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2003, Delgado Bernal 2001, Moll et al. 2005). Anzaldúa (1995) offers insight into the role of la curandera within local communities as both a highly valued community resource and an “agent of knowledge.”

As part of a community’s funds of knowledge, curanderismo relies on its transmission to younger generations for its continuation (Hartley, 2010). Here learning often happens as an apprenticeship, where the apprentice gains the knowledge and wisdom over time and with strong guidance from a mentor-expert. In *Prietita y La Llorona*, Doña Lola is not merely sharing, but rather teaching *Prietita* her knowledge and wisdom.

*“Doña Lola puede curar casi cualquier enfermedad. Ella conoce muchos remedios. Me está enseñando todo sobre los remedios.” [“Doña Lola can cure almost any sickness. She knows lots of remedies. She’s teaching me all about them.”]*

In this particular excerpt, *Prietita* acknowledges Doña Lola’s knowledge and wisdom regarding natural remedies. Doña Lola not only “knows lots of remedies” but her expertise can cure “almost any sickness.” Doña Lola yields a vast amount of knowledge, or “home pedagogies” that *Prietita* also hopes to one day have (Delgado Bernal 2001). As a curandera, she is an “agent of knowledge” whose ways of knowing are situated within the historical and cultural context of the community she serves.

Collins (1993) argues for a “paradigmatic shift” and a re-conceptualization of empowerment for Black women as “agents of knowledge.” “Within Black women’s communities, thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions” (Collins, 1993, 621). Similarly, as a community member and curandera, Doña Lola’s knowledge is validated and (re)produced within a particular community’s notions of truth, knowledge and authority. It is these conditions that legitimize la curandera’s knowledge and grants her authority within the context in which she practices (Bourdieu, 1994).

Doña Lola plays an important role in helping *Prietita* find a cure for her mother. However, *Prietita* also receives unexpected help from another important woman in the story, *La Llorona*. As in the case of curanderas, Anzaldúa also challenges the cultural narratives that seem to define who *La Llorona* is within Latinx culture.

## **La Llorona**

Anzaldúa alludes to the re-telling of *La Llorona*’s story to younger generations and the caveat of *La Llorona* abducting children to replace her own.

*Su abuela decía que la Llorona se aparecía en la noche por los ríos o las lagunas llorando por sus hijos perdidos y buscando a otros niños para robárselos” [Her grandmother said that la Llorona appeared at night by rivers or lagoons, crying for her lost children and looking for other children to steal.]*

Here *Prietita* is reminded of her grandmother’s tales about *La Llorona* as something to be feared. The story of *La Llorona* is said to originate from an old Spanish legend of *La Dama Blanca* (the Lady in White) brought to the Americas by Spanish conquistadores and settlers (Ada, 2003). Versions vary, but as I have heard it through countless retellings, *La Llorona* had been a beautiful, vain woman. After a few years of marriage and having several children, her husband abandoned her for another woman. Unable to handle the betrayal, she drowned her children and herself in a river. Her tortured soul now walks riverbanks in search of her children, or any other children she might come across. Her legend is a cautionary tale

for “bad women” and “bad mothers” whose pride and selfishness can lead to tragic, irrational acts.

In her book, *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa (2007) critiques the narrative of the “bad woman” that pervades Latinx culture. “In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue” (Anzaldúa, 2007, 40). It is through this cultural lens and repeated storytellings that La Llorona’s reputation as a “bad woman” is formed. Knowledge is constructed through discourse, including stories, narratives, and traditions (Hall 2008b). Anzaldúa (2007) furthers the point that the production of knowledge occurs through language, and is organized around systems of culture. She critiques the “cultural tyranny” that drives and distorts reality. “Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture. Culture is made by those in power—men” (Anzaldúa, 2007, 38). Anzaldúa argues that culture drives oppressive discourses that subjugate women and give higher status to men. In the case of *Prietita y La Llorona*, Anzaldúa re-creates the cultural narrative of La Llorona and challenges readers to do the same.

As *Prietita* continues walking in search of the rue plant she needs, she encounters La Llorona.

*En una voz temblorosa, Prietita se dirigió a la mujer fantasma:--Por favor, señora, ¿me puede ayudar a encontrar un poco de ruda? [In a trembling voice, Prietita called out to the ghost woman. “Please, Señora, can you help me find some rue?”]*

The fact that *Prietita* asked for help in a “trembling voice” shows her initial fear of La Llorona. After all, *Prietita* has grown up hearing stories about an evil specter abducting children. In this moment, *Prietita* is “the bridge,” a form of *nepantla*, that connects the fears of dominant ideologies with the possibilities of the counterstory (Anzaldúa 2009a).

Furthermore, Anzaldúa (2009) contends that “. . . we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits. So the walls grow higher, the gulfs between us wider, the silences more profound. There is an enormous contradiction in being a bridge” (47). Still, in a bold move, *Prietita* asks for La Llorona’s help. La Llorona never speaks to *Prietita*, but does guide her to the rue plant she seeks. The book’s illustrations show La Llorona hovering over *Prietita* as a guide and leading her towards the spot where the rue plant grows.

Despite the stories, La Llorona does not hurt *Prietita*. On the contrary, she is *Prietita*’s guide in finding what she needs, and in navigating the vast premises of the King Ranch. La Llorona appears to be knowledgeable enough of remedies to find the rue plant, and familiar enough with the King Ranch context to know that *Prietita* is not safe. She too is an “agent of knowledge” engaged in “community mothering” within her own “spheres of influence” (Collins, 1993). So what if La Llorona is not looking for children to abduct, but rather looking for children who need her help? With a few lines and illustrations, Anzaldúa has directly challenged the narrative of La Llorona as a “bad woman/mother” or something to be feared. On the contrary, she proved to be a nurturing guide engaging in her own mothering ways.

At the story’s end, *Prietita* is reunited with her friends and family who have been out looking for her. *Prietita* shares her adventure and encounter with the helpful ghost woman much to the amazement of her audience.

*—Una mujer fantasma vestida de blanco fue mi guía. [“A ghost woman in white was my guide.”]*

*—!La Llorona!—dijo Teté, el primo de Prietita—Pero todos saben que ella se lleva a los niños y que no los regresa. [“La Llorona!” said Prietita’s cousin, Teté. “But everyone knows she takes children away. She doesn’t bring them back.”]*

*—Tal vez ella no sea como mucha gente piensa que es—dijo Doña Lola.*

*[“Perhaps she is not what others think she is,” said Doña Lola.]*

After *Prietita* shared her encounter, her cousin Teté, the only male in the story, reminds the group that “everyone knows she takes children away.” It is interesting that the male character reinforces the dominant narrative surrounding La Llorona as someone to be feared, and assumes this is something all “know” to be true. This seems to echo Anzaldúa’s (2007) view of male discourse as oppressive. However, equally interesting is that it is Doña Lola, the curandera who challenges Teté’s narrative by emphasizing

that “perhaps she is not what others think.” It is through Doña Lola’s wisdom and positioning that Anzaldúa challenges the dominant cultural ideology surrounding La Llorona as a bad woman/mother.

## ***Re-Positioning Women as “Agents of Knowledge”***

The story of Prietita y La Llorona is a direct challenge to dominant Western discourses of medicine and science that delegitimize women as “agents of knowledge,” and to cultural narratives that frame women through gendered categories, such as the “bad woman” or “bad mother.” I was interested in examining the ways in which Anzaldúa re-represents or re-creates the narratives surrounding La Llorona and La Curandera.

Anzaldúa positions la Curandera and La Llorona in ways that do not reflect the traditional narratives and discourses used to define them or their positioning within more mainstream narratives, such as “bad woman” or “pseudo-medicine.” On the contrary, their re-representation invites readers to question their original assumptions about who these women are and their contributions. La Curandera is represented as both a teacher and community resource and I liken this to Collins’s (1993) Black feminist notions of women as agents of knowledge. As a teacher and honorable elder, Doña Lola is in a position to influence her community and its cultural narratives. Here Anzaldúa questions the ways in which culture is defined by male discourse, and guides the reader towards a more matriarchal transmission of cultural knowledge: Women as cultural keepers through their “spheres of influence” and bodies of knowledge (Collins 1993).

Likewise, La Llorona is re-represented as a nurturing, mothering guide rather than an angry spirit. Far from a “bad woman or mother,” she is redeemed as someone who helps and guides children rather than hurts them. In Anzaldúa’s (2009b) poem, “Postmodern Llorona,” the Llorona navigates complex spaces of identity, including cultural gender expectations and sexuality, and confronts her fears with defiance. Here, she was pivotal to guiding Prietita through the King Ranch to find the remedio she needed. Therefore, La Llorona is a spiritual guide listening to Prietita’s heart and helping her navigate other dangerous spaces.

As a counterstory, Prietita y La Llorona effectively challenges cultural narratives that often exist around women’s identities. It directly confronts the ways in which women as “agents of knowledge” are often delegitimized by Western epistemologies of objectivity. In the story, medical help is sought through a network of resources positioned within the community. Medicine and healing were situated within the family’s network of resources and channeled through a female member of the larger community who was also a friend, teacher, and mentor. Through Doña Lola, Anzaldúa re-centers the idea of medicine as a cultural and community practice sustained by important “agents of knowledge.” For some communities, these practices have become lost. Dominant discourses of Western medicine and modernization have delegitimized them, and also phenomenon like language loss has cut off the transmission of family cultural wealth from future generations. Anzaldúa is giving a voice to the experiential knowledge and cultural capital that Latinx families might possess and should continue to foster in their networks of community resources.

Anzaldúa (1996) also defies the narrative of La Llorona shared through countless generations. The underlying message of the story warns children not to stray too far from their homes or parents because they run the risk of encountering La Llorona, who is known to abduct children. Anzaldúa challenges that very narrative and re-represents La Llorona as a compassionate, nurturing, and helpful guide. Prietita’s encounter with the ghostly spirit was a positive one, and left Prietita questioning what she had been told. She now has her own story, or experiential knowledge, to counter the dominant discourses that represent La Llorona as someone to be feared. It is possible that this counter-story complicates the traditional narrative of fear that parents tell their children to ensure obedience.

## ***Counterstories: Classroom, Familia, and Beyond***

Framed within the tenets of a critical race curriculum (Yosso 2002), the story of Prietita y la Llorona gives a voice to the experiential knowledge students bring from their homes. It legitimizes home experiences for students whose families use curanderas and/or natural home remedies associated with

curanderismo as a source for healing. Additionally, this story challenges dominant cultural narratives and female representations, such as La Llorona, by providing an opportunity for students to question the origins of these ideas and how they are complicated by the story.

Reading the story of *Prietita y La Llorona* also offered me a new perspective of my family history, especially regarding my abuelas as “agents of knowledge.” As a child, I watched them sobar and curar with great confidence in what they were doing. I listened to their stories sharing family history, remedies, and legends. As they have grown older and left the physical world, I am grateful for the opportunities I had to experience their storytelling and wisdom-sharing. Now, I am left thinking of how they learned their art through the storytelling of the women who came before them, like my great-grandmothers. The emergence of technology and Western discourse around medicine have overpowered the “home pedagogies” of marginalized groups rendering them primitive, even to some of the community members themselves. Likewise, the colonizing forces of English in the U.S. has effectively stripped generations from their home and community languages, and inter-generational relationships (Wong Fillmore 2000). In such a world, what does the continuation of these important bodies of knowledge mean for future generations?

Today’s sociopolitical contexts necessitate engaging students in conversations that develop their critical thinking to question, challenge, and interrogate. With every coming day, U.S. society is having to grapple with xenophobic, misogynistic attitudes towards marginalized communities. Discourses, through language and culture, form a constructed knowledge of a racialized and gendered Other through representation (Hall 2008a). Therefore, whoever controls the image has authorship and voice over the identity that surrounds the representation. They define how the image is used, for what purpose, and for whose benefit (hooks, 1990). The “politics of representation” (hooks, 1990) are at the heart of issues over language, power, and discourse. Latinx writers assume their agency and experiential knowledge to contribute to the representation of the Latinx experience in English and Spanish. Anzaldúa, specifically, took this one step further by re-authoring the narratives surrounding *La Curandera* and *La Llorona*. She rerepresents *La Curandera* as an “agent of knowledge” and challenges a cultural narrative that categorizes *La Llorona* within the bad woman/good woman binary used to represent and define women. Anzaldúa is therefore an “agent of knowledge” herself as she challenges and repositions the experiences of those who historically have been silenced, unrepresented and dominated.

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