

# From the Mexican Borderlands to the Irish Bogland: *Atravesando* Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*

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## Abstract

This article presents a reading of Marina Carr's Hester Swane in *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) that moves away from standard comparisons to the European Medea storyline and situates her more closely in relation to *La Llorona* (the "Crying Woman"), a ghost figure in Mexican/Mexican-American folk stories who wanders near bodies of waters, wailing as she searches for her missing children. *La Llorona*, like Hester, is an exile, banished from her local community, and while both narratives have been considered in relation to Medea, reading Hester beyond the Greek story and aligning her with *La Llorona* offers the possibility of locating her within a different cultural context and expanding conventional interpretations. The article traces a brief history of *La Llorona* and her role within Mexican and Mexican-American border storytelling, researching Irish and Chicana religious iconography and its relation to cultural identity, and establishes transnational connections between the two characters.

**Xavier**        You're a dangerous witch, Swane.

**Hester**        (*laughs at him*) You're sweatin'. Always knew ya were yella to the bone. Don't worry, I'll be lavin' this place tonight, though not the way you or anywan else expects. Ya call me a witch, Cassidy? This is nothin', you just wait and see the real—

(Carr, *By the Bog of Cats...*68)

In 1929, theatre scholar Lisa Fitzpatrick writes, W.B. Yeats wrote a letter to the director of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin Ireland, suggesting an

alternate conclusion to Margaret O’Leary’s *The Woman*.<sup>1</sup> Yeats intervened to advise changing the ending of the play, insisting that the heroine be killed off rather than allow her to ambiguously leave on her own after the man she loves spurned her. Fitzpatrick writes:

According to a letter written by W.B. Yeats to Lennox Robinson in April 1929, the original ending of the play had Ellen leaving to wander the roads. In his letter to Robinson, Yeats insists that ‘the heroine must die and we must know she dies; all that has been built up is scattered, and degraded, if she does not come to the understanding that she seeks something life, or her life, can never give.’ (2007: 75)

O’Leary changes the play to accommodate Yeats, a move Fitzpatrick critiques, arguing that, “By changing the resolution, O’Leary allows her character to be safely contained within the mythos of the woman who was beautiful and made, and tragically killed herself. Ellen’s despair thus becomes an individual tragedy, rather than the tragedy of women as a class” (77). This process singles out Ellen, and while Yeats’s letter may reveal an astute understand of her predicament, it places her in the role of sacrificial victim to personal circumstances and doomed by forces that eventually overwhelm her. This direction by Yeats could also be read as indicative of an anxiety about wild women of inauspicious parentage running around the Irish stage and, by extension, the national landscape since, as Fitzpatrick points out, Ellen’s father might have been a Tinker.<sup>2</sup> Her dual heritage, and especially the insinuation of her Traveller blood, marks her and her body as a site of difference. She must be reined in and accounted for; her irrefutable death, as opposed to the open-ended final scene where she takes to the road (like Ibsen’s or Synge’s Nora, she notes) offers stability for the nation while also revealing how representations of women and, as some critics suggest, works by women, have been managed on the Irish stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzpatrick notes that *The Woman* was never published. She refers to the manuscript held at the National Library of Ireland. On the revised ending she notes: “Revisions to the original draft include that the heroine is now clearly understood to kill herself by drowning. However, this is never confirmed either mimetically or in the diegesis, and no body of the dead woman appears on stage” (2007: 75). She adds that, “It is significant, however, that O’Leary does not confirm the death of the protagonist: the audience is denied the final satisfaction of the elimination of the threatening element and a safe conclusion” (77).

<sup>2</sup> In *Tinkers*, the first extensive academic study of the Irish Traveller community, Irish scholar Mary Burke writes: “The Travellers, or to most Irish sedentary people before the 1960s, the ‘tinkers’, are members of a historically nomadic minority community defined by anthropologists as an ethnic group that has existed on the margins of Irish society for perhaps centuries” (2009: 2).

Nearly seventy years later, in 1998, the Abbey Theatre premiered Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...*, a play about Hester Swane, an Irish Traveller also spurned by the man she loves who is preparing to marry a younger woman from a wealthy, land-owning family and who seeks to evict her from the land she has lived on her whole life. Forty-year old Hester lives in a caravan on the outskirts of the bog with her seven-year old daughter Josie, her child with Carthage Kilbride who plans to take their daughter to live with him and his new bride in a 'proper' home. The play opens on the snowy bogland with Hester dragging a dead black swan<sup>3</sup> behind her when she encounters the Ghost Fancier, a merchant of death who has mistaken the morning for sunset, the time set to claim her. Realizing the error, the Ghost Fancier leaves but returns at the end of the play under gruesome circumstances after Hester sets fire to the land, killing the livestock and slicing Josie's throat to spare her a lifetime of waiting for her mother to return, just as Hester awaits the return of the mother who abandoned her on the Bog of Cats as a child. Wailing in agony, Hester then cuts out her own heart and falls dead on stage.

With the introduction of Hester, Carr's play pushes at the boundaries of identity and belonging with its multiple layers of meaning and symbolic invocations, offering several avenues for critical interpretation. Most immediately, as Irish theatre academics writing on the play have noted,<sup>4</sup> Carr invokes a variation of the Medea legend by resurrecting a similar premise for her heroine, suggesting a timelessness to Hester's plight that situates her within the pantheon of mythical feminine suffering and violent retribution for betrayal. Other academics also draw parallels to *Bog* with culturally specific modern plays with a similar plot and cast of characters.<sup>5</sup> And while critics have noted the influence and relevance of particular Greek plays to Irish playwrights—and Irish playwrights continue to produce adaptations of Greek works—this article situates Hester away

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<sup>3</sup> Swans appear often in Irish cultural texts and have tended to be the bird of choice in Irish literature, from the ancient Irish text "The Children of Lir" to Yeats's collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) to Oliver St. Gogarty's *An Offering of Swans* (1924) to more recently Marina Carr's dead black swan in the first scene of *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998).

<sup>4</sup> See Helen Heusner Lojek in *The Spaces of Irish Drama: Stage and Place in Contemporary Plays* (2011); Mary Trotter in *Modern Irish Theatre* (2008); Melissa Sihra's "The House of Woman and the Plays of Marina Carr" where she refers to the play as "a loose re-working of *Medea*" (2007: 212) and Cathy Leeney where she calls Hester a "quasi-Medea figure" (160) in "Ireland's exiled women playwrights: Teresa Deevy and Marina Carr" in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (2004). See also M.K. Martinovich's "The Mythical and the Macabre: The Study of Greeks and Ghosts in the Shaping of the American premiere of *By the Bog of Cats...*" in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "before rules was made"* (2003).

<sup>5</sup> See "Two Contemporary Medeas" by Zoraide Rodrigues Carrasco de Mesquita in *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 7.2 (July 2009): 195-203.

from classical Greek mythology and presents her in a different framework. While the invocation of a Greek cosmology connects Hester with the tradition of ancient tragedy readily accessible through Euripides's *Medea*, and in employing an iconic name in American literary history Carr conjures Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne (whose relationship and out-of-wedlock pregnancy also brand her an outsider in *The Scarlet Letter* as Lojek notes),<sup>6</sup> by placing the discarded and tormented mother in a haunted, liminal space where she searches nightly for her missing bloodlines, Carr establishes a trajectory beyond Greek and American literary traditions and moves into the realm of Mexican and Mexican-American folk legend.

Extending the transnational reach of Carr's play, Hester can be read as a counterpart of the Mexican legend of *La Llorona* (the "Crying Woman") who wanders near rivers and small bodies of water—similarly liminal spaces to the bog—in search of her dead or missing children as she wails into the night with her haunting grief, inspiring deep-rooted terror in the community as a deathly figure children learn to fear and whose tragic fate women seek to avoid. In most versions, she drowns her children as an act of retribution against her husband for betrayal before committing suicide and wandering as a ghost in search of her children. Perhaps most frightening to patriarchal structures of power, however, she stands as a model of lapsed maternity that haunts the future of men because she "symbolically destroys the familial basis for patriarchy" (Limón 1990: 416). Elements of class also haunt the foundation of her narrative since "she teaches people not to transgress the limits of their social class, and keeps wayward husbands and children in their place" (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 121). Read often as a Mexican *Medea*, she inspires descriptions such as "ghostly," "witchy," "monstrous" and "savage" (all terms used to describe Hester) in both the storytellers who pass on the local variations of the tale and the academics who study the genealogy and cultural relevance of the narrative.

While some academics trace origin points of *La Llorona's* narrative to the European *Medea* legend,<sup>7</sup> like variations of the Greek story, *La Llorona*

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<sup>6</sup> Lojek notes that, "Carr's use of Hawthorne's novel has no other precedent in Irish drama that I know of and adds additional layers to a remapping of Irish geography and stage space" (2011: 79). Clare Wallace also establishes a connection between the women, making an observation about Carr's protagonist: "Hester's scarlet letter will ultimately take the shape of her own heart, cut out of her chest in the play's final scene" (2003: 61).

<sup>7</sup> Limón quotes Américo Paredes who points out "that it is basically a European narrative...emphasizing a Europeanized milieu and European values" (quoted in Limón 1990: 407).

versions vary in detail and scope<sup>8</sup> and, like most oral accounts, inevitably manifest traces of a gradual narrative evolution.<sup>9</sup> For example, Sonia Saldivar-Hull points out the presence of water in the stories she heard:

The variant of the *Llorona* legend I grew up with in Brownsville was emphatically aimed at frightening boys and men. In the stories I heard from grandmothers and the many women who crossed the bridge to Brownsville from Matamoros to labor as domestics in Mexican American and Anglo homes, *La Llorona's* appearances were always near a body of water: a lake, an arroyo, the resacas of Brownsville, or the levee on the banks of the Rio Grande. (Saldivar-Hull 2000: 119)

José Limón notes that “the indigenous peoples add an *Indian* woman, sometimes in a flowing white dress, crying *in the night*, near a body of water (an important element in Aztec mythology), and confronting people, mostly men who are terrified when they see her” (Limón 1990: 408, italics in original). The appearance of water in these border-crossing versions tailors the narrative to the local geography and signals a departure from the European storyline, but in versions outlined in more detail later, the story of *La Llorona* returns to Europe when the basic framework of the plot merges with the story of betrayal by *La Malinche*, Cortés’s translator in some accounts and his slave in others, introducing elements of colonialism, identity politics and cultural nationalism that complicate the domestic storyline. Yet regardless of the account, most Mexican narratives typically describe *La Llorona* as a grieving spirit force in search of her missing children, portrayed sometimes as a desperate though benign mother-figure dressed in white with a solitary purpose, or more often, as a vengeful phantom seeking retribution and, like the Irish equivalent of the banshee, committed to screeching death’s call through the lonesome landscape. However, regardless of her intention, she is always depicted as a woman who, in ghostly form, haunts the spectral of the borderlands between the living and the dead.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Doyle notes: “A folktale told for centuries in Mexico and the Southwest, ‘*La Llorona*’ survives today in many forms. In one common version, a proud young girl marries above her station and is so enraged when her husband takes a mistress of his own class that she drowns their children in the river. Stricken by grief when she is unable to retrieve them, *la Llorona* dies on the river’s edge. But to this day the villagers hear a voice in the wind and the water—‘Aaaaiiii. . .my children. Where are my children?’—and see a wailing apparition in white walking up and down the riverbank after dark” (1996: 56).

<sup>9</sup> Oliver-Rotger cites Limón on this: “*La Llorona* is a fluid tale with constant shifts and changes depending on who tells it. Women cooperate to change this narrative, which prevents it from becoming a bounded text and makes it liable to constant redefinition. (Limón 78)” [quoted in Oliver-Rotger 2003: 122].

Against this backdrop, Hester Swane inhabits a similar subaltern position as *La Llorona*. Her “unnatural” ways are read as symptomatic of her Traveller blood, manifested both in her inclination to wander along the bog and her subsequent refusal to settle down in a home, though she is semi-settled in a caravan, putting her at odds with fully transient Travellers and highlighting the irony of her status as “a Traveller who does not travel” (Lojek 70). Her rage is understood not as a form of resistance to her re/displacement, but as part of her genetic or biochemical makeup resulting from her mixed parentage and questionable upbringing. It would be best for the community, those around her argue, if she just quietly went away and allowed them to get on with their lives without the nervous distraction she creates. She, like *La Llorona*, is relegated to borderland spaces where she exists as a disposable relic that threatens hegemonic conditions of power with her refusal to submit into oblivion and yield her man to another woman, instead foreclosing the possibility of men’s blood legacy, interfering with the allocation of inheritance rights including ancestral claims for land and, most importantly, assurances of ties to the future that protect the continued distribution of familial power.

This article then, will examine Carr’s play by using *La Llorona*’s story based on cultural interpretations of her transmorphing into *Malinche* to refract how ethnic difference and gender predetermine Hester’s narrative arc, illuminating transnational connections between the two exiled, embattled figures and opening up both stories beyond the limiting interpretations often imposed upon these complicated narratives. In using *La Llorona* to read Hester, the intent is to move away from the usual center base of interpretation—analyses of her rooted in relation to the classical Greek Medea myth—and offer an alternative framework and interpretive model from where to read and understand her narrative. And while Hester’s story bears resemblance to the similarly exiled *La Llorona*—both suffering humiliations that dictate the forces they fight against—perhaps most important for this study here is an examination of the influences that mark them as “other” from the community they inhabit and how justifications of their initial banishment and subsequent erasure is centered not on the violent acts they commit, but on the basis of their difference.

### **Reading Hester in a Transnational Context**

*Soy hija de la mujer que transnocha*  
 I am the daughter of *La Llorona*  
 and I am *La Llorona* herself,  
 I am the monster’s child and monstrous.

(Gloria Anzaldúa, excerpt from “*Llorona Coyolxauhqui*”)<sup>10</sup>

If *La Llorona* has been called the Mexican Medea, then *La Malinche* has been labeled the Mexican Eve (Oliver-Rotger 2003: 113) and her story been read as a version of downfall and betrayal against her people. The conquest of Mexico by Spanish forces led by Cortés occurred in 1521 and the birth of a male child resulting from the union between Cortés and the indigenous *La Malinche* is often located as the inaugural moment of *mestizaje* in Mexican cultural history. The children of Mexico then, are *mestizos*, the product of both European blood and indigenous Mexican ancestry. In *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*, Sonia Saldivar-Hull notes how Américo Paredes situates the story of *La Llorona* as an allegory for the conquest of Mexico and its indigenous people: “The legend of *La Llorona* contains such a story of *mestizaje*, of miscegenation, which Paredes locates within Hernán Cortés’s conquest of Mexico” (2000: 118). Explaining the narratives she herself heard as a child, Saldivar-Hull points out that:

That history, I now understand, was the history of the conquest of Mexico by Spanish forces. While I understand that, technically, these two legends are distinct, in the variants I heard as a child, *Llorona* and *La Malinche* were the same figure. *La Malinche* was the indigenous woman who was sold into slavery, and, as a slave, was given to Hernán Cortés. Male historiography has it that she was Cortés’s mistress. As his slave, she used her proficiency at languages and became his translator and eventually bore him a child. As a result the woman popularly known as *Malinche*, Malintzín Tenépal, has been blamed for the Spaniards’ conquest of Mexico. To be a *malinchista* is to be a traitor to Mexico or to Mexican customs. *La Llorona* murdered her children because she was betrayed by a Spanish “gentleman”; *La Malinche* symbolically murdered her “children,” the Indian tribes that Cortés and the Spanish conquistadores massacred. (2000: 120)

The notion of miscegenation figures largely in this reading of the story and serves as the basis for the origin myth of non-indigenous Mexicans. While origin myths are often mobilized as a form of cultural nationalism,

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<sup>10</sup> Two previously unpublished poems about *La Llorona* by Anzaldúa appeared in the *Anzaldúa Reader* (2009). In the following excerpt from the same poem, she provides a description on point for Hester when she writes about exile and loss, explaining how she finds herself “...in a dark wood/between home and the world/I feel alienated, feel as though I’m outside and apart from the world, homeless, lost/I’ve lost the sense of being alive,/I have become a ghost,/set apart from other beings” (294).

especially against the backdrop of imperialism as a nation forges its identity in contradistinction to colonial impositions of power, they also serve as reference point of difference, marking the boundaries between insider and outsider. These interpretations place heavy emphasis on the class distinctions between *La Malinche* / *La Llorona* and the Spanish male in the narrative, locating power differentials within an economy of race, class and gender.

In his study of *La Llorona*, José Limón traces the cultural and political significance of her story and offers her as the “third legend of Greater Mexico” after *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Malinche* (1990: 399-400). He argues that the first two symbols have been used to establish a framework where power over women is naturalized and notes the limitations these figures impose on modern women while also focusing on class as a central feature embedded in the narrative. Limón is critical of writers like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes who do not “critically deconstruct the legend” (1990: 406). He offers his own reading that posits *La Llorona* as a figure with the potential to transcend the limiting binary often imposed upon *Malinche* and *La Virgen*:

Ironically, these two major female symbols do not clearly serve female interests. Further, at another level they may ideologically ratify, not only the particular domination of women, but also the continuing exploitation of the Greater Mexican folk masses by a bi-national structure of power. Is there no major, popular female symbolic discourse that clearly speaks to the interests of these folk masses at both of these levels? I submit there is, and we may find it in the legend of the woman whom we left crying in (sic) the streets of Mexico City... (1990: 407)

Limón notes that while efforts by Mexican and Chicana writers to offer “revisionist interpretations of Doña Marina’s<sup>11</sup> biography to show she was a real, sensitive, intelligent woman who had to deal with Cortés under specific personal and political constraints”<sup>12</sup> (1990: 404) exist, no such revisionist attempts appear in relation to *La Virgen*.<sup>13</sup> Limón attributes this to her pervasive presence in the culture and the devotional reach she inspires. Appearing ten years after the conquest of Mexico, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* materializes as an indigenous woman to Juan Diego in 1531 and

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<sup>11</sup> “Doña” is a feminine address of respect typically reserved for elders and precedes a woman’s formal name. The male equivalent is “Don.”

<sup>12</sup> Limón includes an endnote [16] here that appears on page 429.

<sup>13</sup> This appears to have changed in the twenty-two years since the publication of Limón’s article.



becomes an important symbol of Mexican solidarity and cultural nationalism. Her emergence and subsequent prevalence in the culture can also be read as an attempt to offer an alternative and “redemptive symbol for both indigenous and *mestizo* Mexicans” (Limón 1990: 403) to the narrative of colonization and imperial violence enabled a decade earlier. As Oliver-Rotger writes, “the symbolic figure of Guadalupe, the Mexican native version of the Virgin Mary, is identified with transcendentalizing power, silence and maternal self-sacrifice” (2003: 113), characteristics of an idealized femininity tied to nation-formation.

Conquered lands are often configured as feminine and in need of protection by strong male citizen-subjects; Catherine Nash traces this trope in Ireland, noting that, “the gendering of Ireland has been used to define cultural identity and political status of the society and the identities and roles of men and women in Ireland (1997: 111). She argues that “the gendering of Ireland and the construction of Irish femininity have been supported by the traditional associations between nature, land, fertility and femininity” (1997: 110).

This move to connect the idealized female maternal body with nationalist discourse in Ireland employs the concept of ‘woman as nation’ and supports a partnership with Catholicism in the construction of the national mythos:

In the specific context of Irish cultural history, symbolic identification of women has been intensified both by the influence of Catholicism and by association with images of Nationalism. For examples, Yeats’ provocative play (1902) fuses such images of Ireland as the beautiful, young Cathleen Ni Houlihan with the suffering Poor Old Woman, the *Sean Bhean Voch*. (Llewellyn-Jones 2002: 67)

Yeats uses Cathleen Ni Houlihan—who appears as an old woman before turning into a “young girl with the walk of a queen” (11) when young Michael follows her out to the house and into the battlefield—as a way to represent Mother Ireland in the Irish cultural imagination. As Fitzpatrick notes, “as the foundation stone of modern Irish theatre, this dramatic representation of Woman-Nation might seem to reinforce the symbolic consonance between woman and land in a public and definitive act of representation” (2007: 69). In a strange coupling, this symbolic representation is particularly resonant when examined as part of a discourse on sacrifice and devotion. Cathleen, as the old woman, bewitches men into service of the state, luring them onto the battlefield in her name and transforming them into soldiers for the nation, reconfiguring their service as part of their loyalty and dedication to the young beautiful Cathleen who emerges only when they heed the call to action. Rewarded

with Cathleen's youthful beauty and approval, the men risk death for following her out the door as they do. The *Llorona / Malinche* narrative is also tied to feminine representations of land and death, but here, it functions as a cautionary tale for men who are often warned about her power to kill. Against this operational ethics of violence and destruction, the Virgin Mary becomes a redeeming force of feminine devotion.

As in Mexican Catholicism where "Guadalupe has served as a rallying point for Mexican nationalism" (Limón 1990: 405) the Virgin Mary provides the model image of femininity in Irish religious worship and her grace provides a path to salvation. In the past, the Catholic Church actively promoted Marian worship by cultivating Mary's iconography in both rituals during devotional services and within the local community through statues and emblems.<sup>14/15</sup> In "Irish Feminism" Siobhán Kilfeather notes, "The cult of Mary had a deep influence on the lives and imaginations of Catholic Irish women" (2005: 106). For Chicanas, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, *La Virgen* retains a vibrant and enduring presence that continues to pervade the cultural landscape:

Today, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano / *mexicano*. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. She is the symbol of the *mestiza* true to his or her Indian values. *La cultura chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). (1987: 30)

For Anzaldúa, *La Virgen* is a racialized hybrid figure and this identification with the mother privileges the indigenous aspect of Chicana identity, while in *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change* (2010), Gerardine Meaney writes that in Ireland images of the Virgin Mary have been mobilized as an emblem of "whiteness":

The conflation of images of Mother Ireland and Virgin Mary in Irish populist Catholic nationalism deployed the

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<sup>14</sup> Kilfeather notes, "The cult of the Virgin Mary was reinvigorated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by way of the Marian apparitions at Lourdes, Fatima and Knock, Co. Mayo, and recruited to the church's anti-communist crusade" (2005: 106). Nash also mentions the role of the cult of the Virgin Mary in regulating gender relations. (1997: 115).

<sup>15</sup> Cullingford writes: "In early 1985 statues of the Virgin in Kerry and elsewhere were reported to be moving, and attracted enormous crowds of believers. Conservative religious commentators argued that this phenomenon proved that Our Lady was grieved and angered by the terrible events of 1984, as well she might have been, but on what score?" (2001: 238-239).

Virgin Mother's status as epitome of whiteness as a guarantee of Irish (racial) purity. This function could only be performed if the maternal body was idealized out of existence, or at least out of representation. (2010: 7)

While the racial identification shifts, the importance of Guadalupe/Mary prevails in both cultures. The conflation of Mother Ireland with the idealized maternity of the Virgin Mary mirrors the attempt to redeem *La Malinche's* narrative with the appearance of *La Virgen* a decade after the conquest.

Viewed in this context, Hester the Traveller who births a hybrid child out of wedlock and refuses eviction and exile in silence does not conform to idealized maternity tied to either framework of nation building, racial purity or religious dictates on appropriate forms of maternity. She—returning to Yeats's letter to Lennox Robinson—"must die and we must know she dies" because she actually does "come to the understanding that she seeks something life, or her life, can never give" (quoted in Fitzpatrick 2007: 75). Using Yeats's framework, however, it is worth noting that both heroines—O'Leary's Ellen and Carr's Hester—wind up dead in the end.

### **By the Bog of Cats and Other Borderland Spaces**

The Bog of Cats may lie geographically near the center of Ireland, but it represents above all marginal territory, a border area determinedly beyond the confines of 'rational' control. (Lojek 2011: 95)

**Hester**            Ah, how can I lave the Bog of Cats, everythin' I'm connected to is here. I'd rather die. (11)

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) centers on Hester Swane as she reacts to the bulk of devastating news she deals with over the course of Carthage's wedding day, including the community's collective rejection of her lifestyle that does not cohere with normative patterns of domesticity: she does not have a proper 'home', she wanders the bog in search of her long-missing mother and she communes with nature on her walks at night. Carr infuses the text with supernatural references and conjures a Celtic paganism that aligns Hester with the land but also puts her at odds with the traditional settled society around her, including the properly ritualized Catholicism of the community, represented in the figure of eighty-year old Father Willow, a peculiar character busy flirting with the Catwoman who eats mice and drinks milk from bowls. Here, Carr takes on sacred Irish cultural iconography and contrasts them with blunt images of social decay

and moral degeneracy, from the dead swan in the first scene to the unapologetic departure from pious representations of priests. Hester herself is ruled to varying degrees by cosmic and rural inclinations that mediate her response to the community's expectations of her behavior, and whether she "feels" her missing mother's presence or carefully articulates her connection to the bog,<sup>16</sup> she is constantly moving between the living and the dead. This mixing of worlds is part of Carr's aesthetic, as Melissa Sihra notes: "One of the defining characteristics of Carr's dramaturgy is her evocative mingling of the everyday with the other-worlds of myth, folk-tales, ghosts and fairies" (2007: 19). The notion of crossing over from the spirit to the "real" world is another form of border-crossing the play embraces, moving from haunted liminal spaces and encounters with dead brothers to communal public celebrations to private interactions with missing mothers. The provocative juxtaposition of Hester's "witchy" ways with the community's fractured attempts at a normalized bourgeois existence is rendered visible in the ways the characters either actively distance themselves from her or attempt to describe the impulse to do so when they encounter her, acting as though her presence itself is uncanny.

A public outcast, Hester's only source of social currency comes from her child but as Carthage prepares to take Josie away, Hester makes one final play for him. She shows up on his wedding day in her own white bridal dress, accusing him of having made promises back when he was in love with her and marrying Caroline as a selfish act of greed. Carthage meanwhile aligns himself with a legacy of male privilege, social entitlement and material success when, like Medea's Jason, he seeks to marry Caroline for both her youth, thus ensuring the possibility of producing future male heirs, and the consolidation of wealth the match ensures, though he argues he is motivated by a desire to protect his existing family. When this wedding scene ends in Hester's complete rejection, she sets the house on fire—and all the animals in the barn—before coming to terms with the realization that her daughter would in fact be better off living with her father. However, it is little Josie who begs her to not send her away:

**Josie**                    Mam, I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return" (59).

Seeking to spare her child the pain of a lifetime of waiting—just as she has waited for her own mother Big Josie to return for her—Hester slits Josie's throat as she lies in her arms after the wedding celebration and offers an explanation for her actions:

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<sup>16</sup> Carr's play has inspired a burgeoning body of ecocriticism.

**Hester**        Yees thought I was just goin' to walk away and lave her at yeer mercy. I almost did. But she's mine and I wouldn't have her waste her life dreamin' about me and yees thwartin' her with black stories against me.

**Carthage**     You're a savage! (76-77)

While mired in horror over the loss of his child, Carthage calls Hester a savage, reducing her and her actions down to something he can name. It also functions as a reminder that the community has already labeled her a savage, reinforcing the discourse of colonization, domination and eviction that began long before her act of infanticide. Her blood origins, her counter-hegemonic lifestyle and the disruption she poses for normative patterns of domesticity marked her as an outsider from the beginning and form the basis of the collective communal rejection she faces. She inhabits the space of those who must, to quote Gloria Anzaldúa, “cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (quoted in Saldivar-Hull 2000: 67). In *Borderlands: La Frontera* Chicana writer Anzaldúa articulates a theoretical framework of the border/borderlands that transcends literal borders and moves into the realm of other contested spaces. Saldivar-Hull summarizes Anzaldúa's ideology:

Anzaldúa's feminism exists in a borderland grounded in but not limited to geographic space; it resides in a space not acknowledged by dominant culture. She uses the border as an organizing metaphor for Chicanas living in multiple worlds, multiple cultures, and employs border discourse to describe the borderlands' inhabitants: “*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the ‘normal’ (3). (Saldivar-Hull 2000: 67)

Using Anzaldúa's framework, Hester, *La Llorona* and Medea represent examples of “*los atravesados*”—those who cross over—and who occupy borderland spaces. Oliver-Rotger writes that, “Medea inhabits the realm of those qualified as the abject and the psychotic, the other, those ‘*atravesados*’ whom Gloria Anzaldúa situates in the epistemological and geographical terrain of the borderlands” (2003: 282). Here, the setting of the play, the Irish Midlands, itself functions as a border space caught in a nexus of multiple meaning. Lojek notes that Marina Carr “has repeatedly described the Midlands as a ‘crossroads’ and landscape as ‘another character in the work’” (2011: 68).

The notion of crossing and crossing over is key in Carr's play where characters inhabit liminal spaces and where Hester traverses several subject positions, but is always ultimately relegated to the fringe. Hester *atraviesa*—crosses—several subject positions and continually negotiates space and identity as she makes her way in the community. She is also accused of being wicked and prone to misbehaving; she is in essence a *traviesa*—the Spanish word that means mischievous—showing up in a white dress on Carthage's wedding day. And like *Malinche* and Medea, Hester also bears progeny with a foot in two worlds: Little Josie Swane is a hybrid child, part Irish and part Traveller.

Hester is an Irish Traveller, a distinct non-settled ethnic group in Ireland. As Mary Burke points out, Irish Travellers have their own cultural traditions and a distinct language, Cant (or Shelta as it is also referred to) that mark them as outsiders to the settled Irish community (2009).<sup>17</sup> She is clear, however, to note a distinction between Travellers and Gypsies: "Despite apparent similarities to British Romanies, Irish Travellers do not classify themselves as Gypsies, nor are they defined as such by anthropologists" (2009: 3). Lojek notes that, "Long-standing conflicts between the Traveller settled communities have regularly raised questions of rights and assimilation, of what it means to be 'at home' in Ireland" (2011: 93).

In an interview, Carr explained that she chose to make Hester a Traveller because "travellers are our national outsiders, aren't they?" (quoted in Cerquoni 2003: 178; Lojek 2011: 69). This notion of national outsiders is a key component to Anzaldúa's configuration of the borderlands and one that demands a consideration of what exactly comprises a desirable citizenry—who is an insider/outsider and on what basis—and who produces such a population. This question haunts the core of the play as the locals use Hester's Traveller origins as reason to ostracize and cast aspersions upon her even though she (like Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* who faces similar treatment at times) has lived on the land her entire life and has interacted with the people in the community on a daily basis. Carthage's mother, Mrs. Kilbride, is actively hostile towards Hester and her daughter over their lineage: "A waste of time givin' chances to a tinker. All tinkers understand is the open road and where the next bottle of

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<sup>17</sup> In the introduction to *Tinkers* Burke explains the origins and cultural traits of the Traveller community: "Contemporary Travellers in Ireland share common descent and history and possess discrete cultural practices: boundary rules against outsiders, rigid gender roles, an aspiration to be mobile, an adaptive tradition of self-employment and involvement in marginal trades, a preference for flexibility of occupation over job security, a pattern of providing short-term labour in accordance with market demands, adherence to Catholicism involving public displays of religiosity, early marriage and substantial dowry payments when families are affluent, a unique material culture, and district ritual of death and cleansing" (2009: 2).

whiskey is comin' from" (51). Xavier even uses it as a license to molest Hester on his daughter Caroline's wedding day:

**Hester** ...ya'll take nothin' from me I don't choose to give ya.

**Xavier** (*puts gun to her throat*) Won't I now? Think ya'll outwit me with your tinker ways and –

**Hester** Let go of me!

**Xavier** (*a tighter grip*) Now let's see the leftovers of Carthage Kilbride.

*Uses gun to look down her dress.*

**Hester** I'm warnin' ya, let go!

*A struggle, a few blows, he wins this bout.*

**Xavier** Now you are stronger than me? I could do what I wanted with you right here and now and no wan would believe ya. Now what I'd really like to know is when are ya plannin' on lavin'? (67)

Xavier violates Hester on the basis of his ability to treat her as subhuman and further isolates her from the community when he taunts her with the standard threat that “no wan would believe ya”, consolidating his power over her silence too. Desperate and in face of this abuse, Hester nonetheless bargains with Carthage for the opportunity to at least remain on the land in the caravan:

**Hester** If ya just let me stay I'll cause no more trouble. I'll move into the caravan with Josie. In time ya may be glad to have me around. I've been your greatest friend around here, Carthage, doesn't that count for nothin' now? (69)

Unlike Medea, who attempts to negotiate with Kreon for the opportunity to remain one more day—ostensibly to more carefully plan the murders of Jason, his bride, Kreon and her children—Hester wants only to remain on the land and raise her child. Carthage however will not abide this, and offers her money to leave. Hester reminds him that the land he owns was purchased with blood money; he played a role in the murder of her brother Joseph who Hester later reveals she killed not for money but over jealousy. Hester could not deal with sharing her mother, even with her

brother, and kills him, slicing his throat and throwing his body overboard with Carthage's help. Carthage rejects her version of events and, unable to convince him, it becomes clear that while Hester's child with Carthage allows her entry into the community, it will never guarantee her social or cultural acceptance. She will remain an outsider, and with Carthage's refusal to marry her, any chance she has for integration into bourgeoisie society is lost. And while little Josie is partially accepted within the family unit, her grandmother insists on reminding her where she came from:

**Mrs. Kilbride**        Ya got some of it right. Ya got the 'Josie' part right, but ya got the 'Kilbride part wrong, because you're not a Kilbride. You're a Swane. Can ya spell Swane? Of course ya can't. You're Hester Swane's little bastard. You're not a Kilbride and never will be.

**Josie**                I'm tellin' Daddy what ya said.

**Mrs. Kilbride**        Tell him! Ya won't be tellin' him anythin' I haven't tould him meself. He's an eegit, your daddy. I warned him about that wan, Hester Swane, that she'd get her claws in, and she did, the tinker. That's what yees are, tinkers. And your poor daddy, all he's had to put up with. Well, at least that's all changin' now... (17)

Mrs. Kilbride's comments to Josie point out that some members of the community are viewed as more valuable than others. However, as Mrs. Kilbride reveals, perhaps that can be remedied to some extent by altering the circumstances of little Josie's life, and situating her in opposition to her mother.

Hester's "wild" existence, meanwhile, is relegated to the absolute fringes of the bogland. She resists this placement to the bitter end, yet cannot transcend the social rejection that manifests itself in her current banishment from "proper" society, confronting Caroline on her wedding day and issuing a warning:

**Hester**                You're takin' me husband, you're takin' me house, ya even want me daughter. Over my dead body. (21)

Functioning on an ethics of pure resistance, Hester refuses to internalize the public criticism, opting instead to loudly proclaim her right to live where and how she chooses:



**Hester** I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end me days. I've as much right to this place as any of yees, more for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees. And as for me tinker blood, I'm proud of it. It gives me an edge over all of yees around here, allows me see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are. I'm warnin' ya now, Carthage, you go through with this sham weddin' and you'll never see Josie again. (27)

Hester is proud of her “tinker blood” and uses it as a badge of authenticity, insisting she has access to a kind of truth unavailable to the rest. For Hester, being outside of the ‘normal’ means she must learn to strategically survive in a zone that does not want to acknowledge her right to exist and this requires the mobilization of multiple mechanisms of survival. Here, as an act of rebellion for her dis/replacement, she burns down the house. Yet, Hester does not ascribe actual value to the house, demonstrated in the ruthless destruction of it:

**Hester** Would ya calm down, Monica, only an auld house, it should never have been built in the first place. Let the bog have it back. Never liked that house much anyway.

**Monica** That's what the tinkers do, isn't it, burn everythin' after them? (59)

Monica reiterates the community's prejudice against Travellers,<sup>18</sup> linking Hester with an ethics of annihilation and waste, and later reveals that the community can only articulate Hester's rage in terms of “black-art”:

**Monica** Well, I don't know how ya'll swing to stay now, your house in ashes, ya after appearin' in that dress. They're sayin' it's a black-art thing ya picked up somewhere. (61)

Monica's statement is key, linking her as it does with a legacy of dangerous wandering witches—akin to descriptions of *La Llorona*—and attributes the damage she causes to supernatural acts of magic and sorcery, not one rooted in resistance against displacement. Xavier is quick to remind her of

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<sup>18</sup> Lojek notes that “Though Hester's community is now commonly termed the ‘Travelling’ community, other characters invariably refer to her as a ‘tinker,’ a term that is generally regarded (and that these characters clearly regard) as pejorative and largely dismissive of the value of Traveller culture” (2011: 69).

history's treatment of "witchy" women: "A hundred years we'd strap ya to a stake and roast ya till your guts exploded" (68). Painting Hester as a witch is a convenient mechanism for Xavier, whose threats register as an attempt to assert his control over her, and functions as a reminder that the community already believes she possesses "black art" capabilities and as such poses a threat beyond the corporeal realm.<sup>19</sup> It also aligns Hester with *La Llorona*, whose metamorphosis from woman to ghost in the cultural imaginary often involves painting her as a witch. Hester herself tells her dead brother she thinks she is already a ghost:

**Hester**            Oh I think I know, Joseph, for a long time now I  
                              been thinkin' I'm already a ghost. (58)

This assertion connects the two figures because though Hester is alive through most of the narrative—unlike depictions of *La Llorona*—she is forced to nonetheless negotiate the positions of witch and ghost. Here, Hester and *La Llorona*'s fate intersect in the collective treatment they receive at the hands of those around them. Some read Hester as an icon of feminine rage who is attempting to manage multiple rejections from several social forces—much like the treatment *La Llorona* faces. Hester is continually angry throughout the play: she is angry at Carthage for the betrayal on his part; she is angry at her absentee mother who has never returned for her and for whom she nightly searches, enacting her own *Llorona* performance; and she is angry at the intrusive members of the local community who would deny her access to the community because of her "tinker blood." And while she is proud of her Traveller origins and tied to the Bog of Cats by way of personal history and affection, in fact she yearns for the convention of settled, domestic life and wants Carthage to marry her so they can raise their child together on the bog.

Here the bog—like the bodies of water *La Llorona* wanders near—becomes transformed into a mystical space with cosmic pull that lures people in and disappears them from material existence, like Big Josie Swane who never returns for Hester, at once feeding into notions of the Irish landscape as a supernatural force that traps and paralyzes movement forward towards modernity while simultaneously mythologizing the bogland as the final bastion of Irish authenticity working to impede the force of cultural erosion. The bog then, a space of energy (peat) and labor also becomes a place that itself consumes and cannibalizes, and is ultimately rendered complicit in the disappearance of Big Josie Swane whose absence haunts Hester, "further compounding the association of woman with displacement, exile and historical erasure" (Sihra 2007: 212). Hester

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<sup>19</sup> In another connection to Hawthorne, Melissa Sihra notes that, "Similar to the plight of Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* the accusations of black magic are based on a distrust of the extra-ordinary" (2009: 583).

however, does not conform to the community's demand that she "migrate," challenging and resisting the push into exile. In doing so, she refuses to partake in a narrative that moves certain women out of view—like those in Magdalen Asylums<sup>20</sup> or who emigrate for a variety of social or economic reasons and are not heard from again. Hester does not leave, unlike the two sisters in Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990),<sup>21</sup> and sees it as an affirmation of her birthright to remain. She tells her dead brother's ghost she senses her mother nearby:

**Joseph** Death's a big country, Hester. She could be anywhere in it.

**Hester** No, she's alive. I can smell her. She's comin' towards me. I know it. Why doesn't she come and be done with it! If ya see her tell her I won't be hard on her, will ya?  
(55)

She also reveals to Monica that: "All them years I was in the Industrial School I swore to meself that wan day I'm comin' back to the Bog of Cats to wait for her and I'm never lavin' again" (61). After enduring separation from both her mother and the bog, Hester is resolute in her conviction to stay and wait.

In a noteworthy departure from the *La Llorona* narrative, Hester searches for her mother instead of her children. Leeney notes the importance of this point:

It is significant that Hester's child is a girl, since this establishes the line of female connection as the issue. In this way the play is radical in the Irish canon. It is an enactment of mourning for the absent mother; this is not only Hester's mother, but, theatrically speaking, the mother absent from so many important Irish plays. (2004: 160)

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<sup>20</sup> Magdalen Asylums, also known as Magdalen Laundries where women had to work without pay washing the laundry of the local community, were residential institutions for "fallen" women such as unmarried mothers. Writes Francis Finnegan: "Confinement, forced labour and senseless atonement, obsessively urged was but part of their penance. Often the separation from a child was an added torment, and some, without hope and resigned to that unnatural existence, remained in the Homes until they died" (2004: 242). Her book *Do Penance or Perish* researches the history of Magdalen Asylums and their existence in Ireland.

<sup>21</sup> In Friel's play (1990), sisters Agnes and Rose emigrate and despite efforts to find them, they are not heard from again until twenty-five years later when Michael finally finds Rose in London soon before she dies. He discovers Agnes died some time before and learns they moved frequently during their time abroad where they worked as cleaning women until they could not find work anymore and eventually became homeless and died destitute.

Hester's search for the maternal then, is a search for the missing mothers Leeney identifies. If modern and contemporary Irish drama is populated with ineffectual fathers, then mothers or mother figures are virtually absent in most plays, with notable exceptions.<sup>22</sup> Here the ghost of Hester's mother continually drives the foundational energy of *Bog* and reminds the spectator that the persistence of failed maternity and stunted reproduction haunt the core of this play. The layering of past narratives place Hester in a long line of suffering, maligned mothers whose actions leave her story in the hands of those who would deny her right to remain on the land she is connected to through personal devotion and maternal history. The question of who will tell her story emerges at this juncture. By reading Hester beyond the Greek plotline and more closely aligning her with *La Llorona*, the focus shifts and offers the possibility of situating her narrative not exclusively in relation to an established classic about a princess with supernatural powers, but alongside a similarly marginalized character whose folk story endures and belongs to those who retell it along the borderlands.

## Conclusion

In the last twenty-five years, Chicana feminists have recuperated *La Llorona* narratives with modern interpretations rooted in sympathetic and more expansive readings,<sup>23</sup> as they have done with images of the *Virgen de*

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the long-suffering Maurya in Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) or Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985) where Mommo presents a forceful maternal presence, though she is incomprehensible and in need of constant care. See also Marina Carr's *The Mai* (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Cisneros, Maria Helena Viramontes and Cherrie Moraga have all written works dealing with the story of *La Llorona*. Oliver-Rotger notes: "...the reference to other popular figures like *Malinche* and *La Llorona* is also present in Cisneros' and Viramontes' fiction, as well as in Moraga's drama and essays. These references have been viewed as a return to the indigenous essentialism that prevailed during the Chicano movement and as a romanticization of an unknown history" (Cooper Alacrón 6, 141) [Oliver-Rotger 2003: 57]. The title story in Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) reinterprets the legend and offers its own contemporary retelling, as does Viramontes in her urban story "Tears on my Pillow" in the collection *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985). Oliver-Rotger writes that Moraga's "*Hungry Woman* is a dystopian tragedy that draws on the Mexican and European legend and myth of *La Llorona* and *Medea*, both of which relate the tragic fate of women who dare cross borders" (377). Also, many major Chicana/o academics have written extensively on the subject.

*Guadalupe*.<sup>24</sup> As Saldivar-Hull notes: “In border feminist art, the *Llorona* of Chicana feminists no longer figures as enemy or as victim...Feminist writers on the border forge complex narratives that bring to bear the nuances of the theories of intersectionality” (2000: 126). These theories of intersectionality open up the possibility of reading Hester as a transnational, cross-cultural border figure like *La Llorona*. These mothers represent the site of cultural collision and challenge a designated identity. Their defiance also repudiates the kind of historical erasure that Medea’s Jason promulgates: “We need another way to get us sons. No women then —That way all human misery would end” (19). This desire to erase the female body out of existence is rendered clear not only in Jason’s lament but in the ghostly form of *La Llorona*’s body and in the physical banishment of Hester from the community in *By the Bog of Cats*. Yet, Hester’s final words to Carthage reveal her strategy of resistance against the demands she slip quietly into oblivion from communal memory:

**Hester:** Ya won’t forget me now, Carthage, and when all of this is over or half remembered and you think you’ve almost forgotten me again, take a walk along the Bog of Cats and wait for a purlin’ wind through your hair or a soft breath be your ear or a rustle behind ya. That’ll be me and Josie ghostin’ ya. (77)

Hester, like *La Llorona*, will not go away, “ghostin’” both the landscape she is connected to and the community that banished her. The fact that these figures continue to reappear in contemporary forums may reveal a deep anxiety their stories provoke in hegemonic structures of powers, and rather than follow Jason’s decree to alleviate that tension, the continued persistence of their narratives can also be read as a powerful form of resistance against these kinds of forces as they withstand dispossession by refusing complete exile, ultimately returning to assert their presence.

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford links Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor’s move to recuperate the image of the Virgin Mary with similar work by Chicana artists: “Instead of rejecting the traditionally pure and submissive Virgin as an unrealistic and psychologically damaging ideal, O’Connor resituates her in opposition to the patriarchy. This is not an original move (it is more closely related to the ‘goddess’ feminism of the early eighties), but nor is it necessarily ineffective. It may be compared to the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe among Chicana women in Texas, who erect domestic shrines that are both monuments of kitsch and sources of power and consolation” (2001: 251-252).

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