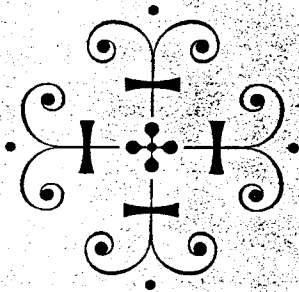
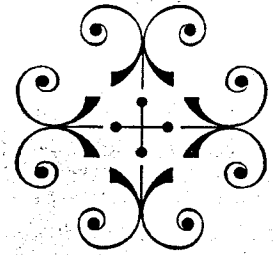


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LA LLORONA, EL KOOKOOEE, AND SEXUALITY

Rudolfo Anaya

In *Bless Me, Ultima*, my first novel, I looked at my childhood through the eyes of a novelist. In the process of writing the novel, I explored the childhood experiences, dreams, folklore, mythology, and communal relationships that shaped me in my formative years. Writing became a process of self-exploration.

Why is childhood so important? During childhood one undergoes primal experiences, and responds to experience directly and intuitively. The child occupies the space of first awareness, and thus, the child is closer in spirit to the historical dawning of first awareness of humankind on earth. The child is a storyteller who assigns roles; the child is a mythmaker.

I grew up on the banks of the Pecos River in eastern New Mexico, and as a child I spent a great deal of my free time along the river, in the hills, and by the lakes that surrounded the small town of Santa Rosa. In the 1940s the town was going through wrenching changes brought about by World War II, but it was still, in many ways, immersed in an ambience created by the first settlers of the valley generations before. For the Nuevo Mexicanos of the valley, the heritage was the Spanish language, the Catholic religion, and the old folkways preserved by the farmers from villages like Puerto de Luna where my grandfather lived.

I am grateful for the cultural and natural environment in which I lived as a child because the ambience provided me with a set of values which have served me all my life. Growing up along the river taught me that nature is indeed imbued with a spirit. One of my first awarenesses of this was the wailing cry I heard one afternoon along the river. My mother told me it was the spirit of La Llorona, the wailing woman of legend who wandered the river in search of her lost children. This fearful figure of our folktales was the first ghost in the bush that I encountered as a child.

Later, as I grew and expanded my territory, I made the journey with my boyhood friends to the Hidden Lakes. In the hills of the llano I felt the spirit of nature throb with life; I heard the voices on the wide plain and in the darker solitude of the lakes and river. Some of the ghosts were communal figures which were part of the Hispanic and Native American folktales. These characters from the folktales had names and personalities; they lived in the oral tradition. Others were more personal spirits which we as children created when we told stories; they were our ghosts, our childhood entry into mythmaking.

Because I grew up in a Catholic household, I was taught that life had a meaning. Later in life I began to understand that as we mature we question meaning, and we learn to construct new answers to the questions of life. Growing up in a Catholic family meant I spent a lot of time trying to understand the nature of God. The traditions of my ancestors and the church helped shape my knowledge as I grew into young manhood.

One of the most important rites of passage that children experience is the awareness of their sexuality. We are sexual creatures, and much of our identity is tied up with our sexuality. Sexuality was not discussed in our home or school, and in the religious arena it was only associated with sin. As I grew into young manhood there was no one to explain the new realm of sexual awareness. Many years later I realized that there were characters in the cultural stories that had a direct relation to sexuality. These folk characters were there to teach sexual taboos. To under-

stand that important time in my life I returned to childhood and analyzed the role of two such folk figures whose stories seem intricately tied to sexuality.

I hope to shed some light on childhood sexuality by looking at these two figures from our Nuevo Mexicano folklore, a folklore that is part of the wider Hispanic culture of Las Americas. We know that if repressed or made a fearful thing by narrow rules, sexual awareness can be stifled. If the rites of passage into one's sexuality are understood, that understanding can enhance one's positive sense of identity.

Everything in the universe is related; we are all connected; from stardust to human flesh, we vibrate with the same elements of the universe. The web of life is infused by spirit, and each one of us has the power to use that creative energy to manifest our potential. This light that shines within can extend itself to others, and thus we learn very early about love and caring, kindness and joy. We also learn that by using the energy we have within we can overcome the negative obstacles in our path.

In life we move from one level of awareness to the next. one identity to the next. Growing into the new levels of awareness in our journey is not just a function of aging, it also means growing in understanding. When there is a crisis of self-identity, we attempt to shed light on the passage. That struggle to know one's self is the crux of life.

The stories of the folk tradition helped me in that search, but I know now that my time to learn the truth imbedded in the stories which dealt with sexuality was interrupted. With time the figures in the stories would have made sense, but at age seven I entered the Anglo American school system and began to lose touch with the folk material of my culture. Long after, as a grown man, I had to return to the stories to understand what they had to teach me.

Some of the stories of the folk tradition told of the monsters which existed in the bush, and because I was to spend so much time in the hills, and near the lakes and river of my native town, I listened closely. It is in the bush that we encounter the darkness that assails our spirit. In the bush exist the monsters of our legends and myths, the ghosts of the communal stories. The spirits and monsters of the bush are creations of our minds, both the communal psyche and the personal. Awareness or coming to a new consciousness are steps toward maturity, and the stories can serve as guideposts.

For us Nuevo Mexicanos growing in the Spanish-speaking villages, the cuentos of the folk tradition related the adventures of heroes who overcame the monsters, and through these stories it was possible to understand the role of the ghosts in the stories.

The historical role of the storyteller has been to characterize these monsters. We all have monsters to conquer, ghosts to confront in the bush. Today the bush has become the dangerous urban streets, the corporate boardroom, or the bedroom, but the folk stories have such a strong hold on the psyche that they serve us even in these new settings. When we understand the monsters within, we know ourselves better.

My childhood environment was a primal setting; it was the river and its bosque. There, under the canopy of the gigantic cottonwood, Russian olive, and tamarisk trees I met my ghosts. I traveled deeper and deeper into the river darkness, always full of fear, because the presence of the monsters was palpable. My ghosts were real. The cry of the doves became the moan of La Llorona; the breeze shifting shadows in the dark paths where I walked could be the monstrous figure of El Coco, the bogeyman of our stories.

In the oral tradition of my folklore, La Llorona and El Coco, or Cucúí (Kookoóee, as I spell the name to fit the sound), were well known. I heard many stories about these two monsters, sitting by the warm stove of my mother in her safe kitchen when family or visitors told stories. And at the end of the stories the warning for us children was always the same: "Be good, be

careful, or La Llorona will get you. Don't stay out late at night or El Coco will get you." These two figures put fear in our hearts; the folk were warning us about something. Was it only about staying out late at night or was there a deeper meaning in the stories of these two figures?

Sometimes in the warm summer nights the gang of boys I grew up with stayed out late in the hills or by the river, and we would build a fire and tell stories. We talked about women, or the young girls we knew at school, and we bragged about our newfound sexual powers. We told stories about witches and monsters, and the two favorite stories were about the well-known figures, La Llorona and El Cucú.

When we left the warmth and safety of the fire we had to walk home in a darkness full of sounds and shapes and lurking figures. Then someone would shout that he saw something move; any shadow could become one of the dreaded ghosts. "La Llorona!" was a cry of terror that turned our blood to ice. Oh, how we ran. I was safe only after I entered my home, the sanctuary which held the proper Christian fetishes to ward off the evil spirits of the night.

Sometimes I found myself alone along the river at dusk, having gone down to the river to cut wild alfalfa for our milk cow. I would work fast and hard; I didn't want to be there when darkness engulfed the river. At that haunting time, the presence of the river came alive. The ghosts of the bush walked in the shadows. I felt fear, dread—real emotions which I had to understand and conquer. I had been warned: Hurry home or La Llorona will get you!

I did meet La Llorona, and I did meet El Kookoóee. There in the darkness of the bushes of my river, I met them more than once. The ghosts of the bush are real, whether we explain them as projections of our psyche or as a creation of communal oral tradition. When you meet them in the dark and you are a child, you know they are real!

According to legend, La Llorona killed her children and drowned them in the river. There are hundreds of variations on the story, but the point is she gave birth to illegitimate children. She broke a rule of the tribe. She was jilted or cast away by the man who fathered her children, and in her rage at being used she killed the children. Her penance was to wander the banks of the river looking for the children she drowned.

El Kookoóee was a masculine ghost, more nebulous, larger, and more powerful, but as frightful as La Llorona. He was the father figure who warned the male child of the dangers inherent in sexual awareness and practices. A friend told me that when he was a child he was told to hurry back from the outhouse. "The Cucú will get you," was the warning. He was being warned not to take time to play with himself.

One ghost is feminine, the other masculine; both are there to warn the child not to indulge in sexual practices. I didn't know that then; I only knew I was aware of, and fascinated by, my new sexual world. Unfortunately, there was no one with whom to discuss my new feelings. Sex is a sin, the priest at the church said. I sensed there was something in the story of La Llorona that would help me understand my change. I was drawn to La Llorona; I felt I had something to learn from her. She was, after all, a mother. Was I her child? How? What secret did she have to reveal to me?

Was she a product of the fear of sexuality of the elders of the tribe? Was she created to keep me from the sexual desires and fantasies which began to fill my world? They had made a monster out of her and banished her to the river where I spent time with my friends. After we swam we rested naked on the warm sandbars and spun myth after sexual myth.

In the evenings when we played hide and seek with the neighborhood girls, the awareness of sexuality was overwhelming. We ran to hide with the girls, to be close for a moment and to touch them. The girls whispered, "You're not supposed to touch or that might make babies." Even kissing might make babies in that mysterious world of sex about which we knew so little. As the evening grew darker our parents called us in. "Cuidado. La Llorona anda cerca."

Now I know that those old men who condemned sexuality and insisted that we fear the natural part of our lives created the spirit of La Llorona. As a child I was on the brink of understanding my entry into young manhood. La Llorona and El Kookoóee were playing a part in my passage into sexual identity.

El Kookoóee was the father ghost, the old Abuelo who rose up from the shadows. He was so powerful; I knew he could eat me alive, tear at my flesh, devour me. He sought my unquestioning obedience; he was a deity who allowed no transgressions. He was a reflection of the fathers of the village who warned me of sexual taboos. Perhaps it was more than masturbation the elders feared; the taboo of incest was also hidden in the warning.

Both folklore figures had proper roles to play, which were to teach me sexual taboos. Did they have to be so fearful? My guess is that most figures in legends and mythology used to teach sexual taboos are fearful creatures. Their role is to frighten the young and keep them within the fold of family, community, and religious dogma.

At each stage of life we enter different awarenesses of our sexuality, and that sexuality is so closely tied to the energy connecting us to others that it is crucial to understand those new awakenings of body and soul. Understanding is liberation, and when I finally understood the meaning of those childhood ghosts I understood myself better. But understanding did not come in one epiphany; it came over many years of searching—a search not yet finished.

My childhood was shaped by a world view that had a long history in the valleys of New Mexico. But at age seven, when I first attended school, I discovered a new universe. The society of the school knew nothing about my world; it knew nothing about La Llorona and El Kookoóee. They taught me about a gnome who lived under a bridge, a monster who would devour Billy Goat Gruff if he dared to cross the bridge to greener meadows. (The figure of the goat is appropriate. It has come to be a symbol of sexuality or lust.) Of course I knew it was really La Llorona who lived under the bridge which I crossed every day on the way from my home on the hill into town. I heard the older kids whisper as we crossed the bridge. Lovers had spent a few moments under the bridge by the banks of the river. The evidence of the night's passion for high school students was there. They dared, I thought, to enter the world of sex in the very home of La Llorona and El Kookoóee. Weren't they afraid? Sex was supposed to be fearful.

Awakening into the world of sexuality was not easy; it was a fearful journey. The ghosts of the bush were there to warn us of our indiscretions, and the strict rules of the church were there to punish us. It was, after all, the patriarchal church that ostracized La Llorona for her sin.

In school I read the story of the Headless Horseman met by Ichabod Crane one fearful night. This Headless Horseman was like my Kookoóee, but the headless wonder was tame compared to El Coco. I knew about El Kookoóee, and what Ichabod experienced in one night I had already experienced many times. In my time of awakening sexuality, in that crucial time which was a crisis of identity, I had already met the taboo ghosts of my culture.

On the feminine side, the two characters I remember from school storybooks are Snow White and Cinderella. Both young girls were feared by their older, uglier stepmothers. Both young heroines are enslaved by the taboos of the older women. Both will eventually free themselves, and the stories have a happy ending. There is no happy ending to the story of La Llorona. She comes from a Catholic world, and breaking a taboo is not forgiven. She is condemned to search for her children forever.

Was I, the boy becoming aware of my expanding sexual world, to be part of her condemnation? If I did not heed the warnings of my elders would I also become an outcast? The writer I was to become would question everything, and I would eventually break with some of the narrow ways of the tribe. I was destined to leave the strict, dogmatic teachings of the church.

My first sin was insignificant and natural; I broke a taboo in the youthful epiphany of masturbation. I became a confidant of La Llorona, and like her, I had no one in whom to confide. We were both sinners, doomed to wander outside the prescribed rules.

Those years were my first years in school. The school was unaware of the centuries of oral tradition of my New Mexican culture. The school system did not acknowledge the ghosts of the bush which I knew so well. The stories of La Llorona or El Kookoóee were never told in the classroom; there was no guide to lead us through our folktales. I was not helped to understand the meaning of my own world.

The schools did not deem important my oral tradition or the stories of my ancestors which came from that tradition. I worked my way through a graduate degree, and I never heard the stories of my culture in the curriculum. The school was telling me that my folkways and stories were not important enough to be in the classroom; I was filled with sadness.

Some will say that losing the stories of the ghosts in the bush is no great loss, but I insist they are crucial in the maintenance of culture. As these folk figures of the culture disappear, the culture which created them is also lost. And because El Kookoóee and La Llorona deal directly with the world of sexuality, they are not mere stories to frighten children; they are archetypal characters which speak forcefully about self-awareness and growth.

We must continue to use our mythic characters in contemporary versions of our folktales. We need wise teachers to help the children understand their growth during the critical years; after all, the stories were created to teach values. The story of La Llorona and El Kookoóee have much to teach us. In the reading circle a good teacher can lead the children into illuminating revelations about the role of these figures. Teaching can be an open process of revelation, not one which fears the intimate areas of growth. An open, accepting process is far better than one which favors fear and whispered interpretations.

We should learn the oral traditions of many tribes, of many places of the world. It was important for me to learn about the gnome, the Headless Horseman, Snow White, and Cinderella, because the stories were a window into the culture that created the stories. The more stories I learned, the closer to the truth I got, the more liberated I became, and the more I realized the common problems which beset us all.

I began to realize that culture often disappears in small pieces. When the children no longer know La Llorona or El Kookoóee stories, a very important ingredient of our culture is lost, and we will be forced to look for those ingredients in foreign cultures. Part of my role as a writer is to rescue from anonymity those familiar figures of our tradition. I wrote a novella, *The Legend of La Llorona*, which describes, from my point of view, the trials and tribulations of the New World wailing woman, the Malinche of Mexico. In this love story I looked not only into the motives of the lovers, Cortés and Malinche, but I also analyzed the political and cultural impact of the Old World conquest on the New World.

But what of the Kookoóee? Were the children learning about this bogeyman of our culture? Was one more element of our folk culture about to disappear? Was the old bogeyman already gone?

In the summer of 1990 I gathered together a group of Chicano artists in Albuquerque. I proposed to them that we build an effigy of El Kookoóee and burn it at a public fiesta. The artists responded enthusiastically to the idea. No one knew what El Kookoóee looked like, but given our creativity, we came up with sketches and began to build the sixteen-foot-high effigy. He had rooster's feet some said, so that's what we put on him, and long arms with huge hands, and his head was big and round with red eyes and a green chile nose. His teeth were sharp, his fangs yellow and long. Matted hair full of weeds fell to his shoulders. He carried a large bag, so we decided to have each child write his or her fear on a piece of paper and put it in the bag. When

the effigy was burned those fears would go up in smoke. The stories' cleansing effect was duplicated in the burning of the effigy.

We drew together as a community to recreate one of our ghosts of the bush, the bogeyman of our childhood. We recreated El Kookoóee, told stories about him as we worked, and made sure the children understood the effigy and the stories of the old bogeyman. We recreated a cultural figure many thought was insignificant, and in doing so we better understood the role of El Kookoóee ourselves. A deep feeling of community evolved; we were no longer alienated artists working alone, we were a group with common roots.

When we burned the effigy one evening in October at a community festival in the south valley of Albuquerque, over 500 people attended. People gathered to look at the effigy, and they remembered stories they had heard as children. They began to tell the stories to their children.

The children were the winners. Unlike our generation's experience at school, they saw that the stories from their culture were worthy of artistic attention. As the sun set and the Kookoóee went up in flames, we realized that we had created a truly moving communal experience. We had taken one character out of the stories of our childhood and rescued him from anonymity.

After the burning of the effigy, I began to look more closely at the role of this ghost of the bush in my childhood. El Kookoóee and La Llorona are not only connected to the awareness of sexuality; they resonate with many other deeper meanings. But to understand those meanings we have to pass on the stories, we have to recreate the characters in our time, and we have to make the schools aware of their importance. For us, building and burning the effigy of El Kookoóee helped validate an element of our cultural ways. Nothing is too insignificant to revive and return to the community if we are to save our culture. We can rescue ourselves.

We still have much to teach this country, for we have a long history and many stories to tell. The stories from our tradition have much to tell us about the knowledge we need in our journey. We need to get our stories into the schools, and we need the stories of many different ways of life. We need to be more truthful and more sensitive with each other as we learn about the complexity which comes with growth. It is futile and wasteful to depend on only one set of stories to learn the truth. There are many stories, many paths, and they are available to us in our own land.

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