Reclaiming Medea: Transforming Latin American Immigrant Identity Through Adaptations of Greek Tragedy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Theatre

By

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May 2016
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Ah-jeong Kim for her guidance, expertise and patience over my years at California State University Northridge. None of this would have been possible without your constant support and encouragement. Thank you Dr. Hillary Miller and Professor Larry Biederman for sharing your incredible knowledge and giving so much time to this thesis. Thank you to Professor Efren Delgadillo for sharing your experiences with me. Special thanks to Dr. Leigh Kennicott for inviting me to the Getty Villa lecture and inspiring this thesis and to Dr. Ron Popenhagen for expanding the world of theatre and encouraging me to think outside the box.

My deepest thanks go to my family and friends for your unending support and encouragement through my graduate studies and the writing of this thesis. Thank you to my mother for your advice and constant support. Thank you to my best friend Karen for helping me to find my path. And last, but most definitely not least, thank you to my husband Mark and my daughters Emilia and Sarah. Without your patience, love, and understanding, I would not be where I am today.
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Abstract

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This thesis will examine adaptations of Euripides’s Medea by playwrights Luis Alfaro and Cherrie Moraga. In isolating issues of Latin American identity and immigration expressed in the adaptations, this thesis will explore how the playwrights integrated these issues into their works. The sociological analysis through which Alfaro’s Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles will be viewed approaches the Latin American immigrant experience utilizing a phenomenological approach modeled after and informed by various sociological experts and theorists. Moraga’s The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea will be examined as a vehicle for rewriting history within the context of her personal struggles with sexuality, gender discrimination and indigeneity. This thesis will also address how localization, humor, and settings in which the productions took place affected the reception of the adaptations.
Introduction

When playwright Luis Alfaro wandered into a bookstore in 2004, he came across a great bargain: ten Greek plays for ten dollars. The first play he read was Sophocles’ *Electra*, in which a young girl murders her mother to avenge her father’s death. While he was reading the play, he was also working with imprisoned youths and one of the young girls confided that she had murdered her mother to avenge her father’s death. He realized that thousands of years later, we are still in the same cycle of “violence and the inability to forgive” (Alfaro, *Lecture*). Alfaro, thinking of how truly current the issues of *Electra* are, challenged himself to transfer the play to a contemporary setting and *Electricidad* was born. Alfaro, the son of immigrant farmworkers, brought issues of gang warfare in the East Los Angeles barrio into the adaptation. The next Greek play that spoke to Alfaro of contemporary parallels was Sophocles’ *Oedipus*. His adaptation entitled, *Oedipus El Rey*, addresses the issues of recidivism for Latin American inmates. But, when Medea crossed his path, she gave him more trouble, as only Medea would do.

Medea has many faces. She is a powerless woman held down by the misogyny of a patriarchal society. She is quick-witted, intelligent and manipulative. Medea is a sorceress and a furious harpy on a mission of revenge. She is a mother. She is an outsider, a stranger. She is an immigrant.

Euripides’s Medea, with her many faces, took many forms in Alfaro’s quest for the adaptation he envisioned. First she was a Bruja or a healer, and a recent immigrant. The play was set in San Francisco’s Mission district and was well received but Alfaro was not completely satisfied. A few iterations later, Alfaro had the “ah-ha moment” when he was struck with a startling statistic: half the women who cross into the United States
undocumented are victims of violent, sexual assault. Alfaro felt that “the price paid for women coming to the United States is unfathomably huge” (Lecture). And so Alfaro’s Medea comes to the United States with a horrible secret that defines her life in the new land in his adaptation, Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles.

Playwright Cherrie Moraga’s Medea also has many faces. She is a lesbian. She is a lover. She is a mother. She is a Chicana. She is an Aztec goddess. She is an alcoholic. She is in exile. She is a murderess. Moraga is a Chicana writer, a lesbian, and a mother. Moraga’s work is a fight for freedom, and she believes for Chicana/os to be free they have to “remember who they are, that they have a pre-conquest state. They have to remember that second-class citizenship, and the lie of immigration illegality, are obstacles to their freedom” (Anthony 4). Indigeneity is an integral element in much of her work, and creating metaphors that “provide a structure you can live by” (Anthony 4). Moraga writes of dangerous women, like Medea, who go back to the Aztec primordial mother, before patriarchy. Women of power can “give birth and take life away” (Anthony 5). They cannot be controlled. Moraga sees Medea as a freedom fighter. In writing plays such as her adaptation The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea, Moraga feels she and other artists have the purpose not just to “heal the people who come after you, but to heal your ancestors” (Anthony 5).

By closely examining Alfaro’s and Moraga’s adaptations of Medea, this thesis will isolate issues of identity and immigration to determine how the playwrights weave these issues into their works. This thesis will also address how localization, humor, and the setting in which productions took place affected the reception of the adaptations.
The Journeys of the Adaptors

The Latina/o theatre movement has made great progress in the United State since the 1960s, both politically and culturally (Ramirez 1). Since the 1960s, the field has grown largely due to playwrights with an eye toward creativity as well as activism. Moraga and Alfaro have made notable contributions to the field. How each playwright to be discussed contributes to Latin American theatre in the United States is informed by their personal journeys and passions.

Cherrie Moraga (1952-)

Born in Whittier, CA 1952, Moraga’s father was Anglo and her mother was born in Mexico. Light-skinned, Moraga passed for white and as a child, never argued to the contrary. Like many second-generation mestizas in America, Moraga grew up with little connection to her Latin American roots. Much of her work attempts to rectify the cultural gap in her upbringing.

Moraga’s writings are deeply connected to her politics, but before politicizing herself as Chicana, Moraga first had to become politicized in recognizing and acknowledging herself as a lesbian. Being accepted as a lesbian in the Latino community was and is a battle in itself. Moraga wrote that acknowledging her sexuality meant, “Acting in spite of the fact that I had learned from my Mexican culture and the dominant culture that my womanhood was, if not despised, certainly deficient and hardly worth the loving of another woman in bed” (Moraga, Last Generation 146).

In her journey to acknowledge and discover her true self, Moraga experienced discrimination not only within the Chicano Nationalist Movement, but also within the
Woman’s movement, the Gay and Lesbian movement, and the Latin American Solidarity Movement (Moraga, *Last Generation* 146). Her experiences with the difficulties of identity in terms of being a Chicana lesbian as well as her desire to embrace her indigeneity inform her works.

Moraga was a writer of non-fiction and poetry, and studied acting, but she felt uncomfortable on stage. She found her true passion in playwriting and studied with Maria Irene Fornes. Moraga said of Fornes: “She allowed me to enter the art of playwriting through a poet’s sensibility” (Ramirez 69). Fornes taught Moraga to “defend my work, fight for my work, stand up to the master-teacher when I felt my vision was at risk of compromise (Ramirez 70).

Moraga writes with a goal to keep alive for Mexicans their pre-conquest history and culture. She writes with a knowledge and sadness of “the full impact of the colonial ‘experiment’ on the lives of Chicanos, mestizos, and Native Americans” (Moraga, *Last Generation* 2). In order to do this, Moraga often infuses her writings with myth, resurrecting the “ancient in order to construct the modern” (*Last Generation* 3). She also writes with a specificity to create a broader canon for the queer Chicana community.

*Giving up the Ghost*, Moraga’s first play produced in 1986, is a coming-of-age story that presents issues of mistrust of the patriarchy, and sexuality as it relates to heritage and gender stereotypes. *Shadow of a Man* (1990) is a retelling of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* that portrays the ideas of authority within the family and the truth of the American dream. With her play *Heroes and Saints* (1992) Moraga began to explore the issues prevalent in *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001). The central character in *Heroes and Saints* is Cerezita, a disembodied head reminiscent of the
pre-Columbian Olmeca statues (Moraga, *Heroes* 233). Inspired by actual events in the Central Valley, the play takes place in a fictional California farming town where the inhabitants have been affected by pesticide poisoning. In many other plays, Moraga addresses issues of Chicana lesbianism, women’s issues, working conditions for immigrant farmworkers, and feminism.

Moraga has won numerous awards for her writing including the TCG Artist Residency Grant, and NEA fellowship for playwriting, and a Rockefeller Fellowship for literature. She has also received The American Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award as well as the Pioneer Award from the Lambda Literary Foundation. She has held the position of Artist-in-Residence at Stanford University since 1996 where she teaches classes in playwriting as well as courses in Xicana indigenous thought and Chicano/Latin American Literature (Ramirez 70).

**Luis Alfaro (1962-)**

Luis Alfaro is a playwright, activist, performance artist and poet. He is a Chicano, born and raised in downtown Los Angeles in the Pico/Union district. Alfaro’s parents, Mexican American farmworkers, were ardent supporters of activist Cesar Chavez. At a young age, Alfaro was influenced by his parents to lead a life with social purpose (Marks).

Alfaro sees himself as “an activist who became an artist” (Svitch 2). He feels that theatre was the instrument chosen for him to channel his calling to create social change. Alfaro’s first writings were based on people he knew from a factory he worked at from ages thirteen to twenty-one. From his time in the factory, he learned and wrote about the
immigrant culture and blue-collar workers. Alfaro feels “being immersed in this community of workers” was as much an influence on his work as his professional training (Svitch 2).

Before writing adaptations his plays covered a range of topics including AIDS, urban adolescence, obesity, lesbian/gay issues, faith, oppression of Latinas, Latin American identity, and the war in Iraq. In solo performances, Alfaro has performed biographical pieces that explore his own journey with his identity as a Latin American gay man, and Latin American family life. He has also written two plays for children based on local issues. His adaptations of Greek tragedies encompass issues of Latin American identity, relationships, recidivism, gangs, immigration, family and crime.

Recipient of a genius grant from the MacArthur Foundation in 1997, Alfaro has won numerous awards for his work and productions including a NEA/TCG residency grant and a Kennedy Center fund award. He is the first resident playwright of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant. Alfaro has been involved in multiple outreach programs for youths, and was the co-director and associate producer of new play development for the Latino Theatre Initiative at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. An organizer of many Latina/o theatre festivals and other events that bring Latin American artists together, Alfaro has been instrumental in creating opportunities for Latin American theatre artists to present work and collaborate with each other.

As integral to his work as playwriting is his desire to bring new audiences to see theatre. Howard Shalwitz, artistic director of the Wooly Mammoth Theatre in Washington DC said of Alfaro’s work: “It’s a different way to think of the role of the
playwright...It’s in the way he fuses his sense of social purpose with his sense of playwriting. It’s all one and the same for him.” To this end, Alfaro has sought out “troubled teens, ex-offenders, members of disadvantaged minorities” to come see his work. After an outreach in Medford, Oregon, Alfaro was able to fill 4,000 seats of a theatre with Latinos. Alfaro also spends much of his time mentoring and teaching students in playwriting as an associate professor at the University of Southern California (Marks).

**Medea to an Athenian Audience**

The Athenian audience, witness to the first production of Euripides’s *Medea* at the Festival of Dionysus, would know her story. They would know how Medea helped her lover Jason steal the Golden Fleece from her father, the God Helios. They would know Jason took the mysterious and exotic Medea to escape punishment for the crime, but not before she killed her brother and scattered his body parts in the ocean to slow her father from pursuing them. Medea and Jason then settle in his kingdom Iolcuc, with their two children. When Jason’s half-uncle Pelias cheats him of his rights to his land, Medea is instrumental in another murder on Jason’s behalf. The result is exile for Medea and her family. They arrive in Corinth, in hopes of a better economic position and it is here Euripides’s play begins.

From this point in the myth, the Athenian audience would witness how Jason casts aside the woman who has sacrificed and committed atrocities for him to wed a wealthy princess, the daughter of Creon, Corinth’s king. Medea is then to be banished and her children left with Jason and their new stepmother. The audience would see
Medea debasing herself to beg Creon for time before she is exiled from Corinth. In the
time granted, she sends a poisoned gown to the princess who dies. This is where the age-
old debate begins as to the reason why Medea then kills her children. Was she jealous of
her husband’s relationship with the princess? Did she kill her children as revenge for
what Jason did to her or to protect the children from a questionable fate?

The Adaptations

In Alfaro’s adaptation, *Mojada, A Medea in Los Angeles*, Medea is a gifted
seamstress who illegally crosses the border with Hason, her son Açan, and their maid
Tita. Set in the East Los Angeles barrio of Boyle Heights, Medea suffers isolation and
fear of her new home due to a series of traumatic events, while Hason and Açan easily
adapt to their new environment. Medea clings to the old ways of her home in the
Mexican state of Michoacan whereas Hason ambitiously pursues upward mobility. Tita,
the maid, in her asides and cultural references provides comic relief and is a bridge
between their native culture and the new culture. Armida is Hason’s employer, an
upwardly mobile, fully acculturated businesswoman who has big plans for Hason.
Josefina, Medea’s friend and confidant, takes the place of the Greek chorus.

Whereas *Mojada* is a realistic and naturalistic depiction of the myth, Moraga’s
adaptation in its structure and tone is more layered and abstract. The play takes place in
three time periods: the past, when Medea lived with her lover Luna and her son Chac-
Mool as her life was deteriorating due to her inability to come to terms with her exile; her
present life of imprisonment for the murder of her son; and the ancient past of the Aztecs.
Medea is living a heterosexual existence before the play begins until her husband Jasón finds her in bed with Luna. Medea and Luna are banished to Tamoanchan (Phoenix, Arizona), a “kind of metaphysical border region between Gringolandia (U.S.A.) and Aztlán (Mechicano country)” (Moraga, Hungry 6). Medea works as a midwife as she and Luna co-parent Medea and Jasón’s son Chac-Mool. Jasón, meanwhile lives in Aztlán ruling over Medea’s land, and is to marry a younger Indian woman. Jasón is not indigenous and therefore has no real rights to Medea’s land, so he decides to marry a younger woman with Indian blood. We soon learn Jasón’s new wife is barren and he now wants to claim his son Chac-Mool, not only because he is and will be Jasón’s only child, but because Chac-Mool is legitimately native and has a right to land.

Before addressing how the playwrights integrated the original plot of Medea with issues of Latin American immigration and identity, it is important to first highlight seminal arguments for or against the use of myth in contemporary plays.

**Perspectives on Adaptation**

Noted theorist on adaptations of Greek Tragedy Kevin J. Wetmore illustrates how Greek tragedy in its origin supported the status quo. Wetmore points out that the festival and the plays reinforced the community’s self-image and reflected the political traditions of the polis as held by the elite of the city who sponsored and attended the City Dionysia (101). In his discussion, Wetmore goes further to say that not all plays supported the hegemony. Wetmore states, “The plays of Euripides, in particular, stand out as an example of the questioning not only of the polis, but of the places and roles of the disenfranchised, such as women and foreigners, and of the morality and practicality of
the political decisions of the polis” (101). *Medea* is an example of the exploration of a marginalized character and the effects of the patriarchal society on the lives of women.

While Wetmore’s work focuses on the Greek plays as vehicles for social relevancy, Hanna Scolnicov, classical theorist and professor of theatre studies, calls attention to Horace’s recommendation to study the Greeks as models for ‘treating of well-worn subjects’ and that even Aristotle referred to the myths as “the best plots for tragedy (89-91). She also reminds us “western art has periodically rejuvenated itself by going back to classical culture as to the source and reinterpreting it” (90). This rejuvenation led to new artistic movements. But where the classical structure can be supportive it can also stifle creativity with its conventions.

Despite this, Scolnicov asserts that Greek Tragedy is universal, and can transcend “the particular and individual” which is what makes it “transferrable from culture to culture” (90). The universality of Medea and how her story carries into many other mythologies and cultures is another reason why the play has had so many iterations.

Not only easily transferrable in its universality, Scolnicov states that Greek Tragedy is also a form of collective memory (92). Scolnicov uses Julius Caesar as an example, in that we all know he will be killed, and our seeing him killed over and over becomes a ritual the audience shares. The problem with this idea is that not all audiences are familiar with the classics, which will be addressed later in this study.

Lorna Hardwick, classics scholar and expert, notes that Bertolt Brecht pointed to “parallels and resonances” between the ancient and contemporary that prompted analytical thinking (65). Brecht himself made a political statement with his adaptation of *Antigone*, in that his Kreon represented Hitler, thus revealing the political and social
climate of the time in which the adaptation was written. The parallels create and awareness in audiences that give adaptations a Brechtian distancing.

Hardwick also refers to Piscator, who is also Brechtian in his argument that theatre should “alter the consciousness of the spectator.” Piscator introduced the idea of theatre of engagement during the avant-garde period of theatre in 1920’s Germany. His idea has come to be known as the “Theatre of Intervention” (67). Hardwick argues that sources or referrals to the classic are “crucial” in the Theatre of Intervention because they provide “distance.” The classics provide a “remote mythological setting or as a means of inducing culture shock by suggesting more overt correspondences and equivalences between ancient and modern crises and debates” and “destabilizes modern certainties” (67-68). Destabilization, Brechtian in nature, promotes thinking, which might lead to intervention.

Antonin Artaud, in his essay “No More Masterpieces” argues against adapting the classics stating, “We must have done with this idea of masterpieces reserved for a self-styled elite and not understood by the general public…” (74). He goes on to say that masterpieces “no longer respond to the needs of the time (75). In its way, this is an argument for adaptation. Artaud is stating that if a contemporary audience “does not understand Oedipus Rex, I shall make bold to say it is the fault of Oedipus Rex and not of the public” (74). What better way to make Oedipus Rex relevant than adapting the play to address contemporary issues? But Artaud argues we should be capable of creating our own poetry and if we cannot “we might as well abandon ourselves now, without protest, and recognize that we are no longer good for anything but disorder, famine, blood, war, and epidemics” (80). Although the statement is somewhat hyperbolic, Artaud’s point is
well taken. In a sense we have abandoned ourselves to many “low” forms of
entertainment, such as reality TV.

Sue-Ellen Case’s theories will also be regarded in terms of how the patriarchal
birth of the classics perpetuates gender discrimination. Case, a distinguished professor at
the School of Theater, Film and Television at University of California, Los Angeles, has
written extensively on theatre and feminism, performance theory, and lesbian critical
theory (Taylor). The validity of adaptation from the feminist perspective will be looked at
through Cases’ arguments.

There is no doubt that much research in the field of theatre has gone into
exploring adaptations of Greek classics from various perspectives. There is a substantial
amount of work written about adaptations specific to location and political context, such
as in Kevin J. Wetmore Jr.’s study of adaptations of Greek classics by African
playwrights in his book Athenian Sun in an African Sky. Adaptations have been examined
through various lenses such as feminism, ritual, trauma studies, and metatheatricality.
Adaptations informed by specific time periods such as the post-modern era and post
apartheid South Africa have also been addressed.

While there has been work about adaptations giving voice to marginalized groups
through theatre, there is little comprehensive work in adaptations that addresses the issues
of identity and immigration specific to Latin Americans in the United States as expressed
through theatre. It is the specific segment of theatre studies that this thesis will address
through close examination of the two adaptations.
Terminology

Because Alfaro’s adaptation centers on identity struggles as a result of immigration, his play will be examined through a sociological lens. The discussion requires designation and justification of terminology. First, acculturation will be distinguished from assimilation utilizing an article by noted psychologists and experts on acculturation David L. Sam and John W Berry. Sam and Berry discuss how the terms acculturation and assimilation have evolved and shifted over time, but a recent definition of acculturation in the field of sociology is as follows: “Those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups…under this definition acculturation is to be distinguished from…assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation.” Assimilation is defined as a strategy of acculturation “when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek close interaction with other cultures.” Acculturation is a “more generic term” and will be utilized through this study in a similar manner.

Other terms that will be used include Berry’s four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Those who “engage in both their heritage culture and in the larger society” are considered to have integrated. Assimilation designates those individuals “who do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek close interaction with other cultures.” In many cases, when one assimilates, “the cultural values, norms and traditions of the new society” are adapted. Separation is when an individual places “a high value on holding on to their original
culture and avoids interaction with members of the new society” (476). If one is not aligned with either culture the result is “marginalization” (472).

As this study will examine individual responses to acculturation, the term “adaptation” will be employed to “refer to individual psychological well-being and how individuals manage socioculturally” (472). To this end, adaptation is a result of acculturation.

It is also important to mention that acculturation can be distinguished as either psychological or sociological. Psychological adaptation to a culture involves an “individual’s satisfaction and overall emotional or psychological well-being” (Sam & Berry 478).

Sociological adaptation “refers to how successfully the individual acquires the appropriate sociocultural skills for living effectively in the new sociological milieu” (Sam & Berry 478). Inextricably tied to the psychological state of Alfaro’s Medea, the ability to adapt sociologically is impeded by what has happened to her in the past, as well as her struggles with identity.

Difficulties with acculturation can result in “acculturative stress” manifested in the form of “uncertainty, anxiety, and depression (Sam & Berry 473-74). Jennifer A. Skuza, advocate and researcher in the area of adolescent immigrants, in her research and writing strives to “humanize the understanding of the acculturation process” with a phenomenological approach to “allow new meanings of acculturation to be experientially revealed” (447). Skuza’s interviews with Latina adolescents who had immigrated to the United States from Mexico provided a living meaning to the struggles of acculturation. Her article is organized by constituents of acculturation, some of which will be employed
in this study to frame the “living” experiences of the characters in the plays. The research and theories of other experts in the areas of Latina/o studies, social work and psychology who have conducted similar studies to Skuza will also be utilized to provide a sociological lens through which to view the plays. As Skuza’s phenomenological approach humanizes the immigrant struggle, this thesis will demonstrate how the plays and their characters in this study do as well.
Chapter I

Alfaro’s *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles*

A Sociological Perspective

For an immigrant from Mexico, the United States holds the promises of prosperity and security. And perhaps for those already inhabiting the so-called “promised land,” there is a lack of compassion or understanding for what an immigrant might undergo having newly arrived.

Skuza’s article, “Humanizing the Understanding of the Acculturation Experience With Phenomenology,” presents the acculturation process through various constituents, bringing to life the plight of immigrants through an experiential approach of case studies rather than dry data. This approach, phenomenological in nature, “humanizes” the immigrant experience. Skuza’s subjects were Latina adolescents, however many of their experiences apply to adults as well. Additionally, the experiences of the immigrant or Chicano children in the plays can be compared to that of the Latinas interviewed for Skuza’s study.

To provide an understanding of the immigration experience, Skuza puts it simply: “In Mexico, a familiar way of being had been established and had served as a guide throughout daily life. Upon immigration, what was once familiar no longer existed and other ways of being had to be learned to meet the demands of new cultural contexts.” Skuza goes further stating acculturating “touches the core of one’s humanity” (451). As we will see in the plays to be discussed, other external elements added to the stress and strain of acculturation, make the new lives of the protagonists even more difficult.
Skuza looks at acculturation as an embodiment process in that what an immigrant experiences mentally, manifests physically. Skuza points out that mental fatigue has been considered in acculturation studies, but not bodily fatigue. Looking at acculturation as an embodiment process, it becomes more apparent how much energy must be exerted to navigate through this new territory and one can imagine the repercussions of this effort. The daily exertion an immigrant is subject to is demanding and fatiguing. The attempt to understand a foreign language all day is itself an exhausting idea. But add to that the other cultural differences an immigrant must deal with, not to mention a rigorous work schedule and the struggle becomes clear. Skuza states that acculturating requires a “constant stream of bodily energy” (452). Mental and physical fatigue combined caused her subjects to want to give up or “disappear.” Alfaro’s Medea exhibits many signs of this need to isolate or disappear and she does so by self-confinement.

In the adaptation, Medea confines herself, largely due to agoraphobia most likely caused by the stresses of her border crossing. We learn midway through the play that she was raped during the border crossing, her body used as currency for the lives of her family. While the rape is in large part the reason behind Medea’s agoraphobia, clinging to her native culture and isolation from the new culture portrays the emotions of the immigration experience in that one might feel traumatized, overwhelmed and exhausted by the differences of the new culture. This leads to both internal and external isolation.

Medea never leaves the Boyle Heights yard throughout the play. The front yard, where most of the action takes place, serves as Medea’s workplace. She is a seamstress and the company who employs Medea brings the work to her. Tita, her maid, acts as her connection to the outside world, running the household’s errands. Through chisme
(gossip), Tita brings to Medea the goings on of the exterior world. Medea also isolates herself by desperately clinging to her indigeneity, that of the Aztecs, which will be discussed more fully later in this study. She prefers confinement and attempts to justify and even idealize and romanticize her isolation. “I don’t want it [the yard] to feel like a prison. I want to love in this yard and make it a special place for us,” she tells her husband Hason (Alfaro, Mojada 28). Medea and her nurse Tita, who also is deeply rooted in indigeneity, have made the yard in front of the Boyle Heights home as much of Mexico as they can. The have planted native herbs and attempt to grow a Mexican banana tree, although unsuccessfully. Tita comments to Medea that the tree “refuses to settle here as much as you and I…” (Alfaro, Mojada 14).

Set designer Efren Delgadillo exemplifies the external isolation and restriction of space. Medea’s house in Boyle Heights feels small and confining in the shadow of the vast columns of the Getty Villa looming over the small set.

Figure 1. “Creating East L.A. at the Getty Villa,” Malibu, CA. Sept. 9, 2015. (Steve Saldivar)
The gates around the house symbolize Medea being gated or locked in her own literal and personal prison due to her fear of the new culture. Meanwhile, looming outside the house of her confinement is the overwhelmingly large Getty Villa symbolizing the vast, hegemonic culture she fears. In this personal prison, Medea isolates herself from meeting members of the new society with the exception of Josefina, a friend of Medea’s maid Tita, and Armida, who is an antagonist. Both characters come to the house invading Medea’s “safe” space of isolation. When Medea learns that even the place she feels safe in is actually owned by Armida, both her inner and outer worlds begin to crumble around her.

Medea’s struggles with acculturation are made more difficult due to trauma mirrors the complexities many Latina immigrants face. The staggering amount of undocumented women who were raped during the border crossing experience that inspired Alfaro’s Mojada is portrayed in his Medea, in her isolation and her fear of acculturating. While the audience is unaware of the incident until halfway through the play, we can tell there is an underlying tension other than the difficulties acculturating. Medea seems fragile, about to break at any moment. When Hason insists Medea leave the safety of the yard and go with the family to the Santa Monica Pier, Medea’s reaction is inflammatory:

Hason-You can’t let the past be the future. I will protect you, mi reina. I am putting my foot down. We are going to the beach as a family.

(An outburst)
Medea—NO! I CAN’T!

(Whoa, where did that come from? Tita stands)

I can’t…

Hason—Okay…I’ll take the boy myself. I was hoping…I Just…I’ll make it better, Medea. I will.

(Alfaro, Mojada 10-11)

The acculturation experience provides strife not just between husband and wife, but also between children and parents. In their article “The Costs of Getting Ahead: Mexican Family System Changes After Immigration,” sociologists Martica L. Bacallao and Paul R. Smokowski refer to the varying degrees of acculturation between family members as the “acculturation gap.” Bacallao and Smokowski state that acculturation gaps in families can “precipitate family stress” and “erode the strong sense of family cohesion (familism)” over time. Normal conflicts that might arise between family members can be “exacerbated by acculturation stress” (53). Bacallao and Smokowski make the point that children normally acculturate faster than adults, as will be seen with Medea and her son Açan.

In Mojada, the disparity between acculturation rates and each family member’s reaction to that disparity is one of the driving conflicts of the play. Hason has already acculturated at the play’s onset, and he wishes to leave behind his native culture. He is on a personal mission to make sure his son Açan does the same. The desire for his son to acculturate is conveyed by the playwright through the evolution of Açan’s attire, a
physical embodiment of transitioning to the new culture. Acan enters an early scene wearing a Mexican futbol jersey:

(Hason picks up Acan and spins him around. They laugh as he puts him down and points to his jersey.)

Hason-Where is your Donovan?

Acan-Mami said I could only wear Mexico.

(Hason’s cell gets a text)

Hason-We’ll see about that.

Acan-Can I have one?

Hason-What?

Acan-A cell.

Hason-What do you need a cell for?

Acan-So I can call you.

Hason-We’re never apart.

Acan-We would be if you bought me a cell.

Hason-Acan, you are my future, we will never be apart. Now get the ball and let’s get you into something a little more American. But don’t tell your mami…

(Alfaro, *Mojada* 12-13)

Hason telling Acan to keep the American jersey a secret from his mother illustrates he is aware of the acculturation gap. Yet, his insistence his son embodies
Americanization through the futbol jersey, sets up the tensions that will occur between the family members.

We see Açan acculturate throughout the play’s progress in his attire. He begins the play wearing a soccer shirt from Mexico and by the play’s end Alfaro describes him as “transformed” and that “he looks different, almost a completely new outfit” (Mojada 78). His mother meets each step in Açan’s acculturation with opposition. In a later scene, Açan enters wearing an American soccer shirt, and knows his mother will ask him to change.

Açan-Please?

(She looks at him, torn, but loving him).

Medea-Only if you thank me in our people’s language.

(Açan grimaces but says it)

Açan-Axqueniuhiqui.

(Alfaro, Mojada 26)

In this exchange, Medea uses their culture of origin as a point of bargaining or bribery with her son. He is not only between his parents in the struggle for acculturation, but is between the cultures themselves. Furthermore, Medea asks him to speak in her people’s language, that of the Aztecs. This goes back to Skuza’s description of the acculturation process as “touching the core of one’s humanity” (451). Medea wants Açan to keep a grasp on his identity as indigenous, a deeply historical and important source of identity for many Chicana/os. Açan represents the physical manifestation of the struggle
between two worlds and how difficult a battle in can be for children in the process of acculturation. Throughout the play he is pulled back and forth in a sort of acculturation tug-o-war exemplified through embodiment of the new culture as well as through language and naming.

Hason wishes for Acan to call him “Dad” as opposed to “Papi” and even goes so far as to berate and mock the words of his native culture:

Hason-Papi! See? That sounds luck a duck that’s lost in a pond. (doing the tough guy again) DAD! It makes you sound like a man. (Alfaro, Mojada 12)

In voicing the American term for father in a “tough guy” voice, Hason aligns being American with being a man, whereas speaking Spanish is aligned with being a lost little creature. In a subtle and playful manner, Hason is leaving his son little choice in the matter.

Where Acan is caught between worlds, as aforementioned, Hason has for the most part completely committed to the idea of acculturating at the play’s onset. Alfaro said of the character, “He looks like a guy who works with his hands at the top of the play. And by the end of the play, he looks like a guy who works in an office who’s become an executive…” (Alfaro Lecture). Hason is not confined like Medea, but making his way in the new world, and with great progress. While Medea is trapped in her self-imposed liminal space of the yard, no longer of Mexico and not of America, Hason yearns for bigger spaces. He has big dreams in this new space. Like Euripides’s Jason, Hason is motivated by power. He is quickly climbing the ladder of success working for Armida, an
immigrant who came to Los Angeles many years prior. He makes it clear that he will do anything to succeed, no matter the cost, even if it involves flirting with Armida, which he claims to be innocent. He goes to great lengths to please his boss Armida, denying his past and his native culture, and his insisting his son give up any vestiges of their old life in Mexico, both physical and metaphysical.

In his willingness to completely give up his original culture and his eagerness to take on the characteristics of the new society, Hason has assimilated into the new society and Aćan is quickly following in his footsteps.

Unlike Hason and Aćan, Medea has not acculturated at all. She won’t leave the house, her costume suggests the native, and Alfaro says, in contrast to Hason, “she becomes more and more indigenous to her own country, to Mexico, as the play goes on” (Alfaro Lecture). Using Berry’s term, to protect herself, Medea “separates” from the new society and is on the path to marginalization. She and Hason are the polarities to which their son Aćan must struggle between. He is a major source of conflict between Medea and Hason in Alfaro’s adaptation. Where Hason represents full acculturation, Medea is the indigenous, which she holds onto for dear life. Hason encourages Medea to embody the new culture:

Hason-You have to learn to be of this place, Medea. Learn how to be American….Dress like them. Learn to talk like them. Be like this place

(Alfaro, Mojada 32).
Later in the play, Hason is frustrated with Medea’s unwillingness to attempt any kind of contact with the world into which they have immigrated. He tells Medea “You have to get out there. We can’t keep living in the past when the future is calling us” (Alfaro, Mojada 62). Medea replies that what the future holds is more than she wanted for them. This implies that Medea is fully aware of their differences in acculturating and how their expectations and realizations of the move are different and impacting their lives negatively. Medea’s rejection of the new society is complicated. She is not only experiencing post traumatic stress from her horrific border crossing, but also dealing with acculturative stress which Berry states can manifest as “uncertainty, anxiety and depression” further exacerbated by lack of social support (474). As Medea’s situation in the play worsens, so too do her symptoms of acculturative stress. While this might not lead a person to the acts of crime Medea commits, constituents of the Greek tragedy that must be played out, in a hyper-dramatic way, communicate how the stresses of acculturating can compile to desperate results.

Linked to the acculturation gap is the idea of bicultural efficacy, which could serve as a solution, or middle ground for families acculturating at different rates. In the psychology discipline, bicultural efficacy is defined as “an adaptive blend of cultural skills that allow an acculturating person to live successfully in two or more cultures” (Skuza 461). Both playwrights weave Aztec mythology into their adaptations to illustrate the struggle between fusing cultures. In Alfaro’s adaptation, Medea is associated with the Guapa, a bird native to her town in Mexico, which has inexplicably been seen in Boyle Heights. Tita too, who has also taken the place of the chorus, is steeped in myth. She opens the play with an Aztec ritual, and grows native herbs that she uses for magic.
She code switches between English and Spanish throughout the play, another example of bicultural efficacy. Yet, Tita struggles with the old and new, Mexico and the United States, stating “I know, you think, ‘this woman does not like Los Angeles:’ at my age I don’t have to! If I could I would go back, but there are only so many trips one can make in a lifetime and mine have come to an end’” (Alfaro, *Mojada* 4).

Hason, Armida and Açan have assimilated, completely rejecting their native cultures and so are not bicultural. Medea cannot acculturate to Los Angeles and clings to her culture of origin and is thus separated. Tita is the only character that seems to have successfully attained bicultural efficacy in that she maintains her hold on her roots through ritual but is able to communicate and navigate the new culture, despite her complaints. Tita has integrated, which to some, might be considered the optimal acculturation strategy.

The struggle with bicultural efficacy can also be an existential struggle. The girls in Skuza’s study “lived bodily and relationally in Minnesota while living only relationally in Mexico.” The girls felt a homesickness for Mexico that needed to be acknowledged, but was difficult to notice or address in the “flurry of acculturation” (462). In bringing this point up, Skuza illustrates the complexity of acculturation, in that the native culture cannot merely be left behind. Acculturation is not simple and fixed, but is “a fluid process of being in two cultures at the same time and moving between them” (Skuza 463). This indicates, that in a sense, perhaps the acculturation experiences of some of the characters are oversimplified and one-sided. Would a person like Hason really adapt that quickly and fully? Would a child like Açan do so without any regard or ties to the native culture? Alfaro creates a situation of polarity with his characters that correlates to the
acculturation rate, which, combined with other events, is a stepping stone on the path to Medea’s descent and final act of murder. The polarity must be created in order for Medea to be led to the final act. The structure of the Greek tragedy demands it.

While Medea’s family is being torn apart by the acculturation gap and other issues, one way this could have been combatted would have been if they had bonded rather than being torn apart. Bacallao and Smokowski state that families can cope with post-immigration changes by maintaining “high levels of familism” (52) which also includes enacting cultural tradition. Bacallao and Smokowski go further to say that familism “provided initiative for at least some family members to become bilingual and bicultural in order to help other family members interact with the host culture” (63).

Some of the girls interviewed in Skuza’s study found relief from isolation in relationships with family and friends. “Relationships, in part, alleviated the difficulties by providing safety and comfort” (460). Many turned to family members for this physical and emotional comfort. Alfaro’s Medea grapples with holding on to the relationships that bring her comfort, particularly with Hason. But in her struggles to hold onto Hason, she has self-isolated due to her agoraphobia, thus alienating herself from those who might bring her comfort.

Bacallao and Smokowski assert that familism is “a core value” of Mexican culture (62). An understanding of the significance of the family’s demise in Mojada is crucial to understanding what drives Medea over the edge. While she is being physically isolated and abandoned, a core cultural value, deeply embedded in time, is being destroyed. Social psychologists, Tajfel and Turner, assert that “individuals need to belong to a group in order to secure a firm sense of well being” (Sam & Berry 475). Medea’s
isolation, coupled with the desertion of her family affects her psychological adaptation and as a result her sociological adaptation.

While the destruction of the family is a large blow in and of itself, Medea’s very identity is also at stake, because of how those who have acculturated diminish Medea for still being rooted in her native culture. Bacallao and Smokowski write that ritual “intensifies collective pride and identity” (63). In Medea’s new life, ritual is minimized and dismissed. The banana tree refuses to grow, Medea’s attempt at ritual is cut short and Armida minimizes Medea for her old ways.

Diminishment is one of the difficulties immigrants face. Skuza discusses how her subjects felt diminished by “stigmatized cultural generalizations” in that they felt discriminated against and this left them feeling like outsiders (459). Throughout the play, Medea experiences diminishment. Josefina visits Medea in her yard bringing her the gift of pan dulce. Medea refuses pan dulce from Josefina saying Hason says they should watch their weight, to which Josefina replies: “I think every Mexican woman should have a big ass. I do! We should look like the old country-plump and full of possibility” (Alfaro, Mojada 17). Josefina’s description of the embodiment of the old country as “plump and full of possibility” very aptly points of the opposing embodiment which would be thinner, lighter of possibility, of weight, and more Americanized. The process of embodiment and the devaluing of the indigenous then is literally and physically diminishing.

Another way in which Medea is diminished is in her work. In Mexico, Medea was thought of as an artist, while in Los Angeles, she is overworked and underpaid. She is not respected for her artistry but rather is told to redo work she toiled over for hours
because the company changed their mind. If she complains, the company threatens to take their work to someone else. Hason says “What you do is special, Medea, no matter how they treat us here” to which Medea responds, “In this country, special pays the same” (Alfaro, *Mojada* 8-9). Here, Alfaro truly captures a very common situation for undocumented workers who were once valued as artisans and reduced to underpaid, undervalued and exploited workers.

What we might expect to find in a play where immigrants are mistreated and stigmatized is a dominant white culture in the role of the exploiter. To some degree this is insinuated. However, the antagonistic character in the play is Armida who is a fully acculturated Latina. Medea is made fun of by Armida as she brags of her success acculturating and ruthlessness in getting where she is:

Armida—It started with my generation. I’m not saying that to be arrogant.
That is something you learn in this country, to take pride and credit for the things that you do. Back home we are taught humility and silence.
That doesn’t work here, it’s a sign of weakness. (looking at Medea)
Don’t you agree? (Alfaro, *Mojada* 39)

Skuza points out that being stigmatized for one’s culture of origin can lead to “feelings of diminishment that call one’s cultural core into question” (459) which is precisely what Armida does to Medea in the aforementioned exchange. Armida diminishes that which Medea clings so desperately to, and makes her point even stronger by looking at Medea and pointedly asking her if she agrees. This moment in the play is
important and should not be glazed over as it is Armida, in essence, challenging Medea to either acculturate, or submit.

Armida goes further when she pushes Medea to open a shop in one of the strip malls she owns. Not only is Medea afraid to venture outside of the house, but also, in a sense this devalues and diminishes her work similarly to the company she works for. In commercializing Medea’s artistry, she would be in a role of submission, which is inevitable for her, due to her circumstances.

Armida is characterized as power-hungry, ambitious and controlling in the adaptation. Her character takes the place not only of Jason’s young princess bride who he jilts Medea for, but also she is the powerful king Creon. The amalgamation of the characters in the adaptation makes for a depiction that reflects a “cultural fear of women in power” (Powers 201). And although Armida is the villain of the play from Medea’s perspective, she also embodies the power struggle a Latina faces in a patriarchal society. She is doubly challenged in her fight to rise up in that she is also marginalized for being an immigrant. While she is cruel and selfish in her dealings with Medea and her family, Armida represents another aspect of the plight an immigrant woman faces in America.

Feelings of invisibility are another result of the struggle with acculturation. For the girls in Skuza’s study, the inability to understand language coupled with feelings of inadequacy led to loneliness and ultimately a sense of being “nonexistent-an essentially silent and invisible way of being…” (458). Medea is also essentially disappearing as she is losing everything that defines her and gives her value, as well as being deserted by her family. Hason tells Medea he has married Armida. He claims it is only a piece of paper and he still considers Medea his love. Armida urges Medea to give up her son or she will
have the courts take him away. She threatens Medea with invisibility using it as a weapon against her: “You can’t stay here. Not in this house. Not in this city. You have to disappear” (Alfaro, *Mojada* 70). When Medea finally agrees to this disappearance, Armida tells her, “You are invisible Medea. Get lost in this country (Alfaro, *Mojada* 72).

Medea is already lost in this country. Medea falls to her knees and pleads with Armida who calls her pathetic. Medea responds: “I am pathetic. I am a wetback, una mojada.” (Alfaro, *Mojada* 71).

By labeling and naming herself with the derogatory term, used by the dominant culture against her culture, Medea sinks to her lowest. Unable to psychologically adapt, she cannot sociologically adapt and labels herself as an outcast, marginalized from the new society.

It is at this point that Medea reveals to Tita that she killed her brother because he was going to prevent Medea from going to America with Hason and keep her in a position of enslavement just when she thought she was finally free of her father’s grasp. And now, Medea has nowhere to go. She attempted to empower herself in Mexico and was again quashed by the patriarchy in the form of her brother as oppressor. She killed her brother so she could be free and empowered, but because of the rape and her inability to acculturate, she is doubly marginalized.

Rendered invisible, Medea clings to the only thing she has, her cultural identity as an artist and indigenous woman. The indigenous woman, as Moraga stated, precedes patriarchy. It is Medea’s primordial state and cannot be denied or destroyed. Medea is no longer the mother or the wife, but she is still the artist and the indigenous. Using Aztec magic, she forges these vestiges of her identity into a weapon to use against Armida, the
one who has stripped Medea of all she had, rendering her invisible to those she loved and to the world. Armida has already taken Hason. Now she threatens if Medea does not give her Acan and the maid Tita, she will report her to the “migra” and take her to court portraying her as an unfit mother. Medea uses magic hearkening to ritual and indigeneity and sews the poisonous dress that kills Armida. Soon after Armida’s death, with a machete in hand, we see Medea enter the house to kill Acan.

There are many elements of *Mojada* that illustrate the plight of an immigrant in Los Angeles, and in any part of the world, for that matter. Each character undergoes a different journey adapting to a new culture giving the audience a phenomenological glimpse into the experience. Medea’s connection to her roots as well as the traumas she has endured expresses the obstacles of acculturation compared to the experiences of the other characters. The various sociological terminology applied to the play illustrates how realistically Alfaro has depicted and humanized the experience through his adaptation.
Chapter 2

Issues of Identity in Moraga’s The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea

To fully understand Moraga’s works and how they express issues of Latin American identity it is essential to contextualize them within the events of her life. The exploration of Moraga’s identity as Mexican was influenced and awakened by the Chicano Nationalist Movement as it evolved from the 1960’s through the 1990’s. The Chicano Nationalist Movement or movimiento occurred when Mexicans “rejected assimilation into the Anglo culture and forged a new ethnic identity neither Mexican nor Mexican American but as Chicano.” The paths taken to form a Chicano Nationalism and acquire power were through “revolt, litigation, protest, electoral work, and building coalitions/alliances” (Gutiérrez 26). From the 1960’s to 1970’s, the main focus of reform was on the public schools. Starting in 1968, high school students began a series of walkouts called Blowouts to protest inferior education for Chicana/os in Los Angeles (Sloan, 478).

The Lesbian Movement faced the obstacles of discrimination from all sides and had to grow in spite of it. Through the struggle, Moraga witnessed the “emergence of a national Chicana feminist consciousness and a literature, art, and activism to support it” (Moraga, Last Generation 225). In her essay, “Haunting the Chicana: The Queer Child and the Abject Mother in Moraga,” author Mitchell says that “Moraga’s work must be seen in the context of the second-wave Chicana feminist movement of the 80’s, a context she herself created” (206). Mitchell is referring to This Bridge Called My Back, Moraga’s first book written and co-edited with pioneer Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa.
Mitchell states lesbians found themselves “excluded from the masculinist and homophbic discourse” which led to them creating an alliance with other women of color (Mitchell 206). The book brought together Chicana lesbian writers for the first time, giving voice and action to the movement through artistic expression. Anzaldúa and Moraga’s work formed a new consciousness that “built new coalitions with other U.S. Latinas and women of color (qtd. in Anzaldúa 1).

Equally informative to her work is Moraga’s identification to the Indian or indigenous part of her history that had been missing in her life. It is Moraga’s embracing of the indigenous that informs much of her work, Hungry Woman in particular. The connotations of Aztlán and identity are a recurring motif in much of her writings. Using Moraga’s definition, Aztlán is “that historical/mythical land where one set of Indian forebears, the Aztecs, were said to have resided 1,000 years ago” (Moraga, Last Generation 227). Aztlán was said to be located in the United States Southwest territory. The Treaty of Hidalgo signed in 1848 stipulated the Southwest be made part of the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War. The territory was originally secured as the Spanish conquered the Indians. Moraga calls the resulting mestizo nation as having been conceived through a double rape “first, by the Spanish and then by the Gringo” (Moraga, Last Generation 229). The desire of Chicana/os to reclaim this territory comprised the fight for ownership of the homelands that was a short-lived political battle in the mid-1960’s. It is the Aztlán that is the land battled over in Moraga’s adaptation of Medea, The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea. But for Moraga and her Medea, the Aztlán she wishes to claim is a Queer Aztlán.
It was not until Moraga had a conversation with poet Ricardo Bracho that the idea of a Queer Aztlán became fully formed. In her 1992 essay entitled “Queer Aztlán: the Reformation of Chicano Tribe,” Moraga describes her idea of a “Queer Aztlán” as a utopic response to “Chicano Nationalism, which never accepted openly gay men and lesbians among its ranks” (Moraga, Last Generation 225). Queer Aztlán then would accept and embrace “all its people, including its joteria” (225). In her essay, Moraga says, “we seek a nation strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender…. In a ‘queer’ Aztlán, there would be no freaks, no ‘others’ to point one’s finger at (Last Generation 235).

The Aztlán in Hungry Woman is far from being the utopic Queer Aztlán Moraga discussed in her essay. In the play, there has been an ethnic civil war that results in the half United States being broken up into small nations, one of which is the Mechicano Nation of Aztlán. After a war “that balkanized about half of the United States into several smaller nations of people,” the Chicana/o desire for Aztlán comes to fruition (Hungry 7). However, a counter-revolution followed between males and females. The patriarchy won and all queers were sent into exile.

Whereas Mojada is a realistic and naturalistic depiction of the myth, Moraga’s adaptation in its structure and tone is more layered and abstract, with a non-linear storyline. When asked if her depiction of the myth is her vision of a dark future, Moraga stated that rather the play is “a critique and an extended metaphor” about the Chicano Nation longing for a place, and what weakens Chicana/os is a “homophobia and entrenched misogyny” (Oliver-Rotger 9). She chose the form of the tragedy because “it teaches deeper and harder than happy” (Oliver-Rotger 10).
Integral to the discussion of identity expressed in the play is Moraga’s interweaving of the Greek and Indigenous Mexican myths to express Medea’s struggle with ethnic identity. The myth of La Llorona informs the story and is woven into the character of Medea. The myth is about a woman who killed her children after being jilted by her lover. Because of her crime she is barred from entering heaven and wanders the night wailing for her dead children. Moraga’s mother, although Mexican, never told her the tale of La Llorona, yet, Moraga said of the myth that it “has had a more profound impact on my writer’s psyche than any story [her mother] recounted” (Oliver-Rotger 10). When Moraga first heard the story, she “recognized the weeping woman” as a sister. “Maybe by being a lesbian,” Moraga said, “my identification was more easily won, fully knowing my crime was tantamount to hers. Any way you slice it, we were both a far and mournful cry from obedient daughters” (Oliver-Rotger 11). Moraga feels that the La Llorona story is a lie. She questions if Medea and La Llorona were truly traitors. Could infanticide be “an act of vengeance not against one man, but man in general for a betrayal much graver than sexual infidelity: the enslavement and deformation of our sex?” (Oliver-Rotger 11). In her portrayal of the La Llorona myth through her character Medea, then, Moraga gives La Llorona the power of her own voice to tell her story.

Similarly juxtaposed onto the play as another aspect of Medea is the Aztec Cihuacoatl, the patron saint of women who die in childbirth characterized by the four actresses who make up the chorus. Moraga was inspired by stone icons of the Cihuacoatl she saw at a museum, stating they looked like “true warrior women…I knew they were my chorus. I appreciated the idea that mothering and losing our babies was a warrior’s act” (Oliver-Rotger 10).
The Aztec myth of Coyolxuahqui is also dramatized within the play. Coyolxuahqui plots to kill her mother after learning she is pregnant because the baby will be a War God. Her brother’s birth will also mean “the birth of slavery, human sacrifice, and imperialism (in short, patriarchy)” (Oliver-Rotger 12). Huitzilopochtli springs out of his mother as an adult fully armed and saves her from Coyolxuahqui. Huitzilopochtli cuts off Coyolxuahqui’s head and throws it into the sky to form the Moon (Luna).

Moraga rewrites Coyolxuahqui’s creation story in her character Luna. While Luna is depicted as more assertive and comfortable with her sexuality than Medea, men also thwart her power. Medea chooses Jasón over Luna when she is threatened with losing her son. Luna, according to Medea, is the “real” lesbian. Medea says, “I’m not you, Luna. I wasn’t born that way…” (Moraga, Hungry 48). The only way Medea can return to Aztlán is to deny her sexuality. Luna is forever exiled from her home in Aztlán due to
patriarchal law. Coyolxauhqui’s murder by her brother symbolizes Luna’s exile and the exile of all who are threats to the patriarchy Aztlan has become.

Another important embodiment of an Aztec goddess through Medea’s character is Coatlicue. She is the hungry woman, the insatiable woman. She is the goddess of both creation and destruction. Medea’s inner battle is a battle of sexuality and indigeneity working to coexist within her. This duality of identity is personified in the Coatlicue myth.

Figure 3. Statue of Coatlicue. Dagli Orti/Getty Images

From this image, Coatlicue embodies the entwined snake, a symbol of fertility, her breasts indicate nourishment, but her necklace of hands, hearts and a skull indicate that she feeds on corpses (the element of the hungry). She also appears as the earth
goddess, mother of the gods and Tlazolteotl, goddess of sexual impurity (“Coatlicue,” Encyclopaedia Brittanica Online). Cihuacoatl, the goddess of those who died in childbirth, while not as associated with derogatory aspects of womanhood, represents the loss of children.

Luna describes Coatlicue: “In the place where the spirits live, there was once a woman who cried constantly for food. She had mouths everywhere…And every mouth was hungry y bien gritona. To comfort la pobre, the spirits flew down and began to make grass and flowers from the dirt brown of her kin. From her greñas, they made forests…. At last she will be satisfied, they thought. Pero, just like before, her mouths were everywhere, biting and moaning…. They would never be filled” (Moraga, Hungry 44-45).

Luna’s description of Medea as a creation myth is another way Moraga is rewriting history. But Coatlicue signifies that Medea can never truly be fulfilled because there are so many opposing forces at work inside of her. To keep her son, she has to deny her sexuality. To be in Aztlán and claim her indigenous rights and roots, she must succumb to gender discrimination. Medea’s difficulties echo the difficulties Moraga must have faced in trying to reconcile all the complexities of identity in her own life.

Patricia Ybarra, in her essay “The Revolution Fails Here,” asserts that the story of La Malinche also “haunts the text” (65). La Malinche is a symbol of betrayal. She was an indigenous translator for Cortes who is seen as a betrayer despite the fact that Malinche was actually sold by her mother to the Spanish. Ybarra asserts that Malinche’s story should not be viewed “outside of the frame of colonial exploitation” (71) and yet in literature and plays, La Malinche is forever characterized not as a victim, but as a traitor.
Ybarra states that in *Hungry Woman*, Moraga’s Medea is La Malinche when she “plays ‘straight’ with Jasón to get her son back” (69). Jasón comes to the borderlands to discuss custody of Chac-Mool. Threatened with losing her son, Medea sleeps with Jasón and makes plans to put their family back together and in doing so “betrays her own lesbianism” (69). Ybarra points out that “There as part of her indictment of the movement’s sexism, [Moraga] recuperates Malinche as she imagines her own lesbianism as a ‘betrayal’ when viewed through the lens of Chicano nationalism” (72). This betrayal and Moraga’s portrayal of the La Malinche myth in *Hungry Woman* exemplifies queer Chicanas having to choose between sexuality and ethnicity, Medea’s central struggle in the play (72). Medea has slept with Jasón, thus betraying the lesbian side of herself as well as betraying her lover Luna.

Moraga further emphasizes the La Malinche motif when at the top of Act II Medea emerges from the Coatlicue icon as the “living Coatlicue,” uncombed and wearing a black slip. After her betrayal to her sexuality, she embodies the quintessential sexualized “wife.” The Cihuatateo dress her in an apron and hand her a broom to complete this ideal of misogynistic domesticity. The Cihuatateo begin to tell the creation story of how Coatlicue became pregnant by stuffing two feathers in her pocket. The idea of this immaculate conception further stresses the image of woman, as seen through the eyes of men. The rewriting of La Malinche through Medea empowers women telling the story their own way, but also empowers the audience to gain an understanding and new perspective of their history (55).

While Medea personifies the queer Latina identity struggles, Chac-Mool is a personification of the second and third generation Chicana/os who do not know about
their history and culture. In characterizing Chac-Mool to represent the Aztec icon, Moraga is rewriting a history, changing the way the god is depicted. Ybarra points out that Moraga, in naming her character after the god, gave the Chac-Mool more meaning (66). Usually Chac-Mool is a term for a sculpture used for sacrifices, yet Moraga has empowered the Chac-Mool with an identity as a fallen hero, embodied onto her character in the play. By instilling Chac-Mool the Aztec warrior into her character, and weaving other elements of Aztec mythology into the story, Moraga educates her audience, whether Chicana/o or not about the indigenous past.

Figure 4. Chac-Mool Statue, Mexico Circa 900. (Roger Viollet Collection/Getty Images).

Chac-Mool embodies the desire to fill the historical gap. He has multiple piercings and has been trying to use pain and physical embodiment to fill the gap in his life. As he is getting tattooed he says, “In the center of the pain, there is always a prayer.
A prayer where you get up to leave and a whole army of people is there to carry you away. You aren’t alone anymore” (Moraga, Hungry 21). The army of people Chac-Mool indicates are his ancestors.

Medea has prevented Chac-Mool from identifying with his indigeneity. He has little or no connection to his ethnic identity, similar to Moraga in her childhood. He is a reflection of Moraga as she struggled to piece together her own ethnic identity. But Chac-Mool also represents the fear of disappearance of identity over generations. In her “Queer Aztlán” essay, Moraga discusses her fears that the Chicano movement is dead and how this death will eventually lead to a loss of Chicano culture altogether in the near future and that she sees this loss daily in the “blonde hair of my sister’s children, the gradual Hispanicization of Chicano students…” (Moraga, Last Generation 226). In a 2000 interview Moraga said, “I am ever-humbled by how difficult it is to teach one’s son (as a Chicana feminist) to love and respect himself and, at the same time, to love and respect women in a racist/sexist dominant culture” (Oliver-Rotner 9). Chac-Mool is a manifestation of Moraga’s fear and perhaps a reminder of the importance and responsibility for future generations of Chicana/os to know of their history. It is significant and symbolic that Chac-Mool is permanently embodying his Aztec namesake.

Chac-Mool is the messenger between worlds and this element of his mythology symbolizes the need for a bridge between identities. Similarly, in Mojada, Açan symbolizes the need for a bridge between his fully adapted father and marginalized mother. Chac-Mool is the one who can be a part of the world Medea lives in but also the ancient world tied to his roots. Another purpose of rewriting more meaning on to the Chac-Mool statue is that Moraga is also bridging the worlds for the audience. Chac-
Mool, as the second generation, should be able to embody and embrace both identities. Ybarra points out that symbolic indigenous naming “mimics many Chicano and Mexican parents’ decision in the 1960s to give their children indigenous names” and that this naming “signaled commitment to the indigenous past” (66). The character Chac-Mool symbolizes the potential to embrace all aspects of identity.

When Chac-Mool learns that his namesake was a fallen warrior, he is upset. He says to Medea, “Well, why would you name me like that, for someone who didn’t win?” Medea replies, “Wining’s not the point” (Moraga, Hungry 28). In discussing the fallen hero, Ybarra points out the fall of Chac-Mool and Medea, as fallen heroes promises a “not yet realized solidarity” (67). Ybarra speaks of a solidarity inspired by the “warriors of Mexican history and myth.” The deaths of the warriors, and Chac-Mool’s death, then, have the capability to inspire solidarity through “adulation of indigenous warriors” (68). This justifies the fall of the hero. Winning is not the point, then, because the fallen hero embodies the struggle for identity and the hopes for a bridging of the gap in the future. This is symbolized by Chac-Mool’s return as a ghost at the play’s end to take Medea away after she dies. The Cihuatateo dance and “This tableau indicates the continuity of the indigenous spirit into the future” (67-68). While seemingly fatalistic, Moraga in her infusion of Aztec myth, then instills hope of a fusion of the indigenous into the lives of Chicana/os.

On yet another level, Chac-Mool’s name implies an additional issue of identity. Medea alludes to the name Chac-Mool as being better than his other name, which we find out later in the play, is Adolfo. Chac-Mool hates this name in that it recalls Hitler. Chac-Mool, in his names, at the same time embodies ideas of an indigenous race as well as an
oppressor and murderer of the members of a race. This exemplifies not only Chac-Mool’s struggle with identity, but also the struggle of any group of people that is oppressed and taken over by another.

Another way Moraga rewrites history for Chicana/os and Mexicans alike is by adapting the mythical and folkloric tales woven in the play as an alternative to their patriarchal depictions of women. In the context of gender discrimination, these mythic women are patriarchal and racist representations that serve men and not women. They are symbols of betrayal, and bad mothering that are used to warn future generations of the consequences of betrayal to men. La Llorona is used to “warn children of the consequences of their bad [specifically sexual] behavior” (Mitchell 203). But, rather than seeing La Llorona as a villain to be feared, Chac-Mool feels sorry for her. When they hear an eerie wind that evokes the sound of La Llorona’s lonely wails for her children, he says to his grandmother, “La Llorona never scared me…I felt sorry for her, not scared” (Moraga, Hungry 37-38). Chac-Mool’s sympathy towards La Llorona, and that he is a child, projects hopefulness of upending the misogynistic conceptions of women for future generations.

Situating Hungry Woman within Moraga’s personal journey creates a deeper understanding of the adaptation. The Queer Aztlán that Moraga envisions takes Chicana/o Nationalism a step further speaking to the need for all Chicana/os to know their history. In rewriting history through her adaptation, Moraga responds to her own fears that the Chicano Movement will die out by creating a voice in her work for the movement. But she impresses the necessity to rewrite patriarchal mythology of women and the patriarchal exclusion of women in the movement through her adaptation. For
Moraga, rewriting/adapting *Medea* revitalizes the classic with issues important to not only the Chicano Movement but also, most importantly, the Queer Chicana/o Movement.
Chapter 3

Alfaro’s Adaptation: Community and Audience Reception

Critics’ Reception

Alfaro’s adaptation of Medea has gone through many incarnations. He has rewritten Medea several times not only to improve the text, but also to localize the play depending on where it is being produced. He has done this for some of his other adaptations, working with people in the community and the production staff to add a local dimension to his plays. Of his process, Alfaro said he reaches out to the community in the form of town hall meetings and story circles. He will pair up with a social service agency or a church and host a meeting to ask questions of community members. He finds out what are the greatest issues and needs for the community (Alfaro Lecture).

Alfaro reached out to the Boyle Heights community in 2005 during the production of his adaptation of Electra entitled Electricidad. The adaptation was about urban violence in the barrio and cholo gangs. The play was workshopped with youths and “addresses identity issues at the heart of the cholo community” and hence “functions as a sort of therapy for the sociological problems that contribute to violence in the cholo community and to the marginalization of the community at large” (Powers 194). The play was produced at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, CA, and through the workshop process involving gang youths, Alfaro integrates the world of the barrio and the world of the play and thus “ameliorates some of the marginalization that contributes to the formation of gangs (Powers 199).

Alfaro once again went out into the Boyle Heights community when he decided to set the Los Angeles incarnation of Mojada there. In an interview in 2015, Alfaro said, “I
started to meet a lot of people that were undocumented, working on the streets helping other people who are undocumented on just really basic things…” (DeRose).

The production team worked together with Alfaro to create the localized version of the play. Efren Delgadillo, set designer, described how Alfaro took the production team out into the community and they came upon a house that inspired the set design. Delgadillo, in an interview in 2016, said that many occupants of Boyle Heights run “front-yard” businesses, and this inspired the setting for *Mojada* (Delgadillo Interview).

In the earlier Chicago production, Alfaro and the set designer were inspired by tenement housing in Chicago’s Mexican American immigrant community of Pilsen. (Schreiber). Localization, critic Jessica Schreiber said, “allows Luis Alfaro to explore, or at least remind us of issues of class, gender, gentrification, and the immigrant experience” (*Mojada Review*). But taking it a step further, localization does not merely remind us of these experiences but creates an environment in which the ancient myth is not only retold, but is an embodiment of local style and terminology (Powers 194). Characters embody local versions of the myths in costumes, physicality, language and humor.

With local references, Alfaro created in-jokes with the audience that added to the adaptations’ relatability. Of the Chicago production, Schreiber said, “there is no shortage of laughs thanks to scenes with Tita (Socorro Santiago) and bread-peddler Josephina (Charin Alvarez) whose outsider gaze sheds light on daily anomalies of life in Chicago” (*Mojada Review*).

Of the Los Angeles production at the Getty Villa, critic Myron Meisel said, “Alfaro’s deployment of savvy insider-Los Angeles references scored well with the
crowd” and that humor “represents truly populist theater intended to appeal to an audience far broader than the art crowd” (*Mojada Review*).

Contemporary references further broadened audience appeal. Critic Evan Henerson stated, “Alfar dexterously weaves contemporary references to telenovelas, chisme and pan dulce with the description of a ‘killer’ dress that would not be out of place in a Jacobean revenge drama (“Curtain Up”). On the subject, Alfaro says “It’s hard to get audiences, especially in these very difficult, divisive times that we’re in, just for people to see themselves in others. And one way that I challenge my audience to do that is to say we are Greek: we are Chicano; we are American. We are all of those things, but we belong to the world” (DeRose). Contemporary references positioned within the Greek tragedy create another sort of bridge that connects our history with the present, connecting across cultural boundaries as well.

In his review about the Chicago production, Chris Jones points out that experimenting with tragedy can result in a “dull or merely academic” production. One of the greatest challenges of adapting, he points out, is the “difficulty of fusing the epic quality of classic dramas with the relative smallness of modern life without exploding believability.” Jones asserts that one of Alfaro’s strongpoints is that he “understands that humor can act as a kind of escape valve” (“Bringing Home”). This is accomplished in both the Chicago and Los Angeles versions with the character of Tita, who takes the place of the Greek Chorus and is also a confidante to Medea reminiscent of Lear’s fool. She points out humorous alignments of the past and present commenting in the Chicago version that the lives she is watching unravel compare to events on a “Spanish-language
soap opera” (Jones). In this way, Alfaro utilizes humor as a wormhole, bridging the gap of time, creating yet another way for the audience to connect to the adaptation.

Jessica Kubzansky, who directed the Los Angeles production of *Mojada*, said of the humor in the adaptation that “we let you laugh, let you love the people…because there are people coming to see the Greek drama and they think it’s going to be really serious…and then they see it’s light. That’s been something really interesting for me to kind of watch people slowly start to understand that this is the Medea story, but not the way you’ve been expecting it” (Alfaro Lecture). What Kubzansky stresses, in saying this, is that the humor draws people into the play. If someone is familiar with the play, perhaps the humor is a signal that they are going to be in for a different experience. If they are unfamiliar, humor invites the audience into the world of the play. Humor serves another purpose for the audience as it creates a light atmosphere in which to alleviate “anxieties surrounding class and racial stereotypes” (Powers 202). Humor dismantles stereotypes that often have no tangible meanings. For example, we might automatically generalize an undocumented person as a criminal, rather than seeing illegal border crossing as a necessity to remedy a desperate situation for an individual. Humor, then, humanizes the immigration experience creating an atmosphere conducive to learning and understanding.

Humor is important to Alfaro in his work and an element of all his adaptations. He aligns humor with nationality, stating that Mexicans “laugh at death because when it comes…there’s nothing funny about it at all. We use a joke to blunt the power of how hurtful the moment is” (Alfaro Lecture). While humor might distract from the serious issues the play addresses, Alfaro’s integration of humor into his work “reflects race and class” in that his use of humor references not only locality but also culture. Alfaro’s
adaptation does a great service to creating a bridge to understanding of immigration issues. Charles McNulty pinpoints what is most important about communicating immigration issues through the adaptation is that “upward mobility in American is typically celebrated as a heroic quest.” In Alfaro’s adaptation, upward mobility is a “tripwire triggering horrors” (Mojada at the Getty). In the examination of acculturation issues in previous chapters and the difficulties immigrants face, Alfaro’s adaptation presents the reality versus the dream of immigrating to a so-called “promised land.”

Alfaro said, in an interview with McNulty, that he’s portraying three different degrees of assimilation, Medea who is unable to assimilate, Hason who eagerly assimilates and Armida, who has assimilated decades earlier and is proud of her accomplishments. But what the three characters have in common, despite opposing goals, is sacrifice. Alfaro said in the interview, “we see what we’ve sacrificed” (McNulty). By “we,” perhaps he means other immigrants or those of Mexican descent. But the audience might also see the sacrifice made through the play. This helps to distinguish the immigrant’s true experience with the “American dream” which Alfaro states “might not make for an easy night in the theater for playgoers who see the fight for the immigrant as strictly virtuous” (McNulty). Sabina Zuniga Varela, who played Medea in the Getty production and has acted in all the female leads of Alfaro’s adaptations, said the play makes the audience question, “When have we sacrificed our personal beliefs to get ahead? When have we gone too far?” (McNulty). Varela went further to say in an interview on NPR that “People talk about this as a land of opportunity and we believe this play highlights it’s a land of sacrifice. And it really highlights what people give up in order to obtain this dream to have more for their children…” (DeRose). Therefore, not
only is the audience gaining an understanding of the sometimes idealistic expectations of immigrants and the reality of the immigrant experience, but also, what immigrants might have to do to succeed and what they might have to sacrifice.

Margolies also brings up the point that the play teaches us about border crossings. Tita tells us about the border crossing “via a flashback, just as other border crossings fill today’s news. The borders in this tale, however, may wander into the mental health territory, also ripped from horrifying headlines” (“At Getty Villa”). About midway through the play, the plot is interrupted by the one and only flashback where we see Medea, Hason, Tita and Acan as they climb fences and scramble through tunnels all accomplished with Kubzansky’s brilliant use of moving chain-link fences. They meet the Coyote (a person who smuggles people across the border) who transports them in a truck for two days. Tita, who narrates the flashback, describes the ordeal: “Tita- We are hot, sweating like animals and burning up. No air in the back” (Alfaro, Mojada 34).

When they finally near the border, the truck is stopped by Narcos (people involved in organized crime and selling of narcotics). They take another girl in the truck and Medea off and rape them.

Meisel said of the scene that Alfaro “invokes the horror of border crossing in pointed contrast to the heroics of Jason and the Argonauts, incisively eliciting awareness of the tragedy (and more crucially ignored, the traumas) of all displaced persons, however variable their motives or their adaptation to life in a new and often puzzling society” (“Mojada Review”). In a time when crossing borders and immigrating is a worldwide issue, by making the universal myth of Medea specific, Alfaro is in turn re-universalizing the play. In dramatizing the horrors of border crossings and the difficulties
once borders have been crossed he is creating an understanding of issues that are more relevant in the 21st century than perhaps they have been in hundreds of years.

Also instrumental in the success of the adaptation is Alfaro’s modernization of the characters. As mentioned earlier, Tita, as chorus and confidante, serves as narrator and source of comfort to Medea and a liaison for the audience across time and cultural boundaries. What to do with the chorus is a difficulty directors and adaptors face when dealing with Greek Tragedy. Mojada was the first of Alfaro’s adaptations where he condensed the chorus to one character. In Oedipus El Rey, he created a chorus of prisoners and in Electricidad, the main character’s neighbors form a gossipy chorus. Whatever choices an adaptor of Greek tragedy makes, transforming the chorus into something relatable is crucial. Alfaro’s decision to create a single character that bridges so many gaps for the audience proved fruitful.

McNulty, in his review of Mojada, describes Euripides’s Jason, as a “shameless narcissist.” Alfaro’s Hason, garners more sympathy and perhaps empathy. McNulty states that he “seems genuinely burdened by the deceits he plays on his wife” and that his actions are motivated by his desperation to “improve the family’s economic conditions.” While the Jason of old has no sympathy and seems to no longer care for Medea, Alfaro’s Hason is sympathetic “for his wife and her old country ways” (McNulty, Mojada at the Getty). Tony Frankel sees Hason as “so accepting, tender, and sweet as the often put-upon head of household…that we are left to wonder if he really deserves his fate” (“Theatre Review”). Other critics do not share this perspective and see Hason as self-serving and “bedazzled” of the good life (Boehm). Deborah Klugman in her review sees
Hason as being seduced and that he exchanges “love and family for material goods” (“What do Greek Tragedies”).

Regardless of whether Hason is a hero or villain, how he differs from Euripides’s Jason is in his humanistic desire for a better life, and he is willing to work for it. Whether his means are moral or not, his journey in Alfaro’s context is relevant and understandable. While he may still not be a character who garners our sympathy, how he acts as both a lover and an opportunist is relatable.

While reviews for Zuniga-Varela’s portrayal of Medea were favorable, some critics had difficulty with her character arc and the pacing of events that propel her to her terrible actions. Because most of the events that lead Medea into action occur in the last third of the play, critics noted Medea’s acts seems rushed and difficult to stomach. The subject of why Medea kills her children is oft debated and most times unanswerable to a large extent. Directors and adaptors struggle with understanding and communicating to the audience the justification or empathy for such a horrific act. Of course, such an act continues to occur and is the subject of contemporary news stories, but still, it is difficult to come to any kind of understanding.

Critics point out that in Euripides, we are privy to Medea’s inner thoughts through her monologues where she ruminates on her situation and the possibility and outcome of her own actions and this is what critics say Alfaro’s Medea lacks. McNulty says the way the drama is structured does not give “Alfaro much time to probe Medea’s thought process. She reacts whereas in Euripides the character both reflects and reacts, emotion superseding reason but not entirely displacing it” (“Mojada at the Getty”).
Frankel said, “Medea’s unspeakable crimes at the end seem sudden and unjustified. The arc of the show is left a bit out of whack, and since many earlier moments work so well, *Mojada* doesn’t follow through with the drama it has set us up for” (‘Mojada Review’). Being privy to Medea’s inner thoughts through monologue or dialogue might have set up her act in a more logical manner.

Anthony Byrnes, in a broadcasted radio review of *Mojada*, asserted that in Alfaro’s *Medea*, we see a timely Medea, reflective of Syrian refugees, “a frightening immigrant trapped in a new country slowly being stripped of her connection to home” But also, while Medea is a character we can feel for, “we understand the horror of Medea’s final act but we don’t feel it” (“A Classic in East L.A”).

Meisel holds Zuniga-Varela’s performance of Medea up against the diva-like performances of Judith Anderson or Zoe Caldwell. Meisel asserts that Zuniga-Varela “navigates the transition with a more delicate hand, debased into horrid transcendence apparently more internal than brazen” (“Mojada Review”). That the descent is internal is something Zuniga-Varela has been lauded for in her delicate and gut-wrenching performance, particularly in her depiction of a woman tortured by post-traumatic stress disorder. But the internal struggle conveyed in the physical act of murder especially of a child is something that critics cannot reconcile, nor could I as an audience member.

That being said, creating an understanding of Medea’s act of murder was not Alfaro’s goal in writing the adaptation. His goal was to unify audiences across cultural and ethnic boundaries. Alfaro believes theater can make us better people and we learn to be better people by “not by shying away from those transgressive feelings-rage, jealousy, vengeance-but rather by confronting them head on” (DeRose). Similarly, Powers
discusses the success of *Electricidad* in that the adaptation educates the public “about the concerns of the Boyle Heights cholos and the sociological factors that contribute to the alienation of those residents who experience identity issues in assimilation to mainstream U.S. culture” (Powers 203). *Mojada* addresses similar concerns creating a specific understanding of the difficulties of acculturation. Powers point out that in adapting, the classic is invigorated, while at the same time the classic is made important and relevant to audiences who may not have thought it so.

**Educator’s Reception**

While the success of the productions is not within the scope of this thesis, examining reception of the adaptations from both audience members and educators can serve to elucidate what aspects of the adaptations resonated. For both playwrights, outreach is an integral element of their work. The topics that resulted from Alfaro’s interaction with his audiences illustrate how adaptations can create a social theatre that stimulates thought and conversation.

Luis Alfaro and *Mojada* director Jessica Kubzansky led a talk at the Getty Villa on September 1, 2015. The seats were filled with teachers and audience members, most of whom had seen the production. Many of the teachers attended the production with their classes and incorporated *Medea* into their curriculum.

What came up quite a bit was varying audience reactions depending on their prior knowledge of the Greek classic. Alfaro talked about the first week of performances and how the “purists” looked for comparisons with the original text, plot and

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1 While Alfaro used the term “purist” casually, it does characterize those who are familiar with the classics and those who aren’t with certain connotations that I believe were unintended.
characterization. Alfaro and Kubzansky commented that they could hear audience
members exclaim when they recognized certain lines from Euripides and recognized the
original characters in their adaptations. Alfaro felt that “purists appreciate[d] the
repurposing of dialogue” whereas those new to the work “experience[d] the shock of it
through a relatable lens” (Alfaro Lecture).

Kubzansky felt those who knew the plot were “watching to see how the train
wrecks” but there is a whole new generation of viewers who “don’t know what to
expect.” Kubzansky likened the idea of watching “how the train wrecks” to watching the
events of 911 unfold on TV over and over “trying to wrap [your] brain around it because
it was so huge and unbearable.” She felt if she watched the event over and over,
somehow it would start to make some kind of sense. She saw Mojada in a similar way,
such that in making sense of Mojada, we see “ourselves in our most dire moments”
(Alfaro, Lecture).

How we see ourselves in the Greek tragedies, and in the adaptations was a source
of connection to students who saw Mojada, in particular. Alfaro has gone to great lengths
to reach out to students with the play. When he was working on the play in Chicago, he
arranged for copies of Euripides’s Medea in Spanish to be donated to each student at a
bilingual middle school. The school has a very large immigrant community. Alfaro said
the students devoured the play like it was “Harry Potter.” They then attended Alfaro’s
production and participated in discussions.

A Los Angeles Unified School district teacher in attendance at the talk discussed
the relevance of the adaptation and how the differences in Medea and Hason’s degree of

However, perhaps a better term would have been “experienced viewers of classics” or something
to the like.
acculturation in the form of Medea clinging to the past and Hason only looking to the
future is something that resonates with first and second-generation Hispanic students.

Mary Louise Hart, a Getty museum associate curator, pointed out that with the
Euripides version of Medea there is potential for students to say “oh, that’s not me. I
can’t relate to her.” The adaptation, Hart said, gives a potential for understanding and
bringing community together (Alfaro Lecture).

Alfaro recounted how at a talk back after the Chicago production, a politician
from the area who had been trying to get immigration policy through for years said,
“when we talk about immigrants we always talk about numbers. We talk about the
millions of undocumented that are living in your city” and that Alfaro’s adaptation
humanizes the struggle (Alfaro Lecture). Similar to Scuza’s utilization of humanization
rather than using numbers in her study, the play, in its humanization of an issue so
prevalent and universal serves a great purpose. Alfaro says that when audiences wrestle
with Medea’s struggle, it can give them a “whole different point of view about it” (Alfaro
Lecture).

At another talk back, Alfaro described how an audience member said he “hated
when you² talk about your identity politics. I feel completely left out and I don’t like it.”
Alfaro said he felt that way his entire career as he tried to break into American regional
theatre. Of the comment, Alfaro said, the plays open a dialogue and that the adaptations
bridge a gap for people to “meet in the middle.” Adaptations are “a nod to the purist, to
the classicist…and a nod to those who never discovered this world, and everybody’s
welcomed at the same table” (Alfaro Lecture).

² By “you” I’m assuming the audience member was referring to the Chicana/o community or
those belonging to an ethnic group that the audience member felt excluded from.
What is apparent from the feedback at the lecture was that the adaptation opened up a conversation about immigration and acculturation that might not have occurred were it not for the fact that the play was an adaptation of a Greek tragedy. Whether or not audience members were familiar with the Euripides version, the play appealed to a diverse audience. This is largely due to Alfaro reaching out to the community. He even went so far as to offer free readings and events connected to the play in East Los Angeles, so the community would be aware of the Malibu performances.

Alfaro feels it’s an artist’s job to “reflect the world we live in. If you see yourself in a small world, that’s a small play. And if you see yourself in a big world, you see yourself in everything. I hope in some way this play reflects what’s going on everywhere, and we can in some way always enter these worlds” (Alfaro Lecture).
Moraga’s Hungry Woman was first commissioned by the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in April 1995, and was produced as a staged reading. Four other theatre groups presented the play as a staged reading from 1995 to 2000. It was not until December 2000 that Hungry Woman was presented in full production as part of the “Plays at the Border Festival” at the Magic Theater in San Francisco (Svitch & Marrero 292). Since December 2000, the play has primarily been produced at universities including Stanford University under the guidance of Moraga in 2005.

Moraga sees her own work as challenging in terms of production and realization. In a 2011 interview Moraga said “the very subject matter of my writing, queer, feminist, and indigenist in perspective and sensibility automatically removes my work from mainstream consideration in terms of production. The costs involved in staging a full-length large-scale work, as so many of my plays are, mean that larger theatres, which cater to white upper-middle-class audiences, will not even consider this work. The result is that few of my plays are realized, in terms of production values, as beautifully as I have imagined them in my writer’s mind” (Ramirez, La Voz Latina 73).

Besides the difficulties producing Hungry Woman, audience reception has been problematic for numerous reasons. For one, audiences have difficulty feeling empathy for Medea throughout the play and tend to side with Chac-Mool and Luna. Moraga made adjustments for the 2005 Stanford University production, allowing for Medea and Chac-Mool to part ways with less of a falling out. Chac-Mool is less aligned with patriarchy as
well. In her 2006 production of *Hungry Woman* at Brown University, one of director Patricia Ybarra’s tactics to make the play more accessible to audiences was accomplished through design choices. Rather than presenting a “museological” design comprised of Greek and Aztec elements in past productions, in Ybarra’s production, the set referenced the border between the U.S. and Mexico in the southwest, with large, circular orbs that alluded to Aztec cosmology of the Sun and Moon. However, the design also symbolized U.S. and Mexican border politics contextualizing the production with immediate issues (Ybarra 82). Costumes and choreography referenced moments in Mexican history. Costumes, in particular, were constructed so that the Cihuatateos embodied “indigenous practice as conscious political acts” and thus gave a reality to the historical suffering of Mexican women, in particular La Malinche (83). This was accomplished through necklaces that “evoked the ’pre-conquest’ era, fabric worn across the Cihuatateos’ chests that recalled the criss-crossed rows of bullets used by the Adelitas during the Mexican Revolution,” and bandanas around the lower part of their faces that “paid heed” to the EZLN’s practice of doing so” (Ybarra 83). The costumes brought attention to the sufferings of both modern and historical Mexican women.

Despite Ybarra’s efforts, most audience members she spoke with interpreted the play through a psychological lens, seeing Medea’s sexual ambivalence a result of her abuse as a child (in the adaptation, Medea had been sexually abused by her brother as a child) (84). Many felt the play was pessimistic despite Ybarra’s adjustments to staging, costumes, set design as well as Moraga’s updated 2005 version. Ybarra attributes her production’s failure to the difficulty of staging the many aspects of the enigmatic La Malinche and a Mexican Medea all in one character. But Ybarra sees her production as
well as the text itself as a “productive failure” in that it is a “useful model…for rethinking social change in the Americas at the moment” (85).

Moraga’s 2005 production at Stanford University was produced as part of the university event, “Rite to Remember: Performance and Xicana/Indigena Thought.” The emphasis of the project was to offer a non-European lens through which to create and view theatre and performance. The production of Hungry Woman was a collaboration of students and faculty, co-directed by Moraga and Anthony. Students created original live music, choreography, and costumes in a collaboration that crossed disciplines. Moraga was quoted as saying the production “reflect[ed] a lifetime commitment to an integration of an indigenous sensibility into their art practice” (Alien “Play Takes On”). There was an outreach into the Bay Area “communities of color,” and also to queer and Chicano communities as part of the project that drew in an audience from many states. The production was touted as “already groundbreaking for its re-telling of the Greek myth using queer relationships” (Barnes).

Other productions did not fare as well. In 2001, Hungry Woman was performed in Dallas, Texas at Underman’s Basement Theatre and featured Adelina Anthony, a student of Moraga’s, and her group Cara Mia, a Latina theatre group. Cara Mia collaborated with the African American Soul Repertory to add an additional layer to the already multi-layered production. Most of critic Jimmy Fowler’s review was an accolade to Anthony’s performance as Medea. He did make the important point, however, that Moraga’s adaptation, while specific to many issues of Chicana/o identity, is “too universal to be exclusively appropriated by any particular movement” (“Custody Battle”). While Moraga
strives to be in dialogue with Chicana/o theatre, Fowler implies the universality of the
work might create a dialogue that speaks to multiple issues.

Humor was a great source of connection to the audience in Alfaro’s adaptation,
and was mentioned in regards to Moraga’s work as well. Critic Taylor Barnes mentioned
humorous scenes “such as a girls’ night on the town in a lesbian dance club where the
ladies line-dance to a disco remix of ‘the Hustle,’ playing against many of the play’s
intense moments” (“Medea Receives”). An overall favorable review, audiences seemed
connected to the work and the reviewer said, “audience members developed an emotional
attachment to the characters. The play elicited gasps, shouts and laughter from the
audience that reflected the emotional turmoil of Medea” (“Medea Receives”). But in the
Arizona State University production in 2014, the humor was not so successful. Critic
Zaida Dedolph pointed out that Adriana Ramos’s Medea, was said to rely on “lesbian
stereotypes” and that her relationship with Luna (Amy Arcega), could have been more
playful and nuanced. Jokes fell flat or were missed by most of the audience (“Hungry
Woman” Review).

The non-linear script and perhaps unfamiliar references to indigenous myth
caused confusion in some productions. Critic Paul Birchall said of the 2002 production at
the Celebration Theatre in Hollywood, that the performance was “long-winded and
unfocused.” He felt the production was “academic and dry” and the multiple thematic
issues were “half-baked and ponderous.” This production was also directed by Anthony
and Birchall said the play was so “ham-fistedly pretentious and metaphorical it never
connects with the viewer on the dramatic level” (“Hungry Woman” Review). It seemed
many problems with the Celebration production, according to Birchall, were due to the
directing, which was “enigmatic and unclear, full of bizarre, inexplicable gestures and movements” (“Hungry Woman” Review). Overall the adaptation itself, the critic felt, was “confusingly oblique and unsatisfyingly scattershot in comprehensibility and purpose” and that it “undermines its own points with choppy execution” (“Hungry Woman” Review). Considering that Anthony directed the Celebration Theatre production and the production at Stanford, it would seem that the audience make-up and the venue has a huge impact of how the adaptation is received.

Zachariah Webb, who reviewed the 2014 production at Arizona State University found the play to be relevant. The byline for his review read, “A group of queer revolutionaries in post-apocalyptic Phoenix are at the forefront of ‘The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,’ but we solved the queer problem by legalizing gay marriage, right? Wrong” (“Hungry Woman” Review). The critic’s cutting statement illustrates the relevancy of the play in reference to queer issues and that sadly, things have not changed enough in the past sixteen years since the play debuted.

Of the play’s relevancy in other regards, Webb said, “Medea’s reimagining casts the story in a whole new light, adding a profound depth to the myth by tangling Euripides’s ‘Medea’ in a web of modern discourses and ethnicity” and that the play “gives thunderous voice to identities largely ignored or silenced by dominant cultures and institutional structures” (“Hungry Woman” Review). In this way, Webb points out the counter-hegemonic nature of the adaptation as well as the lens to ethnicity the play provides.

Webb commented that the using the indigenous lens gave the audience “a distance with which to rethink static notions of otherness prescribed by the norm.” This was
realized, Webb goes on to say, through the aesthetics of the play, with “Aztec-inspired imagery and costumes.” Erica Ocegueda, the play’s dramaturge and choreographer, commented that the play offers “indigenous cultures as a possibility of looking at things a different way” (“Hungry Woman” Review).

For many reviewers, the chorus did not work. Dedolph felt the chorus came across as “cold and emotionless” and perhaps this was purposeful to counter the high dramatics of the main characters, but the reviewer felt this portrayal of the chorus did not work. Dedolph commented the actors did not have the vocal strength to “give strength to an authority figure” (“Hungry Woman” Review). Other reviewers commented that the chorus provided the indigenous perspective but did not really offer any input positive or negative as to their performances.

Stanford University’s yearlong program on “indigenous thought” and “non-European approach to theatre” created a platform for understanding an issue about Chicana/o identity that might be unknown to many. Most university productions included a visit from Moraga, and so to this end, the play created a multi-faceted education opportunity for an under-addressed issue and population. It was certainly a much less promoted production that Alfaro’s Mojada, and less commercial. Both provided possibilities for enlightenment about Latina/o issues for broad populations.

Moraga has much to say about the purpose of her writing, intended audience and reception of her play. In her 2002 essay entitled, “Sour Grapes: The Art of Anger in América,” Moraga responds to reviews about her play Watsonville: Some Place Not Here. The play is loosely based on three events that actually took place in Watsonville, a coastal farming town in Central California. The events were the cannery strikes of 1985-
87, a 7.1 earthquake in 1989, and the appearance of the Virgen de Guadalupe on an oak tree in 1992 (Moraga, *Watsonville* 4). The narratives were taken from interviews Moraga conducted with residents of the town, although highly fictionalized. Similar to *Hungry Woman*, Watsonville received criticism for unfamiliar references and an enigmatic structure. The play was critiqued for not having the components of a well-made play. *Hungry Woman* received similar complaints from critics who complained of the play’s non-linear structure and metaphors and that the play did not connect with the viewer.

In the “Sour Grapes” essay, Moraga acknowledges the difficulties an American middle-class, non-Hispanic audience might have with her work stating, “Corporate Amerika” (Moraga’s spelling) “is not ready for a people of color theater that holds members of its audiences complicit in the oppression of its characters” (qtd. in Oliver-Rotger 3). She acknowledges that audiences become angry when they are the outsider rather than being “enlisted as a partner in the protagonists’ struggle” and must engage with the play through “self-examination” rather than “identification” (qtd. in Oliver-Rotger 3).

Moraga goes further in the essay to hold reviewers accountable to the lack of understanding. She writes, “If critics refuse to learn the traditions, the languages, the sensibilities of the artists they critique how are they then to educate their own readers?” (Moraga, “VG Interview” 4). Moraga asserts that critics still see American theater as “colonial.” So critics of her work are seeing it through a clouded perspective of their own history.
While Moraga asserts that critics should educate themselves in order to educate their readers, Sandra Messinger Cypess suggests critics find a “recognition of difference” as a middle ground for engaging with Mexican texts. She uses the example that she may not share all the experiences of the characters in a play, but she can find a shared experience in “gender oppression” (Messinger Cypess 493). Perhaps a fusing together of Moraga’s idea for educating the critic and Messinger Cypess’s suggestion to recognize differences and look for shared experiences in a work can create a better audience experience.
Chapter 5

The Problem with Poetics and the Well-Made Play

Moraga stated in her essay “Sour Grapes” that the reason some people have difficulty with her plays is because they expected the constituents of a well-made play and felt uncomfortable and confused without that kind of structure (qtd. in Oliver-Rotger 3). Moraga was inspired by her critics to make a careful examination of Aristotle’s Poetics to understand the model of the well-made play. After reading Brecht and Boal, Moraga realized her discomfort with the idea lay with the fact that “Aristotle created his Poetics within the context of a slave-based economy…not unlike the corporate-controlled democracy we are witnessing in the United States today.” She writes “Women and slaves were not free citizens in Aristotle’s Greece” (3). And just as women and slaves were not free in Aristotle’s time, neither are the central characters in Moraga’s plays.

In view of that, adapting a Greek classic such as Medea in a structure oppositional to the well-made play is in itself a political statement that naturally might cause discomfort for some audience members. It is in the very rewriting of the classic that is an act of empowerment against the hegemony of Aristotelian dictates.

But theorist Sue Ellen Case has an oppositional opinion about adaptations of Greek plays and their depiction of marginalized women. Case would most likely agree with Moraga that an Aristotelian depiction of women is dictated by a patriarchal society. Case goes further to highlight the absence of women playwrights in the classical canon, and agrees that adaptations have filled a gap as to the unrepresented historical accounts of actual women in Greece. However, she makes the point that this onstage manifestation of
woman represented the patriarchal value of woman while suppressing the real “experiences, stories, feelings and fantasies of actual women” (7). To this end, how might Case feel about Moraga’s adapting a character to represent lesbi ana that is rooted in and based on a character created by the patriarchy? And furthermore, the indigenous characters also aligned with Moraga’s character Medea were creations of a patriarchal society. The contradiction is most apparent in La Malinche, who, as aforementioned, is demonized as the traitor to the race for marrying Cortes and birthing his children, despite the fact that this was most likely due to rape as was the case during the conquest.

Case stresses that how women are portrayed in the classics must be distinguished from actual true accounts of historical women. By perpetuating the women from classics in adapting, we are perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes. Furthermore, Case emphasizes that as women were banned from the stage at the time the classics originated, and males played the female characters, physicality and gesture of women is and was filtered through a male interpretation of how women walk, talk and move. Cases states, “This practice reveals the fictionality of the patriarchy’s representation of the gender. Classical plays and theatrical conventions can now be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production” (7).

The question is, in consideration of this, how do we justify the very idea of a lesbian Medea when Medea herself is a product of misogyny as is La Malinche? Case goes further to say that male actors portraying women led to a creation of generalized and stereotyped female roles (11). Is Medea then a stereotype? Is La Malinche or La Llorona? While Case might agree that Moraga, in her rewriting, is empowering and revising the
stereotypes of the woman as betrayer, would it not make more sense to create new archetypal female characters by women themselves? Why reinvent at all?

One way Moraga might be combatting this constraint of character in Hungry Woman is through her all female cast but for the character of Chac-Mool. It is no accident that Moraga’s Jasón, emblematic of patriarchy, is played by a woman. She has in this way, upended the Greek tradition, by embodying all the characters as women. Only Chac-Mool, who is a boy, and still holds the possibility of being molded or changed, is played by a male.

While Case might take issue with adapting Greek classics, she does stress that the feminist reader “might conclude that women need not relate to these roles or even attempt to identify with them. Moreover, the feminist historian might conclude that these roles contain no information about the experience of real women in the classical world” (15). But what might serve a purpose for feminists is to “enhance her understanding of how the hegemonic structure of patriarchal practice was instituted in Athens” (15). Perhaps this is exactly what Moraga is doing in Medea’s as well as her own wish for a Queer Aztlán.
Conclusion

Examining Alfaro’s adaptation through Skuza’s as well as other practitioner’s sociological components of immigration illustrated how Alfaro brought out important and relevant issues through the classic lens. Alfaro’s framing of Medea’s traumatic border crossing allowed for a manifestation of multiple issues of acculturation. His depiction of the character Medea humanized the acculturation process. Through the characters’ various reactions to the acculturation process, Alfaro provided for his audiences a variety of perspectives.

Examination of audience and critical reactions to Mojada isolated elements that worked the best to reach audiences. Humor, locality and contemporary references served as bridges between the format of the Greek tragedy and a more modern theatre and reinvigorated the classic story. Alfaro’s connections to community in both the creation of his adaptations as well as the production’s locality illustrated how reaching out in this way can create for audiences a bridge to the classics as well as providing a platform for expression of multiple issues of immigration and identity. Outreach to educators demonstrated the ability of an adaptation to stimulate thought and discussion.

Understanding Moraga’s personal journey to identify as a Chicana lesbian and connect with her indigeneity was crucial to exploring her adaptation. Contextualizing Moraga’s adaptation to her experiences with racism within both the Chicano Nationalist Movement and the Women’s Movement illustrated how her struggles inform her writing.

Analyzing Moraga’s idea of a Queer Aztlán and its role in the adaptation revealed the exclusion of queers in reclaiming indigeneity. Examining La Llorona, La Malinche,
Coatlicue and other elements of Aztec mythology in the adaptation revealed how Moraga overturns their alignment with betrayal. Instilling the Chac-Mool statue with a narrative in the character of Medea’s son allows for expressing the effects of the historical gap. His character is also a reminder of the need to educate future generations of Chicana/os as to their historical past.

The challenges in producing *Hungry Woman* were examined through the discussion of various productions. The efforts made to enable accessibility to audiences were accomplished through design choices and amendments to the script. Ybarra’s view of the play as a “productive failure” illustrated the usefulness of the adaptation as a vehicle for social change. Moraga responded to critical reactions as to the inaccessibility of her works for all audiences with her “Sour Grapes” essay. Looking at criticism of the adaptation against Moraga’s essay illustrates the need for education of critics in regards to non-Aristotelian structures and the need for a middle ground suggested by Messenger-Cypess.

Outreach was also integral for Moraga’s adaptation and created opportunities for exploration of issues of indigeneity on college campuses. Moraga was commended for addressing queer issues, especially under-addressed in the Chicana community.

Holding Moraga’s adaptation to the expectations of the well-made play in conjunction with Case’s opinion of the inherent misogyny of the classic questioned the relevance of adaptation from a feminist perspective.

Creating relatable, contemporary characters that still maintained an essence of their original counterparts was also integral to an adaptation’s success. Both Medeas inspired emotional reactions from the audience whether it was empathy or shock.
Alfaro’s Hason embodied the immigrant struggle to rise up, but he was also ruthless in his means. Armida showed great polarity to Medea and gave us another level of acculturation to examine. Açan illustrated the difficult position children of immigrants can be placed in, both in terms of conflict and identity. Moraga’s Medea provided a glimpse into the complicated issues of identity lesbianas face. She also gave us the indigenous lens through which to see Medea’s identity struggles.

Analysis of both adaptations of the enigmatic and complicated Medea exemplified the multiple ways the playwrights revealed issues of Latin American identity and immigration struggles. The adaptations inspired discussion, and created platforms for education and created a bridge to understanding.
Works Cited


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