

## **Chicanx, queer, warrior\*ess: Cherríe L. Moraga's *Mexican Medea***

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Until today, the Medea myth is one of the most infamous pagan myths in the Western cultural canon. Narrative motifs such as cultural alienation, assimilation in exile, and infanticide have been approached from perspectives of political, cultural-historical, and gender studies. The versatile nature of the myth allows for multi-faceted readings and numerous angles of appropriation. At first, stereotypical female affectivity and injured pride fuel the ancient Western Medea's vengeful actions. Particularly towards the second half of the 20th century, however, emerges a range of decidedly different reworkings of the story. Cruel infanticide is transformed into an act of positive emancipation, attributions of barbarism and alienation oscillate between characters, and cultural norms are overthrown.

With her play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, Cherríe L. Moraga constructs her transcultural appropriation of the Medea myth as evolving around extremist notions of ostracism at the intersection of social and biological considerations of gender binarisms and racism immanent in the fight for a cultural homeland.

This essay argues that until today, the queer homeland Moraga imagines in her play and calls for in her theoretical work is more mythical than real: despite the efforts of Chicanx movements, Aztlán, or: the idealized home in an inclusive community, does not exist. *The Hungry Woman* offers a broad discussion of the shortcoming and the potential the community has – and

while Moraga's and her sisters' work may not change it ad hoc, it brings to the forefront civil and human rights movements other communities have profited from. Change and the inclusion of those currently deemed not a part of the Chicanx community (most prominently LGBTQI\*) may not be as impossible as it appears. As a dystopia, *The Hungry Woman* regards these aforementioned contexts: a queer Aztlan is unattainable, jotería are exiled and oppressed, and the success of activist interventions is as mythical as the goddesses Moraga and her characters call upon. And yet, activism and ideas performed in the drama illustrate the necessity and possibility for a positive change – a change Moraga and other women of color have achieved with their impactful work on intersectionality within modern feminism.

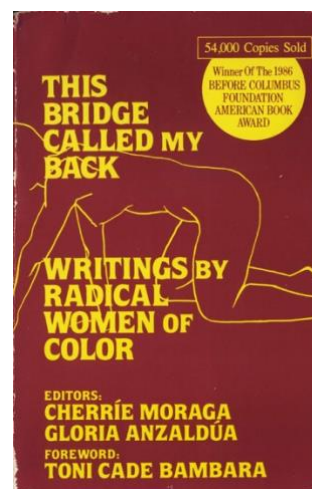


Fig. 1: Title page "This Bridge Called My Back"

#### **Cherríe Moraga: Chicana, feminist, lesbian**

Albeit being one of the most prominent figures of the Chicanx feminist movement, Moraga's identification with it has not always been obvious:

During her participation in the women's movement of the 1970s and prior to her identification as a woman of color, she was not initially conscious that she was neglecting those interests. The realization came to her gradually, and manifested itself, at first, in discomfort – in the sense that something was missing, something was wrong.<sup>1</sup>

She is well-known for her work on the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited with fellow feminist activist Gloria Anzaldúa. In its preface, Moraga recalls her

coming to consciousness as a woman of color: »A few days ago, an old friend said to me how when she first met me, I seemed so white to her. I said in honesty, I used to feel more white. [...] But at the meeting last night, dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over. [...] My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women

<sup>1</sup> Paula M.L. Moya: Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory. In: *Signs*. Vol. 26, No. 2 (2001), pp. 441-483, here 459.

of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack!«<sup>2</sup>

The publication highlights the voices of feminist activist women of color whose work is absent from scholarly and civil discourse at the time. The authors write at the intersections of race, gender, nation, and sexuality, hence contributing to feminist movements beyond those of white middle-class feminists in the US. Anzaldúa and Moraga's work criticizes the lack of representation of (gay) feminists of color in women's movements, queer activism, and the Chicano movement and community. In her later work, Moraga continues to point out the inadequate nationalisms of the Chicano movement which neglects intersectional contributions. In so doing, the Chicano community excludes a vital part of its own: a lesbian and queer community.

Moraga states that a modern Chicanx community needs to embrace all its parts, "including its jotería"<sup>3</sup> and proposes this is only possibly by rethinking the mythical Chicano homeland Aztlán as queer. In "Queer Aztlán"<sup>4</sup>, the feminist points out: "What was wrong about Chicano Nationalism was its institutionalized heterosexism, its inbred machismo, and its lack of a cohesive national political strategy."<sup>5</sup> She refers to the remnants of El Movimiento of the 70s and 80s which has poignantly shaped the values of today's Chicano movement. Both focus on male heterosexuality, machismo, and the notion of submissive, conservative womanhood at the basis of what is still deemed cultural integrity<sup>6</sup>. In its exclusion of some of its associates, the movement weakens itself – a fragmented community offers multiple targets for its opponents whereas a united community embracing its diversity is stronger through it. 'Queering Aztlán' does not mean, however, to implant singular groups, e.g. queer and non-queer, into a specific space; "To 'queer' Aztlán is to insist that identity is plural, multiple, shifting, and fluid, and it also insists that such complexity can allow [...] meaningful collective identity that doesn't snuff

<sup>2</sup> Moraga qt. in Moya, *Chicana Feminism*, p. 473.

<sup>3</sup> Cherrie L. Moraga: *Queer Aztlán*. In: *Ibid.* (ed.): *The Last Generation*. Boston 1993, pp. 145-74, here 147.

<sup>4</sup> "Queer" as used in 'Queer Aztlán' draws attention to both intersections of identity and what bell hooks ("Feminist Scholarship: Ethical Issues", 1989) calls interlocking systems of domination (which they also specify as White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy). Queer and Aztlán are both political constructions and real (Accomando 2008: 113) – real in the sense that Aztlán is an ideal homeland believed to exist in the location of the U.S.-Mexican border and queer as a valid nonconforming gender identity. It is noteworthy that the term 'queer' was used to describe and exile a perceived 'deviant' group of nonconformists and undesirables in many nationalisms. However, in contemporary LGBTQI\* culture and activism, the term has been positively reclaimed to become a valid descriptor of gender identity and perception.

<sup>5</sup> Moraga, *Queer Aztlán*, p. 148f.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156f.

out difference”<sup>7</sup> – it establishes the homeland as intersectional, inclusive, and diverse.

Interestingly, Moraga does not reject Chicano nationalism per se. She rather advocates for it to use all its people and, hence, its full potential in a ‘wiser’ revolution:

Implicit in Moraga's conception of Queer Aztlan is a non-relativist realist claim that it is wrong to discriminate unfairly against people on the basis of race, gender, and sexuality. The »wiser« revolution that she imagines is not a »strategic« or »pragmatic« approach but is based on her own deeply felt conviction about what is needed to make the world not merely different but better.<sup>8</sup>

In her call for a queer Aztlan, the feminist puts forward the sociological and personal perspective that nation, identity, and cultural normativity may change over time. In “Indigena as Scribe”, Moraga highlights the need for openness and inclusion: “Indigenous identity is not culturally static but ever evolving, which implies, of course, cross-cultural fertilizations”<sup>9</sup> – a beneficial mix between communities of various races, classes, and gender identities. The thoughts proposed in her theory work and activism are prominent in her plays as well, as evinced by the following discussion of *The Hungry Woman*.

### **Medea: Myth and Mythemes**

Structurally, the play relies on widely recognized ‘mythemes’ as building blocks of a mythological narrative – in this case, the Medea story. In countless versions of the myth, Medea becomes a ‘collective singular’, the figurehead of both social and individual misconduct fueled by fear and love. She is shown as an ‘other’, dark, inscrutable, but fascinatingly powerful and frightening at the same time. Although the tragedy revolves around the female character, it is not necessarily to be seen as a positive feminist piece. As Bernard Knox points out, “the ‘Medea’ is not about woman’s rights; it is about woman’s wrongs, those done to her and by her.”<sup>10</sup> Medea’s furious emancipation comes at the price of numerous lives, their deaths negating a solely positive feminist reading of the play. Yet, with its accounts of xenophobia, sexism, and notions

<sup>7</sup> Christina Accomando: »All its people including its jotería«: Rewriting Nationalism in Cherríe Moraga’s Queer Aztlán. In: *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008), pp. 111-124, here 116.

<sup>8</sup> Moya, *Chicana Feminism*, p. 459.

<sup>9</sup> Cherríe L. Moraga: Indigena as Scribe. The (W)rite to Remember. In: Marc Maufort, Caroline De Wagter (eds.): *Signatures of the Past: Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama*. Brussels 2008, pp. 151-168, here 161.

<sup>10</sup> Knox, qt. in Betine van Zyl Smit: Medea the Feminist. In: *Acta Classica*, Vol. xlv (2002), pp. 101-122, here 102.

of a (white) cultural supremacy, the Medea myth is used expertly to tackle said concepts by feminist writers such as Moraga.

### **Medea (Meso)Americana**

Moraga showcases the struggles of her Medea within a mostly traditional retelling of her story. In interlacing the classic Euripidean drama with Aztec mythology, she transposes the narrative into a (Meso)American context. Drawing on Chicana feminism and the protagonist's prominent queer identity, Moraga allows for a more charged rendering of a contemporary social narrative of suppression and brutality – a reality gay women of color are confronted with every day. The dystopian play highlights omnipresent socio-political issues in the South of the US and the North of Mexico as well as within the Chicana community: the displacement of a colonized people, the lack of an official topographical settlement, and the nationalist marginalization of feminist, queer, and nonconformist groups within the community. Moraga's *Mexican Medea* establishes and breaks rules in gender struggles and highlights its very own (hi)story of refuge, crisis and forced migration. She draws on culturally specific and universally recognizable narratives of Malinche, la Llorona, and the mythological Coatlicue and Coyolxhauqui to illustrate the age-old oppression of the Chicana (feminist) community both from within and without.



Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Omecihuati, 1979  
Watercolor on fibreglass paper, 22" x 30"  
Discovered in fire in 1982

*Fig. 2: Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Omecihuati (also known as Coatlicue; from title page "The Hungry Woman - A Mexican Medea")*

### **Realist Dystopia**

The 2001 version<sup>11</sup> of *The Hungry Woman* presents the ancient Medea in Aztec, Meso-American dress. It draws a dystopian image of a fictional (yet very probable) future in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This future is

<sup>11</sup> Moraga published a reworking of her play in 2005 which stages the same story as presented in the version analyzed in this paper (cf. Ybarra 2008, 85). The new work is tailored to include reflections on and a critique of the terrorist attacks on the United States on 9/11, emphasizing the growing predicament of demonization of and violence against non-white members of society which they found themselves in as well as an ideological connection between the terrorist actions against the U.S. notion of freedom and the fictional rebellion of Jasón and his "revolutionaries" against the docile and inclusive government established in Aztlán.

“imagined based on a history at the turn of the century that never happened.”<sup>12</sup>

Moraga describes this history and the resulting societal structure in detail:

An ethnic civil war has ‘balkanized’ about half of the United States into several smaller nations of people. [...] [A] revolution established economic and political sovereignty for seceding nations with the ultimate goal of defending aboriginal rights throughout the globe. Several years after the revolution, a counter-revolution followed in most of the newly-independent nations. Hierarchies were established between male and female; and queer folk were unilaterally sent into exile. [...] They reside in what remains of Phoenix, Arizona, located in a kind of metaphysical border region between Gringolandia (U.S.A.) and Aztlán (Mechicano country). Phoenix is now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors.<sup>13</sup>

The first revolution pays tribute to the Mexican-American War, imagining it as won by the Chicano troops instead of being ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The treaty moved the international border and delivered a large portion of Mexican land to the US. In *The Hungry Woman*, this distribution of land is achieved by the aforementioned counter-revolution. The border region becomes a home to those unfit anywhere else: feminist revolutionaries and members of the LGBTQI\* community. Moraga employs Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of the borderland as presented in “La Frontera”: a psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderland made topographical at the US-Southwest/Mexican border – although it may be found in other places as well: “In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”<sup>14</sup> The borderlands constitute an omnipresent split between those it separates and, if inhabited, marks those within it as abject and non-belonging to either side.

Medea and her family occupy the borderland aptly named Tamoanchán (“we seek our home”<sup>15</sup>). The home they long for is Aztlán, the ancestral Mechicano homeland, an idealized, mythological space. Medea is a Chicana feminist revolutionary leader who fought to reclaim Aztlán aiming to unite the scattered Chicanx community on a shared home<sup>16</sup>. She is banished from the city after her lesbian relationship with Luna is discovered by Jasón, the father of her

<sup>12</sup> Cherríe L. Moraga: *The Hungry Woman – A Mexican Medea, & Heart of the Earth: A Popol Vuh Story*. Albuquerque 2001, p. 6 (hereafter HW).

<sup>13</sup> HW, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Anzaldúa, qt. in Accomando, *Rewriting Nationalism*, p. 114.

<sup>15</sup> HW, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> HW, p. 6.

child Chac-Mool<sup>17</sup>. As evinced by the play's title, Medea is restless and insatiable in her passions. Fittingly, she is juxtaposed with the mythological Hungry Woman – a goddess crying for food, or something to fill her numerous mouths and satisfy her diverse hungers – by Luna during cunnilingus (“*[Luna makes love to Medea with her mouth.]* Creation Myth. In the place where the spirits live, there was once a woman who cried constantly for food. [...] her mouths were everywhere [and they] would never be filled.”<sup>18</sup>). Medea and the Hungry Woman have in common that their needs will never be met; the play foreshadows in its very title the futility in striving to establish a homeland and unite those exiled. The revolutionary's hunger is present also “both in Medea's maternal love for her son and her passionate, carnal love for Luna.”<sup>19</sup> – the son signifying a new generation and hope for the future, the lesbian lover highlighting, on the one hand, a steadfast haven for Medea's emotion and passion. On the other hand, Luna is an important reference point for Medea's identity as a lesbian woman similar to what Moraga describes in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Jasón is insignificant in any of the above matters. He embodies a false Chicano machismo<sup>20</sup> and the heterosexist ideals of El Movimiento. He is part of the counter-revolution and has annihilated what the first (feminist) revolution had achieved. What remains is a hegemony of patriarchal suppression and heterosexist supremacy with Jasón at the forefront<sup>21</sup>. Yet, he has an egotistical interest in Medea and their son. Although he is, ironically, the Minister for Culture in Aztlán<sup>22</sup>, he is not allowed to raise claim for land in the homeland. According to the ‘one-drop-rule’ in place, only those with native ancestry may file requests for property. Aztlán's government employs racist laws, repeatedly marking its undesirability for those exiled and its stasis in the recognition of indigenous identities and transcultural fertilization Moraga highlights in other works.

Within the play unfolds a family tragedy of ideals, ideology, and a future of oppression at the center of which is Chac-Mool. As Medea analyses: “He is your [Jasón's] native claim. You can't hold onto a handful of dirt in Aztlán

<sup>17</sup> HW, p. 68f.

<sup>18</sup> HW, p. 44f.

<sup>19</sup> Juan Ruez Padilla: Crying for Food: The Mexican Myths of ‘La Llorona’ and ‘The Hungry Woman’ in Cherríe L. Moraga. In: *Comparative American Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2014), pp. 205-217, here 212.

<sup>20</sup> His Chicano machismo is doubly false: firstly, it prescribes to the exclusionary heterosexism Moraga opposes in her theoretical work. Secondly, Jasón is no Chicano. He is not of Meso-American descent, “the U.S. Air Force father, the quarter-breed mestizo-de-mestizo cousins, [the] mother's coveted Spanish coat-of-arms” (HW, p. 70) expose him as both of Spanish and U.S.-American heritage. Within the play, he unites a double oppression of Chicanx in his very being.

<sup>21</sup> HW, p. 69f.

<sup>22</sup> HW, p. 70.

without him. You don't have the blood quantum."<sup>23</sup> The parents fight for custody and two different possible futures for their child as well as their respective ideologies. As Medea fears, growing up with Jasón would make Chac a smaller version of the suppressor she and her people suffer under. The mother does everything in her power to prevent his father from seizing the boy and shaping him after his nationalistic ideals. Moraga inscribes into Chac a faint trace of possibility for a future after Medea's heart. The soon-to-be 13-year-old aims to unite Mechicano tradition<sup>24</sup> and current policy<sup>25</sup> to transform the future of Aztlán and claim his role as 'man of the family'. This manhood is what Medea tries to delay. "On/in the body of her son, Medea projects the just reclamation of the land she fought for."<sup>26</sup> Losing him would mean losing everything. Medea has been rendered a non-docile patriot for Chicanx due to her gender, sex as well as sexuality. Any chance of making Aztlán her home again is annihilated, her son is her home: "[*Grabbing him by the shoulders.*] You're my land, hijo. Don't you see that? You're my land!"<sup>27</sup>

### **Catastrophising Utopia**

Chac-Mool ultimately decides against his mother, articulating his innocence regarding his mother's situation, and stresses that she has become what Patricia Ybarra deems a version of Malinche, "la Chingada, the fucked one, who betrayed herself [as a Chicana activist engaging with a non-native man] as well as her entire raza."<sup>28</sup> In addition to her sexuality and gender, Chac deems his mother a traitor of their people, making her an even more impossible patriot. In killing Chac, she eradicates a new generation and the most promising prospects of positive change. One might argue that, given the activism and human rights protests currently lead by young people especially in the LGBTQ\* and Black Lives Matter movements, Moraga's Medea has forfeited a realistic chance to fulfil her strive for an inclusive Aztlán. However, his sexual awakening<sup>29</sup> and his refusal to take part of his indigenous identity to Aztlán<sup>30</sup> make Medea question him. "[H]e would be gone forever, that he is

<sup>23</sup> HW, p. 72.

<sup>24</sup> HW, p. 13f.

<sup>25</sup> HW, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Micaela Diaz-Sanchez: Impossible Patriots: The Exiled Queer Citizen in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. In: Maufort, De Wagter, *Signatures of the Past*, pp. 141-150, here p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> HW, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Ybarra: The Revolution Fails Here: Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* as a Mexican Medea. In: *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2008), pp. 63-88, here 71.

<sup>29</sup> HW, p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> HW, p. 83.



no longer a boy and, as a man, he has woken up to grow his innate instinct for the possession of aboriginal land or the woman-mother.”<sup>31</sup> To prevent this, Medea kills her son<sup>32</sup> and spiritual home, in her mind saving him from a life of servitude and racist oppression her people suffer from. Assisted by Chac as a metaphysical presence, she ultimately kills herself, following her son to a spiritual land of peace. Moraga hence juxtaposes the ancient Medea tragedy with the fatalistic ending of antipatriarchal and antiracist rebellion, diminishing an initial hope for a homecoming and the end of ongoing ostracism and life as unwanted refugees beyond a cultural ‘home’.

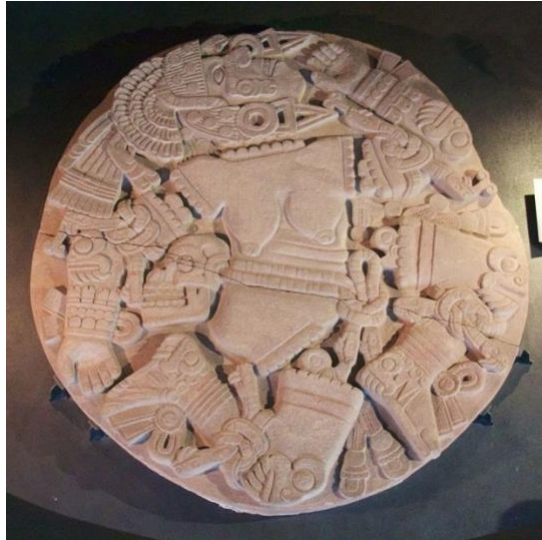


Fig. 3: Coyolxauqui relief stone, Templo Mayor, Mexico City (image: Mike Peel)

### Transcultural Appropriation

In the play, Medea is repeatedly and unmistakably associated with female characters from Aztec mythology, all of which Moraga considers her idols:

Who are my gods? Who are my people? The response is the same for both questions, I discovered, when I discovered the mutilated women of our indigenous American history of story: La Llorona, Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue. I worship them in all their locura, because I admire the living expression of their hungers.<sup>33</sup>

Like Medea in the play, all three are characters disregarded because of their violent deeds: 1) la Llorona commits infanticide by drowning her child in an “act of maternal resistance”<sup>34</sup>: “Indian mothers preferred to kill their own children when they were to be given to colonizers’ wives”<sup>35</sup>; 2) Coyolxauhqui turns against her own mother in an attempted act of matricide, 3) Coatlicue,

<sup>31</sup> Raez Padilla, *Crying for Food*, p. 213.

<sup>32</sup> HW, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> HW, p. x.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2018. Raez Padilla implies the colonial history of Central America also evinced in the play when Medea openly opposes the possibility of Chac-Mool growing up to become a suppressor of (native) women like his father did (HW, p. 70), pointing out that her marriage to Jasón is based on the same colonial act of force as the wedding of Cortez and Malinche: a partnership of convenience manifesting the husband’s status in a country he is not native to. A similar dynamic drives the actions in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

in her dual role as “Goddess of Creation and Destruction”<sup>36</sup>, not only gives birth to Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli, she also does not prevent her son from killing her daughter, thus passively choosing him over her and allowing for the destruction of her own flesh<sup>37</sup>.

1) La Llorona is referenced thrice: first, when Medea, the midwife, mentions that “[a]ll the babies, they’re slipping through my fingers now. [...] They’ve turned into the liquid of the river and they are drowning in my hands.”<sup>38</sup> after her failed last attempt to prevent her own child from leaving her. Secondly, in Chac’s suggestion that he has always been able to hear and understand<sup>39</sup> the woman’s sorrowful cries for her dead baby<sup>40</sup>. Thirdly, before Medea herself becomes La Llorona. She will ‘save’ her son from the hands of his colonizer-father and mourns his impending death in a vision underlined by children’s cries.<sup>41</sup>

2) Medea is the reincarnation of Coatlicue.<sup>42</sup> A Chihuahateo chorus retell the myth of how Coyolxauhqui learns of her mother’s pregnancy and feels threatened by her unborn brother. She conspires to kill her mother. Coatlicue gives birth to the man-child Huitzilopochtli, Aztec sun-god and deity of warriors. He, upon learning of his sister’s conspiracy, defends the mother. “[*Brother and sister, Huitzilipotchli and Coyolxauqi [sic], as the gods of day and night, battle for dominion over the heavens.*”]<sup>43</sup> He strikes off Coyolxauhqui’s head, dismembers her, and throws her “moon-face” into the sky, banishing her into darkness. Paralleling this retelling to the play, Medea is the Mother Goddess whilst Luna appears as Coyolxauhqui witnessing the birth of Chac. This constellation of characters is underlined throughout the play: Luna constantly fights for Medea’s love, utters concerns about her lover’s resentment of being with her instead of living in Aztlán with Chac (Medea: “I’ll keep my son any way I have to.” / Luna: “That’s what I’m afraid of.”<sup>44</sup>). She ultimately admits that a future of the three together was impossible from the outset (“We could never keep him [Chac] here [in Phoenix]. I wouldn’t want to.”<sup>45</sup>). Deviating from the story, it is not the boy who actively banishes Luna into darkness and solitude, but he is the driving force behind his mother doing

<sup>36</sup> HW, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> HW, p. 55ff.

<sup>38</sup> HW, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> His ability to understand the voices in the wind implies that Chac-Mool is the only member of the family not too preoccupied with political developments and revolutions to still retain a close connection to native spirituality and Aztec storytelling.

<sup>40</sup> HW, p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> HW, p. 62f.

<sup>42</sup> HW, p. 55ff.

<sup>43</sup> HW, p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> HW, p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> HW, p. 81.

so. There is space for only one in Medea's life and her affection constantly withheld is what causes Luna to leave. Moraga provides an additional perspective; she explains:

As we feministas have interpreted the myth, Coyolxauhqui hopes to halt, through the murder of her mother, the birth of the War God, Huitzilopotchli. She is convinced that Huitzilopotchli's birth will also mean the birth of slavery, human sacrifice and imperialism (in short, patriarchy).<sup>46</sup>

Thus, Luna's strive for Medea's love is not a sheer struggle for attention and favoritism. It is an attempt to free herself from patriarchal domination. In *The Hungry Woman*, Medea herself becomes the Coyolxauhqui to her own Coatlicue as she not only strives to kill the mother within herself by committing suicide. She also poisons Chac before he is able to continue a legacy of suppression of indigenous peoples in general and women specifically. Even the banishment into darkness is evoked as the woman, in death, enters a spiritual realm finally devoid of the ever-recurring changes between day and night. As her son recollects, "[s]he sleeps during the day when *la luna* has disappeared to the other side of the earth. She can't stand the relentless sun without her, she says."<sup>47</sup> Medea even reflects on her position at Coatlicue's shrine: "What crime do I commit now, Mamá? | To choose the daughter over the son? [...] Ahora, she is my god. | *La Luna*, la hija rebelde."<sup>48</sup> She needs the presence of *la luna*, the moon, watching over her to make it through the day just as much as she needs *La Luna*, the lover, to cope with her struggles. Medea needs a community of people with similar experiences of marginalization and identity to move forward and find a 'home' – even if it is not Aztlán.

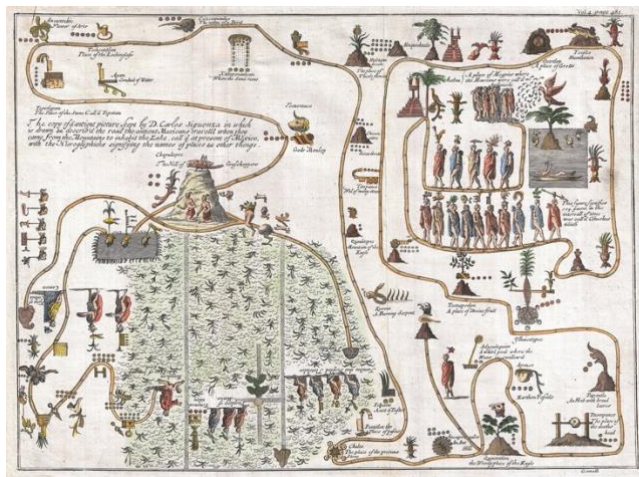


Fig. 4: Map of the Aztec Migration from Aztlan to Chapultepec, 1704, drawn by Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri

<sup>46</sup> Ruez Padilla, *Crying for Food*, p. 210.

<sup>47</sup> HW, p. 20, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> HW, p. 91f., emphasis added.

### **The Myth of Home**

Moraga reflects: “In recent years, I’ve come to understand myth as a similarly divine(d) gift, an opening into the past, told in character and image, that can provide a kind of road map to our future.”<sup>49</sup> Rael Padilla considers this inspiration for future developments significant especially in a Chicana feminist literary discourse: “Chicana writers have built an identity of their own in which the (re)appropriation of the Aztec myth of Aztlán plays an important role”, whilst “Aztec mythology [in general] contains inspiring examples of ambivalent women who transgress their culture in order to fight for their self-assertion and make themselves heard.”<sup>50</sup> Chela Sandoval highlights that Aztlán is “best thought of not as a typology, but as a ‘topography’ of consciousness in opposition, from the Greek ‘topos’ for place, insofar as it represents the charting [mapping] of realities that occupy a specific kind of cultural region”<sup>51</sup>. In concordance, “Moraga wants to name a place, not just a paradigm: she wants a homeland, not just a theory.”<sup>52</sup> For Moraga, Aztlán is more than a figment of imagination. It is real for a dispersed people seeking belonging, home, and safety; it goes beyond the attempt to locate it at the U.S.-Mexican border. Daniel Cooper Alarcon illustrates that the incorporation of Aztlán into modern narratives signifies the “vital role in the creation of a paradisaical Mexican space [it] played both in Aztec empire building and Chicano civil rights struggle.”<sup>53</sup> Not only is it the celebrated ancient homeland and utopian place of origin, but also a recurring “durable political symbol of Chicano cultural nationalism” as well as a root of national identity<sup>54</sup>. Referencing Aztlán in *The Hungry Woman* and Chicana movements alike links the myth to the reality of brief empowerment and recurring oppression of Chicana people. It highlights intersections of discriminations based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, and emphasizes the continuous need for the acknowledgement of autochthonous matters especially within a queer Chicana community.

<sup>49</sup> HW, p. ix.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>51</sup> Sandoval, qt. in Accomando, *Rewriting Nationalism*, p. 114.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Cooper Alarcon: *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination*. Tucson 1997, p. xvii.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 6f.

### **Aztlán**

Although Aztlán is an “important rallying point for a people who often feel dislocated, not only from Mexican and Anglo-American society, but from each other as well”<sup>55</sup>, it perpetuates outdated social structures still prevalent in most societies. As evinced by Moraga’s play in direct reference to an idealized image drawn by Chicana activists during civil rights movements in the late 1960s, it is home to a palimpsest of people from different nations as sexist, classist, and racist as the societies they left behind to form a new ‘home’. Incorporating this home into the Chicana feminist narrative reproduces a white American perspective and school of ideology for reconsideration. Irma Mayorga states that “Aztlán inverts the hegemonic narrative of ‘Manifest Destiny’ and provides a new lens of ethnic consciousness for Chicano civil rights.”<sup>56</sup> Moraga inscribes this critique into Mama Sal’s disapproval of capitalism and imagined racial superiority engrained in U.S.-American identity<sup>57</sup>. As part of the first revolution, Mama Sal and her sisters had to reclaim the Aztec city of Aztlán from beyond the artificially drawn borders. Aztlán, as presented in *The Hungry Woman* and as immanent in Chicano machismo and EL Movimiento, is undesirable for a progressive Chicana people and feminist activism.

### **Queering Aztlán**

Moraga calls for the ‘queering’ of Aztlán and proposes a progressive approach as well as its transposition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “What was wrong about Chicano Nationalism was its institutionalized heterosexism, its inbred machismo, its lack of a cohesive national political strategy”<sup>58</sup> – countering these shortcomings holds the potential for a frugal development. These points are opposed by Moraga’s female protagonists, yet their short-term success and ultimate banishment after overthrowing a corrupted government in Aztlán suggest the need for continued activism. This activism, however, has to be made more effective, as evoked by Luna’s drunk yet provocative rhetorical question: “What did gay liberation ever do for colored dykes? We might as well be back all closeted-up like Mama Sal’s stories of ‘the life’ half-century

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Irma Mayorga: Homecoming: The Politics of Myth and Location in Cherríe L. Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* and *Heart of the Earth: A Popol Vuh Story*. In: Moraga: *The Hungry Woman*, pp. 155-165, here p. 157.

<sup>57</sup> HW, p. 64f.

<sup>58</sup> Moraga, *Queer Aztlán*, p. 148f.

ago”<sup>59</sup>. Moraga herself stresses the need for inclusion and social change: “What we need, is a ‘Queer Aztlán’. A Chicano homeland that could embrace all its people, including its ‘joteria’.”<sup>60</sup> This demand itself is an act of revolution. Moraga aims to ‘queer’ nation, nationalism, and the family – all of which are “untouchable instances in Chicano culture”<sup>61</sup>. To constitute a homeland truly for all Chicanx people, Aztlán and its community need to be intersectional and acknowledge individual experiences of discrimination both within and without a community. It needs to embrace a modern indigenous/Chicanx identity formed and transformed by other cultures, acknowledge belonging on the basis of cultural identity, not on subscription to conservative values or political opposition – and it needs to value and further the work feminist activism has done. It is not enough to include but isolate formerly marginalized peoples: “Queer Aztlan is not just additive – gay folks plus Chicano folks – instead, it racializes »queer« and queers nation.”<sup>62</sup>

Identifying as queer is not the same across cultures, movements, generations – it always implies marginalization in various aspects. Racializing gender identity and sexuality implies the need to acknowledge queerness at the intersection of race, class, and gender – an intersection shaped by individual experiences and seemingly impossible to unite. However, in racializing queerness, race becomes a common denominator for those identifying as queer as well as their communities. It holds the potential to bring together peoples formerly separated by values dictated by heterosexist conservatism without calling for forced identification beyond realms of personal comfort.

One does not have to be (non-)queer to identify as Chicanx and one does not have to change one’s life/preferences to do so. Queer Aztlán ‘queers nation’ in a way that makes it possible for all Chicanx to exist within and be part of a nation and movement that highlights cultural identity and belonging.

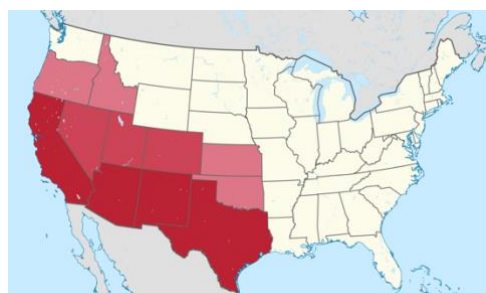


Fig. 5: Map of Aztlán, intensity of color indicates common attribution of U.S. territory to Aztlán (credit: TUBS)

<sup>59</sup> HW, p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>61</sup> Lisa Tatonetti: »A Kind of Queer Balance«: Cherrie Moraga’s Aztlán. In: *MELUS* Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), pp. 227-247, here 229.

<sup>62</sup> Accomando, *Rewriting Nationalism*, p. 115.



In calling for a homeland free from patriarchal and cultural gatekeeping, Moraga continuously contributes to feminist activism and scholarship beyond the Chicanx and U.S.-American communities. Her experiences as a lesbian feminist of color align with what she inscribes into her Medea, marking her homosexuality as the most prominent reason for disregard and exclusion. In openly living out her desires for other women, she not only refuses to 'need' a man to provide her with a future – she also forms an independent identity. For Medea, “lesbianism becomes the ultimate act of self-defining womanhood outside patriarchy and her defiance configures her as a monster.”<sup>63</sup> She burns down her last connection to Jasón by denying his request to “[g]ive up the dyke”<sup>64</sup>. It is only in her exile that she reflects on her self-dependence and actively turns herself against Jasón’s patriarchy yet again, acknowledging her insatiable hungers. As impossible to attain as a queer Aztlán is in *The Hungry Woman*, in today’s political climate and the rise of human rights movements across the globe, one can be hopeful that what Moraga and her sisters fight for may yet be reached.

### **Impossible Patriotism**

As Mayorga states correctly about Moraga’s play, her

recovery of pre-Columbian myths serves as the conduit for cultural critique and transformation. Myths are simultaneously sacred truths and symbolic metaphors, illuminating and mysterious, fiction and history, safe-guarded and public, newly fashioned or of ancient origin, fantastical and quotidian; and, they often escape the opposition of these binaries. But, most importantly, myths are stories.<sup>65</sup>

She demystifies a patriarchal reading of the narratives and interpretations of the female characters mentioned above; yet *The Hungry Woman* also restages the ‘traditional’ struggles of women in society. Medea is fighting a war for recognition of her activism despite being an impossible patriot as well as for an identity and homeland beyond the reach of established yet outdated social values. In her presentation as a reincarnation of “Aztec female legendary figures [portrayed] as complex, active, polyvalent mythological women who integrated both life and death,”<sup>66</sup> the Mexican Medea violates classist, racist, and sexist taboos erected by the suppressing ruling-order occupying Aztlán. She speaks out and takes action against her adversaries.

<sup>63</sup> Diaz-Sanchez, *Impossible Patriots*, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> HW, p. 33.

<sup>65</sup> Mayorga, *Homecoming*, p. 155.

<sup>66</sup> Ruez Padilla, *Crying for Food*, p. 207.

She gains political momentum which reaches its climax in the annihilation of a new generation of oppressors. However, the infanticide she commits renders her resistance futile. She is unable to form a 'queer Aztlán' and preserve her relationship with Luna by her activism alone. Chac-Mool is sacrificed for a greater cause his mother could not influence in any other way, yet the catastrophic murder leaves but one possible consequence for her: retreat in death. Only then is she transferred "home"<sup>67</sup> by Chac into a spiritual realm where the Aztlán she imagines exists. In death she greets everlasting darkness, marking a space where her chosen deity Luna is omnipresent. "Moraga uses a Mexican structure of feeling, constitutive of yet not delimited by contemporary Chicanismo, to imagine a different way out from under the rubble of failed social change."<sup>68</sup> In so doing, she appropriates the Medea myth whilst enriching the narrative by adding numerous facets. Both in the play and in society, the impossible patriotism portrayed leaves behind a legacy to be fulfilled by a future generation of feminist activists. Activism and character are kept alive in the cultural and literary conscience of a people and international audience. Moraga's Medea marks the perpetuation of various female mythological characters as well as the myth of a queer Aztlán – which might just become reality.

### **Mythology & Truth**

The polyphony of the Medea myth is omnipresent in the greater discourse of various versions – especially Moraga's play showcases a *femme révoltée*, contemporary 'gender struggles', and feminist movements in societies across the globe. This plurality enables identification for those in search of an emancipated identity, a home, and acceptance. Moraga conveys an impactful modern message applicable beyond the Chicanx community and, although highlighting the struggle for a queer Aztlán as failed for Medea, gives hope in reclaiming the 'impossible patriots' of old.

Despite queer Aztlán remaining a myth, Moraga's theoretical work on intersectionality and showcasing the voices of feminist activists of color still underrepresented in e.g. European feminist discourse impacts reality. She and her sisters have shaped a school of feminism indispensable from contemporary feminist and postcolonial scholarship and activism. Just as her demand for a queer Aztlán embracing its *jotería*, her demand for the inclusion

<sup>67</sup> HW, p. 99.

<sup>68</sup> Ybarra, *The Revolution Fails Here*, p. 79.



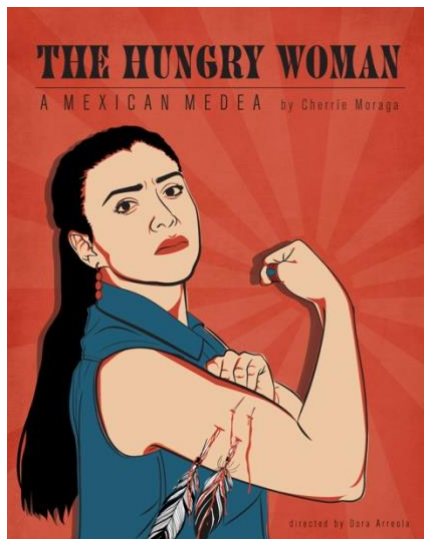


Fig. 6: Playbill "The Hungry Woman", courtesy of Arizona State University

of those marginalized by white feminism remains relevant today, maybe more than ever. Moraga, among others, has made feminism more equal, more inclusive and more multicultural. By writing her Mexican Medea as a homosexual woman of color, she brings questions at the intersection of race, class, and gender into a discourse dominated by rather 'traditional' versions of the myth.

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### Figures

Fig. 1: Coyolxhauqui relief stone, Templo Mayor, Mexico City, photo taken by Mike Peel.

Fig. 2: Title page "This Bridge Called My Back".

Fig. 3: Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Omecihuatl (also known as Coatlicue; from title page "The Hungry Woman - A Mexican Medea").

Fig. 4: Map of the Aztec Migration from Aztlan to Chapultepec, 1704, drawn by Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri.

Fig. 5: Playbill "The Hungry Woman", courtesy of Arizona State University.

Fig. 6: Map of Aztlán, intensity of color indicates common attribution of U.S. territory to Aztlán (credit: TUBS).

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