“Brown Medeas:” Reconfiguring *Mestizaje* for the 21st Century

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Abstract

Whereas due attention has been granted to the “black Medeas” of the post-seventies U.S. stage, the “brown Medeas” of post-eighties/post-*movimiento* Chicana/o theatre have drawn much less scholarly interest. In response to this perceived lacuna in critical analysis, the present paper examines three revisions of Medea’s myth by Chicana/o theatre practitioners. “La Malinche,” by Carlos Morton (1996-97), “The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,” by Cherríe Moraga (2000), and “Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles,” by Luis Alfaro (2015), are taken up here as characteristic instances of contemporary Chicana/o reception of Greek tragic myth. The paper will argue that this new addition to Medea’s afterlife signals a crucial new development in Chicana/o theatre toward transcultural flows, syncretism and negotiation, and, by extension, a shift in Chicana/o cultural and identity politics within the U.S. More specifically, we will discuss why and how revis(ion)ing Medea, correlating her with figures originating in indigenous mythico-cultural material (namely, La Malinche and La Llorona), remotivating her (and their) actions and even reimagining the outcomes of her (and their) stories in the mythoplays under consideration can be interpreted as a gesture toward alternative forms of affiliation, shifting political coalitions, and an emergent—decolonization-oriented but twenty-first-century-specific—*mestizaje* ethos and consciousness.


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Introduction: Medea from Tragic Myth to *Mestiza* Mythopoesis

Latina/o theatre has been firmly grounded on a solid yet pliant complex of ritual and myth since the late decades of the sixteenth century, where we can identify the origins of the theatrical genealogy of Latin Americans in what would later become known as the United States (U.S.) (Huerta 15-21). Yet, whereas dramatization of myth is anything but alien tradition for Latinas/os, engagement with Greek tragic myth and the combination of Greek resources with pre-colonial, indigenous (mostly Aztec and Maya) mythohistorical as well as contemporary cultural material to attend to Latina/o realities constitutes a recent development in the theatre of the Latin American diaspora in the U.S. Indeed, in the past two decades, a number of important Latina/o theatre artists, such as Carlos Morton, Cherrie Moraga and Luis Alfaro, engage in a practice that we shall call “*mestiza* mythopoesis.”¹ The term refers to the

¹ *Mestiza/o* and *mestizaje* translate as hybrid and hybridity respectively, and refer to the diasporic Latin American context. The terms are currently used to connote the complex, biological and cultural intermixture that makes up the Latin American heritage and their meaning has expanded to include not only Spanish and Native American, but also African, Anglo and other U.S. components.

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practice of creating dramatic mythic revisions\(^2\) by drawing material both from Greek tragic myths and from indigenous myths and histories to treat issues that nag and tear at the social fabric, whether local, national or global.

This practice points to the considerable distance that contemporary Latina/o theatre has established from earlier, nationalist accounts of an authentic realm of tradition embodied in numerous Latina/o narratives. It could even be construed as a gesture, on the part of theatrical practitioners, towards celebrating transcultural exchanges and negotiations integral to the sociopolitical and cultural visions of a new mestizaje—as reality, ethos and discourse; a mestizaje that is global in its intent and reach. By practicing the said mestiza mythopoesis, they acknowledge mestizaje, and its concomitant processes of transculturation, as a suitable conceptual, theatrical and real-life alternative for twenty-first artists and audiences. Within this new context, Greek tragic myth is no longer regarded and treated as the inimical (because allegedly Euro-American and thus hegemonic) “Other” of the Latino paradigm (Delikonstantinidou 56). Rather, it is seized on as a rich arsenal of not only culturally familiar, but also resonant and relevant themes, concepts, figures and images of considerable philosophical, political, sociocultural and artistic currency.

The three dramatic mythic revisions under consideration in this paper, namely “La Malinche” by Carlos Morton (1996-97), “The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea” by Cherrie Moraga (2002), and “Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles” by Luis Alfaro (2015), engage the tragic myth of Medea. The myth is viewed and employed in all three plays as an integral part of a shared global heritage, as by nature diasporic, and thus, in a significant sense, allied to the realities of troubled belonging they treat. Similarly to other post-Civil Rights treatments of Medea as “other,” in these plays her otherness acquires an increasing number of dimensions (sexual, class-related and ethnoracial), and the heroine’s tragically self-divided, ambiguous identity is foregrounded. Similarly to other U.S. ethnic Medeas, the mestiza Medeas of this paper draw on their own mythical traditions and heritages (Foley, Reimagining 210-27). In the three revisions of the myth, Medea’s “magical/manipulative powers” are remotivated and tied to a disjunction between cultural traditions and social identities carrying strong ethnoracial inflections; sympathy is created for “her failure . . . to assimilate to another world”; while her “multidimensional otherness” is probingly and compellingly dealt with (Foley, Reimagining 193). Medea’s complexity, radical alterity, and the well-attested productivity of both traits in the American soil and beyond conspired with her affinities to La Malinche and La Llorona to give rise to a new crop of Medeas—the “brown Medeas” of the Latina/o imaginary.

Besides being somewhat uncanny, Medea’s affinities to La Malinche and La Llorona (The Weeping Woman) render her myth even more relevant, compelling and

\(^2\) For the many advantages of the term “dramatic mythic revision,” see Verna A. Foster’s elaboration on the particular choice of words (2012).
inviting of revisionary treatment for Latina/o theatre. The first of the said figures, La Malinche, or Malintzin Tenepal, was, according to most versions of her (hi)story, given to Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador, as a slave by the Mayans. She became his consort and served as his interpreter and cultural translator, later emerging as a prominent intermediary between the Spaniards and the Aztecs, but she was, eventually, abandoned by him for a Spanish noblewoman. Gradually, she was transformed, through a process of mythmaking that has lasted for more than five centuries, from the mother of the first mestizo to traitor whore, or “from historical figure to a negative feminine archetype” (Blake 40); a formulation that was to be debunked by Latina/Chicana feminists in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the course of her long history, La Malinche merged in the popular imagination with La Llorona, also a syncretic figure, whose life story is also reminiscent of that of Medea. La Llorona kills her children when abandoned for another woman by her lover and then laments them for eternity while wandering in search of them in bodies of waters. Not unlike La Malinche, La Llorona evolved from a positive “Mexican maternity symbol” to “a negative cultural symbol,” charged with the crime of “cultural infanticide” (Kanellos 261-64), although, more recently, Latina/Chicana artists and scholars have sought to rescue her too from the bulk of (largely male-authored) historical notoriety by means of restorative treatments of her myth.

Our three re-visions tap into the so-called “Medea–Malinche–Llorona paradigm” (Messinger Cypess 20). The first two correlate the three figures directly, by explicitly combining their stories. The third takes up the said paradigm indirectly, by building on the Latina/o barrio community’s familiarity with the stories of La Malinche and La Llorona in order to offer them an alternative, modernized and painfully critical retelling of the Medea myth. Thereby, the plays affirm the constitutive pluriculturality of the Latina/o identity and experience, and give a more inclusive twist to the concept of mestizaje. As we will discover, in investing into the similarities that Medea’s myth shares with familiar American mythohistorical narratives and in recontextualizing the Greek myth in an early post-Conquest, in a dystopian post-independence/post-Chicano Movement and in a familiar twenty-first-century Latina/o context, respectively, the mythopplays not only ground key points of Latina/o American history in the Medea–Malinche–Llorona paradigm, but also mobilize a radical reconsideration and a process of working through the trauma(s) of that very history.

Carlos Morton’s Medea as “La Malinche”

Carlos Morton explicitly acknowledges and capitalizes on the affinities existing among Medea, La Malinche and La Llorona in his play, “La Malinche.” Set in the early colonial era, in the period following the Conquest, the play radically reconceptualizes the origins of Mexican American culture as well as mestizaje itself, as reality and discourse. Although “La Malinche” is not the only play in which the playwright attracts the titular female figure in his dramatic orbit, it is the only one in
which he gives her so radical a twist in foregrounding her subjectivity and agency, and in reimagining the outcome of her story—a story which carries within it the legacy that many Latin American peoples have inherited. In this play, the drama of the Conquest becomes the drama of La Malinche and Cortés, and the drama of Medea.

His play’s dramatization of the Conquest shares affinities with Tzvetan Todorov’s view of the Conquest. According to the eminent historian and philosopher, the Conquest can be conceived of as “the collision between a ritual world,” where the past is an integral part of the present or even prevails in it, and “a unique event” (84). The Conquest is the invasion of another world and its order, which disrupts the constitutive narrative of the said ritual world, and has to be mythicized and retrojected into an unfolding cosmic saga in order to be integrated into it. The play radically re-mythicizes the Conquest and its legacy, including the legacy of *mestizaje*, in its own unique way by interjecting it into the Medea–Malinche–Llorona paradigm and, more specifically, by re-vis(ion)ing, to paraphrase scholar Ann McBride-Limaye, the leading personage who enabled the drama of the Conquest to play itself out (15): La Malinche as Medea.

La Malinche has been seen and extensively theorized as “the locus for . . . [the] multiplicity of contradictions, ambiguities and irreconcilable differences which constitute the Conquest” (McBride-Limaye 1). She is “the locus for the trauma and the generative power of the Conquest,” and also the representation of “the heritage and the central problems of Mexican and Latin American culture” (McBride-Limaye 17). Therefore, revis(ion)ing La Malinche as Medea, and thus also revis(ion)ing Medea and her myth, remotivating her/their actions and reimagining her/their story’s/ies’ outcomes and implications becomes a way of confronting, rethinking and coming to some sort of (uneasy) terms with the past and cultural memory, the Conquest and its legacy, and even a way of moving forward. Indeed, as we shall see, the play can be understood as Morton’s attempt at working through the traumatic encounter of the Conquest and its post-traumatic reverberations throughout the history of Latin Americans.

Like Medea, Morton’s Malinche is betrayed as a woman, a mother and a native by her partner, Cortés, with whom she has a son, Martín. In view of his precarious position as governor of the conquered territories, Cortés decides to marry a Spanish woman of noble birth, take away his son to be raised as a Spanish nobleman, and marry Malinche off to one of his captains, in order to strengthen his claims on power. On the one hand, the play allows us to witness the full extent of Malinche’s desperation and victimization by Cortés and the colonial and patriarchal regime that he exemplifies. On the other, it creates a space of enunciation: from a subaltern perspective and from the fissures of the colonial/patriarchal system, to the voicing of the female protagonist’s desire which, when acted upon, takes the shape of a project of wrecking revenge, a revenge that is as much personal as it is political.
Malinche’s vengeful plans are contrived to avenge her betrayal both as a partner/lover and mother, and as a Native who sees the future of her people fatally compromised by Cortés’ plans. Yet, Malinche’s revenge is also fundamentally tragic, borne of self-division and further dividing Malinche against herself, as it necessitates that Malinche step outside the roles of mother and caretaker in order to prevent the nightmarish future she has dreamt of from becoming reality; that is, the enslavement of native peoples and the compromised future of mestizo peoples who will be made to despise their constitutive mestizaje. It is precisely this dark prospect of mestizaje that will in time turn against itself, a prospect embodied in Martín’s imminent hispanization, which sends Malinche over the edge and activates her project of vengeance, regardless of the personal costs involved; namely, the destruction of all she holds dear: Martín, Cortés, their family, and their—one once promising—future.

Similarly to Medea, Malinche, accompanied by La Llorona who serves as sort of a chorus and as the protagonist’s accomplice in the course of the play, poisons Cortés’ new wife and the latter’s kinsman, Bishop Lizárraga, the one who orchestrated the bloody marriage. Eventually, she decides to murder her own son as her options become further limited by compounded external necessity: the Spanish will kill Martín because of what his mother did and even if they do not, Cortés will abduct and indoctrinate him into racism. Here, as in the Euripidean version of the myth of Medea, the “combination of predetermination and active choice,” “typical of tragedy,” and the fact that the protagonist “makes a conscious choice with full knowledge of the bad consequences of her actions,” enhances the tragic import of the play (Foley, Female Acts 5). However, unlike the death of Medea’s children by the latter’s own hand in the Euripidean version of her myth and unlike the deaths that precede it, Martín’s death takes on resonances of transformation.

Martín’s death sequence is patterned upon the model of transformation “inherent in [most] mythological symbols,” according to scholar Ross A. Feller, a model that “usually involves a sacrificial act, amounting to a ritualized death followed by some sort of rebirth” (73). In the play, Martín’s sacrifice becomes a “metonymic strategy” by means of which his body—as a representation of what colonially controlled mestizaje will turn out to mean for Natives and mestizas/o, or as the incorporation of the destructive paradigm of Cortés—is eliminated so that mestizaje itself can be reinvented. In other words, Martín’s ritualized death is framed as the vehicle for a transition. The mestizo identity that Martín embodies, and that he would embody was he allowed to live as his non-fictional counterpart did, gives way to the promise of a new mestizo identity, no longer stifled by the colonial and patriarchal legacy of the Conquest. This is a mestizo identity that once given a place and integrated in the vision and reality of the Latina/o world has the potential to heal the rupture that the traumatic event of the Conquest caused in the social fabric of the New World.

Martín’s death exemplifies Donald Heinz’s evocative notion that “[f]rom the pregnant liminality of death, new rituals, new cultural meanings, new life” will come
forth for the survivors, building on and integrating the terrible costs of the sacrifice (xx). Tragic as it may be, the logical extreme of irresolvable conflict and unbridgeable differences, his death is not the end. On the contrary, in terms of the vision laid out by Morton’s play, Martin’s death marks a new beginning whose outcome may be uncertain but does not warrant the relinquishment of hope. In “La Malinche,” Martin’s is not a sacrifice made in vain, but one that can bring about the transformation of the post-Conquest future. Instead of negating mestizaje, his sacrifice affirms rebirth and reinvention in different, more empowering terms for Natives, Spanish, and mestizas/os alike. Thus, the healing potential of the play lies not only in its uncovering of the losses involved in and caused by the traumatic event of the Conquest, and in recognizing them exactly as such, but also in its recovery of hope among the ruins that the Conquest left at its wake by allowing the bearers of the losses, contemporary Latinas/os, to imagine an alternative course of events that is never too late to actualize as the play’s ending suggests.

Just as the future entailed in the Malinche–Cortés paradigm reaches its tragic conclusion, the possibility of an alternative future dawns on the stage of Morton’s open-ended play. It is a future harbored by the loving, egalitarian relationship between the Native servant Ciuacoatl and the Spanish soldier Sánchez who arrive, holding hands, to kneel and pray before the body of Martin (Morton 55). The two characters are the only ones who pay proper respect to the boy’s sacrifice. As silently as their love affair developed in the course of the play, as part of a sub-plot unobtrusively weaving through the main plot, building gradually by small gestures of affection, care and compassion, it now silently carries the promise to remedy the catastrophe that the relationship of Malinche and Cortés wrought upon their world. However small and embattled, the structure of solidarity that their union produces fleshes out the possibility for a more enlightened decolonizing politics and ethics and for a working mestizado identity “neither utterly dictated by nor dependent on the forces of colonialism and their neo-colonial descendants,” to borrow the words of Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson from a different context (18-19). Their union hints at the emergence of a new mestizaje no longer embroiled in the unequal racial and gender power dynamics of the Malinche–Cortés paradigm and the pernicious repercussions that this paradigm held for future generations of mestizas/os.

**Cherrie Moraga’s Mexican Medea as “The Hungry Woman”**

More than fifteen years after Morton brought together the Aztec Malinche, La Llorona and the Greek Medea within the same paradigm in an attempt at revis(ion)ing the Conquest itself and its colonial legacy, Cherrie Moraga tapped into the paradigm Medea–Malinche–Llorona in order to create another Medea. This Medea story would function as a radical critique of the actual post-Chicano Movement reality of Chicanas/os via a dystopic view of an imaginary post-independence Chicano world. The playwright created a Mexican Medea who, much like her Greek counterpart, tries
to assert herself as a desiring subject in an uncongenial, male-dominated world. In this case, Medea’s tragic liminality serves to expose and interrogate the shortcomings of not only Euro-American colonial discourses and practices, but also of the masculinist Chicano nationalist discourse El Plan and its related manifestations, both of which imposed a monolithic understanding of the Chicana/o past and mestizaje. As the playwright has admitted, in this play she employs one of the most controversial mother figures of the world’s imaginary to contribute to the interrogation of the Chicano nationalist mythos and, thus, challenge “from within” sexist, homophobic and patriarchal strands (Moraga, “The Hungry Woman” 290-91).

In line with the notion of mestizaje, dominant in most Chicana/o critical discourse in general, and the paradigmatic site of departure for Moraga’s social criticism and artistic imagination in particular, her play articulates a “cultural doubt” of fixed identity and unproblematic belonging in three ways: through “a hybrid conflation of various forms of myths” (Maufort 124), through the hybrid/mestiza nature of its characters, and through its very bilingualism. The play merges the Greek tragic myth of Medea with the myth of La Llorona/La Malinche, whose constant, compound presence throughout the play stresses her connection with Medea, as well as with the myth of Coatlíque, the Aztec goddess of Creation and Destruction. The title of the play itself, “The Hungry Woman” draws on another Aztec creation myth. Ultimately, however, the title refers to the character of Medea herself: a woman whose insatiable hunger to satisfy her desires and to find fulfillment through that very satisfaction is left unappeased by the workings of patriarchal power (Delikonstantinidou 57) and masculinist geopolitics, and eventually leads to her strange, otherworldly “demise.”

Moraga’s Medea, a curandera (healer), is deprived of her legitimate inheritance, much like the Greek mythical figure and La Malinche. In the play’s mythical-realist future, an ethnic civil war “has ‘balkanized’ the United States” (Moraga, “The Hungry Woman” 294). In the wake of an anti-colonial, revolutionary war, Aztlán, the much-longed-for mythical Chicano homeland, is “born from the pedacitos” (306). However, this Aztlán Liberado falls in the hands of counter-revolutionaries, who establish a new order that is as oppressive to women and queers as the Euro-American pre-revolutionary one. In her futuristic fantasy, Moraga critically imagines this new Aztlán as a place haunted by a masculinist and nationalist specter, in which women are seen exclusively as bearers of the community’s memory and children, and from which queer people are exiled as impossible citizens/patriots. In spite of Medea’s indigeneity and status as a revolutionary leader, when Jasón, now ironically Aztlán’s Minister of Culture, discovers her lesbian involvement with their stonemason, Luna, he has her exiled, along with her lover and her son, Chac-Mool, “to what remains of Phoenix,” the physical and psychic borderland of Tamoachán (294), thus dispossessing her of her rightfully owned land and cultural inheritance.

Medea experiences geographical and cultural deterritorialization, in the sense that both the national Chicana/o culture of Aztlán and the queer culture of Tamoachán,
which literally means “We seek our home” (Moraga, “The Hungry Woman” 307), fail to provide her with a sense of belonging and a workable identity—no matter how plural this identity might be. Instead of transformative and conducive to a new and empowering consciousness, as it becomes for other characters in the play, Medea’s experience of geopolitical and existential rupture/dismemberment of self and life in an interstitial space proves to be devastating. Her deterritorialization is a traumatic experience from which she never recovers, which she never leaves behind in order to rebuild her life. It is an experience which breeds further fragmentation and dislocation in her and results in the surrender of whatever fragile authority she had been clinging on when she is driven mad after having tried to poison her son with herbs (although we never learn whether she does kill him or not in the conventional sense of the word) to prevent his return to patriarchal Aztlán and his inevitable indoctrination into misogyny and machismo.

In foregrounding patriarchy’s decisive, damaging effect on Medea’s ability to affirm herself as a female and lesbian subject while preserving her Chicana ethnic identity and her role as mother, Moraga connects her own personal experience as a queer mestiza to that of her protagonist and dramatizes the difficulty of reconciling the self with the family (the immediate community), with the larger ethnic/cultural community and with a lesbian desire. As becomes evident from Moraga’s play and her other writings, the artist experiences, and has her fictional Medea experience as well, her fragmented, dispersed and nomadic subjectivity, not as a choice, but with an acute sense of disaffection. Yet, despite focusing on the deterritorialization/dismemberment of the queer mestiza existence, she never relinquishes “a vision of a new way to be whole” and to find home “that would respond to the “desire for integration” of her diverse identities (Yarbro-Bejarano 10). And it is, indeed, a new “way to be whole” to the extent that the very notion of “wholeness” is radically reconceptualized by Moraga as one that presupposes severing of/from the body/self from/of neocolonial, patriarchal, and heterosexist moorings, and reconstruction “from the blueprint” of mestiza, feminist, queer desire (Yarbro-Bejarano 7). The play’s final birth/death sequences, in particular, illustrate this desire for and promise of integration/rememberment as well as its costly pursual, as does the play’s epilogue featuring Medea’s reunion with Chac-Mool, and, in one sense, with Luna too.

Narrative chronology, character identities and mythical frameworks collapse in seeming incoherence as a series of births and deaths/sacrifices transpire rendering the play’s end irresolvably ambiguous. Medea gives birth to Luna, she kills Cha’c-Mool, she births herself, Chac-Mool returns (perhaps) to kill Medea and then comforts her while she slips off to sleep or death, and, finally, the two are reunited beneath a waxing moon/Luna. The Christian Pieta image that Moraga earlier evoked in the description of Chac-Mool’s “death” in Medea’s hands is reversed in the concluding scene, creating a cyclical schema that rehearses symbolically the cycle of birth, death
and rebirth, and thus fleshes out visually the transformation of the “deaths” of both Chac-Mool and Medea into their “rebirth” in unity. As our characters merge, they are “both reborn in one another,” “boundaries disappear as the lines between man and woman, self and other, . . . living body and ghost . . . blur,” and the future is torn open (Serrano 127). By the end of the play, we cannot tell with certainly “if Medea is dying or sleeping, if Chac-Mool is dead or alive, and if Luna and Medea will be reunited or permanently split,” Suzanne Bost summarizes (140). We do know, however, that, with linear narratives of conception and destruction dismissed, with the finality of death rejected and with the productivity of sacrifice affirmed, as in Morton’s “La Malinche,” the play situates us at an intersection of life and death which is charged with possibilities of transformation. Indeed, the play’s final sequences are staged as quasi-mystical ritual acts conducive to the healing of the traumas that the legacy of the Chicano Movement either left open or caused by failing to turn democratic rhetoric into reality, especially as it contributed to the marginalization of women and non-heterosexuals.

Just as Moraga’s play re-members dis-membered cultural narratives and icons, multiply appropriated and colonized by dominant traditions, the dis-membered psyches and bodies of Medea, Luna and Chac-Mool are promised reassembling in new configurations in a future no longer mangled and mangling by/due to (neo)colonial, patriarchal control. They are promised transformation, radical and costly, in a future mestiza condition not limited to the U.S. context. If, in Morton’s play, Martín’s death heralded the possibility of transformation of the post-Conquest future, Chac-Mool’s death signals the possibility of transformation of the post-movimiento future along the lines spelled out by mestiza, feminist, queer desire. This is conceived in the play as a future that will take heed of the ambiguities, tensions and costs entailed in the praxis of sociopolitical change, that is, of the tragic import of any radical political project, and that will embrace them as necessary for its self-reflexive continuation. This is, apparently, a future that is up to the audience, up to us, to actualize.

The play’s tragic mode does not accommodate a happy resolution; it does not present us with the neat closure of the (ongoing) psychic and social traumas that interlocked oppressions and subjections cause to the world’s “Medeas”—women whose predicament echoes that of Medea. Yet, in acknowledging the trauma of (cultural) loss and in uncovering its dire consequences, the play allows for sense to be made of the trauma and for lives to work through it, and thus for recovery and transformation to be set in motion. The trauma’s articulation drastically challenges public discourses that seek to repress it thus foreclosing the possibility of healing. As the play intimates, this possibility does not translate into the utopian fantasy of becoming unproblematically whole again. After all, the very notion of wholeness, especially with regard to the mestiza condition, is complicated, even radically rethought, as we have seen by the end the play. Rather, it translates into the realizable
and tragically-inflected prospect of confronting brokenness as such, affirming it, growing into the fractures of both self and world, and, only then, attempting to make self and world into more viable versions of themselves. The (structural) breakdown of the play and of Medea, then, can be construed as the beginning of a breakthrough, or, in the playwright’ words, as a gesture toward “a way of living in advance through a trauma that prepares you for a future of radical transformation” (Loving 124)—a future of queer-ed mestizaje.

**Luis Alfaro’s Medea as “Mojada”**

Almost a decade after “The Hungry Woman” premiere, “Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles,” the product of Luis Alfaro’s exploration of contemporary mestiza/o experience in the U.S., revealed the lingering relevance of Medea’s story by foregrounding the thematic strands of immigration, exile and assimilation that are integral to it. With “Mojada” Alfaro captures the meaning and effects that migration and assimilation have, not only within the broader American context, but also within the small, insular worlds of contemporary urban neighborhoods, where new immigrants, like his Medea, lead their unnoticed, invisible lives. At the same time, Alfaro builds on the affinities of Medea with the familiar cultural figures of La Malinche and La Llorona in order to render the play even more accessible to the disadvantaged barrio communities that he has addressed and engaged in the play’s Los Angeles production.

As a matter of fact, this play, similarly to Alfaro’s two earlier treatments of the Medea myth, “Bruja” (2012) and “Mojada” (2013), conjoined theatre-making and myth-making as social practice. Thereby, it not only signaled a more “democratic turn” in the production of classical material, but also created, to borrow from Laura Lodewyck and Sara S. Monoson’s observations in a similar context, “deeply affecting experiences about utterly contemporary matters for new kinds of audiences” (652); specifically, for the temporary and heterogeneous communities of transition (transition from the social space of the theatre to the larger society) that are forged among all participants involved in the “Medea experience” orchestrated by Alfaro, from the play’s workshopping process to its post-production forum.

For the purposes of this play, Alfaro recasts Medea as an undocumented Mexican immigrant deeply traumatized by/in the process of immigration and due to the costs of assimilation. Medea, a gifted seamstress, has recently arrived with her husband, Hason, and son, Acan, in Los Angeles, really following Hason, who, in turn, follows the American Dream. Exploited for her cheap sewing work and terrified of the “new world” and its strange ways, Medea lives confined in a dilapidated Victorian rental home and its meager backyard, which she has turned into a sort of workshop. Contrary to her husband, who is more than willing to merge in the new country’s work life and society, she obstinately resists assimilation into American society and upholds an adversarial stance towards mainstream U.S. culture. In the course of the
play, the couple’s disintegration is shown to have much to do with Hason’s eagerness to detach himself from their old world and their old life, at the same time that Medea holds on desperately to them as a source of meaning and identity and as a means of self-preservation under adverse circumstances.

While Hason’s drive to assimilate and his desire to gain recognition and wealth, and thus to prevail in the new environment—despite the ethical and other costs entailed in that process—is getting stronger, Medea is getting more and more self-enfolded, isolated in the insular world of her yard. Increasingly, Medea’s alienation grows so profound that distances her even from her son. Acan drifts further and further away from his mother and the staunch Mexican traditionalism that she seems to represent, seduced, much like his father, by the American Dream, translated for him by Hason (by way of Hason’s boss and, as we later learn, his lover, Armida) into the acquisition of consumer goods and commodities. It is precisely Medea’s imminent loss of Acan to the world that Hason and Armida exemplify, namely his transformation into a “vendido” or a sell-out, which will trigger the fatal transformation in the otherwise meek Medea by the end of the play.

In the course of “Mojada” we learn that the way Medea clings to her memories with greater and greater tenacity in order to shield herself from reality is, in fact, symptomatic of her inability to overcome trauma. Yet, Medea’s trauma is not linked exclusively to imperatives of assimilation into a new, overwhelming world of which she is terrified. Her “old world” life in Zamora, Mexico, as well as the family’s horrific journey across the Mexican-U.S. border were equally, if not more, traumatizing. In a heart-breaking confession near the end of the play, Medea paints her old life in dark colors. Among other things, she was exploited by her father and brother, harassed by the latter whom she killed in self-defense, and gang raped while trying to cross the Mexican-U.S. border. Throughout the play, our attention is especially pointed towards the plight of immigrant women who are victimized not only by the racial and class politics of an unfair U.S. labor market, but also by the gender/sexual politics of both the country of origin and the country of settlement.

In “Mojada,” Medea is shown to have internalized the symbolic role of the self-sacrificing Latina/Chicana along the lines of the Latin American ideal of “la madre sufrida,” the long-suffering mother; a cultural image and role that Alfaro makes sure to dismantle by the end of the play. “She lives for La Familia, but they don’t do the same,” writes reviewer Roberto Corona, and he explains: “Medea embodies all the sacrifice, sexuality, and subservience necessary to create a dynamic hybrid between the archetypes of ‘La Virgen’ and ‘La Madre.’ This impossible hybrid is the principal problem for the Chicana mother” (295). The development of Medea from a self-sacrificing/self-abnegating Chicana, from a mother-victim to an avenging Chicana, a mother-victimizer, as a result of Hason’s betrayal, exposes the said impossibility, as well as the unjust power dynamics and oppressive stereotypes on which it hinges. Moreover, witnessing the sacrifices Medea makes while helping Hason to realize his
dream, both in entering the country and in enduring life in the U.S., and witnessing the way her character evolves under extreme and undeserved pressures produce a compelling sense of compassion for her, despite the deplorability of her final actions. Still, the play’s final sequences offer a full-fledged view of the toxicity of the unquestioning faith both in tradition and in the promises of the new world. Following the revelation of Hason and Armida’s marriage, their plans to adopt Acan and Medea’s eviction by Armida, Medea uses the next twenty-four hours to exact her revenge. After killing Armida, Medea turns to her son, Acan.

By the time she decides to kill her son only two future scenarios seem available for him—to Medea’s eyes at least. He will either follow his father and Armida, as he longs to do, and grow to become Anglicized, reject his origins, his past, the Mexican part of who he is, or he will be left with his mother and thus with a life in the impoverished and long neglected inner-city where it will be only a matter of time to “lose him, to gangs or drugs or worse” (Alfaro 73). In either case, Acan, feeling neither quite Mexican nor quite American, will in time grow to despise aspects of his mestizo identity and, therefore, probably see himself as their composite—his imagined attitude toward mestizaje in the play being highly evocative of the kind of future mestizaje Malinche dreaded in Morton’s play. Whichever scenario comes to pass, Medea’s loss of Acan is a near certainty. The murder of her son, then, should be seen in light of this conundrum, which imparts a sense of inevitability to her choice to commit her final deplorable act, thus enhancing the play’s tragic import.

The awe-inspiring epilogue of the play featuring Medea perched on a corner of the roof, wearing a dress made of Guaco feathers and, ultimately, taking flight leaves us grappling with uncomfortable, even disturbing, questions: Where is she flying to? What world is there for people like this Medea and the kind of mestizaje she embodies? We could suggest that this is a world as of yet not actualized, but imagined and given impetus by projects like “Mojada,” whose political impulse has been directed in a most immediate manner toward real-life, inner-city communities of and in crisis. If, in “La Malinche” and in “The Hungry Woman,” it is the death/sacrifice of Martin and Chac-Mool respectively, which herald the possibility of social, cultural and political transformation, in “Mojada” it has been, in large measure, the play’s production itself that has sought to function as harbinger of healing change.

As a social theatre project, “Mojada” reversed the usual media lens through which the U.S. public views issues related to immigration, assimilation, the barrio reality and mestizaje. Besides addressing identity crises related to the immigration experience, assimilation processes and mestizaje itself, and besides functioning so as to bridge classes and cultures intra-diegetically, “Mojada” became literally a forum that fostered dialogue on the issues the play explores; a dialogue exhibiting strong political and (socio)therapeutic inclinations towards dealing with these issues. Reaching out and interacting with the audiences before and after the performance became an integral element of the “Mojada” project, thereby creating a social theatre that
stimulated change. Panels, readings, pre- and post-production discussions, outreach events and educational initiatives were organized in the wake of the production; immigrant enclaves, teachers and students were invited to attend the performances, and participate in post-production panels; while the overall program invested heavily in the engagement of the youth, especially the immigrant youth. Precisely in order to bring the community together, Alfaro “went so far as to offer free events connected to the play in East Los Angeles” (58), Laura Covault notes, so that its residents could be informed about and encouraged to participate in “Mojada,” as play and social platform.

In advocating personal and community responsibility for a process of healing and sociopolitical transformation to be mobilized, “Mojada,” as social theatre project, showed its diverse audiences that “[r]etelling stories of trauma is crucial not only to the recovery and social reintegration of the individual victims, but also to social responsibility and restorative justice. Acknowledging the trauma present in the community, in its members and its practices, can promote healing and solidarity and prevent revictimization” (Kilburn 72), at least and at first, within the context of that community. It could even set off or provide the grounds for a process of sociotherapeutic change that, beginning at the level of the community, could extend to the broader structural level. Alfaro’’s project attempted quite successfully to do exactly that. It grew to become a promising form of immediate—direct and urgent—public discourse or forum of storytelling and listening, as well as a kind of social theatre workshop, and thus an incubator for social processes of healing or psychosocial recovery and, perhaps, even the reinvention of at least some parts of who we are now.

**Conclusion**

The mythoplays we have explored in this paper prove that Medea, a quintessentially hybrid and migratory figure firmly lodged in the mythical-cultural imaginary of the western and non-western world, is ideally positioned to function as a means by which to reconfigure *mestizaje* for the twenty-first century. Due to its responsiveness to a variety of sociopolitical exigencies and ethical issues, Medea’s myth has received a number of variant readings and retellings across time and space, including modern feminist, postcolonial and queer ones. Since the late nineteenth century, Medea has become one of the most popular Greek tragic figures on the U.S. stage, while, from the late nineteen-seventies onwards, a rash of new Medeas, attending to gender as well as to ethnoracial concerns, has had considerable impact on the country’s theatrical scene. Yet, the “brown Medeas” of contemporary Latina/o theatre have drawn little scholarly interest despite their sociocultural and political import; import especially centered on the discourse and reality of *mestizaje*.

The present paper has attested the said import and attempted a contribution to the diversity of Medea’s reception in the U.S., by examining three “brown Medeas”: “La Malinche,” “The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,” and “Mojada: A Medea in Los
Angeles.” In its course, we have discussed the three plays as important instances of contemporary Latina/o revisionary drama, representing a later and distinct phase in U.S. cultural and identity politics. We further considered the fact that, besides the myth’s currency, it is also Medea’s affinities to the Latin American mythohistorical and mythical figures of La Malinche and La Llorona that render her myth even more relevant, resonant and conducive to revisionary treatment for and by Latina/o theatre artists. In light of that cross-cultural bond, we touched upon the ways in which the mythoplays tap into the so-called Medea–Malinche–Llorona paradigm, thus giving a more inclusive twist to the concept and discourse of *mestizaje* that undergirds their creation and production. Additionally, we examined how, in recontextualizing the Medea myth in the early post-Conquest era, in a dystopian post-Chicano Movement and in the familiar contemporary U.S. Latina/o context respectively, the mythoplays ground key points of Latina/o American history in the said paradigm, and, at the same time, allow for and even set into motion a radical reconsideration of and, perhaps, action upon that very history and its future directions.

The three “brown Medeas” that we have addressed here are the products of a “*mestiza* mythopoesis” performed by contemporary Latina/o theatre artists and gaining considerable impetus in twenty-first-century U.S. theatre. It is in the light of the emergent vision of an alternative, global *mestizaje* that the plays included here combine the Greek tragic myth of Medea with indigenous mythical and cultural material. The new *mythoi* that emerge out of this coalescence perform a productive and engaging dialogue between the distinct contexts from which they originate; a dialogue mutually beneficial for all the parties involved. It will be very interesting to see how this dialogue that Medea’s reception by Latina/o theatre will itself be received in twenty-first-century theatre within and without the U.S., in view of the growing demographic significance of the Latina/o population, Latina/o increasing transmigratory presence, and the existence of multiple and diverse *Latinidades* which are currently becoming more and more globalized across the world.³

**Works Cited**


³ For a very interesting reading of the ongoing globalization of *Latinidades*, see Ana Patricia Rodriguez (2008).


