

“This is how all stories begin and end.”

Cherríe Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman* is always attuned to the limited range of stories told of women in mythology, a problem that is amplified for queers and women of color. The recurring narrative of a crazed mother driven by her unwieldy passions and hysteria to murdering her children is one that comes up time and again in many cultures, and is passed down through storytelling to each new generation of children. In writing this play, Moraga took as her case study three examples of this narrative that spoke to her as a Chicana theatre artist: the Greek myth of Medea, the Mexican folktale of La Llorona, and Aztec origin stories. By melding and mixing these stories of misogyny together, Moraga brings humanity to the “crazed mother,” allowing us to see the world through Medea’s eyes as she fights to protect the people she loves in a world built to tear down queer women of color.

To frame this play, Moraga uses a chorus of four *cihuatateo*, who are Aztec women warrior spirits, to guide the narrative along. In the Aztec culture, childbirth was seen as a form of battle, so women who died in labor (much like men who died in war) became *cihuatateo*, passing onto the spiritual realm to serve the gods. The *cihuatateo* serve *Cihuacoatl*, the Aztec goddess of fertility, motherhood, and midwifery, but like most narratives of powerful women, they are also depicted as insidious. They are thought to steal bones and body parts in the night for sacrifice, cause insanity, sickness, and paralysis, and even possess their victims’ bodies. This notion of spiritual possession, sacrifice, and ritual offerings is what captivated me most about *The Hungry Woman*’s framework.

Ancient theatrical performance was thought to be rooted in the realm of ritual – performers and audiences would commune to share in the spiritual transcendence of theatre as an offering to the gods. Aristotle wrote of theatre’s utility in his *Poetics*, highlighting the importance of “catharsis,” a term which scholars have spent centuries unraveling. Some Renaissance philosophers like Lorenzo Giacomini even believed that this need to purge or purify oneself through experiencing pity and fear as an audience was a *medical necessity* to balance the body’s humours. In other words, theatre was a vital part of ancient cultural life, not only as an offering to the gods (ensuring bountiful harvests, health, and military success), but also as a collective experience of emotional purgation. This is what we are doing today.

In *our* world of the play, the *cihuatateo* are queer teens living in an alternate Phoenix, a city “that never rose up from the ashes,” a queertopia on the border of sovereignty and prison. Our *cihuatateo* bridge the worlds of the spirits and mortals, they are both and neither. The year is 2017. A small series of events that occurred in the late twentieth century lit a powder keg of racial conflict that spiraled out of control, until all of North America was separated into different homogenous ethno-states. Phoenix became a diverse land of queer outcasts, a melting pot of LGBTQ+ people exiled from their ethnic homelands. For one weekend each year, the *cihuatateo* of Phoenix gather at the Altar of Coyolxauhqui (the moon goddess) to perform the ritual of Medea and Luna, retelling the story of these ill-fated Chicana lovers. They invoke the departed spirits of Medea and her family to return to this altar for the annual ritual. As the audience, you are now a part of the ritual, a ceremony that celebrates queer womanhood,

indigenous lives, Chicanas and women of color, mothers, immigrants, and all of the people inhabiting the borderlands.

When Moraga wrote this play in 1994, Phoenix was only being introduced to Joe Arpaio, the “alt-right” white nationalists were still hiding behind computer screens, and Donald Trump had yet to purchase the Miss Universe pageant, cementing his deluded sense of control over women’s bodies. Moraga set her story in the mid-2010s, and her prophetic abilities are chilling. The world around us today is eerily similar to the dystopia Moraga wrote of more than twenty years ago.

Truly: Fuck Joe Arpaio. Fuck Richard Spencer. Fuck Donald Trump.

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