A Victimized Woman: La Malinche

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La Malinche, the Aztec mistress of Hernán Cortés, the sixteenth-century Spanish conquistador of Mexico, occupies what must surely be a unique historical position: she is the embodiment of two national myths, the first creative and the second destructive. As the mother of Cortés' son—one of the first children of Spanish and Indian blood—she has been credited as the creator of the Mexican race. By "creating" that new race, she also bears the blame for the downfall of the Aztec people. To this day, Mexican and Mexican-American people debate her place in their national myth, seeking to reconcile that myth's destructive and constructive elements, and so create a less fractured national and racial identity. Much of the truth of La Malinche's story, however, is shrouded in the shifting ground of legend. This paper will examine the historical and literary representations of La Malinche, in order to come to a clearer understanding of her actual historical role, and so better understand the role played by creative forces in shaping both her story and Mexico's creation myth.

La Malinche and Hernán Cortés: A Controversial History

La Malinche was born around 1505 in the village of Viluta. In this Nahuatl speaking town, located in the Paynalla province of Coatzacoalcos in the Veracruz region of southern Mexico, her father was a *cacique*, or lord, of a noble Aztec family. At birth, La Malinche was given the name Malinal.[1]

Malinal had a privileged upbringing. She was sent to schools and retained a higher education because of her social status and wealth.[2] According to legend, she was loved and cherished as a person and was destined to take her rightful place in the lineage of

[1] Different sources list different spellings of her name, i.e., Malinal, Malinulli, and Malín. For clarity's sake, this paper will refer to her as Malinal.

[2] S. Suzan Jane, "La Malinche (*c*. 1500 – *c*. 1527)," in *Herstory: Women Who Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 1995), 41.

inheritance. But life was not so kind. Her father died and her mother remarried, so she became nothing more than an unwanted stepchild. Her mother gave birth to a much-adored son, and Malinal stood in the way of his inheritance. Her mother rid herself of her burdensome daughter by making a deal with passing traders to take Malinal with them. To save face she took the body of a slave's child and buried her as Malinal. She told the town that her daughter had died.[3]

At the end of Malinal's journey across Mexico with the travelers she found herself in the town of Xicalongo. Then she was taken to Tetipac where, as a slave, she was given to a cacique, a Mayan lord and military chief of Tabasco. Throughout her life as a slave she was quick to learn many different languages. She picked up the Mayan dialects of the Yucatan.[4] Eventually her knowledge of languages covered the Aztecs, Mayan, and other non-Mayan groups.[5] As a slave, though, she was reduced from her once noble bearing to chattel. [6]

The cacique gave Malinal to the Spaniard, Hernán Cortés, who had just arrived in Tabasco. Among a tribute of gold, ornamented masks, food, cloth, and twenty slave women, she was a trinket to please the Gods from the Sea. These women were to serve as cooks for the conquistadors. Cortés doled the women out to his military staff. He gave Malinal to a close friend and favorite captain, Alonso Hernádez de Puertocarrero. One month later Cortés reclaimed Malinal.[7] It was said that Malinal's noble bearing had never left her. Her pride showed through in her straightforward manner with her new captives. She held her head

[3] Jerome R. Adams, "Doña Marina (La Malinche) *c*. 1505 – 1530 (Mexico) Mother of Conquest," in *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders from Doña Marina (1505 – 1530) to Bishop Romero (1917 – 1980)* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1991), 3.

[4] R. Michael Conner, "La Malinche: Creator or Traitor," from *The Translator Interpreter Hall of Fame* (2000 – 2003). [Online]: http://www.tihof.org/honors/malinche.htm.

[5] Shep Lencheck, "'La Malinche' – Harlot or Heroine?" from *Lakeside* 14, 4 (December, 1997): 11, 16, 17, 22. [Online]: http://www.mexconnect.com/mex/history/malinche.html.

[6] Jerome R. Adams, "Voice of Conquest, Mexico, Doña Marina (La Malinche), *c*. 1505 – 1530," in *Notable Latin American Women: Twenty-nine Leaders, Rebels, Poets, Battlers and Spies, 1500 – 1900* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995), 14-15.

[7] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."

high, as the other women slaves did not. An unnamed "first hand account", quoted by Jerome Adams, referred to Malinal as "good looking, intelligent and without embarrassment."[8]

Cortés eventually left these Mayan lands. On his path of devastation through the new lands he found he could not communicate with the native people. It was at this time that he was advised one of his twenty slave women spoke these languages.[9] With the assistance of Jerónimo de Aguliar he was able to make a chain of interpretation. De Aguilar was a Spanish priest that had been shipwrecked on the coast of Cozumel eight years before Cortés arrived. A former slave of the Yucatan Mayans, he escaped these captors and lived with a friendly cacique of another tribe. He was, by this time, equipped to speak Mayan along with his native Spanish.[10] Joining Cortés, de Aguliar helped to convert tens of thousands of Indians and Mayans to Christianity. When the slave women were given to Cortés he also converted and baptized them. In March 1519, Malinal was baptized Doña Marina.[11] During the travels of the conquering mass Bernal Díaz emphatically noted about Marina and Aguilar, they "always went with us on every expedition, even when it took place at night."[12]

At first, the success of interpreting was accomplished by Aguilar speaking to Marina in Mayan; she translated into Nahuatl, the lingua of central Mexican highlands.[13] The process was then reversed.[14] Marina soon learned Spanish and the process was refined." The Mexican author Gómez de Orozco stated that Malinche "was an instrumental part of [the Spanish] strategy, interpreting in three languages and providing essential information about economic organization, knowledge of native customs, the order and succession of kingdoms, forms of tribute, rules governing family relations, and so on." Gone were the ineffectual signs and grunts, replaced by precision and detail for Cortés'

[8] Adams, "Voice of Conquest," 5, 15.
[9] Lencheck, "Harlot or Heroine?"
[10] Peter Rashkin, "Cortés and La Malinche," from *The Dagger* (2000), 13, 22. [Online]: http://thedagger.com/archive/conquest/malinche.html.
[11] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."
[12] Adams, "Voice of Conquest," 5.
[13] Ibid., 18.
[14] Ibid.

conquest. Not only did Marina interpret for military purposes; she also helped spread Christianity with her work as a translator. A notary and Christian scribe reportedly referred to Marina as an "Interpreter of Christian Letters."[15] Through her, Spaniards were able to spread their religion.

Moreover, Marina's role in the conquest was seen for what it was by the Indians. They understood that the words were Cortés' and not Marina's; that Marina was operating as Cortés's alter ego. During the negotiations with Indians was when Marina became La Malinche. Malinche was the term used by Moctezuma when he addressed Cortés. Because the Indians perceived Cortés and Marina as a single unit they dubbed her "the Captain's woman," or "La Malinche."[16]

La Malinche stood by Cortés through some of the most important events and meetings during this time. In a letter to his king, Cortés wrote, "the tongue that I have is a woman of this land."[17] She was there, interpreting, at the first meeting with representatives of Moctezuma. When she discovered the plans of Moctezuma and his warriors, she did not keep her mouth shut. She staved off the slaughter of the Spaniards by divulging these secrets to Cortés.[18] As interpreter she was a central part in dealings with Fat Cacique, and the caciques of Cemplona. Cortés and crew arrested five tax collectors sent by the Aztecs. This made allies of the Cemploanans. The Cemploanans were the first Indian warriors to join with the Spanish. More warriors joined the Spanish after an initial battle with the Tlaxcalans. This new alliance brought thousands to aid in the fight against the Aztecs.[19] Through La Malinche, Tlaxcalans understood that the Spanish would end the demands for tribute and human sacrifices.[20]

Believing they were trying to bring civilization to Latin America, Spaniards felt justified in all of their actions. With La Malinche at his side, Cortés created a revolutionary pattern of conquest. He went in with guns blazing. Then he brought in La

[15] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."
[16] Bernal Diaz Del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, *1517-1521*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1956), 230.
[17] Adams, "Voice of Conquest," 17.
[18] Jane, "La Malinche," 42.
[19] Lencheck, "Harlot or Heroine?"
[20] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."

Malinche for negotiations.[21] The touch point for La Malinche was the ability to save thousands of Indians lives and avoid more bloodshed of her people. She wanted to save them and this was her way of doing so. In addition with the Spanish and Christianity human sacrifice and cannibalism would come to an end.[22] As was shown when Díaz explained that both Marina and Aguilar had become expert at portraying the story of Christ in a variety of tongues and "were so expert at it that they explained it very clearly."[23] Now a firm follower of the new religion, La Malinche wanted these new ways for her people as well. A letter from Cortés, housed in the Spanish archives, states: "After God we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina." [24]

Although they were never married, Cortés and La Malinche were loyal to each other and constantly guarded one another's safety. After a battle with the Tlaxcalans, Bernal Díaz, the sixteenth-century Spanish chronicler, reported that Cortés fought his way out of the city "on horseback [with] Doña Marina near him." Further, Díaz told of the wonder of Marina's caring nature when he described her during battles, "yet never allowed us to see any sign of fear in her, only a courage passing that of a woman."[25] La Malinche and Cortés loved each other.[26] La Malinche had earned Cortés's confidence and rose from nothing more than a means to an end as a secretary to his trusted mistress. Díaz reported that many other women were offered to Cortés, but he always refused them.[27]

She became the "Mother of the Mexican Nation" when she bore Cortés a son, Don Martín Cortés in 1522. His was the first Mestizo career that could be charted. He rose to a high government position as comendador of the order of Saint Jago. In 1548, Martin was executed for his role in a conspiracy against the Viceroy, the highest-ranking Spanish official in New Spain.[28]

[21] Adams, "Voice of Conquest," 18, 21.
[22] Lencheck, "Harlot or Heroine?"
[23] Adams, "Doña Marina," 9.
[24] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."
[25] Adams, "Doña Marina," 8.
[26] Lencheck, "Harlot or Heroine?"
[27] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."
[28] Lencheck, "Harlot or Heroine?"

After the conquest, Cortés returned to his wife in Spain. He chose a Castillian knight, Lieutenant Don Juan Xamarillo, to marry La Malinche. Cortés attended the wedding in Ostatipec in the province of Nogales and presented La Malinche with three gifts of land, one having once belonged to Moctezuma. Also, Cortés asked La Malinche to serve as his interpreter in a mission to Honduras.[29] Marina and Xamarillo had a daughter together, Doña María.[30] Malinche fell out of sight. In 1529, Diego de Ordáz, a Spanish adventurer, reportedly sighted her with her husband and son.[31]

Views of La Malinche Through History: Abuse and Realism

During her lifetime La Malinche was only spoken of highly. Bernal Díaz authenticated her pedigree time and again. Although he never gave a physical description, he spoke of her nobility of character, her constant concern for her fellow countrymen, and of her kindness. He was witness to her reunion in Honduras with her mother and half-brother, and was awed by her willing forgiveness of them.[32]

Her name has since fallen into trouble. To call a Mexican or Mexican-American a Malinche is to call them, in some way, a traitor to their culture. "Malinchista" was a word associated with people who turned their back on their culture. Today's Mexico places a villainous emphasis on La Malinche's life: "lover of foreigners", whore, harlot, mistress, betrayer, and a sell-out.[33] In addition La Chingada was associated with Malinche. The two words had taken on the same meaning. To say someone was a son or daughter of a Chingada or Malinche was a heinous insult.[34] At times even Cortés was vilified as a thief and a torturer.[35] Clifford Krauss in a *New York Times* article quoted Mexican intellectual Octavio Paz's book, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, when he wrote about

[29] Jane, "La Malinche," 43.
[30] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."
[31] Adams, "Voice of Conquest," 25.
[32] Diaz, *Discovery*, 67-68.
[33] Clifford Krauss, "A Historical Figure is Still Hated by Many in Mexico," *New York Times*, 25 March 1997.
[34] Marta E. Sanchez, "La Malinche at the Intersection: Race and Gender in Down These Mean Streets," in *Publication of the Modern Language Association* 3, 1 (January 1998): 117-128.
[35] Rashkin, "Cortés and La Malinche," 7.

Cortés and La Malinche, declaring, "they are symbols of a secret conflict that we [Mexicans] have still not resolved."[36]

Today Mexican people have forsaken La Malinche's home. It is shunned. The house sits in the Coyocan neighborhood at 57 Higuera Street in Mexico City. Only travelers are interested in viewing the historical home. Tourist guidebooks even push it into their recesses when touting the wonders of Mexico.[37]

This infamous place was the sanctuary for Cortés to write his chronicles of the conquest for King Charles V. The house could have further been adored for the rich history it held throughout Mexico's growth. Here in colonial times Indians worked weaving blankets and clothing for their Spanish masters. Then in the 17th century it was left in ruins. The revival of the home in the 19th century by monks was another fantastic tale. The monks, against President Benito Juarez's anti-clerical policies, operated a convent in the home. Peasants betrayed the monks by turning them into local officials for running the convent, the house was confiscated, and it was made a jail. During the 1930s the home saw further immortality as a possession of Jose Vasconcelos, a Mexican philosopher, and politician in the 1920s. Vasconcelos rented the home to Lupe Rivera, daughter of the famed muralist Diego Rivera. She used the home as a headquarters for her congressional campaign. Despite all of these historic events that took place in the home Mexico still avoids it. The taint of La Malinche is still too much.[38]

She was the "perpetrator of the original sin." She mixed Indian and Spanish blood. According to Historian Peter Bakewell, the "intermarriage of Spaniards and natives…became normal policy at least during the founding phase of the mainland empire." This was because many of the emigrants to Hispaniola were young, single men who lived with or married native women, this was thus the start of the mestizo population. This new race now forms "most of the Spanish American population." The intermixing of Spanish and Indian women saw declines at different times. As women and families immigrated to New Spain

[36] Octavio Paz, *The Labrynth of Solitude:Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), 87. Clifford Krauss, "A Historic Figure is Still Hated by Many in Mexico," *New York Times*, 26 March 1997.

[37] Krauss, "Historic Figure."

[38] Ibid., 1, 49.

more unions were made within Spanish lines. Further, Spaniards also intermingled with female black slaves. These times of decline created atmospheres of racial anxiety.[39]

In addition, the 18th century saw the mixing of races occurring with such quickness that categorizing people by race was nearly impossible. Moreover appearances alone could not produce a sure definition of race as well. Thus, today's Mexicans must respect not only an Aztec heritage, but also the entire triangle of relatively Black-Indian-White. As much as this could have been hailed, as the way life should have been, the reality is that race and social class did and does matter. Because of intermixing, races could at times blend into different social classes. An Indian with the appropriate dress and profession could pass as a Mestizo, or a person with one Spanish and one Indian parent. On the other hand, a white nobleman would never be mistaken for any other race. [40]

Once again racial anxiety reared its head when economics began to be the resource for determining social status. Whites could no longer hold their thrones; they no longer were the only ones able to acquire fine things. New Spain had become a fertile place for many to make loads of money. This, along with the fact that it was increasingly difficult to define race by appearance, festered with the white population. Striving to retain their hold over the inferior class they reached out for titles.[41]

La Malinche has continued to be considered the cause of the original sin at Mexico's birth, or the "Mexican Eve," representing all that is wrong with Mexico.[42] Some feminists claim that this woman of the 16th century is at the heart of gender relations in Mexico in the 21st century. They claim that men's low perceptions of women were created by this long ago union and can be seen in the nation's current high rate of infidelity and domestic violence.[43] Further, La Malinche is iconic for women who depend on men for importance and security and are later left violated or abandoned.

[39] Peter Bakewell, *A History of Latin America: Empires and Sequels, 1450 – 1930* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), 78, 278-279.

[40] Ibid., 279.

[41] Ibid., 78 – 278.

[42] Paz, *Labyrinth*, 87. Paz cites José Clemente Orozco and his mural at the National Preparatory School, as the perpetuator of this manifestation of Malinal.

[43] Krauss, 18.

The gender system where the male is active and the female is passive is pervasive in Mexican culture.

La Malinche was degraded and blamed for man's racial anxiety.[44] Hispanic men did so because the cause of racial or Mestizo anxiety rested at the feet of La Malinche. Octavio Paz, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, discussed the problem in a seemingly solid psychological basis:

> If the Chingada is a representation of the violated Mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense, but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is Doña Malinche, the mistress of Cortés. It is true that she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador, but he forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over. Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by Spaniards. And, as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal.[45]

Initially, Paz gave her a break for being violated, but in the end she was still the betrayer.

Truly the effect La Malinche had on the male psyche was that she either challenged his power, control, and dominance or she was an affirmation of his inability to protect her. As Leslie Petty put it, "a society of male dominance produces fathers who fear their daughters' beauty, because it may entice a man to violate her, thus threatening the father's role as protector."[46] In the end a female was blamed for men's faults and atrocities.

The Mexican culture had two standards for women. They were either La Virgen de Guadalupe, who was good and clean, or La Malinche, who was bad and dirty. These two historical figures have taken on mythological proportions. For women in Mexican society today these two figures embody the perceptions of political and social femininity.[47]

[44] Sanchez, "La Malinche," 128.
[45] Paz, *Labyrinth*, 86.
[46] Leslie Petty "The Dual'-ing Images of la Malinche and la Virgen de Guadelupe in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street,"* in MELUS 25, 2 (2000): 122-127.
[47] Ibid., 119-121.

Twenty-five years ago Mexico thought they could finally break through their disgust with the image of La Malinche, Cortés, and their son. They built a brilliant monument to them. But neither forgiveness nor acceptance was in their hearts. Fierce demonstrations and riots broke out and the statue was destroyed.[48]

José Vasconcelos, one of Mexico's most important intellectual writers, already saw that the Mexican population could not be separated into or defined by being Indian or Spanish. Instead, he recognized that a fifth race had been created, that transcended the four; white, black, red, and yellow that had existed in the nation. He wanted this to be reflected at the artists' will.[49] Authors had used her in essays and plays such as Carlos Fuentes, Salvador Novo, and Rodolfo Usigli. These artists attempted to show the simplicity of the life she had to create for herself in a harsh situation. Diego Rivera portrayed her as mother and mate, Orozco painted her as the alter ego of Cortés, and Salvador Novo showed her in his play as an interpreter with a willing ear, a religious soul, and a caring heart. [50]

So far the intellectual minds of Mexico were rethinking her. In addition, many Chicana women today do not see her as the cause of their gender problems, but as a woman whose life paralleled their own. The denigration and defamation of their own characters they can see as a reflection of La Malinche's. Her ultimate loyalty to Cortés was a trait to adopt, not to degrade.[51] For Chicanas she had become important in their need to shake off bad stigmas and replace them with an acceptance of their culture.

If blame must have been cast for the downfall of an ancient empire then the very Aztecs themselves should have been looked at. La Malinche just may have been the unsuspecting scapegoat for an unsuccessful king.[52] The Aztecs were not making friends with their Indian neighbors. Instead their brutality towards other Indian tribes and nations were creating enemies. These oppressed Indians would rally with anyone opposing the Aztecs as the Tlaxcalans did. Moreover the heart of the Aztec nation was already crumbling from small pox reported Bernal Díaz by the

[48] Krauss, 32.
[49] Bakewell, 453.
[50] Krauss, 22.
[51] Conner, "Creator or Traitor."
[52] Ibid., "La Malinche."

time Cortés, La Malinche, and their warriors arrived. We could have extrapolated that Moctezuma was doing nothing to contain the disease within the capital. As Díaz said, if they had not come when they did the disease may have infested the entire kingdom and killed off the rest of the empire. Moctezuma's failure to defend his kingdom from all types of invaders is the true source of an empire falling, and not La Malinche's work as an interpreter.[53]

The heart of the matter though was not so simple. Miscegenation, the mixing of racial blood, was not a new idea in Mexican ideology.[54] In the United States of America racial purity had always been strictly adhered to. When the Europeans settled in North America they firmly believed in not mixing with the Indians. Laws were continuously placed on the books to separate whites from Indians, from blacks, and the idea was alluded to with Mexicans, Japanese, and others. Mexicans had been immigrating into North America for centuries. Since the early 1900s they had been under constant pressure to become Americanized. Their religion had been attacked. Their communal and cultural values, gender responsibilities, hair, and clothes had all been manipulated by European ideals. It was not too far of a stretch to say they had also been brainwashed into believing that interracial relations was also wrong.

After decades of trying to fit into the American culture, of wanting to belong simply to have more of the American dream, they had reemphasized this false notion as well. During the late-18th and early-19th centuries, Vasconcelos had already recognized this dilemma. He declared that the country had been striving to emulate Europe and the United States, and that this train of thought for the Mexican nation needed to end. The reference point for the Latin American nations should have come from within, and not from outside ideals.[55] Nevertheless, the ideology had not been fully applied and when it was applied to the "Mother of the Mexican Race," she could have been nothing more than a whore. She was the one to blame for combining Spanish and Aztec blood. Well before the Spanish had come to Latin America, one of the

[53] Lencheck, "Harlot or Heroine?"
[54] Sanchez, "La Malinche," 128.
[55] Bakewell, 453.

ways in which Aztecs conquered other Indians, was to intermarry and miscegenate with the conquered peoples.

La Malinche should not have been held up to today's morals, just as the brutality of the Aztecs could not have been judged. The context was completely different. Cisneros said, "Chicana women," according to Sandra Cisneros, should "accept" [their] culture."[56] The mixing of races then could not have been a sound reason for accusing an abandoned daughter of being a "whore, a traitor, a sell-out." La Malinche forgave her mother; the Mexican people may one day forgive La Malinche.

[56] Pilar E. Rodriguez Aranda, "On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-Three: an Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros," in *The Americas Review* 18, 1 (1990): 64-80; quoted in Petty, "'The Dual'-ing Images," 123.