

Elizabeth Barrett  
HIST 395-G  
María Bárbara Zepeda Cortes  
Final Essay  
5/13/2022

**“CONQUERING” WOMEN: EXPLORING THE CONTEXT AND  
LEGACY OF CONQUEST IN EARLY COLONIAL SPANISH AMERICA**

*Historians are the camp followers of the imperialists...<sup>1</sup>*  
-Inga Clendinnen

Ripped from its overall context, Inga Clendinnen’s words still refract kaleidoscopic interpretations. Written in the perspective of relating how the Spanish observed Indigenous’ “fierce and unnatural cruelty” during the Conquest of Mexico, they are even more potent. Similarly, certain single words, no matter how benignly placed, carry the power of empire; and empire, quantified through institutions, always defines knowledge. Thus, what remains is a cycle: learning in the written, or even linguistic context is created by historians, shaped through apparatus subservient to empire. But the pivotal focus should be on her words, “camp followers.” The nuance is sinuous, gendered, and sexualized. Camp followers are subservient to soldiers: they are the cooks, the washer women, and perhaps most traditionally, the sexual partners of soldiers. Some camp followers may be legitimate wives or children, or they may be enslaved to that burden, yet there is a parity to their station in the strata of the microcosmic campaign. What is important is that the connotation is sexual, and the camp follower is always considered a female.

---

<sup>1</sup> Clendinnen, Inga. “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty’: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico.” *Representations*, no. 33 (1991): 65–100.

This essay is on the trail of the camp followers. Literally and figuratively, it will survey a cross-section of historiography relating to gender, class, and race during the era in which one empire, the Spanish, cannibalized another, the Mexica.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of this project lies one figure, an enslaved, indigenous “camp follower,” Malintzin. Enslaved by her own Nahua people and shuttled to the Yucatec Maya before finally given to Cortés as tribute, Malintzin has been misrepresented, misunderstood, and maligned to the point of becoming the utmost symbol of shame and degradation, *la chingada*.<sup>3</sup> Worse, as Camilla Townsend points out, “The majority of the Mexican populace, however, still looks on Malinche<sup>4</sup> with shame and loathing, seeing her not only as representative of conquest by Spain, but of domination by outsiders in general.”<sup>5</sup> Research into her life and the context in which she was born, enslaved, and then navigated, as well as the legacy she left behind, draws wide-ranging analysis. Because—like the proverbial kaleidoscope—Malintzin’s image shifts, this essay will weave together the views of authors extending the range from the 1980s until 2021.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it will track the evolution of “her” legacy, placing both the depth of the scholarship in her orbit but also the subjectification of her person, life, and context of place itself under scrutiny. Although Malintzin is used as a case study in this essay, the stories of the other Indigenous women in her time and place will help to form how her singularity in the historical record has come to take shape. In every way, her life, in all its prismatic and marginalized glory, has come to embody the struggle between the conquered and

---

<sup>2</sup> Townsend, Camilla. *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> See Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*. New York: Grove Press, 1962, pp. 85-87. Also, Townsend, Camilla. *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> This name deviates from others she is called, and will form part of analysis pertaining directly to her legacy as below.

<sup>5</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> With the exception of Columbus, Las Casas, and Paz, which is treated as primary source/etymological material.

the conquerors. She reflects the flexibly duality of Conquest and assimilation: on the one hand the shining light that draws scholarship on agency, gender, power, and hierarchy, and on the other hand, the abyss into which is thrown the derision and prejudice of all that embodies the cultural “other.”

### **Context: Conquest, Reconquista, Conquistador**

As above, the power of words will continue to be explored. One such word that is as powerful as the “camp followers” is *conquest*. Translated to Spanish, it mutates from a neutral entity to a gendered feminine noun, *conquista*.<sup>7</sup> Cross-gendered etymology and nuance notwithstanding, the word in both English and Spanish languages transmits masculinity, power, and dominion. The connotations are abundantly clear: to conquer is to dominate by force, to subsume a distinctly “other” entity, and to rule with power by any means necessary, up to and including subterfuge.

The conquest in the Americas did not begin nor end with the Conquest of the Mexica, but neither did the Spanish Conquest begin with Colón’s crossing of the Atlantic in 1492. It was a process begun long before, and practiced as a method of legitimate warfare with a distinct and established methodology. The chronology of Conquests in the Canary Islands overlaps the American one, 1478-1496. In those eastern Atlantic campaigns, historians signal to essential main practices of conquest that played out in a similar vein to the Americas and indicate “conceptual continuity” in how Spaniards formed empire.<sup>8</sup> The first method was always repopulation.

---

<sup>7</sup> Asale, Rae. “Conquista: Diccionario De La Lengua Española.” “Diccionario de la lengua Española” – Edición del Tricentenario.

<sup>8</sup> Stevens-Arroyo, Anthony M. “The Inter-Atlantic Paradigm: The Failure of Spanish Medieval Colonization of the Canary and Caribbean Islands.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 3 (1993): pp. 516-17.

There is every symptom of this method of conquest and colonization took place once the Spanish Crown was more settled into the venture in Hispaniola. During the medieval conquests, the Spanish practiced a method of colonization through settlement and repopulation called *repartimiento*, a practice that will be brought up again below.<sup>9</sup> The *Reconquista*, a separate campaign, is also demonstrative of this process. Rather than *Conquista*, as the Spaniards named what took place during the colonization of the Canaries where the inhabitants did not practice any form Judeo-Christian religiosity, the Reconquista took place on the Iberian Peninsula where Muslims and Jews lived, already imprinted with a separate, recognizable yet, to Christian Spaniards, heretical faith. In 1492, queen Isabella “conquered” the peninsula for Christians in her final campaign against the Muslims at the fall of Granada. After that, the “Catholic Monarchs” could focus on uniting their territories. Since no one can serve two masters, Isabelle and Ferdinand harnessed their crusader-esque zealotry and expelled all non-Christians from the country. In this, they confiscated the homes, businesses, and material wealth of a large portion of their subjects. With this wealth they were able to pursue the investment of patronage, in many and innovative ways.

One such benefactor of the monarchs’ new wealth was Cristóbal Colón.<sup>10</sup> Flush with his own religious fervor, he was an explorer seeking support for his expedition to the west. His aim was to incorporate the people of “Cathay” and “Çipangu” into the Catholic church.<sup>11</sup> Together, along with the wealth of newly tapped “gold, jewels and spices of the Orient” to be brought to

---

<sup>9</sup> Stevens-Arroyo, “The Inter-Atlantic Paradigm,” p. 521.

<sup>10</sup> Since words, consent, and names are a major theme in this essay, I opted, like historian Camilla Townsend, to utilize the name he called himself in this first instance to underscore the identity issue which is becoming more and more central to historiography now. However, for readability in the framework of this essay, I will revert to his more popularized Anglophone moniker, Christopher Columbus for the rest of the essay.

<sup>11</sup> Columbus, Christopher., and J. M. Cohen. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969, p. 13.

Castile, after conversion, the people of the Far East would band Europeans to squeeze Islam and all other heretical religions off the earth. Consequently, Columbus' plan to expand ever more westward for Catholic hegemony was in alignment with their religious and colonial goals in building and sustaining empire. Furthermore, it was merely a continuation of the processes already extant on the Canary Islands. Most importantly, it was a plan to unite the material mercantile and dynastic interests of Crown with the religious and geopolitical interests of Church, thus gaining spiritual and political succor as the Spaniards vied for empire against their nearest neighbors, the Portuguese. As the Admiral sailed into the horizon, he truly believed he was bringing glory of his God to the other side of the globe. It is with this special kind of narcissistic religious zealotry that the initial contact with Indigenous peoples occurred.

First contact happened with the many islands of what came to be known as the Caribbean. From here is one of the first linguistic misapprehensions. The Taíno people were peaceful, and despite later misconceptions of their "natural" innocence, were seemingly quite adept at understanding the motivations for their new European visitors.<sup>12</sup> Despite a nearly insurmountable babel, Columbus and his crew quickly revealed their preoccupations with gold and mineral wealth (another major aspect of colonization is reconnaissance of exploitative chattel) and the resultant domination of people in a sexualized reward cycle that ensured repopulation and included Indigenous women. Michele da Cuneo, a fellow Italian and friend of Columbus who accompanied as an adventurer on the Second Voyage (1493), reports that, when rewarded with a woman by his Admiral:

---

<sup>12</sup> For the description of the "innocent" Arawak people, see Casas, Bartolomé de las, Nigel Griffin, and Anthony Pagden. *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. London, England; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1992, esp. p. 6. For the acumen of the same people in understanding the Europeans, see Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984, p. 8.

She was unwilling, and so treated me with her nails that I wished I had never begun. But—to cut a long story short—I then took a piece of rope and whipped her soundly, and she let forth such incredible screams that you would not have believed your ears. Eventually we came to such terms, I assure you, that you would have thought she had been brought up in a school for whores.<sup>13</sup>

Reading trauma is a complicated process, but here the sailor spells out patriarchal physical and linguistic patterns of violence and power, punctuated with shame for sexual complicity.

Certainly, as time went on the linkage of women as a commodity in the colonial marketplace became more established. Columbus himself reports:

The cost of a woman is 100 *castellanos*, the same as that of a farm. The trade is very common and there are now many merchants who go about looking for girls; some of nine or ten are now on sale, but whatever their age they command a good price.<sup>14</sup>

The threats of Taíno people and to the Spanish subjugation of the Taíno were the same: the cannibal Caribs. Historian Peter Mancall points out that, “European’s belief in monsters crossed the Atlantic.”<sup>15</sup> *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a famous manuscript recounting monstrous beings such as these is known to form part of the Admiral’s library.<sup>16</sup> After that first voyage, and as they probed ever deeper into the islands they were told about the cannibals and gold which resided on some other island—an island of cannibals. Thus, the Taíno attempted to push off the Europeans. Coincidentally, when the explorers found the eaters of men—the Caribs—the Spanish observed they were “more civilized than those elsewhere.”<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that the Spanish identified more parity with the “monstrous” Caribs than with the “good”

---

<sup>13</sup> Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem.*, p. 271.

<sup>15</sup> Mancall, Peter C. *Nature and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic*. Philadelphia: (PENN) University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, p. 135.

*Tayno*.<sup>18</sup> Doctor Diego Alvarez Chanca, appointed by the Spanish king and queen to accompany Colón on the Second Voyage as well states, “When they (the Indigenous) understood that we hated these people on account of their cannibalism, they were highly delighted; and after that, if any Carib man or woman was brought in, they quietly told us that they were Caribs.”

Importantly, one must note the bilateral terms with which the Spanish separated the first Indigenous peoples with whom they made contact. Therefore, the resultant logic is that linguistically the two peoples were indeed sorted into good and evil: Taíno and Carib. It is no accident the region is now known as the Caribbean, the etymological derivation of a region populated, and depopulated, by cannibals. What better reason to substantiate the continued exploration and subjugation through violent warfare than as a propaganda campaign against monstrous, cannibalistic, idolaters?

Nicolás de Ovando (1460-1511) was governor of Hispaniola from 1502-1509,<sup>19</sup> author of the *repartimiento* (later called *encomienda*) system. Utilizing the same proven avenues of colonial power and dominance, he did attempt to innovate in some small way during his early tenure, bringing “Africans to act as auxiliary conquerors.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the utilization of enslaved warriors assisting the subjugation of the Indigenous, freeing him up to quell rebellions of the fractious colonial Spaniards. Contemporary historians disagree on the nature of Ovando’s governorship, one casting the blame for sexualized dominion over the Indigenous as perpetrated by the “unruly settlers,” who had forced “the Tainos to mine gold, feed them, and satisfy their

---

<sup>18</sup> Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Historiography reflects different periods for his reign of sexualized terror on the island, but notes in particular the years 1501-1503 as the apex of the promotion of rape as a tool of conquest and subjugation. Restall, Matthew, and Kris E. Lane. *Latin America in Colonial Times*. Second edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 59. Also, Powers, Karen Vieira. “Conquering Discourses of “Sexual Conquest”: Of Women, Language, and Mestizaje.” *Colonial Latin American Review* 11, no. 1 (2002): 7-32.

<sup>20</sup> Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Updated edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 56.

sexual needs.”<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Laura Catelli points to the central role of the sexual subordination of women during the Spanish incursions and settlements of Hispaniola. Her argument is centered on the Spanish preoccupation with the creation of a mixed, cosmic race, through *mestizaje*. Previously, this fascination with *mestizo* creation as part of the calculus of empire was hyper focused upon creolization in the wake of the Conquest of Mexico, but the physical excavations of colonial sites tied to the Ovando settlements in addition to literary excavation of Taíno myth both signal to the true genesis of the Spanish colonial preoccupation with miscegenation practices.<sup>22</sup> As an established institution of female subordination in the European patriarchal society, the commodification and degradation of women to transactional sex workers, or a confining of their bodies to maternal and domestic roles, exposes the preoccupation of sexual practices as they served to continue “patrifocal” Catholic family models.

Upon Columbus’ return to La Navidad, the settlement of the First Voyage (1492) the local cacique Caonabo was blamed for the Spanish deaths, in addition to continuous duplicity in communication with the Europeans.<sup>23</sup> One woman, a *cacica* and his wife, Anacaona, is the only female ruler mentioned in these early sources, Las Casas himself identified her as “Queen.”<sup>24</sup> But for all the power she exercised in relation to her own subjects as well as the Europeans, she was hanged in 1503 during Ovando’s fight against the caciques of Xaraguá.<sup>25</sup> Scholarly evaluations of *cacicas*—female indigenous rulers as linguistically fashioned by the Spanish—is gradually taking shape. Though they have been hamstrung for centuries due to the unavailability of

---

<sup>21</sup> Restall, Matthew, and Kris E. Lane. *Latin America in Colonial Times*. Second edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Catelli, Laura. “‘Y de Esta Manera Quedaron Todos Los Hombres Sin Mujeres’: El Mestizaje Como Estrategia de Colonización En La Española (1501-1503).” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 37, no. 74 (2011): p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> Ochoa, Margarita R. and Sara V. Guengerich. *Cacicas: The Indigenous Women Leaders of Spanish America, 1492-1825*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Casas, Bartolomé de las, Nigel Griffin, and Anthony Pagden. *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. London, England; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ochoa and Guengerich, *Cacicas*, p. 3.



sources, the excavation of colonial sites and evaluation of anthropological data has shed light in corners of American conquest that have been in shadows for too long.

At its most reductive, therefore, the key to dominance in the earliest colonial era was linked to the legitimization of sexual practices for purposes of breeding a new population that could be more easily incorporated into the nexus of empire. As part of the Catholic religion's universal dominion over its "souls", even within sacramental marital relations, coitus was sanctioned mainly for purposes of procreation alone. Considering the comingling of Spanish Imperial endorsement from the Pope for the Catholic/catholic religious sponsorship of "discovery" and "exploration" in the New World, in light of the attendant themes of the European/Catholic past of exploitative religious crusading, it is clear that the construction of this colonial patriarchy was sanctioned by religion. Colony and religion promoted state, and state utilized women as productive objects through breeding, ergo sustaining the patriarchy. The Conquest is a circle: a cycle of violence propagated against women, and continued only through women's participation – a symbolic cannibalization of the physical and metaphysical. and it neither began nor ended with the "conquest" of the Spanish in Mesoamerica.

Scholarship shows that this symbolic circle of dominance neither began nor ended with the Spanish Conquest in America. The patriarchy in this same socio-religious context was not unique to Europeans. In her 1982 article regarding the Yucatec Maya, Inga Clendinnen leads the vanguard in learning more about the "patterns of existence and experience of women" in the Mayan culture by tracing the "impact of conquest."<sup>26</sup> She evaluated the extant sources, in this instance written and dictated by males of both cultures, and identifies bilateral patriarchal societies. Just over a decade later, Matthew Restall deepened Clendinnen's work in the wake of

---

<sup>26</sup> Clendinnen, Inga. "Yucatec Maya Women and the Spanish Conquest: Role and Ritual in Historical Reconstruction." *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 3 (1982): p. 427.

Janet Scott's groundbreaking AHR article, "Gender: A Useful Tool for Historical Analysis."<sup>27</sup> This revealed a certain amount of agency within the sources, lending to a greater revision of the same source materials, but with a prismatic lens which cast interpretations of women's' fates in new light. Although he echoes Clendinnen in many ways, under the evaluation of more sources and with further case studies, Restall is able to highlighting the indigenous complaints about the subjugation of women in their locality, in addition the revealing dimension of the demonization of women from without. Thus, Restall shows how the Conquest impacted Maya community, the supporting colonial church structure underscoring a transactional nature of sex in the pursuit of expiation of sins as the Catholic Church subsumed the religious aspects of Indigenous religion which Indigenous men attempted to challenge. He states, "Maya women resisted the full implications of that racism, willingly and successfully engaging colonial society where generations earlier the unwilling woman had been assigned a cruel death."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, in development of analysis of where historical sources verge on Mayan women's lives, he ascribes to them a level of agency in the pursuit of continuing to live through conformity for survival's sake.

Colonial priests harnessed the private, confessional aspects of the Catholic faith and utilized that power against women in order to extort sexual congress with them, all the while keeping illicit concubines of their own. Colonial settlers, commanding their microcosm of *encomienda* as developed in the earlier colonial period from the older system of *repartimiento*, also suborned women into sexual submission. Restall reports the tacit understanding between the aspects of the community—the European and the Indigenous males and females—and associates

---

<sup>27</sup> Scott, Joan W. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75. Also, Restall, Matthew. "He Wished It in Vain': Subordination and Resistance among Maya Women in Post-Conquest Yucatan." *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 4 (1995): p. 578.

<sup>28</sup> Restall, "He Wished It in Vain," p. 590.

an understanding between the three. Without the participation of those female in the extortionate sexual gratification of the Spaniards, they would not have survived, but would have been unceremoniously dispatched. He relates the fate of one indigenous woman who fell captive to colonial power in Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1566), "She had promised her husband [...] not to have relations with any other man but him, [...] and because of this they had her thrown to the dogs."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Restall's linkage of Indigenous women as complying with Spaniards' sexual demands as the basis for their survival is established, and he states, "that Spanish demonstrations of dominance often took sexual forms is not surprising." In that light, neither is the complicity of Indigenous women in the extortion of sex, especially considering their choice between survival or evisceration. In later historiographical conversation with Restall's article, Zeb Tortorici analyzes some "forty cases of Catholic priests" who were tried for solicitation of sex in the confessional. Incongruously, though this practice was defined as heretical by the existing church structures, "the corpus of documents [he examines] here shows that many priests successfully evaded that charge."<sup>30</sup> He goes further to call for additional scholarship to reveal a need for continued investigation, not only in research to illuminate abuse directed at women and girls, but also the sexual sodomy of boys and young men. Though these events took place during what may be considered a more brutal, colonial era, the abuses of the church have been shown to be ongoing into ours, arguing for the enduring and continuous aspect of colonization through dominant structures of power.<sup>31</sup>

In the same vein as the usurpation of lines of misogynist power in the Mayan culture, Jennifer Dornan signals that a "connection between social complexity and gender inequality may

---

<sup>29</sup> Restall, "He Wished It in Vain," p. 577.

<sup>30</sup> Tortorici, Zeb. *Sins Against Nature: Sex & Archives in Colonial New Spain*. Duke University Press, 2018, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, and Restall, "He Wished It in Vain," p. 583.

be tied to the shift from a generally local, kin-based social organization to a more hierarchical, non-kin-based system of social stratification, usually accompanying the development of centralized authority.”<sup>32</sup> This is an argument for institutionalized authoritative disruption as a methodology of control and spur for the organization of people into subordinate classes, even outside of the European context. She points to archaeological research demonstrating Mayan social stratification from as early as the first century AD.<sup>33</sup> Their society spread across much of Mesoamerica, the cultural and political centers echoing a familiarity with western civilization. Moreover, she tracks women losing power not only “in relation to men,” but also in relation to class.<sup>34</sup> This loss of social status can be evidenced from a disparity of material wealth in burial goods, and overall physical health of the exhumed bodies. Materially and physically, gender-driven disparities are seen to be connected with dynastic social stratification in Indigenous society. But this framework insinuated itself into conceptual and metaphysical aspects of Mayan society as well, and Dornan suggests the genesis for the seizure of power by man over woman is linked to a possessiveness of the procreative process, inseparable from notions of femaleness. The evidence for this idea stems from ritual Indigenous sacerdotal subsuming of menstrual imagery through penile slashing, bloodletting, and piercing, in addition to a lunar 260-day calendar, coincidentally the length of gestation in pregnancy.<sup>35</sup> Thus the Mayan institutionalized religious frameworks exerted control over women for a similar period to Christianity, allowing avenues for an easier spiritual subsuming of power by the Europeans during conquest.

---

<sup>32</sup> Dornan, Jennifer. “Blood from the Moon: Gender Ideology and the Rise of Ancient Maya Social Complexity.” *Gender & History* 16, no. 2 (2004): p. 461.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem.*, p. 462.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>35</sup> Dornan, Jennifer. “Blood from the Moon: Gender Ideology and the Rise of Ancient Maya Social Complexity.” *Gender & History* 16, no. 2 (2004): pp. 466-67.

Above, I have evaluated some of the context into which Malintzin was born and raised, enslaved and exploited. Avenues of power and patriarchy were extant in the peripheral cultures of her society long before the arrival of the Europeans, and these highways were sufficiently fertile for Spanish dominance to take root in the wake of “the war to end all wars.” The *Conquistadors*’ approach in conquering and dominating the Mexica was no different, and their duplicity was no less gendered than the label of conquest. Enslaved to the Yucatec Maya, Malintzin may have been treated as suspect by the precolonial Indigenous as the later mistresses of colonial priests were.<sup>36</sup> At the time of her transfer as tribute to Cortes, she was not a coddled female in a halcyon society of social or sexual parity between genders. Indeed, having been sold into slavery initially by her own natal family, she must have had very few moments of security in her life thus far. It is possible when baptized into Christianity in the Spanish camp as Marina, she truly did feel born again into an empowerment she had never before imagined. Perhaps freed from the yoke of a patriarchal indigeneity and ushered into a religion that ostensibly worshipped a divine female and her son, she transcended the boundaries of the oppressive, enslaving society. It is equally as possible she found herself in a unique set of circumstances whereby harnessing her many years of being a sexualized, enslaved object, she could then leverage her liminality for a more stable position in relation to a smaller power, the Spanish. Perhaps she really had nothing to lose in raising her voice and to translate languages in exchange for survival. What is clear is that Malintzin was particularly suited to the role she would come to fulfill, as the conduit between two empires, and the inheritor of the legacy of disparities and systemic cruelties towards women in both.

---

<sup>36</sup> Restall, “He Wished It in Vain,” p. 584-85.

*La Otra: The Girl with No Name*

La Chingada

A veces necesito otra tradición,  
Otra serie de palabras, de ideas  
Otra manera de expresar que  
Otra soy.

Soy otra.  
La que ahora llora cuando antes se reía  
La que ahora se queja cuando antes celebraba  
La que ahora está chingada cuando antes defendía a las chingadas.

Estoy chingada  
Pero no soy la chingada.  
Estar es una cosa  
Y ser es otra.

Yo, simplemente, soy otra.

-Ellen Maycock<sup>37</sup>

The poem above sheds light on the complexity that has become *Malintzin* in our era. She is *la otra*, the quintessential “other,” fully marginalized in all veins of her life and memory. Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* adapted his moralizing treatise of Othering to anglophone scholarship regarding the Spanish Conquest in 1984, only two years after Inga Clendinnen’s generative quote about camp followers.<sup>38</sup> When identifying the “other,” it is easiest to think in binary terms, woman / man, black / white, or good / evil, like the Taíno / Carib divide. First, her identity as a woman othered her in a patriarchal Indigenous society. Second, her status as

---

<sup>37</sup> Mayock, Ellen. “La Chingada.” *Letras Femeninas* 38, no. 1 (2012): 177–177.

<sup>38</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

enslaved othered her in a society where dominant and subordinate were stratified in a class hierarchy. Third, her Indigenous race othered her to the Spanish, while her role as a linguistic “camp follower” othered her to the Indigenous. In perpetuity, her complicity with conquest and conqueror has othered her to the legacy of her own people, who have only joined together as a united *mestizaje* since the Spanish physically and metaphysically raped the Indigenous people of Mexico, dissolving the borders between Nahuatl, Mexica, Tlaxcala, and Maya, and more. This unity is the true legacy of the Spanish Conquest to the native Mesoamericans. Whereas before the Conquest they were in cyclical dynastic wars, taking and exchanging tribute and enslaving one another, and unilaterally subjugating women (especially non-elite women with no dynastic bloodline to impart), they were now reminiscent of an “Aztec” past, a mythical legacy which actually never existed.<sup>39</sup> Still, now unified, the Mexicans needed their other, someone to blame – a scapegoat for the loss of power and culture and the resultant shame on the patriarchal society. What better icon upon which to hang the unified shame of a civilization than Malintzin, the “other” woman whose “betrayal” led to their demise? To the Spanish she was first Marina, then as the importance of her role developed she carried the honorific *doña* Marina. To her Indigenous contemporaries, with respect, she was named Malintzin, itself a cross-interpretation of the respectful Spanish moniker. The Spanish repatriation of that name as uttered by the Indigenous became Malinche. Since then, malinchista has come to be associated with a preoccupation for “other” cultures, or for degrading thoughts regarding Mexico. In the twentieth century, Octavio Paz coined the term *la chingada*, the “fucked” or the duped one. This term was done wholly in relation to Malintzin’s intrinsic

---

<sup>39</sup> Townsend, *Fifth Sun*, p. xi.

marginalization.<sup>40</sup> La Chingada, a serious epithet, marks the zenith of derogatory Mexican language. All these terms have come to be pinned upon Malintzin, but none of them are her true name.

The girl is nameless.<sup>41</sup> After birth, her mother most likely buried her umbilical cord near their hearth with a prayer, the better that she may be blessed with the ability to keep a clean home.<sup>42</sup> Probably, her mother kept a meticulously clean floor, the broom being a symbol of domesticity, the preoccupation with keeping clean, an aversion to *tlazolli*, sinuous in their culture with excess, with too many things, with dirt, waste, overt sexuality, or as Pete Sigal translates: Trash.<sup>43</sup>

Sigal identifies *Tlazolteotl*, the precolonial goddess of Trash, as “one of the most prominent goddesses in the Nahua codices.”<sup>44</sup> Naked, she is associated with sexual excess, but is also an icon of childbirth, and fertility. She is the grandmother goddess, a sweeping paragon of domestic cleanliness who spins cotton and weaves at the loom. Domesticity and sexual excess are joined in Indigenous holy union, speaking volumes to the unity of domesticity and systemic misogyny. Louise Burkhardt identifies the evolution of this religious figure and attendant customs during the colonial era. As the expiation of sins took place in the Catholic confessional, women especially would approach their confession covered in filth, and after ritually consuming the Catholic Host,

---

<sup>40</sup> Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, pp. 85-87.

<sup>41</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem.*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Sigal, Pete. *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*. Duke University Press, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Idem.*, p. 34.



clean themselves off. This spiritually reaches back to the older custom of communion with the divine through practical domestic action.<sup>45</sup>

There are two competing concepts at play in analysis of Malintzin. As complicit with the Conquistadors she was a traitor to no one in her own time, but as the breakages between Indigenous peoples dissolved into her children, the *mestizaje*, so she assumed a mantle of Malinchista. However, she is at the center of multiple competing symbolic contexts as well. Like the Virgin Mary, mother to Jesus, she is the within a paradigm of three, La Chingada (the duped/fucked one), La Llorona (the failed mother), and La Virgen de Guadeloupe (the idealized Divine Mother). So too was the religion into which she converted based upon a paradigm of three, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Lastly, in the real world, she was in a physical paradigm of three in her consummation of becoming the literal, metaphorical, and physical Mother of Mexico. This time, it was the less-holy trinity of three Martíns, Martín the father of Hernando, the embodiment of a new and intersecting European patriarchy, Martín the European son of Hernando, and Martín her son, a man who was one of the first of the cosmic race, and who suffered, like all his brethren, for his original sin of indigeneity.<sup>46</sup>

Consequentially, the act of using Malintzin as a subject of study inherently objectifies her, especially since she is only seen to be speaking for others, and never for herself. This may cause a crisis of conscience which must be negotiated carefully. Thus revisited, Clendinnen's opening words can be seen as a warning, a linguistic maneuver

---

<sup>45</sup> Burkhart, Louise M. *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989, esp. p. 109.

<sup>46</sup> I take some small semblance of poetic license here, but also since his fully Spanish half-brother was not tortured, and the other summarily executed, it seemed of particular note that he was tortured as he was. Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, pp. 208-210.

deployed at the start of a new scholarly era, born from the need to synthesize class, race, and gender into historical research. Historians must break away from the campaign of empire, and treat subjects and people with respect, giving them empowerment they lacked under the apathy of Eurocentrism, and thereby inheriting their own agency as scholars interpreting people and actions in the past through the lens of the present. Clendinnen's words are a cautionary note. As is often repeated, the past is a foreign country. But if the past must be interrogated through the lens of contextual fluency, surely must also the etymology of the culture which nurtured that past be cross-examined. Though Malintzin never wrote a word, she yet left an indelible impression upon the history of American civilization and the legacy of two empires. If historians evaluate through sources, the amount of ink that has been spilled in her wake could refill Lake Tenochtitlán. Malintzin may not have been a historian, but surely, in every other conceivable way, she made history.

### Bibliography

- Asale, Rae. "Conquista: Diccionario De La Lengua Española." "Diccionario de la lengua Española" – Edición del Tricentenario. Accessed May 8, 2022. <https://dle.rae.es/conquista>.
- Burkhart, Louise M. *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989.
- Casas, Bartolomé de las, Nigel Griffin, and Anthony Pagden. *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. London, England; New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Catelli, Laura. "'Y de Esta Manera Quedaron Todos Los Hombres Sin Mujeres': El Mestizaje Como Estrategia de Colonización En La Española (1501-1503)." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 37, no. 74 (2011): 217–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41940845>.
- Clendinnen, Inga. "'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico." *Representations*, no. 33 (1991): 65–100. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928758>.
- Clendinnen, Inga. "Yucatec Maya Women and the Spanish Conquest: Role and Ritual in Historical Reconstruction." *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 3 (1982): 427–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3787156>.
- Columbus, Christopher., and J. M. Cohen. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969.
- Dornan, Jennifer. "Blood from the Moon: Gender Ideology and the Rise of Ancient Maya Social Complexity." *Gender & History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 459-475.
- Mancall, Peter C. *Nature and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic*. Philadelphia: (PENN) University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.
- Mayock, Ellen. "La Chingada." *Letras Femeninas* 38, no. 1 (2012): 177–177. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23345568>.
- Ochoa, Margarita R., and Sara V. Guengerich. *Cacicas: The Indigenous Women Leaders of Spanish America, 1492-1825*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021.
- Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*. New York: Grove Press, 1962.
- Powers, Karen Vieira. "Conquering Discourses of 'Sexual Conquest': Of Women, Language, and Mestizaje." *Colonial Latin American Review* 11, no. 1 (2002): 7-32.

- Restall, Matthew. “‘He Wished It in Vain’: Subordination and Resistance among Maya Women in Post-Conquest Yucatan.” *Ethnohistory* 42, no. 4 (1995): 577–94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/483144>.
- Restall, Matthew, and Kris E. Lane. *Latin America in Colonial Times*. Second edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Updated edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Scott, Joan W. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376>.
- Sigal, Pete. *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Stevens-Arroyo, Anthony M. “The Inter-Atlantic Paradigm: The Failure of Spanish Medieval Colonization of the Canary and Caribbean Islands.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 3 (1993): 515–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179144>.
- Tortorici, Zeb. *Sins Against Nature: Sex & Archives in Colonial New Spain*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Townsend, Camilla. *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006.
- Townsend, Camilla. *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.