

Introduction

What is the language of conquest? What language do people speak when they battle for land and autonomy, or meet to negotiate? During the conquest of Mexico, Spanish and Nahuatl—the mother tongues of the conquistadors and the Mexica—grew newly powerful. Maya, Otomí and hundreds of other languages were spoken in Mesoamerica in the early 16th century. Yet Hernán Cortés understood only Spanish. Whenever he met with indigenous allies or confronted enemies, whenever he solicited food for his men or sought directions across mountainous terrain, he relied upon perilous and delicate acts of translation. In the early days, Spanish was translated to Maya and then to Nahuatl, later it would be Nahuatl to Spanish or the reverse. From 1519-1526, Cortés trusted in the translations and counsel of a woman, and she traveled across Mexico by his side. Her name was doña Marina in Spanish, Malintzin in Nahuatl. Today she is often Malinche.

Doña Marina's Biography

In 1519, shortly after Cortés arrived on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, this young woman was one of 20 slaves offered the Spanish conquistadors by a Maya lord. Baptized Marina, she distinguished herself in extraordinary ways, becoming instrumental to the Spaniards' logistical ambitions and political endeavors. She served as translator, negotiator and cultural mediator. She was also Cortés' concubine and gave birth to their son, Martín. In 1524 she was married to the conquistador Juan de Jaramillo, and again became a mother—this time of a daughter, María.

The daily patterns of doña Marina's life cannot be well documented. She may have received formal education as a child, but she also suffered abandonment and slavery. And for all the respect the title "doña" and the reverential suffix "-tzin" (in Malintzin) imply, she endured difficult days. She survived the massacre of indigenous people at Cholula, the conquest of Tenochtitlan, a grueling march with Cortés and his men to Honduras and back. She witnessed the deaths of hundreds and bore the children of two Spanish men. Whatever her ability to negotiate cultural differences, she died a young woman—in, or before 1527—and probably not more than 25 years old.

16th-century Sources—Doña Marina and Malintzin

As with so many women from the past, none of doña Marina's actual words have survived, although descriptions written by conquistadors who knew and relied upon her stress her linguistic abilities. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who marched with Cortés, claims she was beautiful and intelligent, she could speak Nahuatl and Maya. Without her, he says, the Spaniards could not have understood the language of Mexico. Díaz's account is the most generous of any conquistador, but it was written decades after the conquest—his eyewitness history filtered through memory. In contrast, the conquistador who knew this woman best, Hernán Cortés, mentions doña Marina just twice in his letters to the King of Spain. Her appearance in the Second Letter has become the most famous. Here he describes her not by name but as "*la lengua...que es una India desta tierra*" (the tongue, the translator...who is an Indian woman of this land).

Indigenous sources from the 16th century depict Malintzin through her deeds. The *Florentine Codex*, one of the most extensive Nahuatl descriptions of the conquest, hints at Malintzin's bravery—as when she speaks from a palace rooftop, ordering food brought to the Spaniards, or at other times gold. In visual images, Malintzin appears as a well-dressed young woman, often standing between men who communicate and negotiate via her poly-lingual skills. Scenes from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, now just fragments from a larger set of images, draw upon pre-conquest painting techniques and conventions. Like Malintzin herself, the *Lienzo* straddles a world of indigenous, pre-conquest practice and European intervention. Indigenous paintings of Malintzin from the 16th century do not bear their maker's signature, and many post-date her death. Whether she would have approved of any of these images, we cannot say. Because so few women surface in indigenous representations of the conquest, her repeated appearance confirms that Nahuas, and not only Spaniards, recognized her importance.

Recent Sources—Malinche, Doña Marina, Malintzin

Since the 16th century, doña Marina's reputation has remained neither static nor settled. Some have condemned her as traitor and collaborator because she aided the Spaniards, quickening the demise of indigenous Mexico and the rise of foreign rule. For others, she was the consummate strategist. Passed to Cortés as a slave and forced to travel at his side, what were her options for survival if she did not translate, if she would not bear his child? And because she bore Cortés a son, doña Marina has been deemed the mother of the first Mexican mestizo. Their child could not have been the first, but her union with Cortés—literally and metaphorically—inextricably binds her to the history of *mestizaje*.

Many Mexican texts and images speak to these conflicted understandings. Two well-known works from the mid-20th century include Antonio Ruiz's painting, *El sueño de la Malinche* (The Dream of Malinche") and Octavio Paz's essay, "The Sons of Malinche," in which he castigates doña Marina as the violated mother of the Mexican nation.

More recently, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicana writers, artists, and activists began rethinking the story of Malinche. In 16th-century sources they found neither victim nor traitor but the strength of a survivor. Malinche did not choose her destiny, but neither did she crumble in the face of adversity. Poems by Adaljiza Sosa-Ridell and Carmen Tafolla explore Malinche's fate and her abilities to negotiate difficult and competing cultural demands. Their narratives also grapple with the violence of colonization—in history, in Mexico and in the United States. The histories they tell are histories of indigenous and Chicana women, but also of shifting political borders.

The violence of Spanish conquest and the quandaries it unleashed persist in the present. We are reminded of this when comparing two contemporary works of art: "La Malinche," by Santa Barraza and Jimmie Durham's "Malinche." The former, which depicts the beautiful, life-giving Malintzin, is a tiny image crafted on metal, it evokes *ex-voto* and other devotional images from Mexico. While it does not deny the horrors of Christian conquest, it paints a world where beauty and violence co-exist. In contrast, Jimmie Durham's sculpture stresses the darker, underside of Malinche's history. There is nothing

redemptive in Durham's vision—Malinche may wear jewelry and feathers in her hair, but no beauty surfaces, no hope arises.

Is either of these images less “true” than the doña Marina of Díaz del Castillo's nostalgic recollections or the Malintzin described by Nahua scribes in the *Florentine Codex*? This is one question posed by this collection of sources. A second question they prompt: does the history of an individual's life have an end? In suggesting how the life of one woman took form and then was re-shaped across the 20th century, in charting the afterlife of Malinche, these sources imply that history is most vibrant when it does not seek to understand individuals at just one moment in the past. To understand the language of conquest, then, it might be necessary to explore how the living remember the deceased, and how ancient accounts transfix the present.