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METAMORPHOSES OF LA MALINCHE AND MEXICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

ANN MCBRIDE-LIMAYE

Understanding Mexican cultural identity rests upon recognition of the fact of mestizaje, the fusion of European and indigenous races which grew out of the sixteenth-century Spanish Conquest of the New World. And, to understand the Conquest one must come to terms with the complex figure of the Indian woman La Malinche in light of her roles as translator, cultural interpreter, catechist to the native peoples and collaborator with the principal figure in the Conquest of Mexico, Hernán Cortés: “La conquista de México no es inteligible sin la presencia de La Malinche.” [The Conquest of Mexico is not intelligible without the presence of La Malinche] (Sullivan-O’Beare, 86). Although all would admit that she served as the vital link between two disparate civilizations, little is verifiable and much is controversial about the life of this exceptional Indian woman. She is a slight figure in terms of historical accounts, yet she is a monumental presence in terms of the Mexican heritage.

Historically, her pre-Conquest name “Mallinali” is suppressed and she comes down to us marked with two post-Conquest appellations, La Malinche/Doña Marina, reflecting the essential duality of her nature. As Doña Marina she is the first Christianized woman of Mexico, and as La Malinche she is the progenitrix of the mestizo race in both a real and symbolic sense: she was the mother of the first noble mestizo, Martín, a son she had by Cortés in 1523 or 1524.1 Beloved by both sides in the conflict La Malinche/Doña Marina has been described as having many faces but only one mask, one of betrayal of the indigenous people who considered her a goddess, while in service to the Spanish who judged her indispensable to their cause. Perhaps the character of La Malinche/Doña Marina can be understood best as the locus for a multiplicity of contradictions, ambiguities and irreconcilable differences which constitute that Conquest—a violent confronta-
tion between Spanish and indigenous culture. In Jon Manchip White's view this is a confrontation between one of the last great civilizations and the first great modern one, between Aztec and Spanish (p. 99). There is of course an impressive historical irony in the fact that at the same time that Spain was purifying itself by driving out the Moors and the Jews in the Old World, she was engendering a new mixed-blood race in the New World, and the old were being driven out quite literally at the expense of the new terms of gold and silver production.

Through an analysis of the proliferation of names, roles and images attributed to La Malinche since the Conquest of Mexico, this study examines the persistence of the historical figure through her metamorphoses in relation to Mexican cultural identity. The paper presents an archeological analysis, i.e., a description of the representations, the discursive formations and images, which make up the character of this woman. (See Figure 1.) In his preface to Carlos Fuentes's book of short stories, Cuerpos y ofrendas [Bodies and Offerings], Octavio Paz states: "El mundo no se presenta como realidad que hay que nombrar, sino palabra que debemos decifrar" (p. 9). [The world does not present itself as reality to be named, but as a word to be deciphered.] The name "La Malinche" is the word I attempt to decipher in this analysis. Because she is at once a figure of immense ambivalence, she is a privileged site for investigating Mexican cultural identity through time: "Y ella permanece hermética, jeroglíficamente indescifrable" (Menéndez, 37) [and she remains hermetically, hieroglyphically indecipherable]. An emblem of the Conquest, she is at once present at the simultaneous destruction of the indigenous world and the creation of the mestizo one. Hers is the heritage of the Conquest and the black and white legends of its aftermath, since it is in the problem of the origins of mestizaje that we find the question of whether the new race was born of an act of seduction or violation.

Texts examined include codices and chronicles of the Conquest and post-Conquest period including: El lienzo de Tlaxcala [The Tlaxcalan pictorial account of the Conquest], Diego Muñoz Camargo's Historia de Tlaxcala [History of Tlaxcala], Vision de los vencidos [Broken Spears], Ramirez Codex, Florentine Codex, Hernán Cortés's letters, Cartas de relación, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's chronicle, La verdadera historia de la conquista de Nueva España [The
True History of the Conquest of New Spain]; as well as later historical accounts by William Prescott, Miguel Angel Menéndez, Mariano García Somonte, Octavio Paz and Tzvetan Todorov; and fictional accounts by Irineo Paz, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Rosario Castellanos and Sergio Magaña, among others.

A series of names attributed to her provides an index of her role and status in the early stages of the Conquest: Ce Malinalli [Princess of Suffering, bringer of strife, grass of penance, also name of the twelfth of twenty days in Aztec month], Malintzin [respectful diminutive always used by the Indians], Malinalli Tenépal [gifted, animated speaker], Doña Marina [Lady Marina], Marina la Lengua [Marina the translator, literally “the tongue”], Marina la de Cortés [Cortés’s Marina], Doña Marina de Jaramillo [Lady Marino Jaramillo], Malintzin/Malinchí/Malinche. The epithet “Malinche” is, curiously, one she shared with Cortés himself which resolved their duality and marked their unity of purpose in the eyes of the native peoples: in the Indians’ eyes La Malinche and Cortés were an inseparable pair. The name “Malinche” can mean “Malinche’s captain”, i.e., Cortés; and marks their political relationship. (See Figure 2.) Bernal Díaz del Castillo reports that the likes of the Aztec emperors Moctezuma and Cuauhtémoc reportedly called Cortés “Señor Malinche” (II, chap. CLXV, 297). Although it is her union with Cortés which is most significant, she exists forever in opposition to him. And, contrary to the conventional fictional and even many an historical account, the Conquest was not a love story.

Although she is a heroine to both the Indians and the Spaniards in the Conquest period, Cortés ends up a hero neither to Spain nor to Mexico during that time. In word and image her persona has undergone a series of transformations from the period of the Conquest through the crises of Mexican history: the colonial period (1521-1810), the wars of emancipation (beginning in 1810) followed by the reform period, the 1910 revolution and its aftermath.

Why is it that even though historians recognize La Malinche’s crucial role in the Conquest, there has been so slight an interest in her as a historical subject? One way to account for this fact is to realize that Cortés’s adulatory biographer, López de Gomara, a man who had little interest in narrating Cortés’s relationship with an Indian woman, was a principal source for later historians. In what he calls his biography of her, M. García Somonte says that
### Figure 1. Historical Summary of Names and Roles of La Malinche.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ROLE</th>
<th>NAME (SOURCE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONQUEST</td>
<td>cacica/princess to slave</td>
<td>Malin, Malina, Malinal, Ce Malinalli,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and its</td>
<td></td>
<td>Malinulli, Malitzit, Malintzin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aftermath</td>
<td></td>
<td>Malinalli Tenépal (Indigenous Accounts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1519-21 and after)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Caoniana (Cuban legend)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christianized Indian woman</td>
<td>Doña Marina (Díaz del Castillo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interpreter to Cortés</td>
<td>María (Florentine + Ramírez Codices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife of Aguilar</td>
<td>translator, Indian woman, Marina (Cortés)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concubine of Puertocarro</td>
<td>Malintzin (Muñoz Camargo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concubine of Cortés</td>
<td>Doña Marina (Díaz del Castillo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peacemaker and catechist</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborator with Cortés</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Translator to Moctezuma</td>
<td>La Malinche (Spanish + indigenous accounts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife of Moctezuma</td>
<td>Florentine + Aubin Codices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of Martín</td>
<td>Malinche (post-Conquest play)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife of Juan de Jaramillo</td>
<td>(Díaz del Castillo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of María</td>
<td>(Muñoz Camargo, Torquemada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goddess</td>
<td>Malinalxochitl, Cihuateteo or La Llorona, Tonantzin, Coatlicue (popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tradition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLONIAL (16th-early</td>
<td>Europeanized Woman</td>
<td>Cuatlancingo + Aperreamiento Codices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th c.)</td>
<td>Blonde translator</td>
<td>Marina (painting made for Duran)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quechul, Noble Savage</td>
<td>Tabascan Coat of Arms (1598)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passionate woman</td>
<td>Marina (Suárez de Peralta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENCE AND REFORM</td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19th c.) Traitress Romantic</td>
<td>(20th c.) Translator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroine</td>
<td>Woman soldier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doña Marina (Ireno Paz)</td>
<td>Spaniard by adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife of Cortés</td>
<td>Wife of Cortés</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Eve</td>
<td>Mother of “cosmic race”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progenitrix of mestizos</td>
<td>Violated mother of Mexicans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragic figure</td>
<td>Tragic figure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medea (Magaña)</td>
<td>Medea (Magaña)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nymphomaniac</td>
<td>Nymphomaniac</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative spirit/Quetzalcoatl</td>
<td>Creative spirit/Quetzalcoatl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Messiah</td>
<td>Feminine Messiah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not La Chingada</td>
<td>not La Chingada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman who made blind leap</td>
<td>Woman who made blind leap</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of faith</td>
<td>of faith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

La Malinche (popular tradition)
La Malinche (Leon-Portilla: indigenous accounts)
La Malinche (Rivera)
La Malinche (Sullivan-O’Beare)
La Malintzin (Vasconcelos)
La Malintzin Tenepal (del Castillo)
La Chingada (=Guadalupe-Tonantzin) (O. Paz)
Electra (Castellanos)

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only recently have historians even recorded her name (p. 115). There are few historical facts available and all of those are from the few years she was actively associated with Cortés (1519-1524). Her origins are a matter of speculation and little is certain about her later years. We do know that in 1524 on the ill-fated trip to Honduras Cortés married her off to one of his captains, Juan de Jaramillo, to whom she bore a daughter, María. Following that, she is a figure that moved from life directly into myth without moving through history. In 1542, some years after her death which may have occurred in 1531, her son-in-law Luis de Quesada initiated his Probanzas de los buenos servicios y de fidelidad con que sirvió en la conquista de Nueva España la famosa Doña Marina [Proofs of the good services and fidelity with which the famous Doña Marina served the Conquest of New Spain]. Historical memory was indeed short in the post-Conquest years. Since that time historians have tended to repeat the same partial truths and falsehoods—especially concerning her origins, and these tales have taken on a life of their own.

In the sense that "[m]etamorphosis is not creation 'out of nothing' but rather transformation of whatever materials are at hand," for her the process of metamorphosis had begun early as a means of survival during the time she was traded from one indigenous tribe to another and assumed roles from princess to slave (Daly, 399). The essence of the most popular version of her origins is found in the accounts of Bernal Díaz's chronicle (II, chap. XXXVII, 156) and is transcribed by Prescott as follows:

She was born at Painalla, in the province of Coatzacualco, on the south-eastern borders of the Mexican empire. Her father, a rich and powerful cacique, died when she was very young. Her mother married again, and, having a son, she conceived the infamous idea of securing to this offspring of her second union Marina's rightful inheritance. She accordingly feigned that the latter was dead, but secretly delivered her into the hands of some itinerant traders of Xicallanco. She availed herself, at the same time, of the death of a child of one of her slaves, to substitute the corpse for that of her own daughter, and celebrated the obsequies with mock solemnity. These particulars are related by the honest old soldier, Bernal Díaz, who knew the mother, and witnessed the generous treatment of her afterwards by Marina. By the merchants the Indian maiden was again sold to the cacique of Tabasco, who delivered her, as we have seen, to the Spaniards. (p. 162)
The twentieth-century Mexican historian, Miguel Angel Menéndez disagrees with Bernal Diaz's oft-cited account for several reasons: it does not hold true to the laws of slave holding at the time, the young woman is referred to as a cacica [princess] which is a Caribbean term, and this theme probably comes from an Egyptian story. We know that Cortés set sail from Cuba in February of 1519 and that he met up with La Malinche in March. Beyond that:

Nada de ella se sabe con certeza, en lo precortesiano. Sólo puede afirmarse que nació esclava en el seno de un conjunto de esclavas, frente a Cortés, en márgenes del Grijalva, año de 1519. . . . Ella estaba ahí cuando llegó el extremeño. Ahí fue dada en obsequio, tras la batalla de Centla, en unión de otras diecinueve esclavas. Ni siquiera se conoce su epitafio, ni dónde fue sepultada. Por deducciones, se dice que murió en 1531, en esta ciudad [México] (p. 38).

All that can be said is that she was born a slave in the bosom of a group of slaves, outside Grijalva, [on the Gulf of Mexico] in 1519. . . . She was there when the man from Extremadura arrived. There she was given as a gift, after the battle of Centla, along with nineteen other slaves. Not even her epitaph is known, nor where she was buried. By deduction they say that she died in 1531, in this city [Mexico City].

Thus, by a series of ambiguous and fortuitous circumstances she was among a group of twenty Indian slave girls awarded to Cortés after his victory in Tabasco. She had gone through this process once previously, i.e., she had been a vessel by means of which her native Nahuatl-speaking tribe (perhaps from Xicalango) had made a peace accord with the Tabascans. By means of this cultural conversion she spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan and would be of ultimate service to Cortés in the coming years of Spanish military, political and religious dominance of Mexico. The indigenous view presented in Vision de los vencidos describes the centrality of La Malinche's role:

. . . Malintzin (La Malinche) habia de desempeñar un papel de suma importancia. Esta mujer hablaba la lengua maya y la náhuatl. Gracias a la presencia simultánea de Jerónimo de Aguilar y de la Malinche, Hernán Cortés iba a contar desde un principio con un un sistema perfecto para darse a entender con los aztecas. Él hablaría an español a Jerónimo de Aguilar, este a su vez traduciría lo dicho hablando en maya con la Malinche, y ella por fin se dirigiría directamente en la lengua náhuatl a los enviados y emisarios de Motecuhzoma, desde sus primeros encuentros en las cercanías de la actual Veracruz (Vision de los vencidos, 248).

[. . . Malintzin (La Malinche) was to play a role of the greatest impor-
tance. She spoke Mayan and Náhuatl. Thanks to the simultaneous presence of Jerónimo de Aguilar and La Malinche, Hernán Cortés could count on a perfect system to make himself understood with the Aztecs from the very first. He would speak in Spanish to Jerónimo Aguilar, and Aguilar in turn would translate that to La Malinche in Mayan, and finally, she would address the emissaries and envoys from Moctezuma directly in Náhuatl from their first encounters near the present-day Veracruz.]

Apparently she learned to speak Spanish in a matter of weeks, and according to Torquemada the Indians saw her ability to speak Spanish as a supernatural power (García Somonte, 183).

Since her initial appearance on the historical scene, the figure of La Malinche has undergone continual change in definition. Cortés refers to her baldly as “una india” and “la lengua” [“an Indian”, “the translator”] in his second letter to Charles I of Spain (at the same time Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire), in the Cartas de relación. Seven years later in 1526, disgraced by the failed expedition to Honduras, he finally refers to her by name in the fifth letter: “... Marina, la que yo siempre he traido conmigo porque allí me habían dado con otras veinte mujeres”; “Marina, who always traveled in my company after she had been given me as a present with twenty other women.” Her legal status was that of barrangana, common-law wife to Cortés—after first having been designated by Cortés to serve Alonso Hernández Puertocarrero in that same capacity. Bartolomé de Las Casas draws a rather down to earth portrait of her relationship with Cortés and her part in the Conquest. The Spaniards used the honorific, Doña Marina, and Bernal Díaz cast her as the Lady in his chivalric account of the Conquest and refers to her in androgynous terms, as “varonil” [manly] and “tan excelente mujer” [such an excellent woman] (II, chap. XXXVII, 157). Her indigenous portrait in El lienzo de Tlaxcala is one in which her figure is constantly reiterated in a prominent form performing the crucial task of translation between the Indians and the Spaniards. (See Figures 2 and 3.) Vision de los vencidos, a compilation of indigenous accounts of the Conquest and its aftermath, refers to her as Moctezuma’s, not Cortés’s, translator (p. 114). In an early post-Conquest catechizing drama presented to Indians in the Oaxaca region, she is cast as Moctezuma’s beloved wife. Many indigenous accounts also refer to La Malinche as Aguilar’s wife (D. Muñoz Camargo, 190). Then, during the long sleep of the colonial centuries she is praised by peninsular historians and romanticized by writers of the viceroy-
alty of New Spain including one Juan Suárez de Peralta, who was perhaps nephew-in-law to Cortés. In the early nineteenth-century wars of independence from Spain she becomes the despised traitor and concubine—the opposite figure to The Creole Virgin of Guadalupe. Later in the century she reassumes her role of romantic heroine who likely as not dies for love as she does in Ireneo Paz’s sentimental novel Doña Marina.

By the time of the early twentieth-century indigenista [pro-indigenous people’s] movement, she is revindicated as not at all instrumental in the Conquest, but merely a translator. From the years of the Revolution beginning in 1910 she becomes recognized as a soldada [woman soldier], the mother of the mestizo race, the Mexican Eve, and even the creative spirit of her race, i.e., the spirit of Quetzalcoatl returned to his people, the creator of mexicanidad. José Vasconcelos calls her “La Malintzin,” wife of Cortés, and lauds her as the creator of the “raza cósmica” [the cosmic race, i.e., the mestizos] (p. 81). At the same time she lends her name to the negative epithet malinchismo, a term which indicates an excessive love of the foreign at the expense of the native Mexican. We can also find in her the origins of the attitude of machismo, i.e., both the fear of femininity and of female betrayal (Goldwert, 35). In La Malinche the Aztec pantheon persists in attributes of Tonantzin (goddess of maize), Coatlicue (goddess of motherhood and death), Malinalxochitl (moon goddess, sun’s sister who helped guide Aztecs to Tenochtitlan), Cihuateteo (La Llorona, the weeping woman who laments her people’s fate after the Conquest). In her we see the likely origin of the popular figures of La Muerte [Death] embodying fatalism and sacrifice, La Chingada [The Great Violated Mother], as well as La Mala [The Bad Woman] and La Macha [The Defiant Woman].

It is the essential duality of her role that has generated a multiplicity of meanings through time and these metamorphoses have had a cumulative effect.

In their project of overcoming the “nightmare of history” by rewriting Mexican history in order to give a truer account of mestizo heritage in terms of experience and identity, Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes have created heroic versions of La Malinche in order to reinterpret the historical accounts of the origin of the Mexican people, and to address the attendant anxiety and an-
guish about those origins. For Paz, La Malinche is La Chingada, the embodiment of the violated “open” mother. Mestizo Mexico is equated with Malinche who is made to represent woman in all her vulnerability in his study of Mexican cultural identity, El laberinto de la soledad [The Labyrinth of Solitude]. Fuentes returns to this figure repeatedly in his novels and dramas to create a “characterology of the Mexican” (García Gutiérrez, 174) where the Aztec past lives on in the present day Mexican reality. In the play [All Cats are Gray], Fuentes creates another version of the Conquest wherein La Malinche fosters belief in Cortés’s extraordinary powers and, in effect, “creates” Cortés, and then offers to join with him to build a new nation. Cortés cannot share her vision and must destroy what she would create. In the play she lives on in a twentieth-century avatar as the spirit of the creator god Quetzalcoatl in the figure of a woman who sells gaming chips in a cabaret. She stands at the side of Moctezuma-President of the Mexican Republic and Cortés-General in the United States’ army—it is the compassionate La Malinche who hastens to give succor to a fallen student in the Plaza de Tlateloco in the demonstrations of 1968. Writers such as Rosario Castellanos and Sergio Magaña provide additional versions in poetic and dramatic works where La Malinche is an active, decisive character rooted in historically concrete circumstances, a person who exercises freedom of choice in fateful circumstances. In Castellano’s lyric poem “Malinche” the young princess is an Electra figure banished by her mother. Magaña’s play Cortés y La Malinche was originally entitled Los Argonautas [The Argonauts] and the heroine plays a Medea who dedicates herself entirely to the glory of the hero Jason/Cortés in his quest for the Golden Fleece. Consequently, she declares that he owes her a debt, and threatens revenge if he abandons her: her revenge will come in the form of the creation of the mestizo race (p. 221).

To contemporary feminist critics La Malinche is an interesting subject of investigation: she is the kind of figure whose historical significance is undeniable, yet one who has been relegated unjustifiably to a marginal status. For Chicana writers such as Marcella Trujillo Gaitan, Sylvia Gonzales and, Adelaida del Castillo and Carmen Tafolla La Malinche becomes a kind of spiritual mother, “a feminine Messiah” (Ordoñez, 3260), who can redeem Mexican and Chicana women. Del Castillo returns to two previous names
the indigenous peoples had called La Malinche and rebaptizes her “Malintzin Tenépal,” a woman who was faced with an existential decision and who trusted her fate to a future she would help create. Tafolla's poem “Yo soy La Malinche” [I Am La Malinche] is a “dramatic self-defense” where La Malinche declares herself a subject not an object, not La Chingada, but Cortés’s equal, a woman who sees and acts and thereby realizes herself in La raza [the mestizo race] (p. 327).

The beauty and grace of a goddess are invariably assigned to her in the early accounts such as that of Muñoz Camargo's Historia de Talaxcala: [fue] “tenida por diosa en grado superior” [she was esteemed as a goddess of high rank] (p. 187). In iconographical terms she has been depicted as having a range of infinitely plastic features from the lovely simplicity of the El lienzo de Tlaxcala to the Europeanized features and dress of the Codices of Cuatlançingo and of Aperreamiento, to the blonde catechist of Durán’s account. Diego Rivera renders her as a woman soldier dressed for battle; Orozco paints her as a massive, nude Mexican Eve seated at Cortés’s side. In a mural in the Tlaxcalan Municipal Building she is depicted with sharply delineated Indian features standing between Moctezuma and a Cortés portrayed with highly Indianized features!

Octavio Paz believes that the strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican imagination and sensibility reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that Mexicans still have not resolved. When the Mexican repudiates La Malinche, he breaks with his past, renounces his origins and lives in isolation and solitude (El laberinto, 78). There are few statues of Cortés in Mexico; it is La Malinche who has become the monument: “... Malintzin es la heroína olvidada de la historia, presente siempre en la tradición, en la leyenda y en la sangre de México.” (Menéndez, 38); [Malintzin is the forgotten heroine of history, always present in Mexican tradition, legend and blood]. There is an abundance of geographical place names dedicated to her (Rodríguez, 53). And, in Eduardo Galeano's present and future tense terms: “she continues to ride beside [Cortés] and “her ghost . . . will continue striking fear for ever and ever, from the woods and caves of Chapultepec” (76-77).14

The persistence of this figure through a long series of trans-
formations appears to be due to the unresolved qualities of the Conquest itself. Hers was the power of language: she was a translator of language and culture and was instrumental in advancing the Spaniards' aims. In short, in this view it is doubtful that the Conquest could have been accomplished with the speed, thoroughness and finality it was without her, or at any rate, without someone playing the vital roles she did. The essence of her role is to be the one who overcomes alterity for both sides in the conflict as she makes communication between the opposing sides possible. Todorov's description of the specificity of her role as translator reads as follows:

[Elle ne se contente pas de traduire; il est évident qu'elle adopte aussi les valeurs des Espagnols, et contribue de toutes ses forces à la réalisation de leurs objectifs. D'un côté, elle opère une sorte de conversion culturelle, interprétant pour Cortés non seulement les mots mais aussi les comportements; de l'autre, elle sait prendre l'initiative quand il le faut, et adresser à Moctezuma des paroles appropriées (notamment dans la scène de son arrestation), sans que Cortés les aient prononcées auparavant (p. 106).

[S]he is not content merely to translate; it is evident that she also adopts the Spaniards' values and contributes as best she can do to the achievement of their goals. On the one hand, she performs a sort of cultural conversion, interpreting for Cortés not only the Indians' words but also their actions; on the other hand, she can take the initiative when necessary, and address appropriate words to Moctezuma (notably in the episode of his arrest) without Cortés having spoken them previously (p. 100).

In Todorov's terms the Conquest turns out to be a conquest of information. In one sense Cortés is simply the foreign leader of a popular uprising against Aztec power, who is capable of putting a series of Machiavellian strategies to use to divide and conquer. He quickly realizes that he needs La Malinche at his side if he is going to have allies since she "... mandaba absolutamente entre los indios en toda la Nueva España" [ruled absolutely among the Indians in all of New Spain] (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, II, Chap. XXXVII, 157).

If as Todorov suggests, we view the Conquest as the collision of a ritual world and a unique event, it becomes readily apparent that she was the one who, perhaps unwittingly, facilitated that collision. For the Aztecs the new event (the Conquest) had to be projected into the past (in the form of an omen) in order to be
integrated into the narrative of the confrontation, for it is the past that prevails in the present (Todorov, 94). For both Aztecs and Spaniards Cortés’s translator turned out to be the key personnage in enabling the narrative to play itself out.15

Let us take a look at the historic setting from the Aztec point of view as depicted in the compilation of indigenous accounts, *Visión de los vencidos*. In 1519 omens of destruction fill the skies of the Valley of Mexico and trouble Moctezuma’s sleep weakening his will to rule the aggressive Aztec empire, an empire he has ruled since 1502. All the signs indicate that Cortés is indeed the god Quetzalcoatl returning to claim his due, i.e., his throne. The world is coming to an end; the world of the fifth sun is moving on to its destruction (time is circular and the world is moving back to its beginning). Moctezuma will not confront the Spaniards militarily, but rather will use other stratagems such as magic to try to appease them, and get them out of the kingdom. While Moctezuma is suffering a personal crisis as he tries to learn what the Spaniards need and then to provide it in order to get rid of them, a kind of chaos of the mind results and the people of Tenochtitlan are panicked. The Aztecs are caught in a highly ironic situation: they had used Quetzalcoatl to legitimize their power, but they had moved away from him—Huizilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca were their chief gods. The myth of the return of Quetzalcoatl was just that, a myth they used politically but barely believed in. Now it was coming true!16 Once Cortés was made aware of this confusion, he of course played his part in the drama. His Indian translator helped him do just that. For the indigenous, of La Malinche’s role it can truly be said “Traduttore, traditore” [The translator is a traitor]. However, the heritage she leaves is not a simple one of treachery and betrayal of her people. Indeed she may well have taken Cortés at his word when he promised the Tlaxcalans freedom from Aztec tyranny and other forms of oppression.

Why is it that the figure of La Malinche continues to play such a large part in Mexican cultural identity? Why is La Malinche continually re-invented? Why is there an ongoing need to revile and to revindicate her? Three related reasons answer to the complexity and extension of her role in terms of its explanatory function: a) she incorporates the problem of the confusion of origins in Mexico because she facilitated the chaos the Conquest brought, b) she embodies the problem of national identity as she
reflects aspects of the three heritages: Indian, Spanish and mestizo, and c) she represents the ongoing process of overcoming difference, of naturalizing alterity, i.e., the process of mestizaje. The quest for an authentic Mexican identity proves to be paradoxical because though Mexicans want to return to their roots, they reject these roots as not their own: "They are mestizos, but they cannot accept their mestizaje" (Riding, 4).

If we understand the Conquest as a traumatic encounter which initiated an explosive process, then we can see further justification for the extraordinary vigor of La Malinche. Let us turn to a characterization Juan Adolfo Vázquez has offered to describe the Conquest as process: "Todavía no ha terminado la conquista, como tampoco no ha terminado la resistencia a la conquista" [The Conquest has not ended yet, and resistance to the Conquest has not ended yet either] (p. 175). The past proves to be very much alive in the present: "the final battle between Cortés and Cuauhtémoc [the last Aztec emperor Cortés finally executed] is still being fought, usually as part of Mexico's continuing struggle to come to terms with its mestizaje" (Riding, 23). The fact that the figure of La Malinche is central in the amorphous Mexican national identity accounts for the fact of the profound ambivalence in which she is enmeshed. She has accumulated a lengthy series of epithets and a variety of artistic representations significant for their range and variety. No single characterization can describe the range of attributes she embodies. She seems to be the locus for the trauma and generative power of the Conquest, a destroyer/creator goddess who obviates difference and transmutes dualities into a third term (Phillips, 111-113). Of course, any attempt to locate meaning(s) in this figure encounters the incertitude the anthropologist Sherwin Feinhandler ascribes as inherent in indeterminate circumstances: "Meaning is difficult to pinpoint when categories are not firmly established; many transcendent meaning can thus be assigned" (p. 6). She is a multivalent national symbol at once a traitress reduced to being the source of an unsavory epithet, malinchismo, uncritical love of the foreign, and the uncrowned queen of Mexico (White, 278). She is both a figure to be anathematized and one to be loved. Since her one mask is that of deception her enigmatic nature is assured.

In quite another sense her fate is that of the translator, i.e., invisibility. She enabled the principals in the drama to act out the
fate of civilizations, but remained Cortés's shadow (Prescott). In the sense that she served as a virtual space in which to transform and redeem difference, and as such her fate was that of a fundamental nature. In his *Anthropologie structurale*, Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the three basic forms of communication between societies as exchanges of women, language, and goods and services. It was La Malinche's experience to embody those types of exchanges and her names serve to mark the as yet unfinished transformations. As Malintzin she is Tonantzin, fertile mother of maize and can carry on the Aztec tradition. As La Malinche she is Eve, a fallen creature who is the physical mother of the *mestizos*. As Doña Marina she is the human counterpart of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint and spiritual mother of the Mexican people. Taken together aspects of these three avatars become the spirit of the creator god Quetzalcoatl who had promised his inevitable return to Mexico: Cortés had falsely fulfilled the prophecy, La Malinche truly fulfilled and continues to fulfill it. Paz creates the name “Doña Malinche” which serves to forge a synthesis between “Doña Marina” and “La Malinche,” between Spanish and Indian, in order to create a *mestizo* name. The last word on La Malinche will probably never be written:

[One finds that certain historical personages never lose their relevance, and because of that they are always objects of study and they continue and will continue to attract the attention of researchers. Their lives are like inexhaustible mines, that, in spite of having given up remarkable riches in one age, provide rich new veins for treasure hunters each time they return to the mines.]

The phenomenon of finding the “rich new veins to explore” is due to critical complexity in these figures: they lend themselves to a great number of critical perspectives because they are sites in which to reconcile cultural contradictions. In this case, La Malinche represents the heritage and the central problems of Mexican culture, as well as those of Latin American culture.17 In semiotic terms she is an unstable, persistent sign whose discursive meaning comes entirely from her union with Cortés; in terms of
non-discursive heritage she steps out of that role and assumes the identity of the abandoned mother of the mestizo race. Historically she was of peripheral interest in the early Spanish chronicles, although of major importance in the indigenous pictorial “text” of El lienzo de Tlaxcala described above. Not until the Mexican Revolution early in this century did interest in her as an historical figure revive. Fictional, dramatic and poetic recreations of all kinds attempted to fill in the lacuna left by the paucity of historical data: Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s chivalric Lady, Doña Marina, would serve as the model for centuries of romantic reveries about Cortés and Marina’s undying love affair. It was the Revolution which dispelled the romantic haze and allowed more historically objective interpretations to assert themselves. Alive in ballad, legend and myth, ideologically she makes the Aztec past available to politicians as well as writers when the historical circumstances warrant. In the cultural vernacular she is a scapegoat invoked untold times each day as La Chingada and in the accusation of malinchismo.

As Octavio Paz’s ongoing critique of Mexico has made clear Mexican culture is in some ways an extension of Spanish culture, but the American goddesses are not the classical ones. The Great Mother figure in Mexico is double: the Virgin of Guadalupe is the virgin mother, and La Malinche is the violated mother. Both can be understood as transformations of the Aztec fertility goddess Tonantzin and constitute crucial sites of cultural mediations and translations which make México the land of La Malinche as much as it is the land of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Mexico is the only country in Latin America that is truly mestizo, and it is in this vision of creation that La Malinche is the symbol par excellence of cross-breeding of indigenous and European peoples, of cultures, and finally of humanity. She glorifies mixture and tolerance to the detriment of purity and intolerance: in Mangana’s play Marina commands Cortés: “¡Multiplicate asta que la racial ignominia de los pueblos se canse!” [Go multiply yourself [singular] until the ignominious racial difference between our peoples exhausts itself!] (p. 202). But it is La Malinche who plays the role of Quetzalcóatl, as she proves to be the source of a long series of alchemical transmutations in her role as the mother of the mestizo race and creator of Mexican identity. Mestizaje is, after all, metamorphosis and significant aspects of Mexi-
can cultural heritage are encoded in her metamorphoses: she is both a national symbol of violation and a symbol of the ongoing naturalization of alterity, of the transformation of the European elements of difference. The process of mestizaje she and Cortés initiated continues to be the means by which the Mexican heritage realizes its possibilities.

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NOTES

1. Hernán Cortés named this son after his own father (as he would name a legitimate son he had later on with Doña Juana de Zúñiga). Mestizaje means miscegenation and mestizos suffered an ambivalent status that would become increasingly negative in the post-Conquest colonial world of New Spain dominated by criollos [Creoles, Spanish settlers] and peninsulares [government functionaries sent over from Spain]. F. Benítez characterizes Martín as “un hijo de la necesidad” [a child of necessity] born of professional collaboration of his parents (La ruta de Hernán Cortés, 124). Cortés secured a papal bull to legitimize mestizo Martín, known as “Martín, the Bastard,” who was sent to live with his father’s cousin in Spain shortly after birth. Once acculturated to Spanish life, he married a Spanish noblewoman and became a member of the Order of St. James. When he returned to Mexico to join his brother: “The two Martins were involved in a conspiracy [of the Gonzáles de Avila brothers] against the Spanish crown, which took place in 1565-1566 and ended in the exile of both from Mexico” (Phillips, 111). N. Cheetham compares him to Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, for his stoicism in this ordeal (258). He met an untimely end on an expedition against the Moors in Granada. Of his descendents Benítez tells us in Los primeros Mexicanos [The Century after Cortés]: “establecía una larguísima sucesión de mestizos para los cuales, lejos de significar su sangre indígena una fuerza creadora y estimulante, suponía inseguridades fundamentales” (177-178) [He established a very long line of mixed-blood descendants for whom their indigenous blood, far from meaning a source of creative and stimulating power, meant fundamental insecurity]. For further discussion of this figure see D. Muñoz Camargo’s Historia de Tlaxcala, 188 and 264.

Translations herein are mine where no citation for a published translation appears. Bracketed titles in unitalicized form indicate no English translation of the Spanish work is available. Spelling variations in source texts are due to: a) varying procedures employed to transcribe Nahuatl and other oral languages of Mesoamerica, and b) changes in Spanish orthographical conventions since the period of the Conquest.

2. M. Foucault’s use of the term “archeology” does not pertain to the realm of geological excavation. Rather, we need to look to what he calls the archive of a society, culture or civilization. The archive is “the general
system of the formation and transformation of statements. . . . The archive cannot be described in its totality. . . . It emerges in fragments, regions, and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater time that separates us from it. . . . This term [archeology] designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence: of the enunciative function that operates within it, of the discursive formation and the general archive system to which it belongs. Archeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive" (131-132). [See L'Archeologie du savoir, 170-171 for text of original.] Archeology describes the searches in the discursive formations in the series of names attributed to La Malinche.

3. Black and white legends of the Conquest are Alfonso Reyes's terms. See Figure 3 and description for an indication of the indigenous view of the desirability of mestizaje.

4. A. Menéndez describes the derivation as “Malin” + “zin” (diminutive) + “e” = “Malina, possessed by Cortés.” Corruptions of this appellation = “Malinche” for La Malinche and “Malinche” for Cortés (151)

5. A. Menéndez, 144. According to R. Castellanos, the violence of the shock of the military Conquest was mirrored in the sexual unions between Spanish soldiers and Indian women (from Mujer que sabe latín [The Woman Who Knows Latin] as appears in B. Miller, Mujeres en la literatura [Women in Literature], 39). In his study, The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503-1541, R. C. Padden maintains that “the primary conquest of Mexico was really more biological than military” (230), and he goes on to mention children other than the mestizo Martin that Cortés engendered. Doña Ana, a daughter of Moctezuma was pregnant with Cortés’s child when she died on the Noche Triste [Sad Night, June 30, 1520 in Gomara’s accounts] when the Spanish were forced to flee Tenochtitlan. Later he had a daughter by another of Moctezuma’s daughters, Doña Isabel. D. Muñoz Camargo’s commentary on the subject matter of El lienzo de Tlaxcala, plate 7, “Quitlauhtique” [They Made Him Offerings] indicates that the indigenous people actively supported sexual unions between Indian women and Spanish men in order to produce mestizo children. Thus, in some cases mestizaje was considered desirable by the Indians and they had two existing models to draw on: a) ajustar paces: the exchange of women to settle peace accords at the end of a conflict, and b) Pipiltin [Sons-of-Lords], polygamous unions among members of the Aztec nobility: “[1]n 1375 . . . the Mexicans turned their backs on their ancestors and sought a foreigner for a king . . . [and subsequently] the ruling families decided to give the king [Acamapichtli] their own daughters ‘so that from them might issue the lineage of the ruling lords of the land’ ” (See note 8 and Figure 3.)

6. T. Todorov, La Conquête de L’Amérique: “Tous s’accordent à reconnaître l’importance du rôle de la Malinche” (106) [Everyone agrees about recognizing the importance of Malinche’s role].

7. M. García Somonte suggests that: “Muchos historiadores repiten lo
mismo y se equivocan” (137) [Many historians repeat the same things and they are mistaken]. From his reading of M. Orozco y Berra’s *Historia de la conquista* [History of the Conquest], G. Rodríguez agrees that her appearance as Cortés’s translator in the *Codex Aperreamiento* (1537) which depicts a contemporaneous law suit against one Pedro Alvarado [“Proceso de Residencia contra Pedro Alvarado], proves that she was still alive (and still Cortés’s inamorata) at that late date (21). G. Rodríguez also cites a reference in William Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico* where he cites Viceroy Mendoza’s statement that Doña Marina was still living in Mexico City in 1550 (64).

8. *Cartas de relación* 48, 253; *Letters from Mexico*, 76, 376. Barrangania, a type of official concubinage, meant that once baptized the Indian women were granted the honorific title “Doña” [Lady] and were worthy beings with whom the Spaniards might copulate without sin. García Somonte describes the women’s situation as follows: “Venían a ser para ellos esposas en todo, menos el sacramento” (69) [They came to be wives to them in every sense except the sacramental one]—which makes the alliance an entirely paradoxical one. R. C. Padden discusses this institution and its relation to the Aztec institution of the Pipiltin (Sons-of-Lords”, i.e., noble children born of polygamous unions, see note 5) and points out that: “Though the conquerors might have used the term in reference to their many concubines, they steered clear of any of the barragania’s legal restraints and responsibilities” (*Hummingbird and Hawk*, 16-17, 231-233).

9. *El lienzo de Tlaxcala* consists of 80 scenes of the Conquest painted on linen cloth by Tlaxcalans in 1552 at the request of the Viceroy Velasco. In this indigenous view of the struggle La Malinche, Cortés’s inseparable companion, dressed in Mayan costume, appears in 22 of the first 48 plates of part I. In these paintings the Spanish are reminded of the dedication and bravery of the Tlaxcalan people without whose help the Spanish could not have vanquished their common foe, the Aztecs.

10. See J. La Faye’s book *Quetzalcóatl et Guadalupe* for an analysis of the genesis of the Virgin of Guadalupe and how she subsumes the figure of the Aztec creator god, Quetzalcóatl.

11. For a discussion of figures of *La Muerte* and *La Chingada* see O. Paz: *El laberinto de la soledad* [The Labyrinth of Solitude], and J. López Blanch: *Vocabulary mexicano relativo a la muerte* [Mexican Vocabulary Related to Death]. For a description of *La Mala* and *La Macha* see L. Gyurko’s article “The Vindication of La Malinche”, 264.

12. See O. Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*: 78-79. R. Phillips, “Seducción y literatura” [Seduction and Literature] in her *Mujeres en la literatura* [Women in Literature], for a critique of Paz’s interpretation (44). In C. Fuentes’s novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* [The Death of Artemio Cruz] the main character embodies the mestizo society physically and psychologically, and he displays the attitude of *malinchismo* as well. Although La Malinche is not mentioned by name in the novel, references to one of her avatars, *La Chingada*, occur a total of 53 times (documentation from an unpublished concordance made to the novel by this author).
13. J. LaFaye indicates that Seneca's tragedy Medea to have prefigured the discovery of the New World to writers such as Las Casas (Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe, 152).

14. E. Galeano, Memoria del fuego. I Los nacimientos (76-77); Memory of Fire. I Genesis (89-90). Although conventional wisdom has it that there are no statues of Cortés in Mexico, according to Alan Riding's account Distant Neighbors there are a few: one statue is located in the Casino de la Selva in Cuernavaca and another in the Hospital de Jesús in Mexico City. Riding tells of an occasion in 1982 when: “another monument to Cortés was placed in the main square of the Mexico City neighborhood of Coyoacan. Dedicated to Mexico’s mestizaje, it showed Cortés and his Indian mistress, La Malinche, sitting behind their mestizo son, Martín. But as soon as López Portillo left office, it was removed, to the delight of local nationalists” (24). Interest in tracing one's genealogy back to Cortés and La Malinche is evident in order to claim a kind of legitimacy. G. Rodríguez’s book, Doña Marina, contains a genealogical chart entitled “Descendencia de Don Hernando Cortés y Doña Marina” [Progeny of . . . Cortés and Doña Marina] drawn up for him by Federico Gómez de Orozco, whom he describes as “el distinguido bibliógrafo . . . que, como descendiente directo posee todos los documentos que garantizan la autenticidad de los datos consignados” (58-59); [the distinguished bibliographer . . . who, as a direct descendant possesses all the documents which guarantee the authenticity of the facts set forth therein].” One notes lacuna in the dates in this genealogical chart.


16. D. Carrasco’s authoritative study Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition presents a thoroughgoing treatment of the Quetzalcoatl myth in terms of religion, cosmology and social organization. He tells the story of Quetzalcoatl’s return as follows: “The city [Tenochtitlan], the king [Moctezuma Xocoyotzin] the [Aztec] nation had claimed descent, and therefore legitimacy, from the Toltec priest-king [Quetzalcoatl]. The Aztecs used the Tollan tale as a political myth, a myth which contained the “true” story of sovereignty and city. This myth also included the detail that the fountainhead of kingship, the founder of Tollan, would return and reestablish his kingdom. But . . . the Aztecs had already reshaped their cosmology and city by placing themselves at the center of space and of the world and a new pattern of destiny had been discovered. Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca, Tlaloc, and Xipe Totec demanded the attention of the Aztec realm while Quetzalcoatl, though still important in the regular expression of the sacred, became slightly crowded to the side. Thus, the appearance of strangers in the east and the return of Quetzalcoatl and the consequences promised in the myth could no longer be “conceived as being within the accepted scheme of things” [reference to Clifford Geertz’s notion of the problem of bafflement]. In fact, it was inconceivable, an attack on the accepted scheme of things. Therefore, the return of Quetzalcoatl was not understood as a renewal or regeneration of the society and cosmos but as an...
uncanny chaos descending on Mexico like the end of another age. . . .
The crisis for the Aztecs is not merely political, it is fundamentally cosmological. It is this crisis of the incarnation of Quetzalcoatl's image that plagues Moctezuma whose identity become effaced before the approaching ancestor. . . The return of the date Ce Acatl [in March of 1519] and the reincorporation of the psychic and mythic structure represented by Quetzalcoatl are experienced by Moctezuma as destructive. According to tradition, Quetzalcoatl had made arrows during his disappearance and if he reappeared on 1 Reed, he would strike down kings [emphasis added]. The conjunction of Quetzalcoatl's reappearance and the striking down of kings is portrayed in Diego Duran's account of the Spanish march to Tenochtitlan. Moctezuma sent gifts of beads and biscuits to Cortes in order to discover if it was Quetzalcoatl returning to Anahuac. The idea was that if the stranger recognized the food, he greeted Moctezuma's messengers and sent back beads and biscuits to the Aztec monarch. They were given to Moctezuma who saw them as divine gifts from Quetzalcoatl" (198-200).

17. Carlos Fuentes uses a geological image to explain what Latin American culture means:

"The culture of Latin America is a culture of conquest and reconquest, or as the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima would have it, of counter-conquests . . . [there is a] vast historical sediment of the river of the Americas: ancient cultures, transposed cultures, copulating cultures, latent cultures, cultures cannibalized and carnivalized, mestizo cultures wresting words from silence, ideas from obscurity" ("The Novel Always Says: The World is Unfinished", 25).

18. C. Fuentes calls Bernal Díaz del Castillo's epic *La verdadera historia* . . . the first Hispanoamerican novel. He maintains that the view therein is even more melancholy than that presented in the native chronicles because Díaz del Castillo knew that ultimately the conquerors would themselves be conquered by the world of their victims (*Discursos de Carlos Fuentes y Luis García Morales*, [Lectures by Carlos Fuentes and Luis García Morales] 27).

19. A. Auldecamp quotes a then President López Portillo describing a scene along the Gulf Coast: "In the depths of this flaming well [oil], we Mexicans see ourselves reflected in Tezcatlipoca's black mirror. Malinche emerges from those depths howling for human sacrifice to satisfy the god of fire" ("An Unsentimental Report from Mexico," 160). [There is no indication if this statement was originally made in Spanish or English.] It is curious to note that even in this vicious, blood-thirsty avatar La Malinche is still serving as a helpmate to a powerful male figure.

20. O. Paz, *El laberinto*: "Por contraposición a Guadalupe, que es la Madre virgen, la Chingada es la Madre violada . . . la Malinche, que es la Chingada en persona" (77-78); ["In opposition to Guadalupe, who is the virgin Mother, La Chingada is the violated mother . . . La Malinche is La Chingada in person.

See chapter 4 of this book, "Los hijos de La Malinche" [The Sons of La Malinche]. In his foreword to LaFaye's book
Quetzalcóatl et Guadalupe, he states that: “Entre la Chingada et Tonantzin-Guadalupe, oscille la vie secrète du métis” (xxv); The secret life of the mestizo oscillates between La Chingada and Tonantzin-Guadalupe” (xx). See chapter 4 of El laberinto, “Los hijos de la Malinche” [The Sons of La Malinche”] (59-80), for further elaboration of these figures. For Fuentes as well, Mexico is “la tierra de Malinche” [Malinche’s land], La cabeza de la hidra. A. Riding articulates the commonly held belief that Mexico is the one truly mestizo country, racially, politically and religiously (5). Todorov names La Malinche as the prime symbol of mestizaje, La Conquête de l’Amérique, 101).

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