"YO SOY LA MALINCHE"
Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism

By Mary Louise Pratt

It was toward the end of the year 13-Rabbit in Tenochtitlan when Moctezuma, ruler of the Aztec empire, first received news of the strange-looking foreigners arriving on the coast of his domain. (In Christian terms, the time was August of 1519, and Tenochtitlan was the biggest city in the world.) "The strangers' bodies are completely covered," reported Moctezuma's messengers, "so that only their faces can be seen. Their skin is white as if it were made of lime...Their deer [for so the Aztecs saw the Spaniards' horses] carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house.... Their dogs are enormous, with flat ears and long, dangling tongues. The color of their eyes is a burning yellow; their eyes flash fire and shoot off sparks." So reported the Aztec chronicles twenty years after Mexico had fallen to the invaders (León-Portillo 13). Were these peaceable visitors, Moctezuma wondered, invaders? the god Quetzalcoatl whose return had been prophesied by the ancients? Messengers upon messengers were sent to report on the newcomers' activities as they made their way into Aztec territory, and their news left Moctezuma "distraught and bewildered."

At first, so the chroniclers report, it was hoped Moctezuma would be encouraged by news of the Aztec woman traveling with the strangers, "a woman from this land, who speaks our Nahuatl tongue. She is called La Malinche, and she is from Teticpac. They found her there on the coast"(León-Portillo 13). One of Moctezuma's own subjects, a young Aztec woman of noble birth, was acting as translator and mediator for the bearded newcomers, and was their leader's lover. As the party made its way inexorably toward Tenochtitlan, the reports multiplied, and so did the questions. Who was she? Why was she serving these pale visitors with their metal clothes and deadly, inexplicable weapons? Why was she helping them forge an army of Moctezuma's own conquered peoples? Why did she save them from ambushes, attacks, misunderstandings likely to prove their undoing? Was her presence, and her role as Cortés's lover, proof of his divinity? Or was she simply a traitor?

Exploration, imperial invasion, and plunder are endeavors overwhelmingly associated with men. Yet this young Aztec woman, known variously as Malintzín, La Malinche, and Doña Marina, became a key participant in the struggle between the Aztec and Spanish empires, as it played itself out in Mesoamerica over the two and a half years between Cortés's arrival and the fall of Aztec rule. Like many key historical agents, Malinche/Marina has acquired importance as a mythic figure. From the time those first messengers reached Moctezuma down to the very present, she has remained a site for the ongoing negotiation of meaning and self understanding in Mexican America. As Sandra Messinger Cypess has documented, her race, her gender, and her historical role as supporter of the Spanish challenge to Aztec rule make her one of the most complex

cultural icons of post-conquest America. Her very presence contradicts, for example, canonical ideologies of conquest and resistance as masculine heroic enterprises, and reductive visions of the conquest as a straightforward relation between victimizers and victims. It is Marina's gender, above all, that throws a monkey wrench into these ideologies, just as it threw a monkey wrench into history—for of course it was her status as a female in a patriarchal society, an object of exchange among men, that delivered her into the hands of the Spaniards. Debate continues as to how her collaboration should be understood: as the passion-driven acts of a woman in love; as the inevitable playing out of female subordination; as revenge on the society that devalued and objectified her; as political strategy linked to her own lust for power; as an archetypal manifestation of female treachery and woman's inconstancy.

In what follows, after briefly reviewing the significations of Malinche in Mexican national ideology, I turn to the 1970s in the United States, when Malintzín became an important site around which Mexican American (Chicana) women negotiated their own struggles of identity to arrive at woman-gendered forms of what critic Norma Alarcón has called ethnonationalism (Alarcón). I propose to examine four poems by Chicana writers which undertake to redefine or resymbolize La Malinche as part of a process of formulating Chicana identities and cultural politics in the 1970s and 1980s.[1]

In Mexican popular mythology, La Malinche, as she is called, is remembered as a traitor, the indigenous woman who sold out to the Spanish conquistadores. She plays a negative role opposite two powerful positive symbols from Mexican history: Cuauhtemoc, the last Aztec ruler and a symbol of heroic resistance to the invaders, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, the national saint created out of the intersection of Christianity and Aztec religion. She is often associated with a fourth legendary figure, La Llorona, the weeping woman who walks at night looking for her lost children. In an influential and controversial study of Mexican national character in the 1950s, the philosopher and poet Octavio Paz elaborated on Malinche's significance in Mexican national mythology. Paz argued that Malinche the traitor functioned in the national imagination as the symbolic mother of the Mexican people. Her illicit relationship with Cortés defined Mexicans as a mestizo people and the illegitimate offspring of colonial rape and/or sexual betrayal. Paz interpreted the popular patriotic expression "Viva México, hijos de la chingada" [Long live Mexico, sons of the screwed woman] as alluding to La Malinche. This myth, Paz argued, constituted part of a debilitating self-hatred and misogyny that undermined the national psyche.[2]

However one regards the details of Paz's argument, the terms *malinche* and *malinchista* survive in Mexican vernacular as derisive terms meaning "traitor," especially suggesting betrayal of the nation. *Malinchista* is a common term for a person who adopts foreign values, assimilates to foreign culture, or serves foreign interests. There are some interesting semantics here that exemplify how history gets coded in language. The usage ties the meaning of betrayal in Mexican Spanish to the history of colonialism and Indian-White relations in Mexico. Notice too the inherent sexism: whether committed by man or woman, betrayal is coded in the language as *female.* To be a traitor is by implication to become female, while to be female is to be inherently a potential traitor. Of course not all speakers of Mexican Spanish know the specific history encoded in the term *malinchista,* yet the ideological constructions that produced the usage also hold the term in place in the language, and vice versa.

As awareness has grown of the ways gender bias tends to "naturalize" interpretations prejudicial to women, critics have been quick to question these misogynist symbolizations of Malintzín. The hostility directed at the figure of La Malinche is seen as a mystification of the fact that the Aztec empire was on the whole overthrown from within. Obviously Malintzín was only one of tens of thousands of indigenous inhabitants of Mexico who collaborated with the Spanish against what they had lived as Aztec domination. In psychosocial terms, blaming it all on La Malinche provides a way of leaving intact a manichean (and androcentric) myth of noble Aztec warriors victimized by ruthless Spanish warriors, a myth that proved useful to Mexican nationalism as it developed following the revolution of 1910. The continued significance of the Malinche myth in Mexico is attested by a recent academic conference held on the subject at the University of Puebla.

North of the Mexican border, in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and California, traditional homelands of Mexican American society and culture, the myth of Malinche came into play with respect to a different nationalist project: the Chicano movement that consolidated itself in the late 1960s. Like all modern nationalisms, ethnic or otherwise, the Chicano movement was masculinist in its conception and tended to unreflectively reproduce the subordination of women. Often this occurred in the name of the unity of both the movement and the nation in whose name it struggled. The foundational document of Chicano nationalism, the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,* produced in 1969 at the First National Chicano Congress in Colorado, depicts the Chicano nation in the following way:

> Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner "gabacho" who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are *Aztlán.* (Anaya and Lomelí 1)

The reaction on the part of women to the monolithic androcentrism of this document was immediate. In 1971, 600 Chicanas met in San Antonio and produced a manifesto titled *Chicanas Speak Out.* While it recognized the *Plan de Aztlán,* the document took up concerns not addressed in the *Plan,* producing resolutions on sex (e.g., "We should destroy the myth that religion and culture control our sexual lives"), marriage (e.g., "With involvement in the movement, marriage must change"), and religion (e.g., "Revolutionary change of Catholic Church or for it to get out of the way"). While the *Plan de Aztlán* has retained its foundational status, the women's document never entered the Chicano archive at all.

In the ensuing years, Chicana writers often invoked the figure of La Malinche as a vital, resonant site through which to respond to androcentric ethno-nationalism and to claim a gendered oppositional identity and history. This has involved negotiating complex self-definitions with respect to the two forces that defined the cultural and political space

around them: ethno-nationalism, whose masculinism and patriarchal values oppressed them, and Anglo American feminism, whose white and middle class biases erased the class and race dimensions of their struggle.

The term *Malinche* first entered the Chicano movement in its established popular meaning as "traitor." Chicana women who married Anglo men or took Anglo lovers were derisively labeled "malinches." According to Enríquez and Mirandé (1978), the label was also applied to Chicanas who left the community to seek higher education, a move regarded as assimilating to white culture, and to Chicanas who allied themselves with feminism. The meaning seems self-evident, but it involves an interesting semantic transferral of a kind familiar to students of colonial discourse. The 16th century relation between indigenous woman and Spanish man is "read" onto the 20th century relation between Anglo American man and Mexican American woman. By extension it applied to relations between the latter and Anglo institutions in general. The paradigm for Spanish colonialism maps what was often called the "internal colonialism" the Chicano people suffers within the United States (Acuña). Just as the indigenous Mexicans were there before the Spanish arrived, so the Mexican Americans in the southwest were there before the Anglos arrived. The analogy rests on deep historical continuity: until 1848 the U.S. Southwest *was* Mexico, and the Mexican Americans *were* Mexicans. The contemporary Malinche myth is historically transposed, but not transplanted.

The remainder of this essay comments in some detail on four poems by Chicana writers constructed around the figure of La Malinche.[3] My aim is to explicate the varying ways in which La Malinche is resymbolized in order to correct the linear postulates of orthodox ethnonationalism. Of particular interest is the imagining of forms of ethnic identity and community that do not depend on inside/outside models of the national.

One of the first Chicana poems using the Malinche figure, by Adaljiza Sosa Riddell, appeared in 1973 in the Berkeley magazine *El Grito.* Sosa re-evaluates the image of the Chicana Malinche, as she laments—and at the same time embraces—the predicament of the Chicana woman married to a white man (Spanish terms are translated in brackets):

My name was changed, por la ley...	[by the law]
Malinche, pinche,	['dammit']
forever with me;	
I was born out of you,	
I walk beside you,	
bear my children with you	
for sure, I'll die	
alone with you...	
Pinche, como duele ser Malinche...	[Damn, it hurts to be]
Pero sabes, ése,	[But you know, man]
What keeps me from shattering	
into a million fragments?	
It's that sometimes,	
you are muy gringo, too.	[very Anglo]

The poet's strategy here is not to reject the label of Malinche, but to assume it, and speak from the position of speech it denotes. This taking of voice is a familiar gesture in emergent writing, which often carves out a position of speech by recoding the very images that have been used to exclude or silence its subjects. The Malinche is a historically silent figure whom Sosa Riddell here mobilizes into speech. The first line of the poem alludes to one of the gendered asymmetries about intermarriage: Chicana women who married Anglo men often "lost" their Spanish surnames, the public badge of Chicano identity, whereas this was not so for Chicano men who married Anglo women and "gave" them Spanish surnames. Masculinist nationalism thus read the women's betrayal as the greater. The poet here challenges this unjust view in her first line. The law that makes her a malinche derives from a patriarchal privilege shared by Anglo and Chicano men alike (Enríquez and Mirandé).

In the remaining lines the poet takes a bold initiative her male detractors cannot take: rather than reject *malinche* as an epithet unfairly ascribed to her, she embraces the Malinche figure and bonds herself to it. She claims Malinche as her mother ("I was born out of you"), referring to the myth of Malinche as the (accursed) mother of the mestizo Mexican people, and as her companion or perhaps her sister ("I walk beside you, bear my children with you"). Indeed, by the end of the stanza ("for sure I'll die alone with you"), Malinche seems to have substituted for the poet's husband as the primary relationship in her life. What has been going on is not simply an idealization of the Malinche, but a painful process of self-salvation under unjust and coercive circumstances. A wry humor, carried by the colloquial term "pinche," mitigates this otherwise poignant statement. As with much Chicano verbal art, the poem ends with a dry ironic twist, in this case a critique of the male's cultural purism on the ground that he too "betrays" it.

Sosa Riddell attempts not to redefine the Malinche or reinterpret the myth, but to speak from within the position it assigns to her and claim that position as an autonomous space of being, rather than a dependent space ascribed from the outside by others. One of the most aesthetically effective strategies in her poem is the use of assonance and rhythm to harmonize the Spanish and English phrases.[4] In the opening lines, for example, notice how the *ch* sound in *changed* echoes the *ch* sound (normally very pronounced) in *Malinche* and *pinche,* and how the rhythm of *Malinche, pinche* is repeated exactly in the following line *forever with me.* The code-switching itself is semantically strategic. The poem changes languages, for instance, after the mention of name-change in line 1; in the final line, it switches to Spanish to tell the interlocutor he too can be Anglo. Such interlingual dynamics are not artificial or contrived, but rather constitute a profound and productive dimension of bilingual verbal culture, here put to aesthetically effective use. The use of vernacular language also characterizes much Chicano poetry, and attests its roots in oral expressive culture, where parody and a witty, slightly self-deprecating sarcasm are highly developed and valued. Both are reflected to a degree in this text. Internal rhyme—"name, changed," "pinche, malinche"—is also a value in Chicano oral aesthetics. In the context of the fiercely monolingual dominant culture of the United States, the elaborate code-switching which this poem exemplifies lays claim to a form of subaltern cultural power: I own both your language and mine, the minority speaker says; both are mine to combine and recombine as I choose.

A more recent poem by Helen Silvas (1988) adopts more fully the patriarchal definition of Malinche as traitor. "Malinche Reborn" is a poem about a Chicana woman who lets herself be seduced and abandoned by a white lover:

moon faced woman
eyes of earth brown
seeking wisdom in writing
dreamt of big fat rat
grabbing, tearing her throat
throwing premonition away
she danced & twirled
under the lunar light

daughter of darken caves
daughter of buried secrets

tossing caution warnings
like white petaled flowers on
morning dew grass
secure well hidden she thought
her forest of curtained emotions
lured enticed like her ancient ancestor
by flour faced creatures
only to be found out discovered
in the morning light
wet by forest tears
morning moisture brands her
she stands betrayed
a traitor to herself

she is malinche.

(Irvine Chicano Literary Prize, 1985-1987, 55)

Here the protagonist is specifically identified as a woman of indigenous descent, who is criticized for not heeding the warnings of her culture against outsiders. Preferring (Anglo) book-knowledge ("wisdom in writing"), she "throws away" the premonition ("rats...tearing her throat") and dances anyway "under the lunar light." "Lunar" here connotes "white," and also alludes to a tenet of traditional Mexican culture that regards moonlight as unhealthy. Parents and grandparents close bedroom curtains at night so the children will not be exposed to it. The two-line middle stanza refers to the Chicana's Aztec history, submerged by the conquest but living on in hidden caves and secret knowledge.

The third stanza repeats the image of the dancer ignoring warnings, and explains the danger: the woman thinks she has protected herself from emotional involvement with her seducer, but, like Malinche, she has not. ("Flour-faced" evokes terms the Aztecs used to describe the Spanish when they first encountered them.) In the morning (pun on "mourning") light of the sun, she finds herself brokenhearted and alone. Here Silvas reinterprets the dynamics of betrayal to draw a highly didactic conclusion. While the traditional myth defines Malinche as a traitor to her people, this protagonist is seen as a

traitor to herself and her own psychic integrity. The image of book learning as a danger is upheld. The Malinche myth is thus reinterpreted within the framework of individualism and autonomous subjectivity.[5]

Silvas's reborn Malinche is traitor to herself, but she has also been betrayed by her white lover. Many poets have sought to reverse the Malinche myth in this way, defining her as the betrayed rather than the betrayer. This reinterpretation has been read back on the dramatic history of the original Malintzín Tenépal. Naomi Quiñonez posits such a reinterpretation in an interesting poem called "Trilogy," which appeared in 1985. This poem aligns three mythical figures from disparate mythologies: Eve, Malinche and Helen of Troy. All three have been blamed for the historic downfall of their peoples, brought about through their sexual alliances with particular men. It is this politics of blame that Quiñonez opens to question in her poem. The poem's first stanza evokes the memory of these three women, specifically of their sexual powers ("the ashes of your vulvas"):

> Eve...Malinche...Helen
> Eve...Malinche...Helen
> Unpredictable hurricanes
> sources of destructive power
> The ancients passed us
> the ashes of your vulvas
> quietly contained them in earthen pots
> golden chalices
> stainless steel safes
> and placed them
> undisturbed
> in coffins
> of dead women.
>
> (*Sueño de Colibri/Hummingbird Dream* 6)

The poet will now disturb these ashes, remove them from their ancient containers. The three stanzas that follow are devoted to each figure individually, questioning established myths. Why blame Eve, the poet asks, for the downfall of a doomed civilization? Helen is described as a creation of male warfare, "just another wooden horse filled with desires to win wars"; "Men have made themselves slaves to feminine beauty." The stanza devoted to La Malinche is as follows:

> Eve...Malinche...Helen
> Eve...Malinche...Helen
> Tú padre te llevó
> a la chingada...
> Often we utter
> the atrocity of Malinche's sin
> as if she had no father
> who ingrained in her
> absolute obedience
> to men
> as if he had not given her
> to Cortez as a gift.

She, obeying men
obeyed her father's wish
to be given
obeyed Cortez
and gave him Mexico.

(*Sueño de Colibri/Hummingbird Dream* 7)

The first two lines are a colloquial expression which in printable English translates as "Your father screwed you over." Obviously, Quiñonez's strategy here is to reinsert Malinche into the history of patriarchy, not as a free-standing historical agent, but as a subject constituted by her society. Far from betraying her culture, in submitting to Cortés, she was doing exactly what her culture taught her to do. The poem rescues her from a depressing picture of helplessness in its last lines. Obeying her father, we read, she "obeyed Cortez and gave him Mexico." In a sardonic twist with which many Chicano poems end, the poem restores Malinche to power and agency: from her position as submissive object, she exerted world-historic power. She was so good at doing what men wanted that she brought down the very patriarchal empire that had created her. Again, the poem ends with a wry, ironic twist. It is interesting to note that none of the other stanzas in the poem display this kind of irony so characteristic of Chicano culture.

Quiñonez's poem refers to Malinche's father giving her to Cortés. In fact, the story is more dramatic still. Cortés's own writings on his adventures in Mexico mention Doña Marina, as the Spanish called her, only twice in passing, giving no hint of her pivotal role in "his" achievements. It is to the Spanish historian Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a member of the Cortés expedition, that one must turn for a fuller account of her remarkable history (Díaz del Castillo [1580]/1963). In his account, Chicana researchers found that Cortés was not the first master she had served. Born into the Aztec nobility, her father had died when she was a small child, and her mother remarried, bearing a son by her new husband. Wishing to pass her family's wealth to her new son rather than her daughter, Malinche's mother, according to Bernal Díaz's account, sold her in slavery to some Maya traders, and feigned her death. Her years with the Maya gave her direct experience of what it was like to live under Aztec domination. Thus, it was through chattel slavery, not courtly life, that Malintzín acquired the Maya-Nahuatl bilingualism that initially made her so valuable to Cortés. And chattel slavery, not love or religious conversion, is what initially brought her into the hands of the Spaniards, at the age of fourteen. Not long after she joined them, according to Bernal Díaz she became convinced of their divine mission and converted to Christianity, as well as becoming Cortés's lover (or taking him as hers).

Bernal Díaz speaks at length of the respect in which Malintzín was held by both Spanish invaders and the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico. During the Spanish occupation of Mexico City she became pregnant by Cortés, bearing a son, Martín, whom Cortés, over her objections, later sent to Spain to be educated. On his return to Mexico, so the story goes, Martín repudiated his Indian mother, breaking her heart. Eventually Cortés "gave" Malintzín in marriage to his aide Juan Jaramillo, with whom she lived until the latter's death. Cortés also gave her a large *encomienda,* that is, a tract of land plus the rights to the labor of indigenous inhabitants of that land, so that Malintzín ended her life in material prosperity.

Obviously these details from the history of La Malinche offer many possibilities for revising the reductive myth equating her with the betrayal of her people to European colonialism. "Her people," for instance, in an important sense betrayed her; she was victimized by patriarchy well before she was victimized by Eurocolonialism; the idea that she sold out to the Spanish is offset somewhat by the extent to which she was also sold out by them, rejected first by Cortés, then by her mestizo son.

An additional revision that arises from Bernal Díaz's account is the re-cognition of Malintzín's decisive role in determining the course of the Spanish invasion. Though she began only as a slave, Bernal Díaz states that Malintzín quickly became a key strategist, tactician and cultural mediator. Her courage, intelligence and negotiating expertise were absolutely essential to Cortés's successes at forging alliances with indigenous groups who opposed Aztec domination. A more radical reading of this history has been proposed, however, one in which Malinche is seen as operating not in the service of Cortés (or anyone else), but towards independent goals of her own. This is the utopian vision proposed in the final poem I propose to discuss (and, I confess, my personal favorite), Carmen Tafolla's dramatic and eloquent "La Malinche" (1978). The poem is best read aloud. (The final phrase *la raza,* literally "the race," is a term used in the Chicano movement to refer to the Chicano people.)

Yo soy la Malinche.

My people called Malintzín Tepénal
The Spaniards called me Doña Marina

I came to be known as Malinche
and Malinche came to mean traitor.

They called me — chingada
¡Chingada!
(Ha — Chingada! Screwed!)

Of noble ancestry, for whatever that means, I was sold into slavery
by MY ROYAL FAMILY — so that my brother could get my
inheritance

...And then the omens began — a god, a new civilization, the
downfall of our empire.
And *you* came.
My dear Hernán Cortés, to share your "civilization" — to
play god,
.....and I began to *dream...*
I saw,
and I *acted!*
I saw our world
And I saw yours
And I saw —
another.
And yes — I helped you — against Emperor Moctezuma Xocoyotzin
himself!

I became Interpreter, Advisor, and lover.
They could not imagine me dealing on a level with you —
so they said I was raped, used,
chingada
¡Chingada!
But I saw our world
and your world
and another.

No one else could *see!*
Beyond one world, none existed.
And you yourself cried the night
the city burned,
and burned at your orders.
The most beautiful city on earth
in flames.
You cried broken tears the night you saw your destruction

My homeland ached within me
(but I saw *another!*)

Another world —
a world yet to be born.
And our child was born...
and I was immortalized *Chingada!*

Years later, you took away my child (my sweet mestizo new world child)
to raise him in your world.
You *still* didn't see.
You *still* didn't see.
And history would call *me*
chingada.

But Chingada I was not.
Not tricked, not screwed, not traitor.
For I was not traitor to myself —
I saw a dream
and I *reached* it.
Another world.....
la raza.
la raaaaaaaa-zaaaaa.....

The poem's opening line, "Yo soy la Malinche" [I am Malinche], has a powerful resonance for readers familiar with the Chicano literary canon. It echoes the opening line of one of the foundational texts both of Chicano literature and of Chicano nationalism, the powerful poem "Yo soy Joaquin / I am Joaquin" written by Rodolpho "Corky" Gonzales in 1967 and made into a moving film under the auspices of the United Farm Workers. Like the *Plan de Aztlán*, "Yo soy Joaquin" had the effect of anchoring Chicano identity in a series of cultural coordinates that included land, agriculture, sprituality, and links to the indigenous. One of its limitations, of course, is that it anchored Chicano identity in a normative male subject. By invoking and challenging this landmark text, Tafolla identifies her poem as an

analogous foundational project, but this time for a specifically female subject and perhaps a Chicana nationalism.

In the first ten lines of the poem Malintzín introduces her canonical identifications and symbolizations, including biographical details as recovered from Bernal Díaz. The following stanza, however, offers a radical rereading of both Aztec and Spanish accounts of the conquest. Malintzín boldly claims that the downfall of the Aztec empire resulted from the injustice done to her by her family, that it was this evil that brought the Spanish conquerors to Mexico's shores. Line 11 refers to accounts of the conquest written after the fact by Aztec historians. According to these accounts, the arrival of the Spaniards was preceded by a number of terrifying omens—a blazing comet in the sky, a temple that spontaneously burst into flames, a rain of fire on the horizon, a woman wailing in the streets night after night (León-Portillo). The arriving Spaniards were initially thought to be the god Quetzalcoatl, whose return in the form of a yellow-haired man from the west had been prophesied among the Aztecs. In lines 17-19 Malintzín establishes herself as the central, world-changing protagonist of the conquest story, not Cortés who was merely "playing" a god and transmitting a fake "civilization." Malintzín, on the other hand, is the visionary: "I began to *dream* / I *saw*, / and I *acted!*"

What Malintzín saw in her dream was another world—a genuine New World—distinct from the patriarchal and militaristic realities of both Aztec and Spanish societies. In lines 24-30 Malintzín refutes the readings of her as a victim of Spanish colonial violence. The victimization story, she argues, is patriarchal in itself, for it excludes the possibility that she might have chosen her roles on her own. The derisive term *chingada* [screwed], used to repudiate this victimized Malinche, is introduced, then repeated with exclamation marks that say "how could anyone consider this attribution?" (The punctuation in line 26 is Spanish.) The stanza beginning at line 31 again underscores Cortés's limitations, for he can envision only one world, the one he came from. Here again Tafolla artfully inserts historical details that add vividness and specificity to her poem. Histories say Cortés did weep the night the great city of Tenochtitlan was burned to the ground by his troops. Malintzín feels the pain, but sees beyond it. Hers is a revolutionary consciousness. In the following stanza Malintzín introduces the figure of her son, and here again she seeks to displace readings (including some feminist readings) in which her reproductive role as mother of a mixed-race child makes her the symbolic mother of the mestizo Mexican race. Malintzín insists that her vision goes far beyond the child she bore and who was taken away from her. Again the emphasis is on Cortés's inability to envision a new and better social order which he could help found. "And history would call *me* chingada," she exclaims, sarcastically.

The poem's final stanza completes the resymbolization of Malinche. Again, canonical interpretations are repudiated: "Not tricked, not screwed, not traitor," and Malintzín's own dream, the "other world" of which she is founder, is at last specified concretely: "la raza," first spoken, then shouted long and loud as if from the depths of her being: "la raaaaaaa-zaaaaa...." The final dots deny closure, opening the poem onto the new history to which the contemporary Chicana is heir.

Though Tafolla's recoding of La Malinche makes the familiar move of revindicating Malinche as mother of the new mestizo race, it does so in a way that does not reduce her to her reproductive role. By attributing to her a vast historical project of a kind not recognizable to the masculinist heroics of orthodox history, the poem subsumes her reproduc-

tive activity into her political and strategic activity. The relevance of this move to the search for a women's ethnic identity and nationalist agenda are clear. Women are called upon to claim power as world-makers and social and spiritual visionaries—what they had tried to do, ironically, in the 1971 manifesto discussed above. The movement is called upon to recognize women as more than just handmaidens to the men and reproducers of the race.

In the 1990s, with ethno-nationalist militancy on the wane in the United States, the myth of Malinche remains a powerful coordinate in Chicano self-representation. As this essay was first begun in the winter of 1992, Edward James Olmos's film "American Me" was released by Universal Studios. (Olmos, a Chicano actor who also stars in the film, is best known perhaps for his role as the chief detective, Castillo, in the popular American TV series "Miami Vice.") "American Me" is based on the life story of a Chicano gang leader named Santana who, among other things, first organized Mexican American prisoners in California penitentiaries into gangs able to exercise some control over their situation. The film is a bleak, unrelenting indictment of the gang-based barrio social order and the violent forms of masculinism it reproduces. Made by an insider, it was an earthshaking recognition experience for many young American men who had grown up, or were growing up, in urban areas. (Indeed, a few months after its release, its worst predictions were borne out when LA erupted following the Rodney King decision.)

Women play only minor roles in Olmos's film, but the roles they play emerge directly from the mythic configurations under discussion here. The Chicana Malinche both begins and ends the story. The film opens with a flashback to the year 1943 in Los Angeles, when Santana's parents are young lovers just engaged to be married. It was a time of intense racial tension in LA, when Japanese Americans had been interred in concentration camps, and Mexican Americans were under suspicion for lack of patriotism. In a gesture shamefully in keeping with these domestic horrors of war, American navymen on shore leave were encouraged by their officers to head for the barrio to attack Mexican American youth who were defiantly declaring their ethnicity by adopting the dress code of the "zoot suit." (The period has gone down in history as the time of the "zoot suit riots.") Santana's future parents are attacked by a roving band of Anglo navymen, his father is beaten and his mother is raped repeatedly. Much later in the film, when Santana wonders how his life has gone so awry, his father reveals this story to him, including the fact that Santana himself was the offspring of the rape. "I tried to love you," says his father, acknowledging that he has failed to do so. "American Me" thus establishes its point of origin in the primal scene of colonial rape, transposed, as in the Chicana poems, from the Spanish-Aztec confrontation to the Anglo-Chicano confrontation. Santana's mother is La Chingada, and her society's failure—to come to grips with this wound and heal it—is the curse, so the film argues, undergirding the intractable violence and self-hatred that poison barrio life.

At the end of Olmos's film, a revindicated variant of the Malinche appears in the person of a single mother who, having lost one son to drugs, becomes determined to find another way of life. With the help of her own mother, she works to support her young son and she enrolls in college to become a teacher. Her surviving child is forbidden to play with the gang youth. Here is a positive version of one of the negative Malinche figures discussed earlier—the woman who leaves the community to seek higher education. Like the Malinche in Tafolla's poem, this woman in Olmos's film is the visionary who sees "our [barrio] world, your [Anglo] world—and another." Many viewers find the resolution unsatisfactory. Malintzín is never mentioned by name in Olmos's film, yet the myth thoroughly structures, and limits, its reading of gender relations.

I do not know whether Ana Castillo was thinking of the *Plan de Aztlán* when she began her epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1992) like this:

> LETTER ONE
> Here's the plan:
>
> On the 15th you arrive in L.A. I'll pick you up at the airport and head for San Fernando, to my Tíos Fermín and Filomena's house. It will be hot, so bring plenty of baby oil (I know how easily you burn!) and feel free to bring a bikini and shorts for tanning. My aunt, unlike the relatives in Mexico, is cool about such things...as long as my uncle isn't around.
>
> I have to warn you about my tío Fermín. He doesn't drink too much—he's a drunkard. He's made a point of becoming a full fledged drunkard, so you don't have to be polite and ignore obnoxious behavior. Like many, he will blame his weakness in character on alcohol. If and when he gets near that point, simply tell him, "Le voy a decir a su mujer," and you'll never see a man get away faster in your life. (Castillo 1)

The cultural and geographic space here is profoundly Chicano —LA, the San Fernando Valley, family ties, bilingualism, the relatives on both sides of the border, and the differing cultural codes between them. Yet it is emphatically not the sovereign homeland of Aztlán where an ancient people lives rooted in the soil. It is a porous space of mobility where people come and go by air and car, entering and leaving. The "bronze people" are the result, in part, of sunbathing (using enough baby oil to tan rather than burn). Instead of a monolithic united brotherhood, it is a nation of men and women, young and old—their relations defined by conflict and difference as well as by love and unity. In this feminocentric description, the sole patriarchal figure is an antiheroic individual driven by an antiquated sexual code. Castillo is one of a generation of vital and talented women writers (Cherríe Moraga, Lucha Corpi,[6] Gloria Anzaldúa, Helena Maria Viramontes are others) who in the last ten years have undertaken to create not only rich and immensely variegated accounts of women's experience, but alternative visions of Chicano culture that set aside the polarizations that gave rise to the code of national brotherhood and the curse of La Malinche.

Notes

1. For present purposes this essay assumes a reader unfamiliar with Chicano/a history and literature.
2. Malinche, so the interpretation goes, emasculated the Mexican male by giving herself to the conqueror. The male compensates, suggests Paz, by adopting a form of sexuality based on violence and modeled on rape. This psychosocial complex in Paz's account is fundamental to Mexican *machismo*. There was much in this analysis for feminists to agree with; however, he goes on to essentialize rape as an inevitable model for heterosexual relations. This was the point on which feminist thinkers obviously part ways with him.
3. In addition to works cited here (see below), I have benefitted from the following literary criticism on the Malinche myth in Chicana poetry: Norma Alarcón, "Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-vision Through Malintzin/or Malinche: Putting Flesh Back On the Object," in Cherríe Moraga and Gloriz Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983); Cordelia Candelaria, "La Malinche: Feminist Prototype," *Frontiers* 2 (Summer 1980): 1-5; Ade-

laide R. del Castillo, "Malintzín Tenépal: A Preliminary Look Into a New Perspective," in Rosaura Sánchez and Rosa Martínez Cruz, eds., *Essays on La Mujer* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center), 124-48; Elizabeth Ordóñez, "Sexual Politics and the Theme of Sexuality in Chicana Poetry," and Rachel Phillips, "Marina / Malinche: Masks and Shadows," in Beth Miller, ed., *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 316-19 and 97-113; Marta Sánchez, *Contemporary Chicana Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Chicano Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Cordelia Candelaria, *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction* Westport CT: Greenwood, 1986); Beatriz Zamora, "Archetypes in Chicana Poetry," *De Colores* 4:3 (1978): 43-52.

4. Sosa Riddell's poem exemplifies many artistic practices characteristic of modern Chicano poetry: Spanish-English bilingualism, to begin with, or rather the practice called *code-switching*, in which speakers switch spontaneously and fluidly between the two languages. Code-switching is a linguistic practice highly characteristic of Mexican American speech, and of other kinds of bilingualism as well. From a grammatical or syntactic perspective, code-switches almost always happen at syntactic breaks, as in the first line of Sosa Riddell's poem ("my name was changed, por la ley"). One of the most numerically frequent code-switches involves terms of address (such as Spanish *m'hija* or *m'hijo'* meaning "my daughter" or "my son") and exclamations (such as *pinche*). Sometimes code-switching involves only switching from English to Spanish phonology (that is, pronunciation), as when proper names are pronounced with Spanish phonology to indicate Chicano identity. (The word *Chicano* itself sounds very different pronounced with English and with Spanish phonology, so that one's pronunciation of it easily establishes one's ethnicity.) Though many Americans from Spanish speaking backgrounds do not speak Spanish fluently, a great many do have fluent Spanish phonology or pronunciation. Chicano or Latino identity is thus readily indicated through speech even when speakers have little fluency in Spanish.
5. Other instances of what one might call "weak revisionist" readings of Malintzín include a reading attributing her political betrayal to religious motivations—a sincere conversion to Christianity, for instance, or a sincere belief that Cortés was a returning divinity. Another, perhaps anachronistically, uses romantic love to explain her behavior—she passionately loved Cortés and would do anything to protect him.
6. Corpi is author of an extraordinary cycle of poems on Malinche written in Spanish in *Palabras de mediodía* (Berkeley, CA: Fuego de Aztlán, 1980). Requiring a much longer treatment than they could be given here, these poems aim in effect to put Doña Marina to rest and move on to something else. The poems are introduced in Sánchez (1985) [see note 2 above].

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