

Interpreter, Interlocutor, Intermediary, Traitress: An Exemplary Figure in Chicana Literature and Culture

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ABSTRACT

La Malinche, Cortés' interpreter and both real and symbolic mother of the mestizo race, is a paradigmatic figure in Mexican and Chicano/a cultures, in which she comes to represent an embodiment of national and linguistic betrayal. By employing postcolonial and gender studies perspectives, this article analyzes La Malinche's liminal position within discourses of silence and speaking. It further shows how La Malinche's hybrid identity undermines hierarchical binary oppositions implied by the process of colonization. On the other hand the article also argues that her victimization is already present in the language she speaks and is spoken about.

KEYWORDS

hybrid identity, Chicano/a culture, conquest of Mexico, La Malinche, liminality, mestizo race.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s provoked affirmative tendencies not only in African-American communities, but in other ethnic minorities living in the United States as well. The "browning of America" refers to the fact that the Hispanic/Latino population is the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the U.S., currently comprising over 16% of the overall U.S. population of more than 308 million.¹ In light of this trend American academic debate, under the influence of the developing discipline of postcolonial studies in the late 1980s and 1990s, turned its attention to the investigation of social movements less studied until then.² Thus, humanities, social and literary studies have reflected the growing international scholarship on ethnicity, race, immigration as well as the center/margin duality. American social movements of the 1960s, some of which succeeded significantly on the local and regional levels in certain states of the Union in addressing issues of racial, social and cultural inequalities, have come under increasing investigation.

The Chicano/a Movement and the Notion of (Women's) Betrayal

One such movement that came to the forefront in this context is the Chicano movement of Americans of Mexican origin whose ancestors became U.S. citizens following the U. S.-Mexican War and the February 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which granted the Mexican northern territories to the victorious United States.³ Chicanismo/a is commonly referred to as a consciously chosen, strategically constructed and adamantly

1 U.S. Census Bureau, "2010 Census Shows America's Diversity," U.S. Census Bureau, <http://2010.census.gov/news/releases/operations/cb11-cn125.html> (accessed 8 September, 2012).

2 Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, "Preface," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), viii.

3 The area obtained by the United States comprised the present states of California, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Kansas and parts of what today is New Mexico and Arizona.

embraced oppositional identity developed within *El Movimiento*, or the Chicano/a⁴ movement, especially by its male proponents. To differentiate Chicano/a cultural legacy and legitimacy against the dominant American culture, pre-Cortesian Aztec roots and relations to indigenous past are vehemently acknowledged in the construction of Chicano/a identity and have become incorporated into the nationalistic ideological discourse.⁵

Therefore, firstly, the ideal form of Chicano/a identity carries a hybrid synthesis of a strategically constructed self that historically, culturally and linguistically differs from that of white Americans, Native Americans and of those Mexican Americans who cannot make claims about their ancestors' presence in the region of northern Mexico prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the consequent annexation of the territory by the US. Secondly, Chicanismo/a inheres a notion of biological commonality, as the Chicano/a nationalistic discourse employed appeals to Indian-ness through blood lines linking Chicanos/as with heroic Aztec warriors and/or "Maya prince[s]".⁶

The radical site of difference of Chicano/a identity, however, does not lie in romantic notions of pure and innocent origins, but in the simultaneous professing of their Spanish lineage. As will be shown below, the implications of racial hybridity in the Latino culture in general and Chicano/a culture in particular, are embodied by La Malinche, Cortés' interpreter and lover, who stands at the very origins of this racial and cultural ambivalence. In other words, in their mestizo/a identity the paradoxical *mélange* of the Spanish oppressor and the oppressed Indian literally embodies the site of Chicano/a difference. A narrative of Chicano/a identity that maintains the Spanish/Indian hybridity makes it possible for the Chicano/a to reinforce his/her status as a "subject defined by resistance" which challenges the politically and culturally dominant white American society.⁷ Chicano/a subjectivity is thus always already marked by difference originating in the mestizo/a embodiment and hybrid cultural legacy.⁸ This legacy, however, is highly charged in terms of gender. As this article aims to show, not only is La Malinche at the source of hybridity and difference, she also comes to represent an androcentric archetype of negative and treacherous femininity which bears on the position of women in the Chicano/a culture.

Allusions to heroic Aztec and Mayan past that were made in both founding texts of the of the Chicano movement – Corky González' poem *Y soy Joaquín*⁹ and Alurista's nationalistic manifesto of *El Plan Spiritual de Aztlán*¹⁰ – promoted notions of virility, brotherhood, and masculine power that implicitly defined the Chicano/a self as male. The Chicano/a movement – vastly represented by university students, both male and female – refused assimilationist tendencies introduced by the U.S. government in the

4 It is my conscious choice to avoid grammatical invisibilization of women in the use of generic masculine nouns Chicano and Chicanos, which describe both men and women. Thus, I opt for the use of Chicano/a, Chicanos/as respectively or the word Chicanismo/a.

5 Cristina Beltran, "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies and the Challenge of Mestizaje," *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2004): 599.

6 Rodolfo Gonzáles, *I Am Joaquín/Y Soy Joaquín* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 16.

7 Beltran, "Patrolling Borders," 599.

8 Although the terms mestizo/a (plural mestizaje) and hybrid/hybridity are used interchangeably in this paper, I do not view them as synonymous in the context of the Chicano/a culture. While hybridity refers to moments of blending of two or more cultures that generate new identities and meanings, mestizaje describes a multiracial identity.

9 Gonzáles, *I Am Joaquín/Y Soy Joaquín*, 1972

10 Alurista, "El Plan Spiritual de Aztlán," in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, ed. Francisco Lomeli and Rudolfo Anaya (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

1940's and 1950's, vigorously demanded full equality with white Americans and asserted the Chicanos/as' right to cultural autonomy as well as national self-determination and fought for an end to racism. The Movement, however, failed to acknowledge the issue of gender inequality.¹¹ As Elizabeth Jacobs notes, class and race were seen as the primary sites of Chicanos/as' oppression, therefore "anyone who had an agenda beyond race and class could not be affiliated to the movement or in extreme cases, consider themselves to be a real Chicano/a."¹² Not containing a single reference to Chicanas, *El Plan Spiritual de Aztlán* was, in Mary Pardo's words, a "man-ifesto"¹³ demonstrating a male bias in the movement. *El Movimiento* was thus a highly gendered phenomenon and was based on machist conceptions of masculinity which, as Chicana feminists point out, excluded femininity as a viable mode of Chicano/a existence.¹⁴ Chicanas' critique of the gender bias was seen as a betrayal of the nationalist program of *El Movimiento*, and the figure of La Malinche – culturally constructed as a symbol of women's despicable presence and behavior – was used to silence female opposition.

Realizing their triple oppression based on race, class and gender, Chicanas embarked on writing literary works highly distinct from their male counterparts. While the male protagonists of Chicanos' writing asserted their macho identity, Chicana writers explored their carnal desires and female embodiment as well as used their traditionally censored sexuality as a site of protest against both the Chicano and American patriarchal cultures.¹⁵ La Malinche, once an androcentric representation of women's association with darkness, betrayal of one's community and deviousness, was re-appropriated by Chicanas as an emancipatory symbol of women's freedom, the female capacity for mediation and the preservation of relationships. Further, she became contrasted with another – by no means less influential – patriarchal model of feminine purity, passivity, innocence and desired female compliance with cultural traditions. These are all contained in the personification of Our Lady of Guadalupe (La Virgen de Guadalupe), the most significant Christian symbol in Mesoamerica.¹⁶ Thus, the most powerful feminine symbols in Chicano/a culture correspond fully with the traditional patriarchal binary view of femininity that lies in the virgin/whore dichotomy – a conception that remains under the permanent critical scrutiny of feminist as well as postcolonial thinkers. This type of dichotomy also informs the postcolonial inquiry about the power relations that pertain to genders as well as cultures and societies in various historical contexts. It is the latter term from the

11 Ramón Gutiérrez, "Community, Patriarchy and Individualism : The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality," *American Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1993): 45.

12 Elizabeth Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature: The Politics of Identity* (New York, London: Routledge), 64.

13 Cynthia Orozco, "Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma García (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 266.

14 Alma García, ed., *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997).

15 Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature*, 65–80.

16 It is beyond the scope of this article to contrast La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche. Furthermore, this discussion is vastly abundant in American academia and in numerous disciplines, e.g. anthropology, history, linguistics, literature, cultural studies, gender studies, religious studies, Latino/a studies and sociology. For a discussion of La Virgen de Guadalupe and her hybrid origins see: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera – The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 49–61; Sarah Ramirez "Borders, Feminism, and Spirituality: Movements in Chicana Aesthetic Revisioning," in *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. Arturo Aldama and Naomi Quiñonez (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 223–244; Jeanette Petterson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest of Liberation?" *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (1992): 39–47. Also, I have dealt with the topic in Tereza Kynčlová, Dagmar Pegues (eds.), *Cesta Amerikou: Antologie povídek regionálních spisovatelek* (Brno: Host, 2011).

above mentioned dichotomous pair that will be discussed in the following lines with the aim of introducing a hypothetical reading of La Malinche's personality as seen from a feminist and postcolonial perspective.

One Woman, Three Languages, Four Names

The multiplying synergies of power and discursive practices on the one hand and patriarchal and class values on the other bring about situations in which – under certain historical, social and cultural constellations – subaltern, subjugated women cannot/may not speak, for in a given moment there is no material and symbolic space in which both their utterance and language can resonate. In a similar manner, there concurrently may not be a careful ear open to listening to their voice.¹⁷

Thus, it is highly remarkable that in the course of the Spanish conquista of Mesoamerica, which from the perspective of subaltern studies or postcolonial studies, gender studies or cultural studies can be described as a collection of the abovementioned silencing, objectifying and oppressive synergies, the unshipping conquerors as well as the domestic, indigenous societies found themselves in a position in which a single woman's voice became vitally significant and, one may add, signifying. European ambitions of colonizing nature that commenced at the very end of 15th century, which Tuhivai Smith describes as one of many expressions of Western imperialism, meant that indigenous communities were faced with the arrival and physical, cultural and epistemological perseverance of "a vast array of military personnel, imperial administrators, priests, explorers, missionaries, colonial officials, artists, entrepreneurs and settlers, who cut a devastating swathe, and left a permanent wound, on the societies and communities who occupied the lands named and claimed under imperialism."¹⁸ In Tzvetan Todorov's words this historical period witnessed "the greatest genocide in human history."¹⁹

Stephen Greenblatt has called Malitzin Tenepal, also referred to as Malinali, La Malinche and Doña Marina,²⁰ "the most powerful woman in Mexico" of her times. Her voice was heard with such success that even Charles V was informed about this matter by Hernán Cortés.²¹ In letters he sent to the King and Roman Emperor, the conquistador recounted the gradual acquisitions of Mexican land and mentioned, albeit barely, that this process was being facilitated by the assistance of an Indian woman.²²

17 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 308–309.

18 Linda Tuhivai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), 21–23. Cf. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 7–12.

19 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 5.

20 Sandra M. Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 1.

21 Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 143.

22 Cordelia Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype" in *Chicana Leadership: The Frontiers Reader*, ed. Yolanda Flores Niemann, Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart and Karen Weathermon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 7–8. Candelaria is correct when she notes that Cortés mentions Malitzin Tenepal – christened Doña Marina by the Spaniards – only twice in his letters addressed to Charles V which aimed

Besides that of the victorious colonizer Cortés and his Spanish entourage, Malitzín Tenepal's voice was also heard by the Aztec emperor Montezuma and his warriors as well as by the Mayan tribes in whose thrall Malitzín Tenepal lived for a number of years in Tabasco. Her mother had sold her to slavery in order to secure an inheritance for her son, who was born following the death of her first husband, Malitzín's father. So vast was Malitzín's audience. One may say that during the entire early 16th century Central Mexico was listening to Cortés's interpreter, guide and later his mistress and Martín Cortés's mother. And the territory listened as Malitzín spoke three different languages.²³ During her enslavement, Malitzín mastered the language of her Mayan captors in addition to her native Nahuatl, the language of her original home – the Aztec empire. Following the arrival of the Spanish fleet to the shores of the Yucatán peninsula, Malitzín was quick to learn Spanish too.²⁴ Thus having acquired the knowledge of a polyglot, Malitzín assisted the Europeans and the indigenous peoples in their mutual encounters, negotiations and subsequent wars.

By no means can one claim both Mayan and Aztec cultures to have been less androcentric than the incoming Spanish, colonizing tradition. Women were subject to strict discipline and rigorous social norms based on essentialist notions of femininity derived from women's biological and reproductive functions. This was not (and is not) dissimilar to the understanding of gender roles on the old continent.²⁵ Yet, Malitzín's female voice succeeded in influencing the history of Central America – and Latin America by default – in a significant and outstanding manner, substantially intervening in the process of Mexican colonization. Furthermore, Malitzín's involvement in the processes of negotiation between the envoys of the Spanish crown and the indigenous inhabitants makes it difficult, if not completely impossible, to conceive of European imperial expeditions to the New World and other continents in traditional, i.e. patriarchal and/or heroic ways. It is this very aspect of Malitzín's presence at and participation in the negotiations that is the most important for the postcolonial and gender-focused inquiry into the history of colonization. Not only does the female interpreter's subjectivity impede and contradict "canonical ideologies of conquest and resistance as masculine heroic enterprises,"²⁶ it also complicates some simplifying notions of the processes of conquering and subjugating of territories and cultures, in the course of which straightforward and undeviating relations between the victimizing colonizers and their victimized, colonized counterparts are said to come to existence.²⁷ In addition, in line with the Foucauldian concept of power dispersion, Malitzín's presence subverts the idea of power streaming in only one direction, that is from the first, colonizer, to the latter, the colonized.²⁸

to provide a report on the process of acquiring the colonized territory. Cortés speaks of Malitzín Tenepal as an "Indian woman" and later he refers to her as Marina. Despite the fact that Cortés wrote his letters "in hopes of securing their author royal favor, prestige, wealth, and, eventually, a royal appointment as governor of New Spain" and thus his epistolary accounts were "self-serving and one-sided," descriptions of his military and diplomatic success as well as the manner in which he portrays Doña Marina testify of his respect for her interpreting and mediatory skills. Moreover, Cortés's letters also show that the conquistador is able to reflect on the strategic significance of Doña Marina's abilities within the framework of his colonizing enterprise.

23 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 100.

24 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 100.

25 Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," 5.

26 Mary Louise Pratt, "Yo Soy La Malinche: Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism" *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (1993): 860.

27 Pratt, "Yo Soy La Malinche," 860.

28 Michel Foucault, "An Introduction," *The History of Sexuality*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 95.

Unlike the situation with Spivak's subaltern Indian woman Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, the unprecedented modality of the historical moment in which two thoroughly diverse cultures and epistemic systems encountered one another resulted in a situation in which the extraordinarily gifted Malitzin could speak (she had the permission), and was able to speak (she was endowed both with linguistic and social skills). During Cortés's rapid conquest of Mexico between March 1519 and August 1520, Malitzin spoke continuously and she spoke her mind in the sense of an articulation of her personal beliefs and opinions. She did so regardless of the fact that she represented an intersection of racial, social and gender-related ideologies which symbolically relegated her as a domestic, colored and othered²⁹ woman-slave into the margins and pushed her beyond any conceivable sphere from which a speaking subject could ever emerge. Despite this unfavorable determination, Malitzin became so popular that in the eyes of the indigenous nations Hernán Cortés and she gradually coalesced and were viewed as one unit. The indigenous name La Malinche, which Malitzin then accepted as an evidence of the respect she had earned, progressively ceased to refer to her solely as Cortés's interpreter. The name was extended onto the conqueror as well and thus designated the two individuals in this ambivalent and single interpretation-defying couple.³⁰ And, as Todorov remarks, "for once, it is not the woman who takes the man's name."³¹

Why, then, is Malitzin currently viewed as a mute, silenced personification of putative female perfidiousness, treachery and betrayal of one's homeland and nation? How did it come about that this outstanding historical figure – in her times highly regarded and revered by the non-Aztec tribes whom Montezuma's oppressive regime had economically subjugated³² – was transformed into one of the fundamental feminine archetypes implying abject femininity in today's Mexican, Chicana/o and Latin American culture? Why is La Malinche "a polysemous sign whose signifieds are, for all their ambiguity, generally negative?"³³ And can this "traitress supreme"³⁴ speak ever again and be heard?

When Voice is Mute and Silence is Audible

We learn about La Malinche and Cortés's cooperation along with his negotiations with and battles against indigenous peoples solely from Spanish records on Mexican conquest. Fragments can also be gathered from codices, indigenous hand-written books, and less frequently from preserved illustrations.³⁵ Thus, there is no document authored by La

29 For a discussion of the implications of the process of othering, see Linda Alcoff's essay "The Problem of Speaking for Others" in *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1993): 5–32.

30 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 143; Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 101.

31 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 101.

32 Debra Blake, *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, Oral History and Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 35, 40.

33 Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature*, 2.

34 Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," 2.

35 A very articulate rendering evidencing La Malinche's importance at negotiations between the representatives of Spanish and domestic cultures is provided by the Florentine Codex, an illustration from which is reprinted in Todorov's *Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* on pages 101–103. The image portrays Cortés and the Aztec ruler Montezuma each placed at the margin of the illustration. La Malinche is positioned between the two men (and the two cultures and worlds they come to represent). Thus, she not only occupies the symbolic space, but also the physical space that can be labeled as liminal. According to Bhabha, liminality

Malinche herself that would authentically³⁶ in her own words capture and reflect on her role as the colonizer's interpreter, intermediary and guide, and – depending on the paradigmatic and critical perspective – a mistress and/or sexual object. It is therefore ironic, albeit not at all unusual, that Malitzín's subjectivity, which was defined by linguistic prowess and speech acts, is absent in the archives of history.³⁷

La Malinche's voice immerses itself into a sphere of boundless silence, for the boundaries of what can be and could have been articulated, recorded and thus known, are endless and incognizable. As Greenblatt notes, this void or absence of chronicles of indigenous epistemologies is a vast field of silences. These are "the silences of the unlettered and those who, though literate, did not have occasion, license, or motive to leave a record of their thoughts."³⁸ Further, as both the averred founder of New Historicism and the doyen of postcolonial studies Edward Said observe, it is European men (and with regard to the prevailing gender norms much less often European women) who are convinced that an integral part of the colonial command as well as discovery- and voyage-related challenge is a kind of philosophical, religious, scientific or historical mission to record the voices of the Other, i.e. the voices of the newly-encountered culture (by means of which – partly unconsciously – the West explores its own identity and its binary, oppositional construction). Simultaneously, however, Europeans' power-laden, conquering and objectifying efforts thoroughly silence the ones whose voices they wish to capture.³⁹ As Greenblatt points out, "the natives themselves often seem most silent at those rare moments in which they are made to speak."⁴⁰

Thus, even if La Malinche herself cannot speak of her life through a story figuratively confined to pen and paper – notwithstanding whether such paper has not been preserved or never existed –, she paradoxically comes to straddle two liminal modes of being: that of an active interpreter who can speak and what is more who is encouraged to speak, and at the same time that of a muffled, muted and, indeed, absent subaltern person, who cannot speak and whose voice is void of resonance.⁴¹

La lengua (tongue and language), a nickname La Malinche was given by the Spanish conquistadores, therefore inhabits Bhabha's space in-between.⁴² She occupies a location between two binary, mutually exclusive assignments that imply the activity of speaking on the one hand and the passivity of silence on the other. Concurrently, she oscillates between being a subject and being an object as she operates in the framework of opposing discourses.

For one thing La Malinche is positioned within what I call the colonizing discourse. This colonizing discourse confers her a voice and urges her to speak; it listens to her words and provides her with agency as well as with symbolic and meaning-making power. As Greenblatt notes, "[La Malinche] could have chosen to tell [Cortés] virtually

refers to a space-in-between that is typified by ambiguity, hybridity, fluidity and the potential for subversion, transgression and transformation. Cf. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 142–146.

36 For a discussion and problematization of authenticity cf. Loomba, 152–153.

37 John Langshaw Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975).

38 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 145.

39 Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conception of the Orient* (London: Vintage Books, 1978).

40 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 146.

41 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 308.

42 Cf. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

anything, and the deeply skeptical Cortés would have been forced to believe her or remain in the dark” since “the limits of her understanding [...] were his limits.”⁴³ For another thing it is precisely this colonizing discourse that banishes her into a position of silenced, objectified victim of the conquest efforts, in which La Malinche vis-à-vis her resounding voice and trilingual proficiency lacks the expressive means necessary for the conceptualization, articulation and conveyance of her personal, gendered, racialized lived experience. In other words, she is an agent, as she can speak within the colonizing discourse and yet she is at the same time muted by what I refer to as the discourse of silence effect. La Malinche cannot speak of herself and her role within the colonizing discourse.

I argue above that La Malinche is a sign that vastly problematizes traditional conceptions of the colonizer-colonized relationship, which is always-already gendered, laden with hierarchies and definitions of power, and which preconceives a sort of a transcendental and incontestable intelligibility of such structure. The notion of the orderly organization of authority is, in reference to Derrida’s critique of logocentrism, untenable, as it is mediated by language, i.e. a system of unstable, slippery and arbitrary signs.⁴⁴ The idea of La Malinche’s speaking of her very self and of her own experience complicates all the layers of both the colonizing discourse and the discourse of silence, plus it complicates La Malinche’s roles within these two discourses. This comes about exactly because she is navigating (a) liminal, hybrid space(s) both within and in between the colonizing discourse and the discourse of silence.

If it were that La Malinche was Cortés’s “critically important tool” and that “eventually he could give her away as used goods”⁴⁵ one could consider her speaking and interpreting voice within the abovementioned colonizing discourse not to have been an active, independent voice that resonated autonomously, but rather an enslaved, objectified means instrumentalized to serve the interests of others. As a matter of fact, La Malinche disappears from all historical documents and chronicles immediately after she completes her interpreting and go-between tasks for the colonizer.⁴⁶

Under these circumstances, Greenblatt’s most powerful woman in Mexico is much closer to being a victimized and instrumentalized representation of femininity than an independent, speaking subject, for speaking in such a context becomes a function of symbolic violence⁴⁷ that the colonizers use against La Malinche, as the mediation of knowledge through translating and interpreting never takes place on equal grounds or between two equal partners.⁴⁸ On the very contrary, La Malinche’s silence in this context transforms itself into a weapon that subverts the idea of the established binary opposition activity/passivity, since this very silence builds barriers to those who would aim to expropriate, steal, other, reposition and rewrite her never verbalized personal story. As I show below, this is exactly what Octavio Paz accomplished in the 20th century in his masterpiece *Labyrinth of Solitude*.⁴⁹

43 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 145, 191.

44 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976).

45 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 145.

46 Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 30. Following the Spanish takeover of the Aztec empire, La Malinche accompanied Cortés during his expedition to Honduras between 1524 and 1526. After this event there is no trace of her in the currently known historical documents.

47 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 35–40.

48 Simon, *Gender in Translation*, 39.

49 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1985).

Hybrid Space, Hybrid Identity

Viewed from the perspective introduced above, the historical figure of Cortés's interpreter offers multiple frameworks of interpretation. La Malinche validates the existence of liminal space – a vital concept in postcolonial studies – and engenders the performativity of multilayered, ambivalent identity. Dwelling in the in-between territory which is to a large degree uncategorizable, however, does not imply that La Malinche can extricate herself from an existence in which she would not be inherently forced to do violence to her self, as this is the location in which she transgresses the margins of the social sphere legitimized by the conquistadors-inflicted order.⁵⁰

In other words, one should be extremely careful, sensitive and self-reflexive when explicating the issue of occupying liminal, in-between spaces, as the danger of reproduction of symbolic violence and implied, silencing power relations is constantly at play. The liminal, border or threshold location and the manifold consciousness that arises from the position on the border is, as Chicana theorist and writer Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, "in a constant state of transition."⁵¹ Liminality is typified by a permanent tension which incessantly changes the domain(s) of definition of the interpretation of the in-between position, for it is simultaneously a hybrid space whose inhabitants are "[t]he prohibited and forbidden [...], [l]os atravesados, [...] the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.'"⁵² On stepping beyond the liminal in-between space towards the established order, all such dis-qualified subjects run the risk of being – figuratively speaking – "raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot," as the only legitimate subjects in the status quo are those in power, i.e. "the whites and those who align themselves with whites."⁵³

Although Anzaldúa paints a hybrid existence in dramatic and drastic colors, it is a milieu which the thinker herself as well as other Chicana writers consciously and reflexively claim their allegiance to, as it fully bears witness to their lived experience. La Malinche represents one of the most important feminine archetypes both in Chicana writing and in Chicana psyche. She is the embodiment of singularity-defying multiplicity that greatly corresponds with the Chicana *mestizaje* (mixed) background. Because they are members of a racial, linguistic, religious and cultural minority, the political struggle of Chicanas is first characterized by a genealogy of colonization and second by their resistance to sexist machismo within their very own community.⁵⁴

Following the American annexation of the former northern Mexico, Mexicans living in the territory literally overnight found themselves in a different country and became second-rank citizens in the U.S. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano/a minority promoted the community's renaissance in the 1960s by establishing a powerful and outspoken *El Movimiento* – the Chicano Movement – and more explicitly by claiming the strategic label "Chicanos," which separates the historically "annexed" former inhabitants of Mexico who were subjugated by white Anglo power from latter immigrants who have crossed the Rio Grande/Río Bravo border. Chicanos/as succinctly

50 Norma Alarcón, "Traductora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," *Cultural Critique*, no. 13 (1989): 86.

51 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.

52 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.

53 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25–26.

54 Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature*, 98–102.

summarized the effect of the shifting U.S./Mexico border that gave rise to their community-awareness in the statement "we never crossed the border, the border crossed us."⁵⁵

As much as the Chicano/a movement claimed it promoted general interests of all Chicanos in the U.S., it was unable – like numerous other nationalist movements – to reflect on the fact that it constructed the nation as an essentialist and homogenous group, implicitly excluding women in general and lesbians and gays in particular.⁵⁶ Thus, despite the active participation of Chicanas in and their identification with the movement and its program of advancing the recognition of Chicano identity as a relevant, comprehensible and inhabitable⁵⁷ full-fledged way of being, their criticism unmasks the nationalist movement's inherent gender-blindness, homophobia and macho rhetoric.⁵⁸ Therefore, male representatives label the women criticizing the unreflected bias of the movement betrayers of the loyalty to the Chicano community and its political agenda. In reference to La Malinche, female betrayers are called malinchistas.⁵⁹ This Spanish term, which marks a traitorous stance towards one's culture and undue partiality toward the foreign in particular and the new in general characterizes the negative Mexican (and Chicano) reappraisal of the historical figure of Cortés's interpreter during the Mexican struggle for national independence. For having slept with the colonizer, for having given birth to his son and thus the mestizo race, and for having facilitated Cortés's successful "civilizing" mission on the continent with her linguistic skills, La Malinche, once a respected icon of the indigenous Mesoamerican cultures, is transformed into the traitress of the Mexican nation. Chicanas, by extension, become betrayers of the Chicano community, as they represent La Malinche's cultural, ethnic and symbolic daughters for being bilingual mestizas who embrace ideologies in opposition to Western as well as Chicano patriarchy.⁶⁰

In other words, if La Malinche inhabits the ambivalent and hybrid space between cultures and languages that is informed by her gender and racial identity, this is also the case for her female mestiza descendants. Chicanas are situated within a web of gender(ed) and cultural relations that are being constantly negotiated, interpreted and translated. They bridge the border between today's Mexico and the U.S. as well as between the Spanish and English languages. And yet, both of these languages are colonizer's languages. These are the reasons why to Chicanas, La Malinche embodies a "paradigmatic figure,"⁶¹ "feminist prototype,"⁶² "mythic figure,"⁶³ and "literary archetype."⁶⁴

55 Rudolfo Acuña, *Anything But Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1995), xvi.

56 Cf. Anna Nieto Gomez, "Sexism in the Movimiento" in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma García (New York and London: Routledge), 97–100 and Gutierrez, 1993.

57 For the term "inhabitable identity" cf. Jan Blommaert, *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Jan Matonoha, "Identita: obyvatelná, zraňující, prázdňá. Identita jako aporie v "reflexi" literárních textů (Součková, Richterová, Hrabal)" in *Kvalitativní přístup a metody ve vědách o člověku. Individualita a jedinečnost v kvalitativním výzkumu*, ed. Kateřina Záborská and Ivo Čermák (Brno: Psychologický ústav Akademie věd ČR, 2010), 96–103.

58 Jacobs, *Mexican American Literature*, 64.

59 Paula Moya, "Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity: Cherríe Moraga and Chicana Feminism" in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 89.

60 Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traditora," 63; Pratt, "Yo Soy La Malinche," 861.

61 Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traditora."

62 Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype."

63 Pratt, "Yo Soy La Malinche," 1993.

64 Diana Tey Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1995).

Translation and Betrayal

Should we choose to view La Malinche's interpreting as a sign of tilt or inclination towards the Spanish conquerors – although from the feminist perspective this is a highly problematic view –, it may become understandable why with Mexico's earned independence from Spain in 1821, La Malinche becomes conceived of as a symbol of treachery and one's selling of the self to the foreign, i.e. European values, culture and domination.⁶⁵ It is because Mexican 19th century nationalism "reads" La Malinche as the person responsible for Cortés's colonizing achievement, as her linguistic competence (and her intimate relationship with the colonizer) are said to have swung the gates of Mexico open for the Spanish to enter.

It must be stressed once again, however, that at the time when Cortés's navy was disembarking on the beaches of the Yucatán, Malitzín was living among the Mayas, having been sold to slavery by her own people, her Aztec tribe and family. This remark is not meant to conjure up the notion of revenge that might have driven La Malinche's later activities. Rather, it aims to point out that La Malinche's action radius, within which she found herself together with another approximately twenty women whom the Maya slaveholders gave to the Spanish as a gift,⁶⁶ and in which she could make decisions as to how her language skills should be put into practice, was extremely diminished. It would be wrong to expect a slave woman to act autonomously and independently under such circumstances. Instead, such hopes pertaining to La Malinche's agency would denote a serious underestimation of the *modus operandi* of the Mexican conquest and of the multiplying effect of the marginalization of indigenous men and especially of indigenous women that were instigated by the process of colonization.⁶⁷

In a patriarchal system (be it subject to the influences of colonization or not) women exist beyond the law of the Father and beyond the language order, and thus the language they can use is not theirs, as Lacan and his disciples Irigaray, Cixous or Kristeva infer.⁶⁸ With regards to the symbolic distribution of gender roles and power relations, nevertheless, it is symptomatic of the androcentric society that, in a peculiar manner, it places the responsibility for the abuse, misuse, and use of language on women and furthermore makes this responsibility a deeply arbitrary phenomenon, as the purpose(s) that both women's speaking and/or silence are to serve are frequently punished by the moral order along gender lines.⁶⁹

Concurrently, aspects of hierarchy and gender are repeatedly represented in binary oppositions that lay the foundations of meaning in Western thought. Besides speaking and writing as Derrida argued,⁷⁰ such a binary opposition is for example represented by the contrast of active utterance versus passive translation and, more specifically, the contrast of a creative act followed by a reacting, i.e. derived act of reproduction and

65 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 101.

66 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 100.

67 Candelaria, "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype," 11.

68 Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 113–125.

69 I analyze at length the complex and sometimes hopeless, no-win position of women who actively use language within a patriarchal moral order using examples from Karel Jaromír Erben's poetry collection *Kytice*. Cf. Tereza Kynčlová "Feministické vzdorné čtení a genderová analýza na příkladech z Erbenovy *Kytice*" in *Česká literatura v perspektivách genderu: IV. kongres světové literárněvědné bohemistiky: Jiná česká literatura (?)*, ed. Jan Matonoha (Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu Akademie věd ČR a Filip Tomáš – Akropolis), 94–99.

70 Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 131.

translation.⁷¹ The oppositions of authorship/translation or original/copy form an analogy to the men/woman binary not only because binary oppositions are hierarchical and always-already gendered, but also because in Western mythology authorship is ascribed to masculinity, whereas reproduction is associated with femininity.⁷²

Thus, La Malinche's speaking, interpreting and acting is inherently performed within a discourse of pre-existent subjugation that is implied by the structure and organization of the language and thinking that both arrive in the New World with Cortés as free-riding stowaways. Dwelling in a liminal and hybrid space, it is, as has been implied, pregnant with new visions, ideas and epistemologies useful for inventing new identities and their performances which (can) bring about the potential for the subversion of an oppressive and disciplining dominance, a feature which is greatly exploited by Chicana writers. It can never be guaranteed, however, that these new identities and innovative versions of hybrid spaces will not turn into an excursion down – if not directly a dead end street – then possibly a dangerous, dark alley.

For as Jan Matonoha,⁷³ inspired by Judith Butler,⁷⁴ warns us, the efforts of various reinterpretations aiming at re-appropriation of the significance, symbolic importance and dignity of identities of the subaltern, oppressed or those who happen to be in the space in-between – be these reinterpretations emancipatory and well-meant – may produce counter-productive effects:

At efforts to quench anxiously one's uncertainty in regards to the status of his/her very self, oftentimes various types of recognized identities are called upon to come rushing to help, to which a subject can yield and thus saturate his/her need for social recognition and, by extension, his/her own self-recognition. These identities may in their effects be, however, subjecting and injuring, for the very difference between the constitution and subjection is, by definition, undistinguishable.⁷⁵

Matonoha points out the danger contained in the moments when the hierarchical, power-laden and discursive order by means of imperceptible, miniature structures or invisible nanofibers creates an effect in which new identities that have been reassessed, rethought and recognized will capsize into a painful and self-injuring conception of one's self.⁷⁶ In such moments one performs Bourdieu's symbolic violence on one's very self.

How to Do Things with a Word

Jitka Malečková shows how the rhetoric of nationalism can banish women into purely instrumental roles: because of the association of women with reproduction it becomes an imperative to produce members of a given nation and pass national (and at the same time inherently patriarchal) traditions and values on to them. According to Malečková,

71 Simon, *Gender in Translation*, 9, 11, 59.

72 Simon, *Gender in Translation*, 9–11. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 3–14.

73 Matonoha, "Identita," 96–97.

74 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

75 Matonoha, "Identita," 96–97. Translation mine.

76 Matonoha, "Identita," 97.

historical sources documenting both early periods of the histories of nations as well as national myths and legends frequently portray the woman “as sole ruler, the wife of an important male figure or as a saint, and only in isolated, rare cases do images of a group of women who actually have had an influence on the course of events appear.”⁷⁷ To a certain extent, La Malinche’s image matches these attributes. Paradoxically enough, however, in the context of the formation of the Mexican (and also Chicano) national identity she comes to serve as the periphery or as the margin, as the undesired binary or, simply put, as the Other,⁷⁸ against which Mexican-ness is defined and from which it distances itself and stretches away.⁷⁹ For it is usually the case that the representation of femininity as constructed within nationalism displays a perfect ideal that needs to be achieved, aimed for, approximated, and desired, rather than despised and dismissed.

Therefore, when Chicanas closely identify with the legacy of La Malinche by re-writing, reclaiming and repositioning her as the symbolic and actual (racial) mother of all mestizas, and by associating themselves as women with her, they successfully subvert the existing machist or, more prominently, misogynist conception of Cortés’s interpreter and companion. As a result Chicanas create a new, free space that allows for artistic production, and most importantly, for a re-definition of themselves.⁸⁰ They are, however, much less successfully able to subvert and undermine another culturally nestled stereotype. This is the fact that Chicano (and Mexican) men consider themselves – as Octavio Paz explains in a famous passage in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* – to be “the sons of La Malinche,” whom they see as a raped and subjugated woman who mothered Cortés’s son Martín, the first symbolic mestizo.⁸¹ Moreover, by having succumbed to Cortés, La Malinche humiliated, paralyzed and symbolically castrated the men of her nation irrespective of whether she fell a victim to the violent act, or, as Paz describes Doña Marina, she gave herself to the colonizer voluntarily.⁸² As the meaning of the word that Paz later ascribed to the mother of mestizaje will indicate below, the idea of voluntariness is thoroughly absent in La Malinche’s notorious nickname. Only a void remains.

The mestizo race as well as Mexican and Chicano identity are thus derived from an act of emasculation or the deprivation of masculinity in indigenous men. The suggested rape of La Malinche symbolizes the abasement, defamation and subjugation of men, women, and the land – in other words, it represents the final conquest of the territory by a foreign culture, and an accomplished colonization.⁸³ Then, Octavio Paz – author *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (*El laberinto de la soledad*), which ranks among foundational works of Mexican literary canon – adds another label to La Malinche’s already multiple names. This appellation is already an interpretation of the Nobel Prize winner’s reading of this principal female figure and especially of her experience of and involvement in the conception and birthing of a new race and thus Mexican (and subsequently Chicano) nations. He calls her La Chingada – literally the fucked woman.

77 Jitka Malečková, *Úrodná půda. Žena ve službách národa* (Praha: ISV nakladatelství, 2002), 166. Translation mine.

78 Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

79 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 65–88.

80 Naomi Quiñonez, “Re(Riting) the Chicana Postcolonial: from Traitor to 21st Century Interpreter” in *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. Arturo Aldama and Naomi Quiñonez (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 138.

81 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 65–88.

82 Blake, *Chicana Sexuality and Gender*, 41.

83 Alarcón, “Traddutora, Traditora,” 61.

This is a label by which Paz attempts to explain the somewhat masochistic self-understanding of the Mexican self and of Mexican machismo.⁸⁴ This label strongly accentuates the sexual subtext and violent possession of a woman. At the same time this is also stressed by the epithet La Malinche, which denotes her passive, inactive role. In this regard, every woman is already a whore – La Chingada, as the Spanish vulgar verb *chingar* (to fuck, to screw something or somebody up, to maim) within the context of a heteronormative order a priori signifies and connotes (male) activity and (female) passivity on the one hand, and implied sin on the other. In Western culture, the sexual act always inherently entails all such meanings and, further, is associated with violence which is actually dictated and instigated by the very aforementioned verb, the meaning of which “always contains the idea of aggression, whether it is the simple act of molesting, pricking or censuring, or the violent act of wounding and killing. The verb denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force. It also means to injure, to lacerate, to violate – bodies, souls, objects – and to destroy.”⁸⁵

The sin which is implied by both the verb *chingar* and by the derived feminine label La Chingada, and which arches over to the mythical past of a virgin, innocent Eden that becomes according to traditional understandings corrupted by Eve’s original sin, leaves an impression solely on the bodies of women. By the effect of this verb, La Malinche, La Chingada, Eve, mother, woman all become prisoners in their sexualized bodies, bearers of stigmatized sexuality, embodiments of hated sin, and, finally, representations of abject passivity. Because of the always-implied sin, La Malinche is a metaphor of betrayal, since the verb *chingar* in its significance makes any other intercourse but rape impossible and discursively drives the grammatical, targeted patient into a single role – that of a victim. Thus, if the *chingón* – who discursively cannot be anyone else but a rapist – i.e. the possessing subject is at the same time the colonizer himself, the woman’s sinful transgressions are multiplied. In addition, when the colonizer prompts La Malinche to speak, the effect of her sin is amplified, as the ab/mis/use of language is, as I have mentioned earlier, scarcely a safe haven for women. La Malinche’s sin casts a shadow on her (symbolic) sons, Paz’s *hijos de la Chingada*. The transfer of responsibility from the rapist colonizer onto the victim is discursively accomplished.

These are the reasons La Malinche personifies the repudiated mother of the Mexican and Chicano nations, and why her daughters are the heiresses of this culturally constructed and injurious rejection, as the abjectivity is implied and inevitably performed by language itself. La Malinche, however, is not the national “traitress supreme.”⁸⁶

The victimizing and subjugating traitors are, purely in the Foucauldian spirit, the above discussed verb, language and discourse. The pessimistic purport of La Malinche’s determination and its potentially injurious effect on liberatory and empowering reinterpretations of this ambivalent and multi-layered figure in Chicana writing can, however, be mitigated by employing, once again, Foucault’s observation that language and discourse do not subject their speakers only, but also produce them.⁸⁷ As Cortés’ female interpreter and partner moves within the proverbial minefield of the interlocking network of power, gender and discourse, she is able to make use of languages that are available and accessible to her, so that she can grasp the colonizer’s world of ideas and,

84 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 65–88.

85 Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 76–77.

86 Candelaria, “La Malinche, Feminist Prototype,” 1.

87 Cf. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1978.

as a result, comprehend her own culture anew.⁸⁸ In this respect, not only is La Malinche the actual mother of racial mestizaje and hybridity, she is, more importantly, a symbol of cultural mestizaje,⁸⁹ and also a personification of the ability to inhabit the hybrid, ambiguous space in-between. As such, La Malinche is a sign of hope, for she marks an exit out of the oppression stemming from dualistic modes of thinking. It is this very aspect that makes La Malinche an important figure for Chicanas, as they also inhabit social, cultural, racial and gender(ed) spaces which defy binaries along the geographical U.S.-Mexican border.

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88 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 101.

89 Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 100.

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