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Woman as Dialect: La Malinche in the Construction and Re-Construction of Post-Colonial Mexican Identity

Natalie Irene Schuman
Bard College

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Woman as Dialect: La Malinche in the Construction and
Re-Construction of Post-Colonial Mexican Identity

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by
Natalie Schuman

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It seems that after 20,000, I am out of words. I'll be brief.

Thank you

For teaching me new ways of seeing,

Nicole Caso,
Peter Filkins,
Tom Keenan,
Peter Rosenblum,
Robert Weston,
Mary Whittemore.

For unending support,

Mom,
Dad,
Em,

For being dear to me and letting me be dear to you,

Angel,
Emma,
Emmet,
Freddy,
Jake,
Lydia,
Mandy,
Meghan,
Rob,
Sean,
Tash.
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Introduction

“Her first step is to take inventory [...] She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of [...] She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths” (Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 83).

The historical and symbolic figure of La Malinche, (also known as Malintzin, Malinal Tenepal and Doña Marina) an indigenous slave who became Cortés’s translator and lover, has been warped countless times to fit shifting political agendas and national identities in post-colonial Mexico. The multitude of reductive meanings that La Malinche has come to signify include, but are not limited to, interpreter, mediator, traitor, misguided and exploited lover, whore, and sell out. Her name has been transformed into an insult, Malinchista, now officially listed in Spanish dictionaries and used commonly in Mexican Spanish, means traitor. Despite the little historical information available about the infamous figure, historians, writers, artists, and politicians have appropriated her legacy countless times in an attempt to articulate Mexican national identity.

What historical information we do know for sure about La Malinche comes to us mostly from Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España, written in 1517. La Malinche was born in 1502 in Coatzacoalcos to an Aztec chief, giving her more access to education than most. After the death of her father, her mother remarried and sold Malintzin to nomadic traders in order to gain her inheritance for the son she bore by her second marriage. Malinche was eventually sold by the traders to the ruling cacique of Tabasco, where she lived until Cortés’s arrival in 1519. Upon his
arrival in Tabasco, the *cacique* gave Malintzin to Cortés along with 19 other women to serve as domestic slaves upon the Spaniards’ conquest. Malintzin’s role quickly changed from domestic and sexual servant to indispensable aide as her knowledge of the country, its native customs and two of its native languages (Mayan and Nahuatl) became known to Cortés and his men. La Malinche acted as a translator, adviser and perhaps lover to Cortés, with whom she bore a child.

As a convenient representation of conflicting loyalties and intersectional identities, La Malinche has taken many symbolic forms. She has become the embodiment of the Mexican identity struggles between indigenous and Spanish influences, and the particularities of her mode of survival have been largely ignored in favor of a simplification into a symbol that serves the political agenda of the work in which she appears.

An analysis of the ways in which the figure of La Malinche, along with her symbolic counterpart the Virgin of Guadalupe, have been appropriated in foundational works of literature and art throughout Mexican history sheds light on broader trends regarding the objectification of women. In understanding La Malinche as a semiotic object through which writers, artists and politicians articulate their own personal national identity, I hope to reveal a masculinist impulse within linguistic, historical and artistic tradition to use the symbol of the woman as a channel through which the author articulates his own identity. In this way, I will argue that the symbol of the woman operates as language does. Her various conventional definitions (whore, mother, intermediary, virgin, are several of those explored in this paper) combine to form a system of symbols that the masculine author has at his disposal. Just as language offers
him a glossary of signifiers through which he can work out and articulate his inner thoughts, feminine archetypes can be utilized to verbalize his interiority. Within these parallel modes of expression, both language and the symbol of the feminine are intermediaries between one’s experience and the articulation of that experience.

Language as intermediary

If we think of language simplistically, as a system of symbols and sounds in which each sign substitutes for or denotes a direct experience, we see that language is an intermediary mechanism through which meaning is deferred. In this sense, language itself is a process of translation, from actual meaning to a linguistic sign. Octavio Paz, in his canonical essay “Translation: Literature and Letters” writes, “language is already a translation - first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase” (154). So if language is a translation from direct experience to the articulation of that experience which allows one to share it with others, what comes before language?

Before a child can speak our language, she relates to her experiences and the objects around her in a relatively unmediated way. Once she moves from the “nonverbal” to the verbal world, she makes her formal entrance into culture, as her modes of observation and expression are regulated by her culture’s language. In this way, language is the intermediary between her natural, unmediated state and her participation as an agent of her culture. Therefore, language can be seen as an intermediary between nature and culture.

Language helps to mediate between nature and culture by creating a common plane of understanding between its speakers. In his essay “The Nature of Language,”
linguist Edward Sapir explains language’s productive power in that “once the form of a language is established it can discover meanings for its speakers which are not simply traceable to a given quality or experience itself but must be explained to a large extent as the projection of potential meanings into the raw material of experience” (10). He proposes that there is a man who has only seen one elephant in his life, yet is able to speak without hesitation about ten elephants or two elephants walking side by side or a herd of elephants. In this example the speaker is able to analyze his experience (which consists of only one elephant) into dissociable elements in order to transcend the immediately given in his experience (one elephant) and create a world of the potential integrating with the actual (a herd of elephants), thus transcending his reality through language. Sapir argues that this imaginary space created by language is what makes up culture. Instead of existing within nature where only one elephant exists, language allows its speakers to transcend nature and occupy this imaginary linguistic realm (culture).

In this way, language is the conquering agent of culture. It takes that which is immediately given, nature, and transcends it, even subjugating it to its will. A compelling example of language’s ability to conquer is the concept of “mother earth.” Without language, man could never overpower nature in all of its power and beauty. By putting a name to the insurmountable force of the earth, language allows man to simultaneously control and transcend the concept of the natural world. And he does so with the symbol of the feminine. Naming allows the concept of nature to be controlled, precisely by gendering it as a concept that can and should be possessed (woman).

Nature is no longer an unpredictable and impenetrable force, now she is simply a woman. She is our mother and she loves us. No matter how scary her storms, how
debilitating her droughts, how tumultuous her seas, she is on our side. This is a linguistic fallacy, the natural world does not love us like a mother her child, she is ambivalent towards us. But language offers man the opportunity to control that which he cannot feasibly do with his body alone. Language conquers nature’s storms, droughts and seas and this imagined linguistic power becomes real as language builds around it a culture and a system of belief that perpetuates the fallacy of our strength.

Why Mother Earth? Woman as intermediary

Just as language allows man to bridge the gap between the chaos of nature and the concise expression necessary to coexist within culture, the symbol of the woman is utilized as a linguistic channel between man’s inner self and his extrapolation of his interiority. She is a dialect. A conduit for man’s meaning. She is the reproduction of his essence, biologically and linguistically. Just as language is a conduit between actual meaning and the articulation of meaning, women are often used as translative bodies. The symbol of femininity, whether within the archetype of the mother, the virgin, the whore, among others, is often used to negotiate questions of male identity, nation-building, or of translation theory itself. Given the abundantly studied concept of woman as some deformed or incomplete version of man, she is placed, on the hierarchy of cultural ideals, as closer to nature than man. She is therefore often seen and portrayed as an intermediary between nature and culture, between meaning and articulation of meaning.

My argument for the utilization of women as linguistic signifiers relies on the ever present concept of women as intermediaries between nature and culture, just like language. On the scale of nature and culture or of regression and progress, men have perceived themselves to have conquered the chaos of nature and evolved to a purely
human state. Women, on the other hand, occupy an ambiguous and intermediary position somewhere between evolved man and animal. She is therefore often used as a gendered symbol of the universal feeling of ambiguity, or the state of being in between things.

Women’s perceived intermediary state between nature and culture allows her to be used as a linguistic intermediary, towards the articulation of masculine interiority. Octavio Paz’s book *The Labyrinth of Solitude and The Other Mexico*, originally published in 1950 features an essay called “The Sons of La Malinche.” This essay has become a touchstone text for revisionist work on La Malinche and for understanding Mexican national identity as a whole. In his essay, Octavio Paz identifies the effort to resolve conflicting indigenous and Spanish identities as the primary struggle of the Mexican man. He explains that Mexican identity is bound up with insecurity and unpredictability: “treachery, loyalty, crime and love hide out in the depths of our glance. We attract and repel” (71). He considers his country’s national identity a very confused one from the perspective of the foreigner peering into the Mexican experience, attempting to identify and classify it, as well as the perspective of the Mexican, looking inward in order to understand himself. Paz goes on to define that enigmatic quality: “The details of the image formed of us often vary with the spectator, but it is always an ambiguous if not contradictory image: we are insecure, and our responses, like our silences, are unexpected and unpredictable” (71).

In order to articulate this feeling of ambiguity, Paz uses the metaphor of the woman. Paz argues that just as Mexican national identity’s enigmatic quality is born out of Mexico’s heterogenous and complicated make up. In this way, Paz argues that Mexico is like a woman:
Woman is another being who lives apart and is therefore an enigmatic figure. It would be better to say that she is the Enigma. She attracts and repels like men of an alien race or nationality. She is an image of both fecundity and death. In almost every culture the goddesses of creation are also goddesses of destruction. Woman is a living symbol of the strangeness of the universe and its radical heterogeneity. As such, does she bide life within herself, or death? What does she think? Or does she think? Does she truly have feelings? Is she the same as we are?... Despite woman’s full, rounded nakedness, there is always something on guard in her: Eve and Aphrodite concentrate the mystery of the world’s heart. (72) This representation of woman points to her assigned categorization as a lesser human, as an unstable and incomprehensible animal who offends the refined, empirical nature of the ideal man. Paz identifies the source of anxiety within Mexican identity as the existence of competing loyalties to Spanish and indigenous influences. Paz suggests that this complexity, this irreconcilable duality is best represented in the “living symbol of the woman.” In this essay, Paz appropriates woman’s ambiguous character as well as the specific symbol of La Malinche to extrapolate on his own inner tensions and contradictions.

Just like the generalized woman he speaks through, as quoted above, Paz articulates Mexico’s identity struggle through the manipulation of La Malinche’s assumed tensions and conflicting loyalties. Paz writes that the nation was born out of the rape of the Spanish conquest. Note that the English translation interprets the Spanish word
violación as violate, despite the fact that the word more commonly means to rape. Paz writes,

Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were fascinated, violated [raped] or seduced by the Spaniards. And as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal. (72)

In making this connection between the ambiguous and conflicting Mexican national identity to the ambiguous and conflicting nature of La Malinche and of women in general, Paz makes use of the common discursive tool of woman as the signifier of ambiguity.

In The Creation of the Patriarchy, Gerda Lerner discusses this tendency exhibited by Paz to reduce women into symbolic enigmas. She argues that women are considered ambiguous because they are not allowed the privilege of theoretical and ultimately false simplification and hierarchization through language. She writes:

Women, like the poor, the subordinate, the marginals, have close knowledge of ambiguity, of feelings mixed with thought, of value judgments coloring abstractions. Women have always experienced the reality of self and community, known it, and shared it with each other…Patriarchal thought has relegated such gender-defined experiences to the realm of the 'natural,' the non-transcendent. Women's knowledge becomes mere 'intuition,' women's talk becomes 'gossip.' (224)
She knows real experience while men, in the terms of linguist Edward Sapir, have the freedom to transcend reality or “the immediately given in their individual experiences” through mechanisms of culture such as language (10).

Lerner goes on to situate the captivity of women to the realm of the actual within the socially enforced sexual division of labor:

Women deal with the irredeemably particular: they experience reality daily, hourly, in their service function (taking care of food and dirt); in their constantly interruptible time; their splintered attention. Can one generalize when the particular tugs at one's sleeve? He who makes symbols and explains the world and she who takes care of his bodily and psychic needs and of his children - the gulf between them is enormous. (224)

In dealing with the particular, with “food and dirt,” women’s mode of relating privileges the particular, the real, which is messy and often conflicting. Men’s ability to imagine a herd of elephants, to return to Sapir’s metaphor, is available to them only because they do not have “the particular tug[ging] at [his] sleeve.”

In her essay “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”, Sherry B. Ortner breaks down this connection between women’s connection to nature and their consequent symbolic portrayal as ambiguous intermediaries in more detail. Ortner arrives at her thesis by attempting to determine the origins of the universal subordination of women while also dispelling the fallacy of biological hierarchy between the sexes. She argues that if we cannot attribute the subordination of women to biological deterministic factors of physical superiority and inferiority, we must find a structure that is common to every culture that would explain women’s classification as inferior. She argues that this
common structure is culture itself, as defined by its language systems. She defines culture as “the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purpose, controls them in its interest” (72). Once she identifies culture as having been deemed superior to nature in its ability to control the latter, she proves that on the spectrum of natural and cultural, women are identified as closer to nature than men, and therefore seen as inferior. Ortner clarifies that women have not been completely relegated to the status of animal. She is not completely natural, but she is closer on the spectrum than men and therefore is seen as the intermediary between the two realms.

Ortner traces the origins of this classification of women as more natural than men to various biological factors that have forced them into the role of the intermediary. She argues that women have internalized this role and it has come to define their perceived psychic structures and their actual relationships to nature. Due to the “natural procreative functions specific to women alone,” “her traditional social roles, imposed because of her body and its functions, in turn give her a different psychic structure-and again, this psychic structure, like her physiological nature and social roles, is seen as being more ‘like nature’ (11). Citing Chodorow, Ortner argues that “feminine personality”, which she classifies as a result of “social structural arrangements rather than innate differences”, is characterized by “personalism and particularism” (21). She claims that “woman’s dominant psychic modes of relating would incline her to enter into relationships with the world that culture might see as being more ‘like nature,’ immanent and embedded in things as given, rather than, like culture, transcending and transforming things through the super-imposition of abstract categories and transpersonal values” (21). Ortner argues
that men relate to the world in a more mediated way, they abstract and categorize objects as opposed to interacting with them directly. In fact, they identify more strongly with the assigned symbolic value and meaning as opposed to the literal objects and people. Like Lerner, Ortner argues that women have been excluded from the cultural practice of generalizing because their daily lives are entrenched in the particular.

In Ortner’s next phase of analysis, which identifies the values assigned to these differing psychic structures according to the framework of culturally defined value systems, she suggests that on the hierarchy of human spiritual functions, the socialized female psyche is simultaneously positioned both at the top and the bottom. Women’s “embedding and particularizing” compared to men’s “transcending and synthesizing” places women closer to nature on the nature-culture spectrum, a position that men have deemed inferior, thus situating her at the lowest level of cultural progress. However, women’s relatively unmediated method of relating also symbolizes the most unifying characteristics of humanity, an ultimate, communal morality. Thus she is located both at the top and bottom of the cultural hierarchy of relational functions.

To explain the paradox of women’s apparently simultaneous inferiority and superiority on the spectrum of human spiritual functions, Ortner uses the example of the mother and child. She explains that mothers typically show unconditional commitment to their children regardless of categorizations like sex, age, beauty or clan affiliation. This extremely personal and unmediated mode of relating may pose a threat to “culture and society ‘from below,’” insofar as it represents the fragmentary potential of individual loyalties vis-a-vis the solidarity of the group. However, it may also “be seen as embodying the synthesizing agent for culture and society ‘from above,’” in that it
represents generalized human values above and beyond loyalties to particular social categories” (83). Ortner argues that while society must enforce allegiances to socially created categories as opposed to personal loyalties, society also insists upon a communal morality that transcends specific social categories. She writes: “Thus that psychic mode seemingly typical of women, which tends to disregard categories and to seek ‘communion’ (Chodorow, p. 55, following Bakan, 1966) directly and personally with others, although it may appear infracultural from one point of view, is at the same time associated with the highest levels of the cultural process” (83).

Given women’s responsibility to socialize children, to bring animal-like infants into the realm of transcendent culture, women are deemed occupants of the intermediate space in between culture and nature. Comparing the culture/nature relationship to a clearing within a forest, Ortner writes: “that which is intermediate between culture and nature is located on the continuous periphery of culture’s clearing; and though it may thus appear to stand both above and below (and beside) culture, it is simply outside and around it” (85). Thus, Ortner explains how cultural systems can assign symbols to women that often have “completely polarized and apparently contradictory meanings” (85). Because women’s methods of relating can either be seen as “ignoring” or “transcending” socially created categories, women can represent either the subversion of culture, and therefore be portrayed as dangerous threats to society, or as the ultimate symbols of transcendence. These competing symbolic evaluations have the “implication of generalized ambiguity of meaning characteristic of marginal phenomena” (26).

Cultural systems of value have heralded women as the ultimate symbol of ambiguity in her supposedly constant struggle to reconcile her connection to nature and
her connection to culture. In reality, Ortner argues, this is a struggle that exists within every human:

...every human being has a physical body and a sense of nonphysical mind, is part of a society of other individuals and an inheritor of a cultural tradition, and must engage in some relationship, however mediated, with ‘nature,’ or the nonhuman realm, in order to survive. Every human being is born (to a mother) and ultimately dies, all are assumed to have an interest in personal survival, and society/culture has its own interest in (or at least momentum toward) continuity and survival, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals. And so forth.

Instead of occupying the ambiguity that is universal to human nature, Paz, for example, can only conceptualize his inner conflict through the symbol of the female.

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa articulates this paradox of women’s symbolic value through the concept of the Shadow-Beast. Anzaldúa writes:

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces. The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature’s cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man’s
recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into
a frenzy of anger and fear (17)

Anzaldúa’s characterization of woman’s simultaneous divine and undivine nature can be
equated with Ortner’s theory that women can be placed both on the top and bottom of a
culture’s value system because of their closeness to nature. Anzaldúa’s “divine”, “the god
in us” can be equated to Ortner’s understanding that the same feminine closeness to
nature and loyalty not to societal categorization but actual, personal, particular loyalties is
seen as embodying the values of a culture “from above”. Woman is at once divine and
undivine. She represents the symbolic ideal of societal values and the symbolic threat to
society’s categorizations and systems of organization.

When Anzaldúa writes: “She is man’s recognized nightmarish pieces, his
Shadow-Beast” (17), she confirms Ortner’s argument that there is nature and ambiguity
and internal conflict within all of us, man or woman, but men discuss their own
ambiguity by using women as the symbol of their own personal conflict. Just as Paz
argues that the Mexican man’s identity struggle is the fault of his raped mother (hijos de
la chingada). It is not simply a condition for human existence, but his mom’s fault. In this
way, he defers his own complexities onto the symbol of the woman.

This concept, as articulated by Anzaldúa as the “divine” and the “un-divine,” and
by Ortner through the explanation of “mutually contradictory” symbolizations of women
is also expressed in Lévi-Strauss’s concept regarding the “taboo” versus the “divine.”
Lévi-Strauss identifies the primary function of the myth (like the allegorical Malinche or
Guadalupe, along with many other mythical allegories that utilize the symbol of the
woman) as the reconciliation of conflict between polarizing values. He argues that this
"binary structure" of values is inherent to human consciousness and that myths are an inevitable outcome of this universal conceptual structure. Alongside binary categories of good and evil, darkness and light, nature and culture, lie categories that contain elements of both sides of the binary. For example, just outside the binary of god and man, there is the category of the angel which occupies both conceptual spheres. For my purposes, another example of an anomalous category is woman, somewhere between man and nature, or man and god (in that she is symbolized as both “divine” and “undivine”).

Lévi-Strauss argues that "anomalous categories are typified by a surplus of meaning, they are more intricate and possess a higher semiotic power; therefore they endanger the binary basis of meaning constituting categories of a given culture" (**). He articulates culture's tendency to define these anomalous beings as either "sacred" or "taboo." He goes on: "At times, the anomalous category functions as a link between two poles perceived as scary and dangerous." Given Ortner’s analysis of women’s perceived dual identity between nature and culture, women’s contradictory and ambiguous purport threaten the binary construction of society and must be either vilified or hallowed so as not to pose a threat to the society’s structure which relies on binary categorization to function. To return to Paz’s semiotic utilization of Malinche and Guadalupe (which will be analyzed in more depth in Part 1 of this essay), we can now see how the symbol of woman as an ambiguous intermediary between nature and culture allows her to appropriated in order to represent the ideals and the downfalls of a given cultural identity.

The concept behind Ortner’s “mutually contradictory,” Anzaldúa’s “Shadowbeast” and Lévi-Strauss’s “sacred and taboo” will be continually referenced throughout this essay as “the paradox of female value.” To reiterate, this paradox is a
product of the binary structure of Western thought, language and culture which considers women’s tendency to prioritize the particular over the general, or actual personal relationships over categories as a threat to the power structures within the culture that rely on categories and hierarchies to function. In an effort to quell the anxieties created by women’s ability to transcend social categories, symbol systems trap women in the binaries of good and evil, “divine and undivine,” “taboo” versus “divine” in order to ignore the complications of real, personal relationships. Woman comes to represent all of the dangers of a society “from below,” in so far as her mode of relating threatens social categories, and also represents the ideal of the society “from above” in that this mode of relating indeed represents a communal moral good (Ortner). This is the paradox of female value.

In his use of the general symbol of the woman and his analysis of Guadalupe and La Malinche, Octavio Paz participates in this cultural practice that Ortner identifies. Paz is concerned with the ambiguity of the Mexican identity and believes conflicting loyalties are the foundational cause of this vague and marginal form of identification. Following Ortner’s argument, the symbol of the woman provides Paz with an ideal representation of this ambiguity, because of her conflicting loyalties to the particular (her child, in Ortner’s example), and the abstract categories of her culture. Additionally, her perceived identity as an intermediary between nature and culture invite her utilization as a linguistic tool, as an intermediary between Paz’s interiority and the articulation of that interiority through metaphor and symbolism.

In his discussion of the historical La Malinche, Paz makes some telling choices in his explanation of her role that when placed in conversation with Frances Karttunen’s
essay “Rethinking Malinche” seem ahistorical. Frances Karttunen offers an alternative
and much more nuanced explanation of La Malinche’s relationship to the Spanish
conquest. As opposed to Paz’s interpretation of La Malinche as nothing more than a
willing sexual partner of Cortés, Karttunen suggests that she offered her very useful
services in self-defense: “this is no love story, no tale of blind ambition and racial
betrayal, no morality play. It is the record of a gifted woman in impossible circumstances
carving out survival one day at a time” (312).

Additionally, Karttunen refutes the accusation of La Malinche’s disloyalty to her
people by arguing that there was no concept of ethnic identity at the time of the conquest
that has since been superimposed onto Mexican history. There was no sense of the people
of Mesoamerica as ‘Indians,’ united as one against the Europeans. Kartunnen writes:
“They identified themselves as Mexihcah, Tlaxcaltecah, Cholotecah, and so on. As she
was none of these, how could Malintzin be a traitor to all or any of them?” (304).

These particularities regarding Malinche’s mode of survival have been ignored in
favor of an objectification of Malinche into the symbolic representation of Mexican
identity.

What is at stake?

This tendency to reduce woman to a semiotic object has implications beyond
linguistic, historical or aesthetic trends because the words and symbols we deploy shape
the reality into which those signifiers are projected. In other words, language produces, or
reproduces culture. As acclaimed translator Gregory Rabassa writes in his book “If This
Be Treason: Translation and Its Dyscontents,” “Languages are the products of a culture,
or perhaps the reverse as some bold anthropologists might have it” (4). While I understand that all languages have some general point of origin at which time the culture must have influenced the formation of the language, I do not think it is bold, as Rabassa suggests, to argue that language shapes culture as signifiers take on value and meaning beyond the original object that is referenced.

Language does more than put a name to the objects or experiences that naturally appear within a system; language allows for the projection of potential meanings into reality that do not exist outside of the linguistic realm. Therefore, when women are used as semiotic objects or when their inferiority is implied by linguistic mechanisms, the effects go beyond the linguistic realm as language predetermines for its speakers certain modes of observation and interpretation.

**What’s to come**

The first section of my paper will analyze ways in which Malinche and Guadalupe have been reduced to a symbol of Mexican national identity and morality. The following interlude on translation discusses how her role as a translator influenced her symbolization as treacherous. This section also explains how praxis on her translativa duties and translation as a whole can be used to challenge the limitations of language itself. I will introduce feminist theory regarding the potential power of the translator, as well as how feminist and post-colonial translation poses an alternative to the binary mode of production of meaning that has entrapped Malinche for centuries. The final part of the paper discusses how Chicana feminists utilized this radical discourse regarding translation and language to perform their frustration with the binary mode of meaning production and propose an alternative mode of representation.
Part 1: La Malinche in History and Myth

If the project of this essay is to break the linguistic, literary and historical walls that Malinche has been trapped inside for centuries, I must first analyze how she has been appropriated and thus spoken through in various discourses over the past 500 or so years. In order to delegitimize the language and binary thinking that entraps her in mythic constructions and robs her of a voice, we must first see how she has been utilized as a symbol for various political means.

This chapter begins with an overview of Malinche’s first appearances in the chronicles of various Spanish historians and soldiers in Cortés’s army in order to contextualize her later appearances with the little historical information that we have. The following section of the chapter discusses how Malinche was transformed from a historical figure into a mythical one, through an analysis of the ways in which Spanish colonialism conflated indigenous religious myths with Christian idolatry. Finally, I will analyze the appropriation of Malinche in the 19th and 20th centuries by Mexican politicians, artists and writers in order to make sense of their complex and hybridized national identity during two formative moments in Mexican history, the struggle for independence from Spain (1827-1829) and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).

Malinche’s appearances in historical texts

In order to understand how the mythical figure of Malinche has been re-translated at different stages in Mexican literary history to meet the needs of the contemporary Mexican political imaginary, we must first review the original historical documents that
feature Malinche. She first appears in chronicles of the conquest by Spanish historians and conquistadors. Written in 1527, Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva Espana (The True History of the Conquest of New Spain)* gives Malinche the most attention among the other historical accounts of the time. Castillo was a soldier in Cortés’s army and his chronicle recounts his memories of the conquest and Cortés in a heroic light.

These early writings that feature the figure of Malinche reveal some of the tensions and ambiguity that the figure of Malinche will come to embody more purposefully in later texts. In his detailed account of the conquest, Díaz del Castillo uses the name Malinche to refer to both Cortés and the actual Malinche. For example, in recounting an interaction between the city of Tlaxcala’s leader, Xicotencatl and Cortés, Díaz del Castillo writes: “The elder Xicotencatl then addressed Cortes as follows: ‘Malinche! Malinche! Often have we begged of you to forgive the hostile attacks we made upon you” (175). Díaz del Castillo pauses here and explains that he refers to Cortés as such because he came to be known as Malinche by all of the tribes they encountered. He writes: “This name was given to him because our interpretess Dona Marina was always about his person… They therefore called him the captain of Marina, and contracted that appellation in the word Malinche” (176). The conflation of these two distinct identities through the name Malinche creates confusion in Díaz del Castillo’s narrative, as Malinche ceases to be a character in herself, but is lost in her translative duties and under the shadow of Cortés. This misnomer of Cortés amounts to an erasure of Malinche’s identity as she is totally subsumed by her translative duties.
An analysis just of Malinche’s various names may shed light on her complex and ever-changing identity. She is referenced in various texts as “La Malinche,” “Malintzin,” “Malinalli Tenepal,” and “Doña Marina.” In Cortés’s own chronicles, Malinche is referred to simply as his “tongue.” Her Nahuatl name was Malinalli Tenepal, Malinalli denoting the 12th day of the month on which she was born, and Tenepal signifying a person who speaks with ease. Once given to the Spaniards, she was baptized with the name “Marina,” likely considered the closest Spanish name equivalent to “Malinal.” Díaz del Castillo called her “Doña Marina,” roughly translating to “Lady Marina,” Doña being a signifier of respect. In translating this Spanish name “Doña Marina” back into Nahuatl, indigenous speakers changed the “r” which does not exist in the Nahuatl language to “l” and added their own signifier of respect, “tzin.” Thus she became “Malintzin.” Spaniards translated this version of the name back into Spanish as “Malinche,” given that “tzin” sounds like “tzin-e” when pronounced, producing the Spanish equivalent “che.” These multiple names likely came about as a result of Malinche’s continual traveling throughout Mexico, where upon entering a new territory, her name would be translated from Spanish back into Nahuatl and vice versa as people with whom she interacted attempted to translate her name from Nahuatl, to Spanish, then back again.

Franciscan friar Diego de Landa’s Relación de las cosas de Yucatan and humanist Francisco Lopez de Gomara’s Historia de la conquista de Mexico also feature Malinche heavily in their accounts, considering her an integral part of the success of the conquest. Hernán Cortés himself chronicled the events in five letters to the king, entitled Relaciones (Reports). While Cortés does not mention her as frequently as Díaz del Castillo, Cortés does reference her in the second and fifth letter, while recounting two controversial
events during the conquest in which her intervention proved to be crucial: the massacre at Cholula and the murder of Cuauhtemoc.

All four chroniclers attribute Malinche with warning the Spaniards of an ambush that the Cholulans were planning. According to these accounts, Malinche was sent to parley with the Cholula leaders and befriended one of their wives, who informed her of the Cholulans’ plot and tried to convince her to escape from under Cortés’s control, marry her son and join the Cholula. Apparently Malinche went along with the Cholula woman’s plan, only to escape back to Cortés and inform him of the plot against him.

The nuances in these accounts place differing levels of significance on Malinche’s strategic betrayal of the Cholula. Some, for example, state that the Spanish would have learned of the plot regardless because the Tlaxcalans, enemies of the Cholulans, had also warned the Spaniards of the impending attack. However, the ultimate characterization of Malinche in all of these chronicles as loyal to the Spaniards despite opportunities to flee is consistent. Additionally, as Sandra Messinger Cypress points out in La Malinche in Mexican Literature from History to Myth, the detail regarding Malinche’s rejection of a marriage proposal from an indigenous family indicates “a metaphoric act signifying the repudiation of the native in favour of the foreign” (1991, 35), conduct now considered archetypal of this mythical figure, and solidified linguistically as the definition of the term malinchismo.

The Real Academia Española, the authoritative dictionary of the Spanish language provides two definitions for the term “malinche.” As an adjective, malinchista, the term signifies “Persona, movimiento, institución, etc., que comete traición” (A person, movement, institution, etc, that commits treason). The other definition references
*malinche* the shrub or small tree, with flowers “de color rojo fuego” (fiery red) that are said to have abortive properties. The term Malinche also appears in nature in the form of the Malinche Volcano on the border between Tlaxcala and Puebla, Mexico. It would not be difficult to draw the symbolic connection between Malinche’s ascribed characteristics as the neglectful mother of the Mexican people to the Malinche tree’s abortive processes. Nor would it be a stretch to connect Malinche’s perceived instability and danger to her volcanic namesake. The connection regarding Malinche’s various namesakes that bears the most significance to my thesis however, is that the Malinche Volcano is located on the border between two cities. It is precisely Malinche’s complex and difficult to define identity that makes her such an ideal symbol through which to imagine Mexican political identity. In these ways and others, Malinche lives on, beyond these original appearances in Spanish texts.

**From history to myth: The Virgin Guadalupe and Malinche Dichotomy**

With the help of these key historical interpretations of her role in the conquest, Malinche was transformed from a historical figure into a mythical one. Her legacy as a symbol within Mexican culture was informed by the indigenous traditions of myth and by the colonial imposition of Western myths. Specifically, as the conquest transplanted a hierarchy of feminine ideals onto the indigenous cultures, as represented by female figures like the Virgin Mary and Eve, Malinche came to symbolize the Mexican Eve while the Virgin of Guadalupe stood in for Mary. The very notion of a hierarchy of feminine ideals or a hierarchy in itself was also in some instances a product of colonialism. Many indigenous structures of myth and language did not presuppose
hierarchy or binarism as mechanisms of language or culture. The following section analyzes the conflation of the real individual La Malinche with the mythical figures of indigenous religion and Christian figures of femininity. This imposition of a binary mode of cultural production allowed for the creation of La Malinche as myth, which transcended the reality of her experiences in favor of a simplified cultural signifier.

As Malinche transformed into a myth, she was understood as a signifier of the evils of femininity, in opposition to the Virgin Guadalupe who represented the good woman. This dichotomization of women into the categories of good and evil is situated in a recognized pattern among various cultures to let this dichotomous symbol of woman be the metric against which the society’s standards are held. As explained in my introduction, Ortner argues that this paradox of feminine value in which the symbol of the feminine can represent apparently contradictory meanings is a result of women’s assigned status as intermediaries between nature and culture. Additionally mentioned in my introduction is Anzaldúa’s writing on this subject in which she denotes the female as the signifier of both the “divine” and the “undivine.” I will return to this concept at the end of the chapter, but it is important to keep in mind as the following analysis discusses this tendency towards the dichotomization of feminine value.

In contemporary Mexican culture, the Virgin/Whore dichotomy is apparent in the cult of Guadalupe and the scapegoatism of La Malinche. Malinche and Guadalupe are both symbolic mothers of the Mexican nation who are portrayed to have conceived of their Mestizo children by rape and by immaculate conception, respectively. La Malinche can be seen as an Eve character and the Virgin Guadalupe as the Mexican Virgin Mary. Guadalupe is a passive mother, revered only for her open lap onto which her orphaned
sons can seek refuge. La Malinche is also a maternal figure, especially given her child with Cortés.

This comparison of Malinche and Guadalupe was made possible by an oversimplification of the two maternal figures. The dichotomy was also influenced by parallels between Western symbols of femininity and the goddesses of indigenous religions. The indigenous religious system was comprised of a collection of complex and multifaceted deities. Regardless, historical reinterpretations of these symbols oversimplify the indigenous goddesses and situate the origins of Guadalupe and Malinche in the goddesses Tonantzin and Coatlaloqueuh. Coatlicue (“Serpent Skirt”) is the earliest fertility and Earth goddess from whom Tonantzin and Coatlaloqueuh are derived. She is the mother of the celestial deities and symbol of the earth, both creator and destroyer.

The duality of her symbolism is evident in the manner in which she is depicted. She wears a skirt of braided snakes and a necklace of human hearts and hands. Her feet are taloned and serpents slither out of her body in the place of limbs. Her breasts sag, suggesting that she has nourished many (Klein, 231). Coatlicue is a complex and multifaceted goddess, a manifestation of good of evil, creator and destroyer. She embodies characteristics that are inherently contradictory, and therefore negates the binary opposition of good or bad woman.

Coatlicue is most famously depicted in an eight foot tall sculpture that was rediscovered in the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City in 1790. The statue, which looms over its viewers at the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, is the largest three-dimensional Mexica carving in existence (Klein, 229). The power depicted in this statue is
representative of the goddess’s ascribed authority in myth, she was the ultimate source of life and death, of good and evil, totally untethered by the confines of binary opposites.

Coatlicue was split into several different goddesses by the male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture, each of whom adopted some of her characteristics and symbologies along the lines of good and evil. The deities Tonantzin, Tlazolteotl and Cihuacoatl reigned in the place of the complex Coatlicue. Gloria Anzaldúa writes: “They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects” (73). This dichotomization of the female goddess by Aztec culture was exacerbated by the Spanish during their conquest as they imposed upon Aztec myths the much stricter binary opposition of Christian idolatry. Tonantzin came to represent “the good mother” (Anzaldúa, 74), or “Guadalupe’s bruja-ized (witched) Other in colonial discourse” (Lara 100).

The conflation of Tonantzin and Guadalupe is often traced back to her supposed appearance to a recently converted indigenous Aztec named Juan Diego on December 9, 1531, only 10 days after the Conquest. Upon the Tepeyac Hill, once home to a shrine for Tonantzin, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to the Aztec. She gave him a painting of herself on native fabric and commanded him to build a church on the hill. Since her apparition on Tepeyac Hill, both Tonantzin and Cihuacoatl were redefined by Spanish religious doctrine as perverted forms of the Virgin Mary.

During the Conquest, Spanish moralities and symbol systems surrounding women merged with depictions of Tonantzin and Cihuacoatl and many other female deities whose complexities were negated in favor of a single dichotomy, good and bad woman. In the Nahua symbol system the serpent was an earth figure with no explicit ties to sin.
However, given the frequent appearance of the serpent in imagery of indigenous goddesses, the Spanish conflated the symbol of the serpent in the Christian tradition with that of the indigenous tradition. This was a convenient connection that allowed for colonial representations of Coatlicue and her fellow deities to be demonized rather than recognized for the creative potential that the serpent truly represented in the Aztec symbol system.

The Spanish historian and friar Bernardino de Sahagún, author of the Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España (General History of the Things of New Spain), also known as the Florentine Codex was one Spaniard to perpetrate this symbolic conflation. Sahagún referred to Tonantzin-Cihuacoatl as “our mother Eve, who is deceived by the serpent” (1:19). Lara argues that this reconstruction of indigenous symbol systems along gendered lines linked “indigenous deities and women to a particularly dangerous sexuality associated with paganism, that is, with dangerous sexuality” (102).

Neither I nor the scholars cited above would argue that Aztec society was fluid or egalitarian regarding gender relations, as evident in Anzaldúa’s analysis of Aztec’s splitting up of the goddess into pre-Conquest. However, I do argue that the imposing Western morality did prioritize a dichotomous structure of thinking that was not as pervasive in Aztec religion prior to the Conquest. These projected colonial gender biases completely neglected the complexities of the original goddesses and in doing so, rejected the very possibility of dichotomous, non-binary representation. Rebecca Overmyer-Velazquez describes this imposition of binary representation as a “Christian disregard for Nahua complementarity and balance” (72).
In *Christian Morality Revealed in New Spain*, Rebecca Overmyer-Velazquez analyzes the Nahua culture portrayed in the *Florentine Codex* as well as Sahagun’s own biases and ideological projections. She argues that the Conquest restructured the more fluid method of thought and myth systems of Nahuatl culture:

Book Ten is explicitly informed by a Christian emphasis on a good / evil dualism... The Catholic worldview manifested in Book Ten serves this destruction by eliminating complicated Nahua conceptions of the human relationship with the cosmos as one that is interdependent, ambiguous, and precarious, yet in balance. It replaces, or at least attempts to replace, these conceptions with exclusive, hierarchical categories of good and evil, God and devil, male and female (10).

Overmyer-Velazquez’s goes on to analyze the Nahuatl morality in depth as it existed prior to the conquest. She identifies acceptance of the existence of chaos as characteristic of Nahuatl morality, and suggests that order is a temporary state, with chaos always lurking on the periphery. Within Nahuatl morality, the chaotic movement of the cosmos was prioritized in favor of “a permanent structure or static hierarchy of being, which preoccupied neoplatonist scholastics like Sahagun” (10). While Christianity defined unity by denying, not incorporating, the second element of a pair, Nahuatl privileged a dialectical dualism. By simply dismissing the second element of a pair as “evil” or “sinful,” instead of incorporating opposites into a dualistic whole as was typical of Mesoamerican thought, Christian morality is defined by conflict.

The colonial reinterpretation of the indigenous female goddesses is very much in line with these differences between the two systems of thought. For example, the
dichotomization of Coatlicue into discrete good and evil parts as mentioned above represents the imposition of Western thought and its obsession with binary opposition.

Lara reiterates the more fluid nature of Nahual morality through a linguistic lens. She states that the Nahuatl language did not have a word for “virgin” or “whore,” thus making the virgin/whore dichotomy that is ever present in Western tradition impossible to apply. As neither ‘virgins’ nor ‘whores’ in classic Nahua thought, Tonantzin, Cihuacóatl, Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl and even the individual La Malinche were transformed to fit into the binary opposition of good woman and evil woman, Guadalupe and Eve, la Virgin Guadalupe and her counterpart, La Malinche. Or, as Lara says in her essay “Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary,” “the virtuous virgen and [the] pagan puta” (99). To use yet another scholar’s terminology for this dichotomy, Norma Alarcón writes: “the indigenous female slave Malintzin Tenepal was transformed into Guadalupe’s monstrous double and ... her ‘banner’ also aided and abetted in the nation-making process or, at least, in the creation of nationalistic perspective” (58). Derived through a process of colonial dichotomization of the complex indigenous goddesses, La Malinche and Guadalupe came to represent the ideal of the nation and the potential dangers that lie within, respectively.

Guadalupe and Malinche in Mexican history

In order to better understand how Malinche and Guadalupe came to be the signifiers for Mexico’s anxieties and ideals, we can analyze how these two and other feminine symbols have been appropriated in political discourse during formative moments throughout Mexico’s history.
In the dichotomization of female religious symbols, Tonantzin, the protective mother God was transformed into Guadalupe. Like her indigenous counterpart, the Virgin Guadalupe was thought to be a protective mother to the poorest people, to young children and to women giving birth. Like her *European* counterpart the Virgin Mary, Guadalupe was thought to protect her worshippers from an angry and all-powerful god. In the early years of the cult of Guadalupe, this all-powerful male god was likely thought of as a European Christian male figure. Given her ties to the European Virgin Mary, Guadalupe was seen as a protective mother, still tied to her indigenous past in her connections to Tonantzin, in the face of a European god. As Jacques LaFaye writes in *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*,

> Mother of gods and men, of stars and ants, of maize and agave, Tonantzin-Guadalupe was the imaginary compensation of the Indians for the state of orphanage to which the Conquest had reduced them. The Indians, who had seen the massacre of their priests and the destruction of their idols, whose ties with their psat and their supernatural world had been severed, took refuge in the lap of Tonantzin-Guadalupe... a natural and supernatural mother, composed of American earth and European theology (xix).

Guadalupe represents a sort of middle ground between the mother goddess Tonantzi and the European Virgin Mary. For that reason, as David Kinsley argues in his book *The Goddesses' Mirror*, “Although she is clearly identified with Christianity as the Virgin Mary, it is also clear that there are motifs in Guadalupe's cult that stress her special role as guardian and patron of the Mexican people against foreign Christians” (252). Guadalupe's roots are simultaneously present in indigenous and European culture,
making her an ideal symbol of nation-building during the Mexican revolution, as nationalists attempted to reconcile their indigenous and Spanish influences in the creation of a new and independent national identity.

This strategic utilization of Guadalupe as the symbolic intersection of Mexico’s European influence and its indigenous past is made evident through an analysis of how she appeared during Mexico’s war of independence. General Manual Felix Fernandez, an active participant in the wars for independence and Mexico's first president after the adoption of the Constitution of 1824 changed his name to Guadalupe Victoria. “Victoria” for Victory and Guadalupe after the Virgin (Kinsley 252). Additionally, José María Morelos, a Mexican Roman Catholic priest and revolutionary leader during the War of Independence, issued a proclamation during the War of Independence, insisting that all Mexican patriots wear the emblem of Guadalupe and pay tribute to her regularly (Lafaye, 9).

Despite Guadalupe’s obvious roots in Spanish theological imperialism, her perceived loyalty to Mexican people over the Spanish is made clear through an analysis of one of her European counterparts. The Virgin de los Remedios was a popular image among Spanish rulers and was enshrined in Mexico City throughout the conquest. During the Revolutionary Wars (181-1821), Loyalists carried banners of the Virgin de los Remedios while Insurgents carried banners of Guadalupe, with each side shooting at their respective enemy virgins. Through identification with one feminine symbol or another, Mexican identity was solidified during this formative moment of nation building. In this way, the symbol of the woman was utilized as a symbolic tool to articulate on Mexican identity.
Just as Guadalupe was appropriated as the political symbol of Mexican salvation, Malinche represented the original symbol of political betrayal. Norma Alarcón recounts writer and politician Ignacio ‘El Nigromante’ Ramírez’s speech on independence day of 1861 in which he reminded the Mexican people that they owed their initial defeat to Malintzin, “Cortés’s whore” (58). Comparing this portrayal of Malinche as a scapegoat for the sins of the Mexican people, Alarcón calls Malintzin the Mexican Eve. She writes: “Thus, Mexico’s own binary pair, Guadalupe and Malintzin, reenact within this dualistic system of thought the biblical stories of our human creation and tradition” (59). Just as language is a set of symbols used to express meaning through a process of deferral, these dichotomous symbols of the feminine were used as signifiers of political identity.

In addition to the formative period of Mexico’s fight for independence, symbols of the feminine were utilized in nation building strategies after the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) as a new Mexico struggled to define itself.

The Centennial of 1921, a celebration of the anniversary of Mexican Independence organized by the government of Alvaro Obregón provided the administration with the opportunity to present a new vision of Mexican national identity post-revolution. The centennial marked the first commission in the state-sponsored mural program that would come to define the Mexican national imaginary space as well as Mexico’s actual public spaces. The celebration also included cultural events, beauty pageants, ceremonies, exhibits and parades, all of which can be analyzed to determine the dominant methods of nation-building through the lens of the indigenous woman.

The images produced by these official programs demonstrate a return in the national imaginary to Mexico’s indigenous roots, often through the symbol of La
Malinche, or the more abstract figure of the indigenous mother. Adriana Zavala, author of “Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art” characterizes this romanticization of the indigenous as distinct from pre-revolutionary norms regarding Mexican national identity. She writes: “Tradition was no longer based on bourgeois, Christian values with selective races of indigenous culture set in the distant past; instead, in this revolutionary context, it was reinvented as a folkloric mix of contemporary elements like Mexico’s dual heritage - indigenous and European” (153).

The Centennial allowed for the mobilization of popular support and legitimation of the revolution through associations with historical figures and events and marked a decisive shift in Mexican national identity towards the romanticization of the indigenismo. This revolutionary indigenismo did re-establish indigenous art and culture as integral parts of Mexican identity but also revealed the racial prejudices of the revolutionary elite.

The Centennial committee staged a celebration of Mexico’s pre-Columbian past while simultaneously pushing forward an agenda of modernity and assimilation into European models. “La Noche Mexicana” was an exhibition of indigenous art that presented contemporary indigenous culture as essential to Mexican national identity. Despite the administration’s strategic use of indigenous culture in the nation-building process during this celebration, the commitment to indigenous values and history appears to have been little more than symbolic. Gonzales recounts the discriminatory admissions policies of the Centennial, in specifically regarding entrance to “La Noche Mexicana.” Gonzales cities an editorial in the newspaper La Democratica that accused committee
members of favouring the bourgeois over the masses for entrance to this exclusive event. Regarding the protests that erupted as a result of this discrimination, Gonzales writes: “Workers also protested over having to pay 10 centavos to see films screened for the Centennial, an admission fee that favored those wearing ‘frock coats’ over those wearing ‘huaraches’” (263).

The Centennial also featured the “India Bonita” contest, a beauty pageant for indigenous women that laid bare the racial prejudices of the time and the clear manipulation of indigenous identity in the forging of a new national consensus. The contest was billed as the “first entirely racist contest” and the winner, María Bibiana Uribe became a symbol of national unity. In this formative moment, Mexican national identity was built upon the symbol of the indigenous woman as the representative ideal of Mexico’s pure autochthonous roots.

These supposed celebrations of indigenous identity can be attributed to the rise of the mestizaje ideology, a term that Zavala defines as privileging “Mexico's Indo-Hispanic heritage to the exclusion of other ethnic and racial groups, [it] is a melting-pot ideology that collapses race and culture in order to champion the mestizo individual as a symbol of racial, and, therefore, national unity” (155). This melting pot ideal is represented in nationalist constructions as the coming together of two opposing halves, like in the publicly commissioned murals by Rivera and Orozco in which the indigenous woman represents the intermediary, allowing for the movement between indigenous and European spaces.

The symbol of the indigenous woman appeared in Mexican political art and propaganda post-revolution most famously in the public murals “La Creación” (1922-
1923, Mexico City, Mexico) by Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco’s “Cortés y Malinche” (1926, Mexico City, Mexico). Both murals depict a scene of creation and feature a return to indigenous identity as central to the new national identity of post-revolution Mexico. In this way, artists such as Rivera and Orozco who were associated with the state manipulated La Malinche and the very concept of gendered mestizaje to formulate a modern conception of Mexican nationhood.

Following the end of the military phase of the revolution, José Vasconcelos was appointed the Minister of Education in 1921 and began to develop Mexico’s mural program. Diego Rivera was commissioned by Vasconcelos in 1922 to paint a mural in the auditorium of the Preparatoria in which he depicts the evolution of the Mexican people. Rivera’s mural depicts a hierarchy of Mexican cultural values, identifying the indigenous “Adam and Eve” of Mexican culture as the “pure autochthonous types” (Paz, El País, 103) from which, through the influence of European ideals, the Mexican national identity is transformed into its post-revolutionary evolved state.
At the bottom of the mural sit an indigenous man and woman, nude and dark-skinned, looking up at their enlightening influences towards the formulation of a more civilized and virtuous Mexican identity. While Rivera acknowledges the indigenous past of the nation, he emphasizes the influence of Western culture as key to the formulation of modern national identity. Zavala argues that this representation of the hierarchy of the Mexican people is in line with *mestizaje* as the dominant ideology surrounding the ideal Mexican. She writes: “Indians sat in a separate realm and were transformed by having Western values bestowed upon them” (156). Zavala connects this hierarchy to the utopian notion elucidated by Rivera’s patron for this piece, Vasconcelos.

Vasconcelos was the author of the notion of “La Raza Cósmica,” as made famous by his essay of the same name. In “La Raza Cósmica,” published in 1925, Vasconcelos argues for the superiority of Latin American mestizo culture over Western culture through his identification of the mestizo as “a cosmic race,” having the benefit of both Indian and European influence.

This utopian notion of a fifth race was the ideological root of Vasconcelos’s mural program which aimed to reject the notion of European influence on Mexican culture and art by grounding it in indigenous traditions. In “Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms,” Vasconcelos’s essay’s preface includes the following relevant statement: “Indigenismo, that is, a renewed attention to Mexico’s ancient civilizations and indigenous culture, linked art to the nation-building project, even as indigenous subjects would be portrayed emptied of active historical participation and meaning” (403).
Returning to an analysis of “Creation,” Rivera’s representation of the indigenous Adam and Eve at the bottom of the hierarchy can be further complicated by distinguishing between the male and female indigenous figures. The woman at the bottom of the mural sits beneath the modernizing influences of abstract and cultural virtues: Wisdom, Faith, Hope, Charity, Comedy, Song, Music and Dance. She sits with her legs open and her arms arced, encircling the negative space that her body creates. Her pose evokes the form of a bowl; a passive receptacle for the wisdom bestowed upon her by the enlightening forces above. In contrast, the male figure sits more upright, he is speaking with the two figures above him while the female figure sits in awe of her respective figures, not actively engaging with them. The male figure ignores the serpent to his left, indifferent to its temptation. Additionally, the male figure is associated with the more concrete and empirical enlightening forces of Science, Temperance, Fortitude, Charity, Justice, Prudence, Tragedy, Tradition, Erotic Poetry, Knowledge and Fable.

This nationalist ideology of mestizo superiority relied on the symbol of the indigenous as passive recipients of cultural evolution. Just as the indigenous man and woman in Rivera’s mural are seated while all other enlightening figures stand erect, other nationalist constructions of mestizaje consider the indigenous side of this ideal Mexican to be passive. For that reason, the indigenous half of this ideal Mexican is often depicted as a woman, and what better woman to represent the passive mother of Mexico but La Malinche.

Orozco’s 1926 mural “Cortés and Malinche” was part of a series of frescoes in the National Preparatory School that depicted the violence of the Spanish conquest. Orozco’s places La Malinche and Cortés as Adam and Eve figures just as Rivera references
original man and woman in the indigenous context. In this portrait, Orozco makes reference to the ever changing perception of La Malinche in political and social discourse. She and Cortés sit hand in hand above the fallen body of an indigenous man. While Malinche looks down upon her son, Cortés looks ahead blankly, gazing towards the future with no regard for the cadaver, his right foot even lays carelessly over the fallen body.

Orozco’s representation of the origin of the Mexican man, and thus the Mexican nation, depicts Malinche and Cortés as his Adam and Eve, sitting in a state of power and tranquility. The union of these foundational figures is contingent upon the destruction of
the indigenous man that lies at their feet. Cortés right hand is interlaced with Malinche’s in an embrace signifying collaboration and maybe even affection, while his left hand crosses her body in an effort to trap her, or perhaps protect her, keeping her from helping or mourning the death of indigenous people. As stated by Mark Hernandez in his book “Figural Conquistadors: Rewriting the New World's Discovery And Conquest in Mexican And River Plate Novels of the 1980s And 1990s,” Cortés act of control over Malinche signifies “a final separation from her former life” (87). Hernandez goes on:

The image of Cortés and Malinche symbolizes synthesis, subjugation, and the ambivalence of her position in the story of the nation’s colonial past, ambivalence in the sense that she has been cast as the mother of the first mestizos, but these mestizos suffer from a complex of being hijos de la chingada (products of a mother who has yielded to her violation)” (87).

Octavio Paz wrote at length about the concept of “hijos de la chingada” as well as Orozco’s mural. He calls the origin depicted in Orozco’s mural “tragic,” identifying the origin of Mexico as a symbol of violence: “sexuality is not innocent but criminal… Orozco’s impressive mural possess great sadness. He painted the enigma of the origin. A tragic enigma” (El País, 103).

Here we return to Paz’s original understanding of Mexican identity as explained through the symbol of the enigmatic woman, referenced in the introduction to this essay. Regarding Orozco’s mural, Paz writes: “The strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the imagination and sensibility of the present day Mexicans reveals that they are more than historical figures, they have been converted into symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved” (75). To Paz, this secret conflict is the apparent
irreconcilability of dual identities within the Mexican man, Spanish and indigenous. As opposed to accepting both identities at once, Paz argues that the assumed masculine Mexican “does not want to be an Indian or a Spaniard” and thus “condemns his origins and hybridism” “when he repudiates La Malinche” (75). Just as Lévi-Strauss argues that myth is the attempted reconciliation of binary opposites, Paz argues that the myth of creation surrounding the union of Malinche and Cortés is tragic because it “represents oppositions that are irreconcilable unless one of the terms is annihilated” (103). By vilifying Malinche as the scapegoat for contradictory tensions within the Mexican national identity, these representations contribute to the mystification of the origin of the Mexican man that necessarily implicates the cultural signifier of the treacherous woman. Paz is not concerned with this gendered aspect of the mystification, especially given that he utilizes the symbol of the enigmatic woman to describe the conflicting loyalties, thus alluding to some apparently innate female vulnerability.

Paz, Orozco, Rivera and the political figures mentioned throughout this chapter utilize La Malinche or the symbol of the woman, indigenous or general to externalize their manichean inner identities. This androcentric model of representation implicates the woman as the ultimate signifier of ambiguity and conflict. La Malinche is the ideal symbol of the capacity within the Mexican man to prioritize Spanish influence over the more apparently noble indigenous or mestizo influence. In her partiality for the Spanish, she represents the potential traitor within every Mexican. However, the proliferation of her vilification over other indigenous aides to Cortés leaves something to be explained as to how Malinche and Malinche alone became the signifier for national treachery. I
believe that an analysis of her specific role in the conquest as a translator may explain how she became the ultimate scapegoat for national betrayal.
Interlude on Translation

The extent to which Malinche has been utilized as a signifier for national betrayal can be better understood though an analysis of her role as a translator. I argue that Malinche’s vilification as an aide to Cortés is grounded in contempt for her translative duties. As discussed in the introduction to this essay, language is both formative to and representative of a culture’s ideals and history and in this way, betrayal of one’s language means betrayal of one’s culture. As Anzaldúa writes, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language” (81). Not only was Malinche betraying her people by providing information and guidance to Cortés and his army, but she was doing so through a linguistic betrayal, which cuts deep, according to many translation theorists.

As I will show in the following interlude, translation discourse features extensive writing regarding the treachery implicit in translation from one’s mother tongue to a foreign language. Not only is there evidence in translation discourse that Malinche’s legacy is partially tainted due to her role as a translator, but there is a trend within the discourse to feminize this linguistic betrayal given translation’s perceived reproductive function. This will help to explain how Malinche became the ultimate scapegoat for Mexico’s colonization.

This section will also feature post-structuralist and feminist responses to the conventional understanding of translation as merely reproductive and thus inferior to the act of writing the original text. These new understandings of translation as elucidated by Jacques Derrida, Louise von Flotow and Lori Chamberlain will hopefully work to challenge some of the misconceptions about La Malinche as a translator and as a woman,
as well as give some theoretical background for the revisionist work about Malinche done by Chicana feminist writers.

To dive deeper into an analysis of translation’s perceived treachery leads us to a literary critique of translation, in that it is an attempted reproduction of the essence of the original text which is almost always seen as secondary to the authority and supremacy of the original. Not only does a translation betray the mother tongue and thus the mother land, but the very project of translation is perceived as lesser before it begins because it is merely a reproduction. It is through this perception of translation’s function as reproductive that the practice is feminized in translation discourse. Later in this section I will show how this conception of women’s reproductive capacity as inferior to men’s productive power is paralleled in other social and cultural practices of power.

Conventional translation demands loyalty and fidelity to the original, as if to incorrectly translate or to translate with subjectivity (both of which are arguably impossible to avoid) is to betray the authority of the original. The Italian phrase traduttore, traditore (“translator, traitor”) is an apt example. Though the phrase’s exact origins are unclear, it is often attributed to an Italian response to the “questionable beauty of French translations” of Dante (Kahane, 2). Ironically, while the phrase’s general meaning is transmitted through its translation, something is lost to the English speaker given that the Italian purposely plays with the similarity of the two terms, which differ only in two letters. Regardless, the concept that translation betrays the original and the implicit condemnation of translation as lesser than the original in this sense is evident.

Lori Chamberlain expands on this concept of translations as derivative in her essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation”: “The cultural elaboration of this
view suggests that in the original abides what is natural, truthful, and lawful, in the copy, what is artificial, false, and treasonous” (455). These qualitative signifiers of the original text and the translation are complicated by a sexualization of translation that imbues the “copy” with feminine characteristics. This hierarchization of the original vis-à-vis the translation is a relatively recent concern that came about as a result of increased literacy and the advent of the printing press. As writing became commodified in this new way questions of ownership arose and the author’s rights were prioritized over those of the translator (Bassnett and Trivedi, 2).

The most familiar feminized metaphor of translation is the concept of les belles infidèles, coined in the 17th century in France by scholar Gilles Ménage. In reviewing Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt’s translations of a series of classics including the works of Caesar, Lucian and Tacitus. d’Ablancourt’s liberal methods of translation were progressive for his time and he garnered much criticism for authorial interventions in the translation of these canonical texts. d’Ablancourt justified his changes by arguing that classic texts required re-working to meet the literary and stylistic preferences of their contemporary readership, and therefore be beautiful to their readers. In their unfaithfulness to the original, d’Ablancourt believed that his translations had achieved beauty. Thus the adage essentially argues that a text can either be beautiful or it can be faithful.

By referencing les belles instead of les beaux the adage feminizes the concept of infidelity in translation and thus draws an implicit parallel between the bond of fidelity in translation to the bond of fidelity in marriage. The translation here is feminized, and in
keeping with the connection to marriage, the original text is figured as masculine. In her analysis of *les belles infidéles*, Chamberlain writes:

> For *les belles infidéles*, fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translator (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author).

However, the infamous “double standard” operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the “unfaithful” wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing. This contract, in short, makes it impossible for the original to be guilty of infidelity. (456)

This passage implies that the original is capable of infidelity, because, as many other feminist scholars of translation, literature and linguistics have argued, the very act of writing is a process of deferred meaning or *translation*. Therefore it is possible that an original piece of writing may betray its writer’s intention because it must go through that original translation from experience to language. Regardless, conventional metaphorics of translation exclusively implicate the translation, and thus, the feminine in the potential betrayal.

> Both conventional marriage and translation paradigms demand the fidelity of the wife (translation) to the husband (author) in order to ensure the legitimacy of the child. As Pilar Godayol writes in her essay “Metaphors, Women and Translation,” fidelity in both marriage and translation is a means of establishing legal maternal authority over the child or the text:

> It is important to legitimize the product. There must be a conformity that guarantees a supposed social order, in which the author has all the rights to
the text and its reproduction. It is a question of control over what we consider to be ours. The father wishes to control the paternity of the child. The author wishes to ensure that the relationship of power created between the value of the production and that of the reproduction. (102)

There are significant parallels between how translation discourse subordinates the translation as a feminized act of reproduction and how hegemonic cultural paradigms subordinate the woman as merely reproductive in contrast to man’s perceived productive power. As Chamberlain writes, “As feminist research from a variety of disciplines has shown, the opposition between productive and reproductive work organizes the way culture values work: this paradigm depicts originality or creativity in terms of paternity and authority, relegating the figure of the female to a variety of secondary roles” (455). We see this condemnation of women as merely reproductive in the linguistic construction of scientific discourse surrounding biological reproduction.

In biological discourse, the concept of woman as reproducer of man’s essence can be traced back to Aristotle’s theory of reproduction. According to this theory, the fetus begins in the man’s body and its form is imparted to the woman during conception. Aristotle compares the process to that of a craftsperson using the raw material of a tree to carve out a bed. Woman provides the raw material and man provides the form. He writes: “By definition the man is that which is able to generate in another… the female is that which is able to generate in itself and out of which comes into being the offspring previously existing in the generator.” Man is seen as the generative being, the source of the child’s form and essence, while woman is a mere vessel through which that form is passed into being.
In her book "The Less Noble Sex: Scientific, Religious, and Philosophical Conceptions of Woman's Nature," Nancy Tuana traces the origins of this theory back to Genesis. She writes, “Just as the god of Genesis imposed form on the dust of the earth and breathed life into it, the seed of the male imposes the nature of a human being on the blood of a woman’s womb” (132). In these formative texts, man is represented as the real producer, while woman merely reproduces the essence inserted in her by the man. In this sense, she is once again seen as a translatable body, the intermediary between man’s essence and the articulation of his essence, in this case, in the form of a child.

This gendered representation of conception is echoed throughout biological texts that seem to borrow terminology and style from fairy tales, recounting the heroic journey of the sperm to the egg, who lays in wait for instructions as to how to produce his child. Just as Aristotle considered the female body a passive receptacle for man’s essence in the form of his sperm, many scientific texts characterize male and female anatomy as productive and reproductive, respectively. Emily Martin’s essay “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles” provides ample evidence for this pattern.

In analyzing dozens of scientific descriptions of the biological process of conception, Martin notes a tendency to portray the egg as a passive receptacle for the man’s active and purposeful sperm. Describing the passivity of the egg, Martin writes:

“It does not move or journey, but passively ‘is transported,’ ‘is swept,’ or even ‘drifts’ along the fallopian tube. In utter contrast, sperm are small, ‘streamlined,’ and invariably active. They ‘deliver’ their genes to the egg, ‘activate the developmental program of the egg,’ and have a ‘velocity’ that
is often remarked upon… Together with the forces of ejaculation, they can ‘propel the semen into the deepest recesses of the vagina.’(489).

The vocabulary cited in these scientific texts suggest a pattern in the representation of women’s primary mode of production, that being reproduction, as totally dependent on the man for the investment of his product. To return to the utilization of woman as a metaphoric vehicle for man’s essence, this pattern is paralleled in translation discourse wherein the original text (the product) is figured as masculine and the translation is feminized as reproductive.

To return to La Malinche, we can see how her condemnation as a woman who translated her language into that of the oppressor and thus betrayed her people follows a tradition of the feminization and vilification of translation. Additionally, given that translation is thought of as a purely reproductive process, it follows that Malinche would be represented as passive in her decision to aide Cortés, and that so much onus would be placed on her reproductive abilities, seen through her representation as the mother of the mestizo people.

As translation studies have gained weight and visibility in recent years, these notions of fidelity within translation and its purely reproductive function have been challenged by many translators and writers. In his extensive writing on translation, Jacques Derrida challenges the hierarchy and dependency that is typically assumed regarding the relationship between the original and the translation. He argues, instead, for a duality of translation as production and reproduction, that the original text is in conversation with its translation and, in fact, asks to be translated. In his book The Ear Of the Other: Otobiographies, Transfers, Translations, Derrida writes:
Translation does not come along in addition, like an accident added to a full substance; rather, it is what the original text demands - and not simply the signatory of the original text but the text itself. If the translation is indebted to the original (this is its task, its debt [*Aufgabe*]), it is because already the original is indebted to the coming translation. (153)

As Derrida suggests a reciprocal relationship between translation and original text, he and other theorists also argue that the goal of a “faithful” translation that is evoked in more conventional translation discourse is impossible. Instead of seeing this impossibility of translation as a negative, Derrida and others suggest that translation allows us to see the differences between languages clearly, and see the deficiencies of our own language. His critique follows to suggest that language can only exist as foreign to itself, despite the fact that Western philosophy aims to repress that foreignness in favor of some pure or transparent language through which philosophic thought can be effortlessly conveyed. Instead he argues that this type of pure language does not exist, and that the practice of translation offers an opportunity to truly see language’s limitations and thus find a way to resist those limitations. Or as Barbara Johnson writes in “Taking Fidelity Philosophically”: “The bridge of translation, which paradoxically releases within each text the subversive forces of its own foreignness, thus reinscribes those forces in the tensile strength of a new neighborhood of otherness…” (148).

Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator” discusses this ability within translation to see the space between two languages:

“If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and event silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then
this language of truth is – the true language. And this very language, whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translation” (Benjamin, 77).

As Paz writes, “Thanks to translation, we become aware that our neighbors do not speak and think as we do” (154). The very existence of a multiplicity of languages and the impossibility of totally accurate translation from one language to another proves the influence that culture and hegemonic discourse has on the particularities of language. Or, in the words of yet another writer, in his introduction to Time Commences in Xibalba, Nathan Henne remarks that the readers of his translation might actually be at an advantage to those reading the original, not because of his superior translation abilities, but because "translation actually opens up the narrative by enacting a poetics of the uncertain lying at the heart of the novel" (ix). Henne’s poetics of the uncertain are a response to the notion of immutable truth, "This poetics of the uncertain describes a way of making meaning that always recognizes the resulting meaning as only partial and fleeting, underscoring the fact that language cannot ever precisely define” (xi). These theorists argue that within the process of translation, there is an opportunity to deconstruct language itself and all of this grandiose assumptions of accurate expression.

When applied to Malinche and her role as translator, this analysis of translation that imbibes it with productive qualities liberates her from her representation as a passive receptacle for the transference of the stuff of colonization.

This radical approach to translation which aims to deconstruct the fallacy of the immutable truth of language became particularly useful to feminist writers who struggle
with the patriarchal nature of language. This notion of the patriarchal nature of language has posed a serious dilemma to many feminist writers as they attempt to write about their experience with a language that deems their experience inferior or, second to man’s experience.

As feminists began theoretically deconstructing the patriarchal structures and institutions that were understood as agents of manipulation in the subordination of women, writers found that even the very language with which they sought to analyze and deconstruct the patriarchy was tainted by misogyny. Language became understood as not just a “tool for communication but also a manipulative tool,” as Luise von Flotow writes in “Translation and Gender: Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism” (8). In identifying the patriarchal functions of language, feminists had uncovered the double bind of patriarchal language which allows them to articulate the prejudice of language only through that very same tool of oppression. Verena Stefan, a radical German feminist described this frustration in her 1978 book Shedding: “Language fails me as soon as I try to speak of new experiences. Supposedly new experiences that are cast in the same old language cannot really be new” (53). Or, as Luce Irigaray puts it in her book The Sex Which Is Not One”(If we continue to speak the same language, we will reproduce the same (his)tory. Repeat the same (his)stories)” (205).

In the 1970s, feminists began to manipulate the practice and theory of translation in an effort to lay bare those hegemonic prejudices with language. Their performative translations, inspired by poststructuralism, were acts of linguistic and political resistance that served to subvert conventional language. In her account of the rise of feminist translation Lori Chamberlain writes: “[f]eminist and poststructuralist theory had
encouraged us to read between or outside the lines of dominant discourse for information about cultural formation and authority; translation can provide a wealth of such information about practices of domination and subversion” (472). In direct opposition to most conventional translation which attempts to conceal the act of translation and simply reproduce the work in the new language, feminist translations sought to make the translator and her process visible.

Often dubbed “rewriting,” feminist translations perform their reading of the text through their translation (Bengoechea). This active form of translating works to dispel notions of translation as a mere act of re-production, but of “production, rewriting and manipulation” (Claramonte, 110). A feminist translation can allow for the examination of the construction of notions of male and female in different languages and cultures, and to acquire insights into the ideological and discursive construction of gender identities. The goal of feminist translation and other linguistically deconstructive acts of resistance can be summarized in the following sentence by Hélène Cixous: “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve/discourse” (1975 - 886). Rather than indulge in an idealization of translation as “a grandiose humanist bridging of differences” as put by Luise von Flotow (98), feminist writers and translators conceptualize translation in terms of the difference it elucidates. This strategic characterization of translation as not merely reproductive but creative in and of itself gives way for reinterpretations of Malinche’s role as translator that do not succumb to notions of female reproduction as inferior and imbue her actions as passive.
Feminists concerned with the patriarchal trap of language diverged into two camps, the reformists and the radicals. Reformists viewed conventional language and its misogynistic implications as symptomatic of the culture from whence it came. Linguistic reformists led efforts to integrate empowering conventions into language through linguistic education courses and printed handbooks of ‘non-sexist’ language.

The radical camp saw the patriarchal nature of language as one of the causes of their oppression and thus approached all conventional language as detrimental to women’s progress. In her book “Feminism and Linguistic Theory,” Deborah Cameron writes:

“The radical feminist view, then, is of women who live and speak within the confines of a man-made symbolic universe. They must cope with the disjunction between the linguistically validated male world view and their own experience, which cannot be expressed in male language. Indeed, since language determines reality, women may be alienated not only from language but also from the female experience it fails to encode” (93).

To return to Edward Sapir’s framework, radical feminists argued that because language does more than just name things, but it creates a world “of the potential intergrading with the actual,” not only was the language exclusionary to women, but the world that language creates, which Sapir calls culture is also exclusionary (10). Language allows its speakers to imagine a world which is not there and therefore transcend that which is immediately given in order to create a new reality, made up of the linguistic imagination. As Gertrude Stein writes, “Observation and construction make imagination” (1933: 243). Observation being that which is immediately given, construction being
language in this case, make imagination, or “the potential intergrading with the actual” which Sapir names culture. Because language excludes women’s experience, the new reality it creates will necessarily exclude them as well.

Feminist writers concerned with the confines of conventional language performed their frustrations in texts that featured new words, spellings, grammar functions or metaphors. Some of the prominent authors producing this type of linguistic resistance include Hélène Cixous, Madeleine Gagnon, Annie Leclerc, Nicole Brossard, Mary Daly, Louky Bersianik and others (Von Flotow 15). Von Flotow cites the work of French-Canadian radical feminist Nicole Brossard, whose approach to the patriarchal limitations of language was to fundamentally deconstruct it. In her book L’Amér, ou le chapitre effrité (1977), Brossard examines and deconstructs the symbolic archetype of the patriarchal mother and its linguistic implications. In her analysis of the book, von Flotow writes: “The patriarchal mother is the woman reduced to reproduction, the woman whose creativity and individuality is suffocated by this forced, unrecognized labour, and who is prone to suffocating her own children as a result” (15). In this text Brossard is deconstructing some of the same linguistic traps that Malinche has fallen into throughout the past 500 years. Malinche and more generally the symbol of the woman have been “reduced to reproduction” in a linguistic sense, as men use her symbolic image to reproduce their own narratives and identities. Moreover, Malinche as biological reproducer comes to symbolize the start of mestizaje as the fruit of her betrayal has come to mark the launch of a hybridized race in Mexico. Brossard begins with the linguistic and cultural practice of reducing women to their reproductive value but strategically utilizes the enemy itself, language, to deconstruct that practice.
The title of the book, L’Amér is a word that Brossard created which contains three preexisting French terms: mère (mother), mer (sea), and amer (bitter). Through the construction of this new word, Brossard questions the romanticisation of motherhood by assigning it embittering characteristics, as well as referencing the fluid and cyclical nature of the sea which is an important image in feminist thought (von Flotow 15). In fashioning this new word, Brossard deconstructs the word mother and all of its associations while posing a linguistic alternative that complicates the identity of the mother.

These post-structuralist developments regarding translation’s ability to allow the translator access to the space in between languages is liberating for many of language’s speakers. As we saw with feminist writers who deconstruct language as a means of challenging the patriarchy, problematizing language through translation in this way provides post-colonial writers with a framework for a new politics of difference and allows for the occupation of liminal spaces between languages and cultures (Borderlands) in their literary work.

Once again, this practice of radical translation is about more than literature. By eschewing the hierarchization of the original text and the translation, post-colonial writers are also challenging the notion of their cultures as derivative, lesser translations of their European colonizers. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi write in their introduction to *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, “Europe was regarded as the great Original, the starting point, and the colonies were therefore copies, or ‘translations’ of Europe, which they were supposed to duplicate” (4). By disputing the convention that translation will always be inferior to the original because it produces loss (Robert Frost
said that “poetry is what gets lost in translation”), these post-colonial translators and writers propose that it may actually create a new plane of understanding, what Homi Bhabha calls “the Third Space,” in which “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (38).

This mode of understanding translation and language becomes particularly useful to Chicana feminist writers in the past half century who resist the limitations of colonially imposed language and cultural hegemony through a literary and linguistic occupation of this Third Space. In the following section, I will be analyzing Chicana feminist writing that destabilizes conventional attitudes towards linguistic identity, sexuality, gender, and ethnonational identity through an occupation of this Third Space (or Borderlands, as Anzaldúa calls it). Particularly, I will be analyzing how these writers apply the above mentioned radical interpretations of translation, language and the occupation of the space-in-between to challenge reductive representations of La Malinche.
Part 2: Chicana Re-Imaginings of La Malinche

The project of many Chicana feminists is to perform a struggle for self-identity and self-representation and this struggle is often developed through a critical and performative lens of language. Chicana writers are not just struggling against the patriarchal constraints of one mother tongue, but their bilingualism further complicates their identity-formation in the social, political and aesthetic realms. In their literary work, many Chicana writers resist the imposition of binary forms of identification, as either American or Mexican, English-speaking or Spanish-speaking, for example. Instead, writers like Gloria Anzaldúa occupy the border between their conflicting identities, and perform language in a way that negates the singular in favor of the dualistic.

Chicana feminism is a movement that seeks to analyze, challenge, and ultimately change the ways in which Mexican-American women are subjugated and silenced. Through praxis, Chicana feminists work to reclaim their identities, asserting agency over their subjectivity and resisting the influence of hegemonic conventions regarding gender, sexuality, race and identity. Some of the movement’s most influential writers include Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Norma Alarcón, Sandra Cisneros and Martha P. Cotera. I am particularly interested in the ways in which these radical writers resist oppressive conceptions through an occupation of the space in between languages.

Perhaps the most well-known example of this linguistic resistance in Chicana literature is Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, in which Gloria Anzaldúa employs code-switching, neologisms and transgressive chapter structure to destabilize the reader’s notions of conventional language, and therefore conventional notions of identity
formation. As Anzaldúa writes, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language” (81). While conventional literature tends to take language as a given, the simple machine through which the author transmits his ideas, Anzaldúa and the other feminist writers mentioned understand that language is more than a machine. Language is formative and powerful; though not always fair, it is malleable, and these authors occupy and mold language to fit their needs.

Even the structure of Borderlands transgresses conventions of literature and language. Rather than develop her argument of a “New Mestiza Consciousness” in a chronological or functional fashion, Anzaldúa weaves her argument in a fluid and informal way. Delia Poey describes this structural style in her book Latino American Literature in the Classroom: The Politics of Transformation, stating that the book “unwinds itself - or winds itself - in a coiling structure, since all of these categories exist simultaneously and are embedded in one another” (60). In addition, the text seamlessly integrates quotations from other writers, Mexican sayings, poems and personal anecdotes, blurring the lines of conventional academic legitimacy. As opposed to a concise and simplified explanation of her identity, Anzaldúa structures her book as a relational and fluid performance of self and nation, neither possessing nor in need of the resolution of conflict.

For an English speaker, reading Borderlands presents a fundamental challenge to our conventional notions of linguistic fluency through its strategic utilization of codeswitching. Take the following passage, in form and content, for example:

Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally
crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically *somo huérfanos* - we speak an orphan tongue (80).

By refusing to translate the italicized Spanish throughout the text, Anzalúa challenges the prevailing standard of fluency in order to perform her linguistically and culturally dual identity and thus transgress conventional language’s tendency to entrap its speakers in a singular mode of expression and identity.

This semantically strategic use of code-switching has been analyzed in depth as a tool of resistance by bilingual speakers. In her essay “Spanish/English Bilingual Codeswitching: A Syncretic Model” Kristin Becker discusses this linguistic performance of the *mestiza’s* occupancy of the Borderlands: “codeswitching allows bilinguals to more effectively overcome the untranslatability that mixes language and culture… and shifting relationships between co-occurrent languages and cultures” (2). By maintaining her bilingual identity, Anzaldúa confronts and deconstructs Western binary notions of national and linguistic identity. In her essay “Yo Soy La Malinche”: Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism, Mary Louise Pratt argues that in the context of a “fiercely monolingual dominant culture,” the use of purposeful codeswitching claims a subalterm linguistic power: “I own both your language and mine, the minority speaker says; both are mine to combine and recombine as I choose” (863). This linguistic performance allows the speaker or writer to overcome orthodox valuations of language use in order to assert an alternative linguistic power that transcends national and dialectical borders.

Not only does the medium of the text transgress conventional boundaries of expression through the radical use of structure and language, but the content itself works
to destabilize hegemonic notions of identity formation. Take the poem “To live in the Borderlands means you,” for example:

are neither *hispana india negra española*

*ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata,* half-breed

captured in the crossfire between camps

while carrying all five races on your back

not knowing which side to turn to, run from; [...]  

*Cuando vives en la frontera*

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,

you’re a *burra, buey,* scapegoat,

forerunner of a new race,

half and half - both woman and man, neither -

a new gender; [...]  

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*

be a crossroads (216).

In this poem Anzaldúa urges her readers to occupy the border between whichever cultures or structures they feel torn between. By advocating for the occupation of the Borderlands, Anzaldúa is rejecting western notions of binary opposition. As Nathan Henne argues, by denying the ambiguities and conflicts within identities, the Western
binary produces absence. Anzaldúa proposes a welcoming of those conflicts, a “break down of the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner” and a “massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” (Anzaldúa 102). She writes:

La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (101).

By encouraging the occupation of a hybrid space, Anzaldúa advocates not for the reconciliation of conflicts, because that would produce absence as aspects of identity that do not fit within “rigid boundaries” are erased, rather the performance of conflicting identities to form a fluid and relational identity, grounded in difference and ambiguity (102).

Now for a little more context on the Anzaldúa’s movement. Chicana feminism was a response to Chicano nationalist movement of the 1960s, which was essentially masculinist as illustrated in their foundational document, the Plan Espiritual de Aztlán. In her historical account of the movement’s inception, Mary Louise Pratt cites the following excerpt from the Plan in her essay:

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. 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. (861).

As Pratt notes, this founding document reproduced traditions of women’s subordination through the use of “neutral” gender pronouns and nouns, and through the omission of gender-specific language, thus excluding the experience of Mexican women.

In response to this *Plan*, 600 Chicana women met in 1971 in San Antonio to produce a counter manifesto, *Chicanas Speak Out*, that aimed to supplement the *Plan* by speaking to issues that were ignored in the original manifesto. This new text included resolutions to destroy the “myth that religion and culture control our sex lives” and other goals related specifically to Aztlán’s potential ability to liberate women from patriarchal subjugation. *Chicanas Speak Out* never entered the Chicano archive, while the original *Plan* remained a permanent fixture of the Chicano movement.

**La Malinche in Chicana Literature and Poetry**

An analysis of various literary and poetic re-imaginings of La Malinche by Chicana feminists reveals how performative language can be used to liberate the figure from a legacy of hegemonic definitions of femininity and national identity. In her own analysis of some of these contemporary literary interpretations, Mary Louise Pratt writes: “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” (862). As Chicana feminists locate themselves not on the “inside / outside” of a particular national identity but on the border between conflicting loyalties, La Malinche’s complex identity
becomes the site of a new model of nationhood and linguistic expression that rejects the confines of binary logic.

The predominant aim within many Chicana texts is to revisit mythical and linguistic traditions that have presented and defined male and female roles. Thus Chicana writer tends to implicate herself in their deconstruction of these traditions, given that she have inevitably been influenced by their propagation. Cherrie Moraga explains in her book *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó por Sus Labios*: “Coming from such a complex and contradictory history of sexual exploitation by white men and from within our own race, it is nearly earth-shaking to begin to try to separate the myths told about us from the truths; and to examine to what extent we have internalized what, in fact, is not true” (118). The following excerpts from poems and books written by Chicana authors reveal a tendency to resist hegemonic gender roles through unconventional linguistic style and content that deconstructs and destabilizes predominant concepts of femininity, all through the reimagining of the figure of La Malinche.

In an untitled poem published in 1973, Sofia Riddell challenges the conventionally negative associations of La Malinche by embracing and identifying with the figure. It is important to remember that all of the historical and literary writing through which we can analyze Malinche has been written by others. Malinche has left behind no oeuvre that we can interpret in order to better understand her. Left without a voice, masculinist historians and writers have told her story for her and slandered her in the process, as well as any woman who shares in her complex and “treacherous” identity. In her reinterpretation of Malinche, Riddell reclaims the voice of Malinche in order to subvert her negative associations. She assumes the identity of Malinche and speaks
through her, and in doing so she “carves out a position of speech by recoding the very images that have been used to exclude or silence its subjects” (Pratt 863).

My name was changed… por la ley…

Malinche, pinche,

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…

Pero sabes, ése,

What keeps me from shattering

into a million fragments?

It’s that sometimes,

you are muy gringo, too.

Previously silenced by conventional notions of malinchismo, Riddell occupies and embraces the accusation, stating that Malinche is “forever with me,” and thus destabilizes its negative valuations.
Riddell’s identification with Malinche as opposed to male writers’ imposed valuations of Malinche is possible only because of the author’s female identity. Riddell’s strategy differs from that of male authors who utilize the symbol of Malinche to extrapolate on their identity in that she does not simply come to terms with her identity through deferred analogies but occupies the linguistic space that the epithet creates. For example, Paz identifies himself and his Mexican brothers as the sons of Malinche, not personally guilty of transgressing borders or loyalties, but only guilty in so far as they have inherited their mother’s treacherous legacy. Riddell completely embraces the identity of Malinche as her own, thus challenging the very notion of border transgression as sinful.

This poem utilizes the paradigm of La Malinche’s supposed treachery in order to deconstruct the gendered asymmetry regarding the alleged betrayal implicit in intermarriage. The first line of the poem, “My name was changed… por la ley… [by the law]” alludes to the manner in which a Mexican woman who has married a white man is permanently stigmatized by her choice as her new last name becomes a signifier of ethnonationalistic betrayal. Because “la ley” does not require a Mexican man to change his name to that of his hypothetical white wife’s, he is not forced to carry the patronymic stain of intermarriage. Just as the word malinchista encodes treachery as female, patronymic tradition encodes betrayal of one’s race through intermarriage as female as well. Just as translation theory’s les belles infidèles implies an implicit double standard, to use Lori Chamberlain’s terminology, in which the feminized “wife/translation” is tried for crimes that the the “husband/original” is by law incapable to commit, the patronymic tradition exclusively implicates the female while pardoning the male, as a linguistic rule.
Riddell challenges this biased patronymic rule with the final sentence of the poem: “What keeps me from shattering / into a million fragments? / It’s that sometimes, / you are muy gringo, too.” In this allegation against the Mexican man that “betrays” his culture, Riddell deconstructs the power that her anglo name has over her perceived loyalty to her Mexican identity by suggesting that the man, “ése,” is just as guilty of this supposed transgression.

Aside from the content of poem which clearly destabilizes conventional notions of treachery as encoded in language, Riddell’s make strategic use of form to further deconstruct those patriarchal models. Not only does Riddell codeswitch and thus challenge linguistic norms, she rhymes the Spanish and English words. For example, “Malinche, pinche” is rhymed with “forever with me” in the following line. This has the effect of further normalizing what is usually considered a sign of linguistic ineptitude by making it clear to the reader that the inclusion of Spanish words was decidedly purposeful.

The following poem by Carmen Tafolla entitled “La Malinche” depicts another Chicana writer’s attempt at the deconstruction of the historical and mythical figure of Malinche:

Yo soy la Malinche.

My people called Malintzín Tenepal
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 Hernan Cortes, 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......

Tafolla's poem also challenges masculinist interpretations of Malinche by occupying her voice and speaking through Malinche in the first person. However, while Riddell identifies herself as Malinche in order to deconstruct and interrogate her own dual identity, Tafolla's poem does not explicitly implicate her own experience, though it is implied. It is a poem about Malinche as told by Malinche. As Carmen M. Del Río writes in her analysis of this poem in the essay “Chicana Poets: Re-Visions from the Margin”:

This Malinche is personalized, and her individualization in the poem is a direct rejection and challenge to the exploitation of the patriarchal image thus undermining the patriarchal ideological stereotyping of the female, rendering them symbolic objects of derision or idealization, reducing them to property for the use of the dominant male. (437).
This personalization of Malinche is in contrast to masculinist renderings of Malinche that appropriate her as a semiotic object, thus rendering her actual identity invisible.

In retelling Malinche’s story from her fictional perspective, Tafolla rejects the commonly accepted notion of Malinche as a passive victim who was “used” or “raped” by Cortés. Tafolla’s Malinche laughs at her assigned nickname, Chingada, (“Ha”), and asserts “But Chingada I was not. Not tricked, not screwed, not traitor”; “I acted” Through words of action and purpose, Tafolla mobilizes a previously victimized figure into shameless action. In “The Sons of La Malinche,” Octavio Paz writes of the passivity of the raped mother, who he personifies later in the essay as La Malinche. He writes that the passivity of this raped mother is “abject”:

“she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust.
Her taint is constitutional and resides… in her sex. The passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the Chingada [raped woman]. She loses her name, she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition” (25).

Paz considers Malinche a victim of Spanish colonialism, and this story of victimization is patriarchal in itself in that it excludes the possibility that a woman might be active or have some control over her actions. By presenting an alternative to the narrative of victimization, Tafolla does not allow her to “lose her name” or “disappear into nothingness” as Paz suggests is typical of women given their passivity and victimhood.

In fact, Tafolla begins the poem with an assertion of Malinche’s identity, her name: “Yo soy la Malinche.” This line does more than allow Malinche to assert her
independence and her identity within a masculine tradition of representation that erases her through victimization and forces her to “disappear into nothingness”. The opening line is also in conversation with male writers in the Chicano literary canon. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s 1967 poem “Yo Soy Joaquin / I am Joaquin” which is a foundational text of Chicano nationalism, is evoked in Tafolla’s opening line. Gonzalez’s poem situated Chicano identity within a series of cultural components such as land, agriculture, spirituality and romanization of the indigenous. Similarly to the Plan de Aztlán, this foundational Chicano text identified the movement from the perspective of a normative male subject. In her analysis of this poem, Pratt writes: “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” (869). Tafolla’s poem is not just an attempt to destabilize mythical constructions of La Malinche by asserting the independence and identity of the figure, but also to destabilize masculinist forms of Chicano movement building by asserting the presence and position of herself, as a Chicana woman.

Tafolla’s poem reimagines the narrative of the conquest and places Malinche, not Cortés at the center of her radical rereading of the story. While Cortés was simply “playing god” and trying to impose his “‘civilization’” (Tafolla’s placement of the word civilization in quotes creates the effect of a sarcastic belittling of Cortés’s project), Malinche had a more profound goal, “I began to dream…”. Cortés is limited in that he can only imagine one kind of civilization, one that works like Spain. Malinche, however, is portrayed as a visionary: “No one else could see! / Beyond one world, none existed.” But Malinche could see “Another world - / a world yet to be born.” Her project was
“immortalized” in her and Cortés’s child: “my sweet mestizo new world child,” but Tafolla does not deem Malinche’s ability to reproduce the ultimate mechanism of her revolutionary action. As Pratt writes: “By attributing her to a vast historical project of a kind not recognizable to the masculinist heroics of orthodox history, the poem subsumes her reproductive activity into her political and strategic activity” (870). In this way Tafolla calls her readers to action, she ends the poem with an ellipsis, as if reminding us that the process of refiguring national and ethnic identity so that women are no longer simply reproducers of race or semiotic tools to men is an ongoing and incomplete process...
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