Imperial and Postcolonial Desires: 
*Sonata de Estío* and the Malinche Paradigm

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“[E]s o será santa, prostituta, reina, mendiga, virgen, adúltera, mártir” writes Octavio Paz, listing the roles María Félix played on and off the screen. At various moments, Mexican, Chicano, and Chicana cultures have characterized La Malinche in similar terms, prescribing the cultural role of visible women through her cultural and literary trajectory. In the figure of Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s Niña Chole, the confluence of La Doña and La Malinche resounds across cultures and across historical landmarks, creating a connect-the-dots vision of the staying-power of gendered metaphors for culture. Reading the canonical Spanish novel *Sonata de estío* and the star-studded Mexican film *Sonatas* through the lens of post-nationalist Chicana feminism evinces the international application of La Malinche’s capacity as the quintessential symbol of loss in nationalist discourses on both sides of the Atlantic.

The late nineteenth-century Spanish traveler in Ramón María del Valle-Inclán’s 1903 *Sonata de estío* relives Cortés’s conquest of Mexico in fantasy-laden sexual encounters with the Mexican Niña Chole, a thinly veiled Malinde and the stand-in for Spain’s one-time colonies. Beyond the artful romance and adventure characteristic of Valle-Inclán, a nostalgic and nationalistic agenda produces a historical allegory that describes an alternate path better...
suited to the author’s national vision for recently post-imperial Spain. Through the techniques of the Latin American historical, national allegories of the nineteenth century and allusions to the 16th century chronicles of the Conquest, Valle-Inclán fictionally restores Spain’s lost empire. Having tried independence in the arms of the allegorical Mexican governor-husband, La Niña Chole/Malinche rushes back to the arms of the novelistic descendant of Cortés, the Marqués de Bradomín—narrator and protagonist. Bradomín recovers Spain’s lost imperial past in La Malinche’s reassuring embrace.

The narrator in this historical allegory reminds the reader of Spain’s conquest of Mexico through the precise geographic setting, the characters, and the plot, giving Sonata de estío many attributes common to the Romantic historical novels that rewrote the history of the emerging Latin American nations following independence. The Niña Chole symbolizes and substitutes the Mexican territory as she fills the traditional role that La Malinche plays in historical novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries, beginning with Félix Varela’s Jicoténal (1826). In Sonata de estío, as in several nation-solidifying novels of post-colonial Latin America, the author transforms the nation’s past according to his political agenda, thereby altering his vision of the present. Doris Sommer tells us that in the immature state of the history of the newly independent nations there lie “epistemological gaps that the non-science of history leaves open, [into which] narrators could project an ideal future. The writers were encouraged both by the need to fill in a history that would increase the legitimacy of the emerging nation and by the opportunity to direct that history toward a future ideal” (76). The literature of the post-colonial (and post-imperial) period thus responds to a national crisis of self-definition—in Latin America and in the Spanish Generation of ’98 alike. Spanish writers such as Miguel de Unamuno, José Ortega y Gasset, Azorín, Pío Baroja, Antonio Machado, and Ramón del Valle-Inclán, known for pondering and lamenting the diminished state of Spain after the loss of its colonies, also engaged in the process of defining the national entity and its future path. Valle-Inclán, in the writing of his Sonata de estío fictionally makes Spain an enduring imperial power that recuperates its colonies through the use of fantasy, historical allusion, and allegory. He presents the other side of post-colonial literature—the post-imperial side. As the novelists of nineteenth-century Latin America invent a native perspective and substitute the Spanish histories of the colonies written by the colonizers with histories that support their contemporary socio-political needs, Valle-Inclán invents a (hi)story that affirms Spanish
male authority over the colonial woman—Spanish imperial rule through romantic metaphor. Michel de Certeau observes in *The Writing of History* that “each telling and retelling of the past is no more than a projection of the present onto the past: In fact, historians begin from present determinations. Current events are their real beginning” (11). The historical novel retells history from a perspective that changes the reader’s perception of the past and thereby of the present as well. Valle-Inclán uses this phenomenon, mastered by the post-independence novelists of Latin America, and changes the narrator’s present perception of himself by altering the history allegorically. His nostalgic and decadent narrative agenda fantastically recuperates the Empire through the substituting history with fiction, thus in a sense, rewriting his history.

The fictional story of the Marqués de Bradomín and La Niña Chole of the *Sonata* is grafted onto the symbolic story of the allegorical (and historic) couple Hernán Cortés and La Malinche. Two layers of symbolism work as the narrator-protagonist of *Sonata de estío* uses La Niña Chole to stand in for La Malinche’s body, which in turn symbolizes the lost colony.

The story begins with El Marqués de Bradomín’s departure from the port of London for a romantic adventure after contemplating bittersweet memories of a former voyage on which he lost a lover, Lili. He arrives in Veracruz on a tall ship, and he meets La Niña Chole—in his words a beautiful “princesa india”—who is married to Mexican General, Diego Bermúdez. El Marqués and La Niña decide to travel together in the same party, he forces her into sexual submission, and she subsequently falls in love with him. After she is sexually and sentimentally conquered by El Marqués, her husband and father General Bermúdez violently reclaims her from the Spaniard. La Niña finally escapes from the Mexican patriarch and returns the arms of her Spanish lover, reassuring his dominion with her embrace.

While many critics address Valle Inclán’s literary and biographical relationship to Mexico, they have not connected the chronicles of the Conquest or the nineteenth-century historical novels to the *Sonata de estío*. Obdulia Guerrero Bueno affirms in her analysis of Valle-Inclán’s writings about the Americas, “Valle-Inclán ama profundamente la tierra mejicana y por extensión toda América hispana. Esta es una verdad indiscutible” (13). Her analysis, however, does not consider the possibility of an allegorical reading or of allusions to the Conquest. Luis Mario Schneider’s exhaustive collection of Valle-Inclán criticism in Mexico includes essays by Alfonso Reyes, José Emilio Pacheco, Roberto Barrios, and Emma Susana Speratti Piñero—all of whom discuss the author’s
characterization of Mexico, but do not tie the *Sonata de estío* to La Malinche. Though the connection to the rhetoric of the Conquest is not exploited in Valle-Inclán criticism, regular references to the decadence and nostalgia of Spanish Modernismo abound. Valle-Inclán himself describes this *Sonata* a year after publication stating that “El mundo artístico de las *Sonatas* ha desaparecido, y lo sustituye otro primitivo, elemental, y milenario” (qtd. in Phillips 189), a statement which may explain the colonial desire in this *Sonata*. Its hidden political agenda surprises the typically “art-for-art’s-sake” style of Valle-Inclán’s prose and jests at the “woe is me” Spanish intellectuals of the early twentieth century.

Valle-Inclán’s narrator claims not to share the afflictions of the writers of the day: “Los decadentismos de la generación nueva no los he sentido jamás. Todavía hoy, después de haber pecado tanto, tengo las mañanas triunfantes . . .” (100). The characteristic decadence of the Spanish Modernistas that resides in Spain’s loss of its imperial status would not apply to the Marqués de Bradomín because in his version of the past, the colonies are not lost, and logically, there is no reason for decadence. The narrator’s opinion of the “generación nueva” appears in the first two pages of the novel, where the narrator has not yet left the narrative present to tell his tale. This introductory section acquaints the reader with the narrator and provides the retrospective context of the story that he will tell. El Marqués tells us that, “al sentir cercana la vejez,” he will do as the lovers of his youth (“*de mis tiempos*”) would do, and confess (99). This first clue to his age, followed by the narrator’s distancing himself from the events to be narrated (“Por aquellos días de peregrinación sentimental era yo joven y algo poeta, con ninguna experiencia y harta novelería en la cabeza” [99]), give the reader an idea of the time that passed between the action and its narration while also suggesting that literature and fantasy will influence the telling of his story. The Marqués narrates from his mature years while the narrated action takes place when he is a young man with, as he describes himself in the quote above, no experience outside of the great novels and history books.

Two references to historical events divulge the context of the story and the identity of the “generación nueva” of which the narrator speaks unfavorably: the Treaty of Vergara (el Abrazo de Vergara) of 1839 and the Mexican secular Reforma. The young narrator emigrates from Spain to England after 1839. A reference to the Mexican Reform made by another character provides the reader a temporal frame specific to the time of the action during the action itself. In the twelfth chapter, the Reverend Mother of
the Convent that El Marqués and La Niña visit refers to the anti-religious ideology of the governing institution of Mexican Reform: “En todas partes gobiernan los enemigos de la religion . . . aquí lo mismo que en España” (129). Since the Reverend Mother says within the narration that the enemies of the Church are currently governing, we can deduce that the action takes place after 1857. Roughly forty years later (at the time of the narration), Spain loses its last colonies and the Generation of ‘98 is the “generación nueva” that the narrator finds so decadent.

These historical references provide us with the narrator’s political views as well as a temporal reference. His migration to London and the unfavorable nickname that he gives the Treaty of Vergara, “La Tracién de Vergara” tell us that he is a monarchist, loyal to the Spanish Crown. His conversation at the convent lamenting the loss of the Church’s power confirms his conservative politics.

The treatment of La Niña Chole in Valle-Inclán’s novel, the treatment of La Malinche in Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s 16th Century eyewitness account Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España, and in Félix Varela’s Jicoténal, the first historical novel of the Americas published in 1826, are strikingly similar: she is a native princess, a prisoner enamored of her master, a noble victim of a patriarchal system, and a polyglot. Díaz del Castillo affirms La Malinche’s noble lineage when he presents her to the Spanish reading public in his text. In Chapter XXXVII Díaz del Castillo remembers “Cómo doña Marina era cacica e hija de grandes señores, y señora de pueblos y vasallos” (69). The narrator of Sonata de estio calls La Niña Chole “princesa maya” and “reina india” throughout the entire story. El Marqués also affirms her respectable status by presenting her as being “de origen español” (130). Valle-Inclán demonstrates the connection between La Niña Chole and La Malinche in a telling passage where El Marqués characterizes himself as the conquistador and her as the slave princess:

Crucé ante La Niña Chole orgulloso y soberbio como un conquistador antiguo. Allá en sus tiempos mi antepasado ( . . . ) no habrá mostrado mayor desavío ante las princesas aztecas sus prisioneras, y sin duda La Niña Chole era como aquellas princesas que sentían el amor al ser ultrajadas y vencidas. ( . . . ) La deshojaron los labios como las esclavas deshojaban las rosas al paso triunfal de los vencedores. (121)

The narrator of the chronicle (and the historical novel) also emphasize the victimization of this Indian noble woman by the circumstances of the Conquest. Díaz del Castillo tells us that Marina arrives in Cortés’s possession “por manera que los de Xicalango la dieron a los de Tabasco, y los de Tabasco, a Cortés” after
having explained her rightful place of nobility in her native culture (69). Sandra Messinger Cypess interprets the establishment of Malinche’s good lineage combined with her subsequent victimization in Díaz del Castillo’s text:

He affirms her noble Indian lineage first, as proof of her appropriateness for her subsequent role. (...) Bernal Díaz then adds background information on the birth and youth of La Malinche. (...) The Spanish reader (...) would readily notice that events in the early life of this young Indian woman corresponded to events during the childhood of Adamis, the exemplary Christian Knight of a [Spanish] fictional work. (...) Both Doña Marina and Adamis are of noble lineage, and as children they become victims. (30)

Whether or not Díaz del Castillo’s account was rhetorically enhanced is not as noteworthy as the pattern of characterizations of La Malinche that it establishes in literature and popular culture. Certainly, her alleged nobility does make her a more appropriate representative of her people or the colonies at the allegorical level. Three hundred years later Varela and Valle-Inclán follow this pattern and portray her as a victim of the patriarchal order, but in these narrations she is also a sinner or traitor. When La Malinche’s submission is to a man who represents the narrator’s Other, the narrator tends to characterize her victimization as her own fault. Díaz del Castillo does not blame her or accuse her of sin or treason; he was, after all, a loyal soldier and admirer of Hernán Cortés. The narrator of La Malinche’s submission to a Spaniard in Varela’s American novel, however, characterizes her as sinful as does the narrator of her submission to a Mexican representative of la patria in Valle-Inclán’s Spanish novel. In both depictions La Malinche is a victim and simultaneously a traitor who, by submitting sexually to her master—when that master is the enemy of the narrator of her story—has sinned.

In the case of La Niña Chole the wars between men that result in her victimization are not the sixteenth-century wars of the Conquest, but rather the nineteenth-century wars of independence played out through the allegory of the Mexican Criollo general. In her own words, Valle-Inclán’s Malinche confesses that, “—Hay en mi vida algo imperdonable, (...) He cometido el mas abominable de los pecados. (...) Yo era una pobre criatura inocente cuando fui una víctima de aquel amor maldito” (138). The cursed love she refers to is the sexual relationship she has with her father. This relationship between La Niña Chole and her father allegorizes the relationship between Mexico and its post-colonial, native Government. The post-imperial Spanish fantasy casts the relationship between Mexico and its national government as unnatural, non-procreative, and incestuous. La Niña Chole’s subsequent return to
the Spaniard thus restores natural law and saves the native woman from the barbaric postcolonial government embodies in the native patriarch. Robert Young notes in Colonial Desire that this in not an infrequent scenario in imperial discourse. He quotes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s observation of colonizers’ common characterization of European interference in traditional Caribbean rituals as “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (qtd. in Young 152)—a concept that justifies and almost demands intervention on ethical or humanitarian grounds. Clearly the Mexican woman is better off with the Spanish suitor (the government) than she would have been with the violent, incestuous Mexican Patriarch. The Spaniard’s love saves her from a terrible fate foreseen in the scene where the General whips La Niña Chole and drags her away violently.

Messinger Cypess and Antonia Castañeda observe in La Malinche in Mexican Literature and “Sexual Violence in the Politics of Conquest” respectively, that among other gifts that solidify political alliances between pre-Columbian states, women were frequently traded as an admission of treaty or deference following military conflict. The Marqués’s treatment of La Niña Chole as a slave that passes symbolically from man to man follows this historical treatment of women in general and more specifically the traditional literary treatment of La Malinche.

In addition to La Niña’s resemblance to La Malinche, Valle-Inclán furthers the alluded historical frame by patterning the trajectory of El Marqués de Bradomín’s adventure after Cortés’s 1519 expedition as recorded by Bernal Díaz del Castillo and by Hernán Cortés himself. In the first chapter of the novel the narrator reveals his nostalgia for the colonial period as well as his adventurous spirit. He describes himself as “poeta” with “harta novelería en la cabeza” (99)—a clue to the literary allusions to come, the first of which is a direct reference to the sea route of Hernán Cortés: “Hice el viaje a vela en una vieja fragata que después naufragó en las costas de Yucatán. Como un viajero de otros tiempos, iba a perderme en la vastedad del viejo Imperio Azteca” (100). Cortés writes in Las cartas de relación that his ship came to “dar a fondo a la dicha tierra intitulada de Yucatán” (43). Aside from the reference to the chronicles of the Conquest, the generalization that the Yucatán peninsula is part of the Aztec Empire indicates that the narrator is distorting aspects of his tale (especially since Valle Inclán was well versed in Mexican history and culture)—the Aztecs never conquered the Mayan peninsula.

The Marqués situates himself from the outset in the place of Hernán Cortés. Among many proper names of historical figures
and places, he includes “Grijalba” (153), “Grijalva” en Díaz del Castillo; “San Juan de Tuxlan” (the first chapters), “Tuistas” in the Historia verdadera, and “Cañistero de Ulúa,” “San Juan de Ulúa” in the chronicle. Such use of real-world historical people and places is a defining technique of historical allegorical novels.

Valle-Inclán’s patterning of events in his text after the events told in Díaz del Castillo and Cortés shows clearly in the following passages that detail the arrival to Veracruz. Cortés describes founding the city and Valle Inclán’s narrator describes admiring it. Once Cortés is ashore in Veracruz, “[se] comenzó con gran diligencia a poblar y a fundar una villa, a la cual puso por nombre la Rica Villa de la Veracruz” (Cortés 61). El Marqués in Valle Inclán narrates his arrival similarly: “la fragata . . . pudo doblar la Isla de Sacrificios y dar fondo en aguas de Veracruz . . . contemplé . . . la playa donde desembarcaron . . . los aventureros españoles . . . Vi la ciudad que fundaron” (113). Bernal Díaz del Castillo tells us that Cortés decides to “hacer su estada de asiento” (86), and with Moctezuma’s cooperation “acordamos de poblar e de fundar la Rica Villa de la Veracruz” (91).

The narrator’s identification with the conquistadors and his general attitude about his journey, full of allusions to great historical empires—Ancient Greece (103), the Roman Empire (102), Oriental Dynasties (165), for example—further reveal his entrenchment in imperialist discourse. The following quote, for example, describes his first impression of the Mexican shore that he refers to as “aquellas tierras antes españolas” (105): “Cautiva el alma de religiosa emoción, contemplé la abrasada playa donde desembarcaron antes que pueblo alguno de la vieja Europa, los aventureros españoles . . .” (113). He goes on to say that he feels like a conquistador and compares himself with various explorers and landholders of the Americas:

Como no es posible renunciar la patria, yo, español y caballero sentía el corazón henchido de entusiasmo (…) y la memoria llena de recuerdos históricos. La imaginación exaltada me fingía al aventurero extremeno poniendo fuego a sus naves (…) Yo iba a desembarcar en aquella playa sagrada (…) al perderme, quizás para siempre, en la vastedad del viejo Imperio Azteca, sentía levantarse en mi alma de aventurero, de hidalgo y de cristiano, el rumor augusta de la historia. (114)

The patterning of the trail, the Marqués’s personal identification with Cortés and the province of Extremadura, and the reference to the burning of the ships demonstrate Valle-Inclán’s attentive incorporation of the information in the chronicles into his narrative. Valle-Inclán even has the Marqués narrate the story
of his youth as an old man, much like Díaz del Castillo himself narrated his youthful adventures in the colonies from old age.

The narrator distorts La Niña Chole in addition to making her fit the mold of La Malinche. She substitutes the objects of the narrator’s desire of his previous travels. La Niña Chole, has the eyes and body language of “la raza maya” and speaks in her “vieja lengua” despite her being “criolla” and “de origen español.” Evidently this character—not a realistic depiction of a woman that he met on his travels, for by definition one cannot be “criollo” and Maya—is an impossible, all-encompassing mixture of Mexicanness. Her pan-Mexicanidad betrays the allegorical charge of the representation of Mexico that she will take on as the plot unfolds. She is the lost woman and the lost territory—here, as with la Malinche, one and the same.

The very first sentence of the novel declares the purpose of the journey that El Marqués will narrate: “Quería olvidar unos amores desgraciados, y pensé recorrer el mundo en romántica peregrinación” (99). The plural of the “amores desgraciados” contradicts the information that the narrator gives us—that he had only one past love, Lilí. The plural of “loves,” however, does beg the post-imperial reading. The lost loves can be forgotten by substituting them with one love that incorporates both the loss of the colonies and the loss of the woman: the love of La Malinche. While crossing the Atlantic on the tall ship El Marqués narrates

Pensaba siempre en mi primer viaje. (. . .) El lamento informe y sinfónico de las olas despertaba en mí un mundo de recuerdos: Perfiles desvanecidos, ecos de risas, murmullo de lenguas extranjeras (. . .) mezclándose a las notas de la tirlesa que en la cámara de los espejos cantaba Lilí. Era una resurrección de sensaciones, una esfumación deliciosa del pasado. . . . (102)

The insistence on recollections of the previous events, here and throughout the novel, points to the two levels of the tale. This journey stimulates his memory of the boat trip that he made with his lost love, Lilí, and this trip stimulates the memory of the journey that his ancestors made to the colonies—another lost love. El Marqués is able to recuperate both losses simultaneously substituting them with La Niña Chole who embodies Mexico and who has the same smile as Lilí. El Marqués slowly begins to mix his desire for Lilí with his desire for La Niña and he also begins to mix his perception of the Mexican landscape with the Mexican woman. La Niña Chole’s body is the place where the colonial desire coincides with romantic desire. The narrator reveals her metaphorical role by feminizing the land. For example, “La naturaleza lujuriosa y
salvaje, aún palpitante del calor de la tarde, semejaba dormir el sueño profundo y jadeante de una fiera fecundada” (107).

This narrative practice of the feminization of the territory is not uncommon in the chronicles of the Conquest. Alfred Arteaga shows us that we can observe this pervasive heterosexual metaphor for colonization by reading Cristóbal Colón’s diary, or John Donne’s “To His Mistress Going to Bed.” The 1619 allegorical painting, “Americae” by Jan van der Straet, and any number of imperial texts, many of which Peter Hulme discusses in his “Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality and Mobility in Early Colonial Discourse” demonstrate the same phenomenon. Robert Young explains in Colonial Desire that the land and the people colonized are typically feminized and that colonialism was a “desiring machine with its unlimited appetite for territorial expansion” (98). Young also observes that colonial texts tend to focus on the soil; that “the focus on the soil emphasizes physicality of the territory that is coveted, [and] occupied” (31). De Certeau opens his Writing of History with an analysis of the gendered writing of European identity on the feminized Americas. The attribution of feminine human properties to the desired territories draws attention to the reality of the sexual violence on the women during the Conquest, it reveals the colonizers’ sexual desire to reproduce themselves in the population of that land by having sex with the women, and it makes each sex act between a conquistador and a native woman a micro-colonization pregnant with allegorical implications.

Jicoténcal and the postcolonial novels of Latin America build on the colonial motif and further the symbolism of the feminization of the land present in Cortés, Colón, and Díaz de Castillo by blaming the victim. As Norma Alarcón has pointed out, the novels of the Latin American independence movement perpetuate the symbolism of the woman as territory and populace that began in the discourse of colonization. The ironic decolonial employment of colonial rhetoric becomes clear in Varela’s Jicoténcal:

La soberanía de los Estados es como el honor de la mujer: cuando los pueblos la conservan intacta, son respetados y estimables, como lo es una mujer honrada en todos los países; más cuando el interés, la corrupción, la debilidad, o cualquiera otra causa les hacen ceder su apreciable joya, ni los unos ni las otras son más que objetos de desprecio, dignos, cuando más, de lástima y de conmiseración. (Varela 107)

Here, as in various moments that aspire to define nation, a woman’s sexual activity represents the nation’s permeability, and the male governing forces must protect it.
The first sexual encounter and the playing out of the Conquest fantasy by La Niña and El Marqués further demonstrate the symbolism of this woman’s body. Initially La Niña Chole resists the Spaniard’s aggressions: “Me puse en la faz sus manos de princesa india, manos cubiertos de anillos, enanas y morenas, que yo hice prisioneras. Sin dejar de mirarla, se las oprimí hasta que lanzó un grito, y después, dominando mi despecho, se las besé” (emphasis added 135).

The next sexual encounter is the sexual reenactment of the conquest: “Quise primero que la Niña Chole se desentrase el cabelllo, y vestido el blanco huipil me hablase en su vieja lengua, como una princesa prisionera a un capitán conquistador. Ella obedeció sonriendo” (157). After this telling scene the native woman belongs to the Spaniard. And, as in jicoléncal, this sexual domination means the metaphoric domination of the territory by the Spanish. Later her father comes for her and she goes back to the Patriarch as I have described.

The sequence of dominance up to this point can be interpreted allegorically as a recounting of Mexican history from contact to independence. In the thirtieth chapter the narrator abandons the historical frame and the Marqués de Bradomín recuperates the woman. She prefers the Spaniard to her father/husband, and shouts “¡Mi rey! ¡Mi Rey querido” as she reunites with the Marqués (178). In his arms she cries “¡Nunca nos hemos querido así!” (180). The words that Valle-Inclán chooses to express this sentiment literally describe the illusion of the entire text and lead us again to the historical reading, thus supporting an allegorical reading—they never loved each other in such a way because the historical entities which they represent never did reunite, Mexico did not prefer to go back to the Spanish king after gaining independence. The portrayal of the La Malinche as a cultural allegorical figure in Sonata de estío demonstrates that nationalist discourse, be it post-imperial or post-colonial, uses this woman to articulate itself. The characterization, domination, and moral judgments of the women characters by the narrators and by the other characters of both Varela’s and Valle-Inclán’s novels clearly manifest the angst resulting from the loss.

The protagonist in Valle-Inclán’s text revives Spain’s former domain over the American territories through the sexual metaphor. El Marqués de Bradomín establishes his power over the territory previously dominated by his ancestors by means of its substitution by a representative entity that still lends itself to domination: a woman native to that land. The lost Imperial past is substituted by a narrative present in which Mexico prefers and returns
to the arms of the Spanish King. (“Mi Rey querido nunca nos hemos querido así”). This Aztec/Maya/Criolla princess, described as a representative of a pre-Conquest cultural group as well as a post-colonial person, and confused with the landscape itself, is La Malinche, the incarnation of the desired territory and the desired love.

After fusing the fictitious contemporary characters into real historical characters and allegorical representatives of their respective cultures, Valle-Inclán moves them about as pawns, writing a new historical script for them to follow. The use of allegory creates a new history in which the Empire recuperates, or never really loses the colonized territory. Norma Alarcón notes in her essential essay “‘Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism’ that in the 500-year trajectory of the Malinche legend from the Conquest to Octavio Paz and, later, the Chicana feminist interpretations, “there are two previous stages (…) the first corresponds to the chroniclers and inventors of legends; the second corresponds to the development of the traitor myth and scapegoat mechanism, which apparently came into fruition in the nineteenth century during the Mexican Independence movement” (281).

The nineteenth-century traitor myth, begun by a Cuban exile in Philadelphia, may not come from preoccupations about Mexican history at all, however. Varela, observing Spanish-U.S.-Cuban politics from the perspective of the U.S. uses La Malinche to present the future of free Latin America and to call for a pan-Latin American decolonization that liberates the Caribbean. In this second stage of La Malinche’s legend, her symbolic charge of representing the lost territory is not particular to Mexico. I would like to add to this chronology that La Malinche undergoes a new reconstruction at the pen of one of the great authors of the Spanish Generation of ‘98 in her capacity as a symbol of the denial of loss. La Malinche, constantly reconstructed at the service of the ideology of those who retell her, becomes the common object of Latin American and Spanish nationalist discourse. During the 19th and early 20th centuries’ battles for territory, national identity, and national culture, La Malinche remerges to remain at the front of nationalist discourse and criticism, forever a symbol of colonial and decolonial desire. When those discourses join, as in the film adaptation of the Sonata, they drop La Malinche as if to state that her presence makes the collaboration impossible—which side would characterize her as traitor? In Manuel Barbachano’s 1959 cinematographic interpretation of Valle-Inclán’s Sonata de estío, the Spanish and Mexican production team omits La Malinche from the equation,
and in doing so decolonizes the plot from the Mexican perspective.

In a Mexican nation-affirming move, the film reverses the novel’s European-over-Native hierarchy as symbolized in the Malinche-Cortés pairing. The strategic substitution of the Conquistador figure with a Gonzalo Guerrero-type image of cultural contact in which the European man assimilates to the native woman’s culture upsets a time-tested gender-race paradigm. Although the novel is well loved in Mexico, the film adaptation flops.

María Félix’s cinematic romance with Francisco Rabal in the Spanish-Mexican production, entitled Sonatas, affirms Mexican culture on an international stage. At the tail end of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, the seasoned national industry began collaborative international projects with Latin America and Spain that redefined “Mexican” within the industry (López, “Cinema” 10). Manuel Barbachano Ponce and Juan Antonio Bardem’s 1959 Sonatas, featuring Cine de Oro all-stars María Félix, Francisco Rabal, Fernando Rey, and photographer Gabriel Figueroa and Spanish tragic film star Aurora Bautista, uniquely addresses the question of national Mexican culture by juxtaposing the mid-nineteenth-century Spanish political turmoil and the post-independence battles for Mexico’s establishment. The symbolic weight of Félix’s face in the role of the Mexican lover and her ability to convert the Spaniard from a selfish Don Juan into a Mexican liberal idealist define the film’s allegorical statement regarding Mexican national culture.

The film follows the life of El Marqués de Bradomín, played by Francisco Rabal, through his romantic adventures that turn political at the stroke of luck. Disinterested in politics, and victim of unfortunate coincidences presented through his passionate affairs, Bradomín finds himself unwittingly at the center of two major political struggles on either side of the Atlantic. Set in 1824 in Bradomín’s romance with his cousin Concha (Bautista), the wife and countess of the president of the Fernando VII’s juntas de purificación, Part One begins and ends in provincial Galicia. After falling in to the hands of the rebel captain, General Casares (Fernando Rey), Bradomín befriends the general and must comply with the request that leads him to be discovered in Concha’s quarters by the Monarchist Count. Forced to flee among dissidents to the Spanish crown because of his romantic affair with Concha and the resulting involvement in the political conflict, Bradomín must leave behind his vengefully slain lover and his country on the cold Spanish shores. Bradomín carries the dead Concha as far as possible before the ocean waves begin to lap at his feet reminding him
that these shores are the territorial limits of Spain. Heart-broken, he leaves Spain and the Spanish woman behind.

Six years later in Veracruz, the 1830 battles between the conservative Monarchists and the liberal heirs to Father Hildalgo’s cause lead by Vicente Guerrero set the stage for Bradomín’s next love affair. Bradomín’s stay in Mexico coincides with the Spanish expeditionary forces’ attempts to reestablish the Spanish crown. Consequently, Bradomín must flee the liberales who seek the expulsion of all Spaniards from Mexico. Passing through the beautiful countryside, Bradomín comes upon La Niña Chole, played by María Félix, at the famous Mayan ruins of El Tajín. Despite his guide’s warning that Chole is not “la diosa indígena” as Bradomín claims to see her, but rather the wife of conservative General Bermúdez, he immediately falls in love with her and attaches himself to her caravan. Eventually Bermúdez’s soldiers catch up with him and incarcerate him. La Niña Chole buys his freedom after all of his cellmates are murdered. Bradomín then sweeps her away, proposing that they escape together. She playfully goes along for the ride, but when they arrive at a convent to rest for the night, he presents María Félix’s character as “la Marquesa.” She resists the adulterous farce at first, but amid death tolls and the threat of her husband’s revenge, she eventually opens herself to Bradomín’s advances as they profess life-long love to each other. At mass the following morning, Bermúdez’s troops invade the chapel where, unknown to the Marqués and his lover, fugitive liberal leader Vicente Guerrero is hiding. As the conservative troops advance, the priest reprimands the soldiers. La Niña Chole and Bradomín, more out of the solidarity that comes from being pursued by Bermúdez and his army than out of political convictions, buy the soldiers off with her jewels to defend Vicente Guerrero. Guerrero thanks them, and after the two lovers have a brief romantic toss in the woods, he takes them to his party’s residence where idealist General Casares has joined the Mexican liberal forces. When Bermúdez’s troops arrive at the town, Guerrero, his forces, and the townspeople themselves rise up to fight against them. Moved by the liberal fervor, by Casares’s death, and by La Niña Chole’s love, Bradomín mounts a white horse and rides to the battlefield amid shouts, “¡Que viva México y el general Vicente Guerrero!”

This 1959 Mexican-Spanish film collaboration is the cinematographic interpretation of Ramón del Valle-Inclán’s 1902 and 1903 novels, Sonata de otoño and Sonata de estío. The resolution of the film, however, reverses the novelist’s post-imperial fantasy of Spain’s dominance over post-colonial Mexico by changing the
Marqués de Bradomín from the Cortés figure he embodies in the novel into a Gonzalo Guerrero figure. The Barbachano-Bardem screen adaptation for a Mexican public contradicts Valle Inclán’s project and affirms Mexican nationhood through Bradomín’s love affair with another female representative of Mexico, María Félix, and his subsequent assimilation to Mexican culture and Mexican Independence.

Bardem and Barbachano’s Niña Chole has no Mayan, Aztec, or overtly exotic cultural characteristics as she does in the novel, aside from her entrance onto the screen at the ruin of el Tajín. The character is stripped of the pan-ethnic representativeness that she carries in the novel, and she no longer comes across as the stand-in for La Malinche. While the film version discards the chronicles of the Conquest and la Niña Chole’s symbolic relationship to La Malinche, and thus Mexico itself, Bardem’s casting of the quintessential Mexican movie star in the role of La Niña accomplishes the national symbolism. Félix’s international recognition as the queen of Mexican cinema makes the use of Malinche’s national symbolism redundant or even obsolete. One way or another, la Niña Chole equals Mexico at the allegorical level.

According to Félix biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo, Mexican producer Manuel Barbachano met anti-Franco Spanish director Juan Antonio Bardem and they decided to collaborate on an international film. At this time María Félix was the confirmed cinematic ambassador of Mexico. Bardem insisted in casting Félix in the role of La Niña Chole although Barbachano did not agree with the fit. Upon Bardem’s arrival to Mexico City with his screenplay of Sonatas, the Mexican production team discovered that the Spaniard’s screenplay lacked an understanding of Mexican culture (Taibo 241). Although Bardem resisted the changes to his writing and never fully agreed with any of them, Barbachano convinced him that all the “cambios propuestos por el equipo mexicano tenían sentido y eran absolutamente necesarios” (241). While we do not have access to the text that never reached the silver screen, one can only infer what the changes entailed. The 1950s and 60s marked Mexican Cinema’s period of international collaborations in which Mexico was establishing its Época de Oro reputation at the international level (López “Crossing” 33–34). Known for its color local and Mexican themes, mid-century Mexican cinema was charged with national representation (Monsiváis 117–123). Charles Ramírez Berg writes that during Mexican Cine de Oro, “the Mexican film industry became the leading Spanish-language film producer in the world (...) and a recognized medium of national
self-expression” (13). He continues to describe “this development of national cinema,” especially the movies filmed by Figueroa:

As part of the nationalist movement, Golden Age films succeeded in creating an idealized, romanticized, and imaginary Mexico that illuminated movie screens in Mexico and Latin America. (13)

Given the nationalist preoccupations of this post-revolutionary period of film production that finally establishes its cultural legitimacy and parity within the international art scene, it is logical to assume that Valle Inclán’s fictional recolonization of Mexico by Spain would not be well received in light of the imperialistic overtones. With the cultural expertise of Revueltas and Cabada, the experience and fame of the Mexican production team, the name-recognition of Valle Inclán, and the dream cast of Francisco Rabal, María Félix, Fernando Rey, and Aurora Bautista, the film looked like an inevitable smash hit. The Mexican adaptation, however, was a flop. Bardem, who grew to hate the film, attributes the flop to intervention in his script, the choice of Valle Inclán’s Sonatas over Tirano Banderas, and the film’s example of “cómo se puede equivar- car totalmente el encargado del reparto” (qtd. in Taibo 244). Taibo expands on his informant’s opinion stating that he finds Bautista too healthy to play a convincing Concha, Rabal too handsome and pleasant to play Bradomín, and Félix too defined as a personality to fit into the role of La Niña Chole: “[E]n María Félix no es posible encontrar a la ‘niña Chole’, porque ella es otra cosa y jamás se podrá fingir” (244). The cast may indeed have caused the failure, but not for the reasons Taibo and Bardem cite. Félix’s iconic status as cinematic representative of Mexico brings back the layer of symbolism that the production team may have tried to omit by removing La Malinche. This substitution may “decolonize” the story, but Félix’s cultural draw upsets the gender dynamic that the novel employs with the Cortés-Malinche subtext.

Critics and popular culture concur on Félix’s iconic status. Diane Hershfield cited Félix as the exemplary “Mexican femme fatal” in her study of Women and Mexican national identity in film. Sam Dillon’s recent New York Times homage to María Félix following her April 2002 death tells readers that during the three decades of Félix’s career, she “reigned as the supreme goddess of Spanish-language cinema” (A29). Dillon’s interview with Carlos Fuentes summarizes the extent of Félix’s stardom. In the same obituary Fuentes states, “María has a mythic quality, and she’s a great national symbol.” Octavio Paz compares Félix to the “idols” of Mexican womanhood in his prologue to a María Félix photo
collection. After comparing Félix to Coyolxauhqui (10), Paz explains that Mexico has traditionally been permeated by masculine values, “el padre, el patriarca, el abuelo, el jefe, el macho” (13). Despite the “valores masculinos,” many feminine images, he continues, have mythic and symbolic proportions in their ability to encapsulate Mexican culture. Some myths:

[S]on dulces como la virgen de Guadalupe, colina maternal, amparo de huérfanos; otras son abismales e insolandables como la Malinche; otras son risueñas y denodadas como la Adelita de los revolucionarios. El mito de María Félix es distinto. (. . .) Fue y es un desafío ante muchas convenencias y prejuicios tradicionales. (. . .) María Félix es una mujer muy mujer que ha tenido la osadía de no ajustarse a la idea que se han hecho los machos de la mujer. Es libre como el viento; dispersa o congrega a las nubes, las parte o las ilumina con una centella, con una Mirada. (13)

Paz’s adept comparison of the Virgin, La Malinche, Adelita, La Llorona and María Félix attest to the symbolism present in the figure of María Félix and pinpoints Félix’s proclivity for defying gender roles. As we see in the Barbachano-Bardem film Sonatas, it is precisely Félix’s national symbolism that allows the subversion of gender roles. Carlos Monsiváis writes in his study of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema that among Mexican actresses, “[o]nly María Félix constructed her powerful aura” (Mythologies 121–122) in a genre that demanded female submission and integration into the landscape:

[H]er categorical voice and enslaving gestures undercut the humiliations demanded by the scripts (. . .) she took on the traits of the cacique and renounced feminine psychology. She became something unheard of: a woman who controlled her own destiny. (122)

Monsiváis’s description of Félix’s ability to “undercut” the submissive roles demanded by the period recalls La Malinche. While Paz compares the two in their mythical representativeness of Mexican culture, Monsiváis describes Félix in the way that Chicana feminism describes La Malinche. Indeed Monsiváis is not the first to speak of Félix’s ability to destroy gendered limits in female characters; Elena Poniatowska writes in 1990 that “María es la única que en México ha logrado cambiar las reglas del juego” (Quién 72). Unlike Malinche who has been narrated by others and was not able to leave us with her own words, Félix’s self-construction through role choices and acting are an embodiment and textual testament to self-determination.

In addition to the obvious changes in plot, characters, and
time frame, the Spaniard’s loyalty to the woman’s culture introduces and old, forgotten paradigm that history selected not to emphasize: in the filmic resolution of the plot the Marqués de Bradomín falls for La Niña Chole and then takes up arms to fight for Mexican reform under the Mestizo flag of independence. Instead of acting like Hernán Cortés, Bradomín acts like Gonzalo Guerrero; he fights on the side of Mexico, not only assimilating to the culture of his female lover, but also acting towards its liberation from the oppression sponsored by his native culture. Barbachano’s team asserts the Spaniard’s assimilation to Mexican culture and the man’s assimilation to the woman’s culture since the woman represents Mexico. The consequential upsetting of the gender dominance essentially preserves national pride at the expense of masculine pride.

The path of la Niña Chole from voluptuous symbol of fictional Spanish recolonization to nation-affirming Mexican maiden with enough allure to get a Spaniard to take up arms for Mexican independence traces Mexico’s selective tradition of culture. The nuances that govern the selection become evident with history’s selection of what Norma Alarcón calls the “two monstrous figures,” Malinche and Cortés, as the parents of modern Mexico over Gonzalo Guerrero and his Mayan wife (Alarcón 279). Raymond Williams tells us “the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures [is] the culture of selective tradition” (54). The historical lines that contemporary culture draws depend upon the cultural values of the contemporary system in such a way that “the traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its contemporary system of interests in values” (55). As Rolando Romero points out in “Counter Malinche,” the negative characterization of Gonzalo Guerrero and celebration of Jerónimo de Aguilar confirms the values that the institution of the Crown wished to emphasize. Aguilar returned to the Spaniards and reconfirmed Spain’s race, religion and Conquest mission; Guerrero stayed in his adopted culture with his Mayan wife, and was consequently characterized as a traitor and a Jew. Romero notes in his work on Gonzalo Guerrero that “Guerrero’s life is never a part of those [Conquest] narratives” and as a consequence, “historians mention him only briefly and always with contempt” (“Texts” 345). The selection that Romero describes reveals a particular set of values that has remained solidified—vestiges we can observe in the popular flop of Sonatas. The 19th and 20th century’s selection of the Malinche-Cortés couple over the Guerrero-Mayan wife couple as the allegorical parents of modern Mexico and the model for Latin American syncretism reflects the prescribed alignment of gender and race.
History’s preference of Malinche and Cortés over Guerrero and his native wife also speaks to the pervasive, postcolonial Latin American perception that assimilation to Western ways equals progress. That’s why the film didn’t hit home, and that’s why we don’t remember Gonzalo. To do so would bring about a reversal of the racial/gender dynamic modeled in the story of La Malinche and Cortés, a dynamic that ties together the hierarchies white over brown and male over female. Such a reversal would serve positively to upset the racial-national dynamic of subordination in accordance with a nationalistic agenda by having the European assimilate to the Mexican culture. The coincidence of race and gender, however, would cause the upset of the gender dynamic that nationalistic politics tend to preserve.

More than Guerrero’s siding with the “enemy,” his assimilation to the woman’s culture has caused his banishment from history. If it were only his siding with the enemy that caused his rhetorical banishment, would he not have been resurrected from history during the independence movement? Williams tells us, “in the workings of the selective tradition, reversals and re-discoveries, [and] returns to work apparently abandoned as dead . . . keep large areas of past culture, if not alive, at least available” (55). If, then, Guerrero represented an alternative model for syncretism that embodied the new social prescriptions of post-colonial Latin America, why would authors beginning with Varela rescue La Malinche instead of him? In all likelihood the primacy of the woman’s culture over the man’s in the case of Guerrero does not fit the Liberal agenda of the 19th (or even 20th) century. Why, then, would the new Marqués de Bradomín not achieve the popularity of his novelistic original despite his Mexico-affirming acts? Because he lets himself be dominated by the culture of the woman he loves. Bradomín, like Guerrero, “renunció a España/y peleó como maya entre los mayas (Gonzalo/renounced Spain/and battled as a Mayan among Mayans)” (José Emilio Pacheco n.p.).

Carlos Velo, the director in the Mexican production team, recalls the film’s box-office flop. In an interview with Taibo, he attributes the films lack of popularity to the fact that the film “era muy lejos de lo que el público parecía esperar y de lo que los lectores de Valle Inclán suponían” (Taibo 242). While Valle-Inclán draws upon the stability of the colonial, gendered racial dynamic in his novel, Bardem and Barbachano interrupt it in favor of the national Mexico-affirming agenda and at the expense of masculine cultural dominance. Although Bardem assures Taibo that the film Sonatas is not critical of Valle Inclán’s Sonatas (Taibo 246), the difference
between the two works reveals an unmistakable shift in projects—the first being re-colonial and the second decolonial.

Barbachano’s attempt to “forget the Alamo,” as Pilar of Lone Star might say, or to “reinscribe[e] a colonial imaginary with a decolonial one” (Emma Pérez 126) aims to forget La Malinche. The act of national decolonization, however, contradicts the gender factors that govern the selection of Malinche and Cortés over Guerrero’s family in the first place. Norma Alarcón urges us to stop isolating epistemologies of oppression, and to heed those figures whose wholeness provides a model for whole decolonization (Alarcón, Interview 1). Ignoring La Malinche in efforts to decolonize inevitably leads to an incomplete decolonization. Ana López, in agreement with Diane Hershfield (15–23), argues Mexican cinema’s inability to forget la Malinche, stating that Mexican film inevitably aligns women with La Malinche or La Virgen de Guadalupe (151). Given La Niña Chole’s adultery and her affair with a Spaniard (in the film), she falls under the category of Malinche regardless of Barbachano’s censoring. Is La Malinche inescapable as López would suggest, or do Williams’s rules of selectivity demand that she not be forgotten? Perhaps it is the masculinist construction of culture that needs forgetting before La Malinche and Guerrero can share the Mestizo stage of cultural representation.

Notes

1 Ramón del Valle-Inclán, author of Luces de Bohemia, Tirano Banderas, the Sonatas, and many other canonical texts of Spanish literature, is considered an exemplary figure of Modernismo and fin-de-siècle literature. His works appear internationally in classrooms and M.A. and Ph.D. exam lists in universities that offer Spanish literature programs.

2 For a comprehensive bibliography and study of these novels see Sandra Messinger Cypess chapters 4 and 5.

3 La Reforma began at the institutional level in 1855 when the liberal government, including the future Zapotec Indian president Benito Juárez, overthrew Santa Anna. In 1857 the Ley Juárez abolishing clerical privileges and military immunity and the Ley Lerdo disentitling the Church’s corporate land were incorporated and passed in the new liberal constitution that for the first time omitted declaring Mexico a Catholic nation.

4 Although one of La Malinche’s major roles in the conquest was translator (a skill that many Chicana critics and writers later emphasize and with which they identify for it attests to her intelligence and talent to adapt to more than one culture) in Jicoténcal the Spanish, Aztec, and Tlaxcalan characters in the novel converse freely without need for translators.
For a discussion of Chicana writers and La Malinche/La Lengua please see Tey Diana Rebolledo Women Singing in the Snow chapter six, “Constructing Identities as Writers,” 125–130.

I want to thank Rolando Romero for making me aware of this film; without it, this piece of Malinche historiography would be missing from my research.

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